

The phenomenology of space: Motels

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In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard, argues that real human dwellings and dwellings that are portrayed in literature often have important psychological implications. He argues that “the house [and other dwellings] would appear to have become the topography of our inmost being” (xxxii)¹. By “phenomenological” or “eidetic” experience, Bachelard, who follows in the tradition of Roman Ingarden – the first major literary theorist to explore Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology and the reading experience – means a person’s immediate, rather than analytical, preconceived reaction to a specific event, detail place, or person. For example, when, in a suspenseful film the music changes – becomes louder or softer, modulates to a minor key, is produced by different instruments, or abruptly ceases-one immediately experiences fear or relief. One does not stop, analyze, and then conclude that the music has modulated to a different key or from the full orchestra to only cellos and double basses, and then decide that these changes suggest danger. Instead, one’s spine chills and adrenaline pumps immediately. So too, as readers or film viewers, we also have phenomenological reactions to rooms in the various levels of a traditional house and to other living spaces.

Living spaces have had various configurations, uses, and therefore various phenomenological implications in different times and countries. There have been places in which travelers might spend the night. There was the centuries-old English hotel that is a combination of pub and traveler’s inn, which has remained functional today because it was and is a relatively safe, respectable, and congenial gathering place for the entire community. There was also the American hotel of large eastern cities, which have in the past been a place of refinement and safety, a place with a fine dining room that is still today considered a place with plenty of security. There was the saloon/hotel of the old American west, which was a dangerous place – a place for men only, a place for fist- or gunfights into which no respectable woman could venture. When many Americans began to own automobiles, they traveled – for work and for vacations – and stayed in motels. Motels were in the wide-open spaces of the American Southwest, where long distances separated towns, and motels were not even in or near a town, but beside a road in the empty countryside – conditions that led to the phenomenological meanings we associate with them.

When I was a child, my family traveled by car throughout the United States, often through isolated areas. In the northeastern United States we stayed at what were called “tourist homes,” homes in which families rented out extra bedrooms to tourists in the summer. In them I felt completely safe.

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¹ Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon, 1969. First published in French under the title *La poetique del’espace* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958. Translation, New York: Orion Press, 1964.

But in the American southwest, we usually stayed in what were then called “tourist camps,” “tourist cabins,” or “tourist courts,” all of which were fairly prevalent from the 1920’s to the 1950’s and were substantially cheaper than hotels. In them I was afraid.

1. The earliest commercial structures were *tourist camps*, which Leon Hale describes as “a somewhat higher accommodation than you’d find in a campground.” The original ones had “a string of unpainted one-room cabins... [whose] walls were mostly screens, with roll-down canvas curtains” for protection when it rained. As Hale remembers, “You need a bathroom? – just step out the front door, turn right, walk about half a country block to the only toilets on the premises. Showers too, if you could stand the cold water”². A slightly better caliber tourist camp had four walls. These tourist camps were cheaper than hotels, As Leon Hale explained, “About the only way to spend the night cheaper would be to camp under a tree somewhere”³.
2. Early *tourist cabins* were just that – a few cabins scattered behind, beside, or around a farmhouse or filling station and a communal shower and bathroom, like the Auto Camp in *It Happened One Night* (1934). Later tourist cabins each had their own bathrooms.
3. The slightly more traditionally configured *tourist courts* of my childhood were arranged in a straight line or in the shape of an “L” or “C” around a grassy area, with, perhaps a small metal swing for children. Each unit consisted of one room and a bathroom and was separated from the next by a parking space or carport.

The units in tourist cabins or tourist courts were widely separated from each other and often at some distance from the office/reception area. In them I felt isolated, vulnerable, and frightened. In those days – the 1940’s and early 1950’s – the rooms did not have phones. One could not dial for help, much less for room service. I always felt that we were out there alone, a feeling that was compounded by the fact that we were in unfamiliar places, on the outskirts of towns or out in the countryside with no houses or even barns in sight. Often we knew no one within hundreds of miles, and the people in cafes and gas stations talked funny. In those tourist courts, I was always aware that if bad men – robbers or killers – attacked us or if we had a fire, we were on our own. That my father kept a loaded pistol under the driver’s seat of our car was no comfort. It only reminded me that he thought he might need it. I only wished he would bring it into the room at night. Whenever we spent the night a hotel, I was relieved. With other people with shouting distance, I felt, perhaps not completely secure, but a lot safer.

4. Tourist courts gradually evolved into *traditional motels*, structures in which all adjacent units are connected and which had head-in parking in front of each unit.

TOURIST COURTS AND MOTELS IN FILM

My early fear of motels was later validated by two films – Orson Well’s 1958 *Touch of Evil* (1958) and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), which was adapted from Robert Bloch’s 1959 novel⁴, These two films supported my conviction that tourist courts were very dangerous places indeed⁵, and

2 “Today, ‘motels’, but back then...”, *Houston Chronicle*, Aug. 20, 2003.

3 Ibid.

4 New York: Simon and Schuster.

5 According to Tom Dirks, in “The Greatest Films” at www.filmsite.org and www.greatestfilms.org, “The film’s screenplay by Joseph Stefano was adapted from a novel of the same name by author Robert Bloch. Remarkably, Bloch’s 1959 novel was based on legendary real-life, Plainfield, Wisconsin psychotic serial killer Edward Gein, whose murderous character also inspired the mother-obsessed farmer in *Deranged* (1974), the Leatherface character in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and serial killer Jame Gumb (“Buffalo Bill”) in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

they established the same conviction in many people – a conviction reinforced by the use of motels in many subsequent films.

In *A Touch of Evil*, which I think of as the Ur-motel film, Ramon Miguel Vargas, an American sheriff (Charlton Heston) leaves his wife Susan (Janet Leigh) alone in the middle of the day in a tourist court in an isolated area of the Mexican countryside. Parking spaces separated the cabins, and there were no other guests. In one of those cabins, any man or woman was an island. After her husband leaves, Susan strips to her underwear and lies down on the bed, but can't sleep because of the loud music that is broadcast into her room. The frightened and ineffectual desk clerk (Dennis Weaver) can do nothing to thwart the thugs, and the wife learns that the phone lines to town have been severed. After she complains to the desk clerk, the thugs taunt her so that both she and the audience expect them to rape and/or kill her. Later the thugs take her to a hotel in town and plant marijuana on her to incriminate her. Although she is not harmed and all turns out well, the sense of foreboding that was generated during the motel sequence remains to haunt the audience long after the film is over.

This frightening sequence in *Touch of Evil* is the source of *Psycho* (1960). The only difference is that the Bates Motel is a *motel*. There are many similarities in the settings of the two movies. The Bates Motel is in an isolated part of the country. There are no other guests. The desk clerk, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins), seems ineffectual and creepy. And the potential victim, Marion Crane, is again played by Janet Leigh. *Psycho*'s suspense is heightened by the fact that she arrives in the middle of the night during a heavy rain and thunderstorm⁶.

But unlike *Touch of Evil*, in which, despite the foreshadowing and aura of evil, no harm befalls Susan, in *Psycho* Marion is brutally murdered in a scene that is one of the most frightening in all of film. Her stabbing in the shower is an event that the audience does not want to and at first is not able to believe, because they do not expect to see a film's main character killed before the first fourth of the film has elapsed.

After the *Psycho* motel murder sequence, as they say, the rest is history. That scene firmly established in the viewing public's mind that motels are the loci of vulnerability and horrible violence. Henceforth, seeing a motel – especially an isolated one – in a film can be guaranteed to generate intense audience suspense.

Various subsequent films then utilized motel settings for scenes of great violence.

In *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967, Warren Beaty and Fay Dunaway, Clyde's brother (Gene Hackman) dies after a shootout with the police when the Barrow gang is discovered in some tourist cabins. Later, what is left of the gang hides out at Pruett's Tourist Court (cabins) in Platte City, Iowa, where they are discovered by the police, who then lie in ambush and kill them in a torrent of gunfire as they drive down the highway after leaving the tourist cabins in an attempt to escape.

In Robert Altman's *Thieves Like Us* (1974)⁷, a fictional couple like Bonnie and Clyde, Bowie (Kieth Carradine) and Keechie (Shelly Duvall) go on a similar bank-robbing spree. But they too are doomed. Because of the development of the mass media of the time, radio reports, and newspaper accounts that include photographs of them, it is inevitable that they will soon be caught. They hole up in one of the tourist cabins that is on a gang member's sister's farm. She houses them in Cabin 13 and calls the police to tell them where Bowie is. The sister hold Keechie in the house and they both watch as the police converge on Cabin 13 and almost demolish the front door with a barrage of bullets and shot gun blasts. The noise of the gunfire mixes with Keechie's hysterical screaming to create an ending of extreme horror.

These stories are based on fact. That tourist cabins, cabins, and tourist courts were not in towns where people might recognize them, were away from police departments, and were located in isolated areas made them ideal hideouts for criminals.

6 The other terrifying scene in the film occurs when Norman Bates traps Lila Crane (Vera Miles) in the basement, a locus of evil, as I discussed in "The Phenomenology of Space: Cellars", at the Sixteenth International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis, July, 1999, in Urbino, Italy.

7 Based on Edward Anderson's novel *Thieves Lie Us*, the source of a 1949 film, *They Live by Night*.

Even in *Kindergarten Cop* (1990), a film that is often comic, the two undercover police officers, John Kimble (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and Phoebe O'Hara (Pamela Reed) stay in a motel in a remote area. When Kimble returns to the motel unannounced and hears noises in the bedroom, both he and the audience expect to find Phoebe being captured or killed. But when he enters the bedroom with gun drawn, he only finds his partner in bed with her fiancé, in a scene that helps to sustain the balance of suspense and comedy that permeates the film.

In his 1985 adaptation of Tom Stoppard's *Fool for Love*, Robert Altman set it in an isolated tourist court in the desert, apparently to draw on the suspense of such a setting. In contrast, the play's 1983 stage premier was set in only one room of a motel, a claustrophobic setting that emphasized the fact that the man and woman, who have the same father and who have had an ongoing incestuous affair, cannot extricate themselves from each other. In the film, the setting of an isolated motel in the desert seems artificially imposed on the play, probably because a one-room setting does not function well in a wide-screen format, unlike the film of Sartre's *No Exit* (1962) in which the small screen format emphasizes the characters' imprisonment and the fact that "Hell is other people." Unfortunately the setting for the film fails to work well both because it loses the sense of claustrophobia and because by the time Altman made the film in 1985, the motel setting had already become a cliché.

In later films the motel remains a cliché.

The structure of *Memento* (2000), which is set in a motel, is clearly intended to confuse the viewer. Not only does the main character suffer from anterograde amnesia, which makes it impossible for him to store new memories, but part of the story is told in black and white in chronological order and part is told in color in reverse chronological order.

The film *Identity* (2001) is by far the bloodiest and most suspenseful of recent films set in motels. The setting is a fairly modern, two-story motel in an isolated area of the Nevada desert. Like *Psycho* the film takes place at night during a rainstorm whose flooding has trapped a group of people there. In *Identity* the isolation of the motel, the rain, and nighttime all echo *Psycho*. The creepy desk clerk is reminiscent of the desk clerk in *A Touch of Evil* and of Bates in *Psycho*. Also the fact that the outdoor scenes are filmed in lighting that often makes them look as if they were filmed in black and white provides even more echoes of *A Touch of Evil* and *Psycho*. In *Identity* not only are the roads in both directions from the motel made impassable by flooding, but, after a while, telephone connections are broken and even the travelers' cell phones go dead, echoing the cut phone lines in *A Touch of Evil*. At the motel, one bloody murder, then another, then another takes place, in a plot reminiscent of Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*. The murders appear to be being committed by a psychopathic serial killer, who was being transported by a policeman from prison to a special hearing of his case. One by one, each of the people at the motel is murdered. Particularly chilling is the fact that one young boy, who was traveling with his adoptive parents, is apparently the son of the serial killer. His presence leaves the audience simultaneously afraid that the boy will come to harm by his biological father and that the boy himself may become as actively evil as his father.

The film involves scenes that show the killer imagining himself to be various characters who are staying at the motel. It is unclear how much, if any of the violence did take place or was only imagined by the convict. But regardless, the setting, the horror of the murders shown, the terror the characters manifest as each begins to fear being the next victim, makes *Identity* the epitome of films in which motels are the setting for horror, violence, psychosis, murder, and extreme terror. The plot is so confusing that it makes no sense.

Both *Memento* and *Identity* have plots that are so convoluted that I suspect that the purpose of each director was to sufficiently confuse the viewer into concluding that because the plots were so complicated, that the film must be conveying some deep psychological meanings. It seems to me that it is the motel setting of each film that dominates the film and generates more suspense than the plot, the characters, or the psychological premises on which the films are based.

In Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* published in 2005 and released as a film in 2007), the motel violence is extreme. The events in the West Texas setting support the old belief that there was "no law west of the Pecos" – because towns and their sheriffs and police were so far apart.

West Texas is an empty, wind-blown desert of wide open, sparsely inhabited space in which early tourist courts, and later, motels thrived. In the novel and film, most of the killer Chigurh's murders occur in motels. A simple catalogue of the slaughter suggests that one is never safe at a motel. It is in or near a motel that Chigurh kills a man in a green guayabera, shoots at but doesn't kill Moss, guns down several strangers during a gun fight, dresses a leg wound he sustained in the gun fight, and kills Moss, two men, and a young girl women outside their motel room, kills the young girl who was hitch-hiking to California, and kills an unidentified Mexican man.

Most recent motel films borrow details from previous films – details that have become clichés. One recent representative and rotten example is *Vacancy*. It has, like *Psycho*, with a car traveling a deserted highway, an isolated motel, and a creepy desk clerk, a seedy motel room, and no other residents. The film borrows from *identity* the almost black screen, which is punctuated by flashes of red. They have no way to escape, cannot make phone calls to the outside world, and are aware that others have been killed there and that they themselves are the next targets for murder.

The writers of *A Touch of Evil* and *Psycho* discovered and utilized the psychologically valid anxiety a traveler used to feel when staying in a tourist court in a desolate and almost unpopulated area, which *Touch of Evil* and *Psycho* demonstrated. Since then, motel violence and fear have become a cliché for horror films such as *Psycho II*, *Psycho III*, *Deranged*, also entitled *Motel Hell*, *Mountain Top Massacre*, *Choking Hazel*, *Hell Ride*, and others. But the association of motels and irrational violence has become so prevalent that I spent the entire time I viewed *Fool for Love* expecting some horror, merely because the setting was a run-down tourist court. I even got uncomfortable when, in *Rainman*, when the Babbit brothers spend the night in an old-fashioned tourist court.

Such details have also been used to produce comedy. Tom Dirks points out that “A satirical parody of scenes from various Hitchcock films, including some from *Psycho*, were included in Mel Brooks' comedy *High Anxiety* (1978)” and he specifies that

“the shower scene itself has been referenced, spoofed and parodied in numerous films, including Brian De Palma's *The Phantom of the Paradise* (1974) and *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Squirm* (1976), Victor Zimmerman's low-budget *Fade to Black* (1980), Tobe Hooper's *The Funhouse* (1981), John De Bello's *Killer Tomatoes Strike Back!* (1990), Martin Walz' *The Killer Condom* (1997, Ger.), Wes Craven's *Scream 2* (1997), Scott Spiegel's *From Dusk Till Dawn 2: Texas Blood Money* (1999), and the animated *Looney Tunes: Back in Action* (2003), in which Bugs acts out with the film's black-and-white footage and a can of Hershey's chocolate syrup poured down the drain⁸.

What interests me is the way fiction and film writers utilize the various levels of a house and other spaces which human beings inhabit in order to bring to our conscious attention the phenomenological emotions and associations that lie just barely below our consciences. These films brought to the viewing public, who might never have stayed in a motel, the fears associated with staying there. Aware or not, we, as members of the same culture, have certain associations with upper rooms, attics, main floors, cellars, residence hotels, huts, and motels. And these films about violence and horror in motels confirm for me why I was so irrationally terrified in motels and tourist courts when I was a young child.

Contemporary motels are large, belong to huge chains, have many security features, have rooms that open onto inner hallways, are in the middle of a city, and are all alike. They are indistinguishable from hotels, except that they provide parking spaces. They are so stereotyped that is hard to be frightened in them. So, do I still feel vulnerable and frightened in a motel? If it is configured, but like the tourist courts and motels of my childhood, on a lonely stretch of a highway, and with doors that open to the outside, well, yes, I do. If it is a Holiday Inn in the middle of a city, I am merely bored.

⁸ Dirks, op. cit.

