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*«The thing looks like a house: perhaps it once was. The walls exude traces of unspoken violence, retained indelibly during an incalculable amount of time; resurfacing at times, unexpectedly. Staring at such an entity, one could be drawn to believe it may be somehow alive and pulsing.»*

## POSTMODERN UNCANNY: FEAR AS A CRITICAL TOOL Chiara Salmini, Silvia Cipelletti

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Chiara Salmini has worked in Los Angeles at the first Pornhub-organized art exhibition, and as a set designer for the artist Trulee Hall in London. She practiced in Berlin and Zurich. She developed this project as a student under the mentorship of Silvia at Accademia di architettura, Mendrisio (AAM) and subsequently in collaboration with her and trans magazine. It was subject of a talk in HIL777, ETH.

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Silvia Cipelletti, born in London 1994, is an architect, currently a teaching and research assistant in AAM in the field of urbanism, film studies and set design. She contributed to this project first as an editor and then co-author.

«There is no place like home.»  
— Dorothy, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

Anyone may be familiar with the feeling of disquiet experienced in the very walls of one's house, when darkness transfigures reassuring objects into threatening omens, shapeless figures emerging from the folds of the unconscious.

It could be described as that angst that disguises what is familiar to us into *something else*, a hidden metaphor for the underlying daemons of our very homely nest. Doubles of ourselves suddenly come to confront their original.

This ensemble of sensations can be ascribed to what goes by the name of *uncanny*.

## I STATE OF THE ART — IS THE UNCANNY BORN IDIOSYNCRATIC?

«The *uncanny* is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.»

— Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche*, 1919

What is the *Uncanny*? The definition retains an underlying obscurity, allowing for innumerable possible new interpretations. It is a slippery concept: «born idiosyncratic», as it seemingly lacks a univocal meaning.<sup>(1)</sup>

If the Romantics associated it with the sublime, Jentsch with intellectual uncertainty<sup>(2)</sup>, Freud traced it back to doubles, repetition and recurrence. The ambiguity of the *Unheimlich* is inherent in its opposite, *Heimlich*, which means «familiar», but also «hidden, and secret».

The first step of Freud's definition process is a dissection of its sinister etymological meaning through the German lexicon. Eerily<sup>(3)</sup> enough, that dictionary had been written by the Grimm brothers, the quintessential narrators of Germanic *Heimlichkeit* and the popular fabulae — on enchanted houses and grandmothers that turn into wolves.

The *Uncanny's* manifestation in the double is intended as a separation from the ego of something considered dangerous or unacceptable. Doppelgangers, twins, alter-egos, spirits, corpses, and again dismembered and mutilated bodies, heads that talk...<sup>(4)</sup>

The more common an object is, the stronger is the fear that there is something wrong about it — but we don't know *why*.

Freud locates the concept of the *Uncanny* in the aesthetic domain, through a catalogue of literary case-studies translated into the psychoanalytic discourse. His research in the aftermath of WWI comes in the line of an attempt to explore the effects of this lugubrious trauma in the collective consciousness of the European *Heimat* and inaugurates an opening of psychoanalysis to societal concerns.<sup>(5)</sup> Placing the *unheimlich* focus on particular time frames such as the post-wars suggests its manifestation as a reaction to a historical trauma, an involuntary return following a collective repression.

Our transversal quest for the *uncanny* in architecture through the lenses of cinema brings us to imply that the return of ornament in postmodern design holds *uncanny* connotations: decoration and symbolism, all that had been

repressed or *buried* with the advent of Modernism, came back with mutated and hyperbolic forms with Postmodernism. Doubles and twins, and therefore architectural replicas, are uncanny, just like the miniature reproduction of the Church of San Miniato, a burial in itself, in the opening of Brian De Palma's *Obsession* (1976).

## II THE HOSTS OF UNCANNY — TWO CASE-STUDIES: *LOST HIGHWAY*, *SCARFACE*

The in-depth study of the *uncanny* and its origins brought us to a critical vision of familiar narratives and the meanings they entail. We chose the role of architecture in film as the medium in order to identify and describe the elements and symptoms of the *uncanny* storytelling.

The two following chapters are dedicated to dialectic variations on the theme of the «private» environment, *host* of everything that is *heimlich*, twisted into the *unheimlich*. The first, *Domestic Horror*, describes the protagonists' villa in David Lynch's *Lost Highway* as a metaphor for the psyche, a stage for the return of the repressed, featuring disbalanced interpersonal relationships and sour gender roles. In the second chapter the iconic villas in *Scarface* become the public facade of the broken privacy of the anti-heroes. The characters, mirrored in the architectural excess of their homes, are means of description of the society they represent.

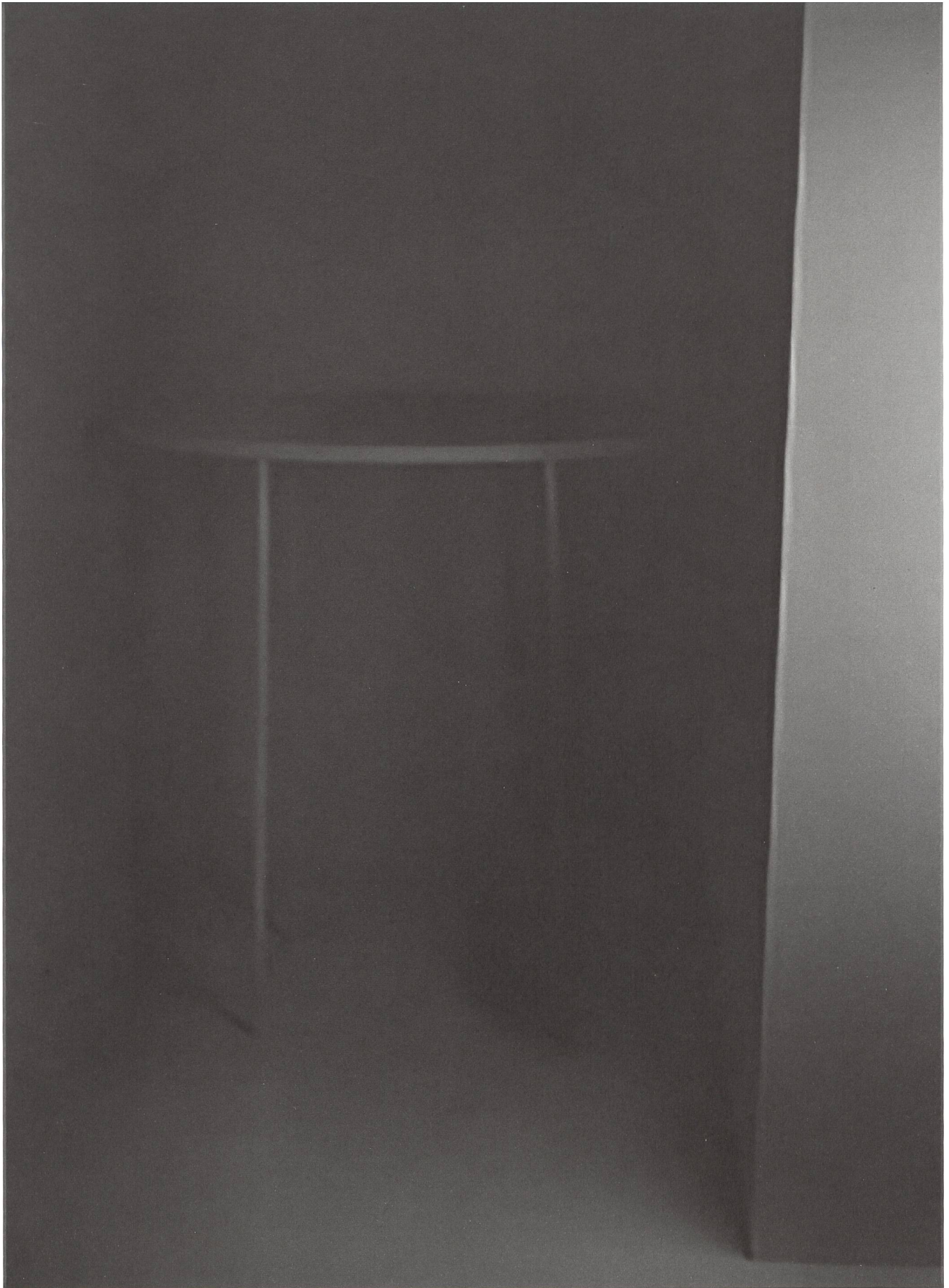
The «*uncanny effect*» is not the objective per se: its dimension goes beyond a means of narration and suspense, becoming a veritable critical and ideological tool. It is precisely the alleged intimacy of the filmed images and spaces that aims to first cause the viewer's identification, and then a selective estrangement from what is represented: the pictures of the directors seem to suggest that «not everything is what it seems». In this case, in truly postmodern fashion, the *uncanny* undermines the ideological framework of concepts such as Home, Man, History, going as far as to the obsession with privacy.

## III DOMESTIC HORROR — *LOST HIGHWAY*

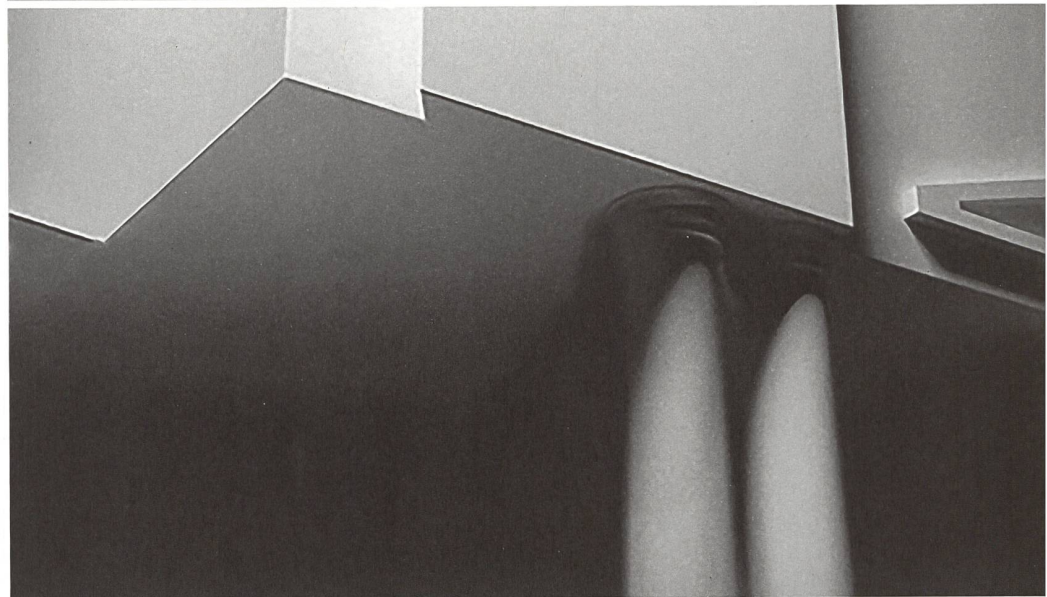
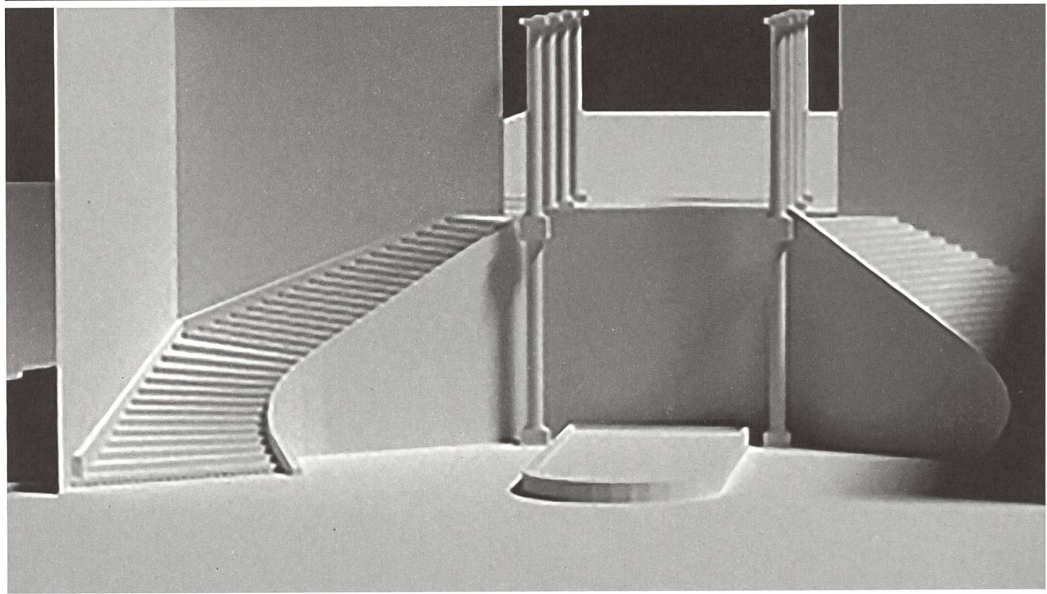
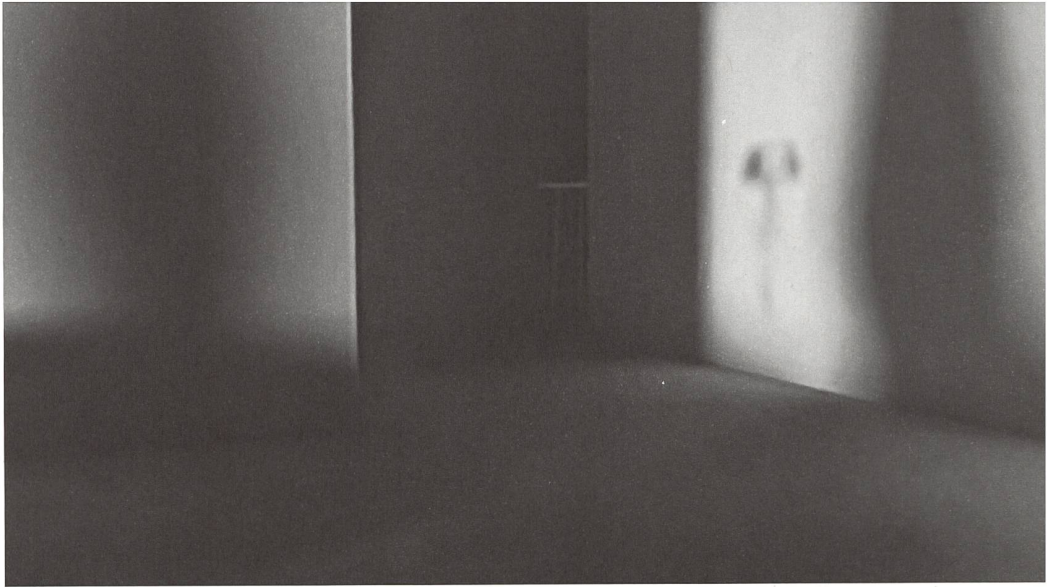
«A 21st century horror-noir. A graphic investigation into parallel identity crises. A world where time is dangerously out of control. A terrifying race along lost highways»

— David Lynch, Barry Gifford, *Lost Highway*, 1997

The films by David Lynch abound in domestic architecture, which is nothing but a physical extension of its inhabitants. *Lost Highway* is perhaps one of the most exemplary films in this sense: Fred's house comes to completely reflect his mind, with its dark and unknown sides and the presences that inhabit them. It is interesting to note that the villa in which the story is set is home to Lynch himself: a fact even more alienating given the murky implications of the story. Fred's story begins in his villa in the Hollywood Hills, in a semi-dark bedroom: the opening shot introduces us to his gloomy and strange world, where every detail suggests an *uncanny* presence. We see a silhouette in a mirror in the darkness, an electric shutter opens, without showing who



Marco Buetikhofer  
2020



Marco Buetikhofer  
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activated it; someone rings the bell. Silence is interrupted at times by precise ambient sounds, which are amplified until they become deafening.

The never confirmed suggestion that Fred and Renée are not alone in the house is a clear uncanny artifice; in Burke's words: «When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes». (6) As Fred drenches in the shadows of the corridor, we get the feeling that *something* is happening, or that he sees *someone*, but neither we nor he are fully aware of *what*. Here lies the uncanny deliberately sought by the director, a stylistic tool to express and amplify the scope of domestic horror.

Fred Madison's modernist house — built by none other than Lloyd Wright, son of Frank Lloyd Wright — is inscribed in a tradition of film criticism to the ideals of the Modern Movement crystallized in the Athens Charter of 1933. (7) An architecture so Apollonian, however, presupposed a repressed Dionysiac, and the forms of the uncanny expressed in postmodern culture are nothing more than a denunciation of the failure of this ideal.

It is relevant in this context to cite Shéhérazade and Aureli's study on familiar horror, in which the authors identify the symptoms of the social inequalities of the Modern Age in the very structure of the bourgeois house. (8) The true hidden demon would be the shadow of the original injustice necessary for the survival of capitalism, buried within the walls of the single family house with its division into public and private, day and night, male and female.

The *uncanny* glances from the corridor of the Madison house, in the asymmetrical power relationship between man and woman geometrically symbolized by the stature of Fred compared to Renée's: when they speak next to the corner table in the living room, he dominates her menacingly against the background of forcibly clichéd conversations — uncanny quotes from Hollywood's golden age films and the 1950s soap operas.

For the production of *Lost Highway* the director himself intervened on the architecture of the house: the windows in the living room were reduced to become slits closed to the outside world, a sign of Fred's defensive attitude, and a deliberately long corridor was added, covered with non-reflective materials, further obscured by the black curtain in the room.

In an interview with the cinematographer Pete Deming we read that the ceilings of the Madison house are no more than eight feet high, but it is never clear to the viewer what the true dimensions of the spaces are. At times, the filming of the living room makes the human figures look outscaled: this is partly due to the position of the camera and the angle of the lens, partly to the actual sizing of the objects, deliberately disproportionate. The cabinet that shields the entrance staircase has the design of a low TV case, but the height is that of a shelf, so that every time Fred is filmed next to it he appears small and suffocated, almost threatened by furniture.

This motif of disproportion is repeated throughout the film, as in Andy's villa: next to the staircase, in the center of the frame, two tiny armchairs and an oversized cabinet confront each other in an uncomfortable relationship, eternally condemned to incommunicability. Deming said of the film

that «there was a constant feeling that something could get out of the background, leaving the viewer in doubt. The film works below the surface while observing it». (9)

Home to the uncanny — if it owns one — is a wooden shack in the middle of the Californian desert, a distorted version of the villa on the Hollywood Hills, equipped with an anti-living room furnished with ruined and dust-covered sofas, exploding and imploding seamlessly in time. The Mystery Man is a paranormal intrusion into the neo-noir, arriving to reveal and destroy the psyche of the hero — the classic bourgeois hero, who believes himself to be the victim of the Femme Fatale, is actually an aggressive, irrational being who defends his supposedly endangered male role. So the classical 50s' noir returns in *Lost Highway* in mutated and uncanny forms, without redeeming neither the victim nor the executioner.

#### IV OVERABUNDANCE AS THE TRAGIC TWIST OF REPETITION — HYBRIS AND CLIMAX: SCARFACE

*«In the story of The Ring of Polycrates, the guest  
turns away from his friend with horror because  
he sees that his every wish is at once fulfilled,  
his every care immediately removed by kindly fate.  
His host has become uncanny to him.»*  
— Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche*

The 1983 *Scarface* film, directed by Brian De Palma and written by Oliver Stone, tells the story of the rise and fall of Cuban boss Tony Montana, played by Al Pacino and inspired by the characters of Richard III and Narcissus. (10) In his essay *De Palma's Postmodern Scarface and the Simulacrum of Class* (1993), Ronald Bogue locates this iconic anti-hero in a wider critical picture of the world of which he evokes the excesses of greed, narcissism and oppression: the society of late capitalism.

Hence we have chosen this movie to introduce the discourse on the Depalmanian *Unheimlich*.

We have previously anticipated how Postmodern architecture, with its exaggerated citations, its obsession with superficiality and redundant imagery, is the result of an aesthetic return process. Brian De Palma's camera materializes a series of haunted houses and their cursed inhabitants: these homes are neither welcoming nor domestic, because their owners do not want to be considered *common* in the first place.

The intrusion of public and representative forms into private architecture is meant to express primordial impulses of oppression. The luxurious villa owned by Tony Montana is full of his status symbols, both magniloquent and artificial. The villa, named *Little Paradise*, was built in 1906 by the architect Bertram Goodhue in full revival style, with ceilings inspired by San Giovanni in Laterano, a «Byzantine» room and hyperbolic replicas of classical art. A return to architectural eclecticism, contaminated by the modernist refusal of ornament and Tony's baroque and eccentric taste. It is consequential, therefore, that his antagonist's home is a strangely modernist, international-style villa, ostenta-

tiously decorated with (literal) pieces of modern art.<sup>(11)</sup> This location has its own symbolic history: known as the *Florida White House*, it was owned in the 70s by Richard Nixon, who took refuge there during the Watergate scandal. The president was allegedly having tight links with the mafia, and in particular with some Miami-resident bosses with whom he would meet in the villa located in Key Biscayne, Florida.

Architecture as a form of representation and consolidation of power is truly a disturbing *revenant* if, in 1990, the mafia boss Walter Schiavone ordered his architect to build a new «Villa Scarface» in Casal di Principe: an unsettling Doppelgänger that merges fiction into reality, an identical replica down to the last detail, *haunted* perhaps: six years after its construction, its owner was sentenced to life in prison.

If Frank's Modernism is defeated by Tony's Postmodernism, Tony himself is killed at the hand of Alejandro Sosa, member of a gang of Colombian criminals, straight back to the protagonist's *heimlich* roots. In an uncanny metaphor of a broader spectrum, it seems appropriate to quote Anthony Vidler in relation to the wall paintings that are found outside Tony's studio: they are copies of the frescoes of the Villa dei Misteri in Pompeii. As Vidler states<sup>(12)</sup>, Pompeii itself symbolizes the «return of the removed» in architecture: together with the city emerged artistic finds related to Dionysian mystery cults, casting doubt on a literary tradition that identified in the ancient world the apex of philosophical rationality. The return of the dark Dionysian to challenge Apollonian clarity is a metaphor for the postmodern revenge on the modern<sup>(13)</sup> and, lastly, according to Bogue, for *Scarface*, which takes pleasure in destroying the capitalist myth of the «American dream».

De Palma's criticism, however, does not propose an alternative meta-narrative: like the countless mirrors at the Babylon Club or the surveillance videos in Tony's office, the images, even if multiplied exponentially, do not help the characters to better understand reality. They are only images that refer to other images, without actual connection to the real.

The limit and the strength of the postmodern relativistic vision consists in the annulment of any point of reference, which results in an ethical and spatial disorientation. *Scarface* criticizes both the modern and the postmodern vision: Frank and Tony are both antagonists, De Palma's cinematic eye portrays them with irony, celebrating their spectacular sacrifice. The villa and the Babylon Club are destroyed by a primitive fury, the faces of men take on the appearance of satyrs and silenes, the mirrors are shattered without remedy and Narcissus falls into his spring.

The film itself is a *Stairway to Nowhere*, and like that of the Nautilus Club in Miami<sup>(14)</sup>, it does not seem to offer any solution other than the death drive of Tony himself; however, in the meantime, he entertains the viewer.

## V INTEMPESTA NOCTE — WHERE WERE WE AT?

«We've met before, haven't we?»  
— Mystery Man, *Lost Highway*

What had begun as a psychoanalytic, *synesthetic* deviation into the realm of aesthetic, already precipitated the uncanny into history and sociology: the *Unheimlich* seems to contaminate everything it touches — just like another infamous king, the mythological Mida. The postmodern tendency to quote the forms of classical architecture is a symptom of the revenge on the dogmas of the Enlightenment. This conflation of eras and ideological currents can be paralleled to the uncanny locations that flatten the spatial-temporal curve, assuming an out-of-time identity; a dimension where actions almost fatedly repeat themselves, turning the agents into unavoidable victims of destiny.

One feels the same while hearing a Shakespearean tragedy over and over again: the joke never gets old, the story maintains intact its existential meaning.

Scarface can be seen by all means as a postmodern remake of a Shakespearean tragedy: Tony's killers are conjured from the Pompeii frescoes like the ghosts for Richard III in the Tower of London. The spatio-temporal flattening begins with eclectic architecture, a conjunction of styles seemingly unrelated in a cornucopia of epochs. Like Macbeth, the protagonist is besieged by an army of faceless figures, whose deaths are much less tragic than his own; it's just an oracle, we are entering an *off-time* sequence.

Following Mark Fisher's notes on *The Shining*, we borrow the concept of aeonic time, «a kind of recording system in which the violence, atrocity and misery that has happened in the building is stored up and played back...»<sup>(15)</sup>

*Lost Highway* is a great catalogue of such locations: these topographical, cinematic black holes evoke the ever-oppressive phantasms of violence. Once the portal is entered, another looping dimension of time is opened — as in the Moebius stripe, which is the metaphor for the film's plot.

The individuals that are affected by the energy of the place seem to suddenly lack individuality, repeating the actions of their predecessors. At the same time, their attention and agreement is required — Mystery Man: «you let me in» — and a slight variation on the recurrence of events takes place. *Wrong copies* are created and overlapped; time and space are flattened, but infinitely layered.

If evoking a doppelgänger is *unheimlich*, then what happens in the moment and place where it is conjured? Are some places inscribed with a particular force that created a disjointed time — or maybe, «too adjoined»...?

«The time is out of joint: time is disarticulated,  
dislocated, dislodged, time is run down,  
on the run and run down»  
— Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 1993