

David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* and the Los Angeles Uncanny

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ABSTRACT

Unlike other American metropolises, Los Angeles' identity is inextricably intertwined with moving images and postmodernism, thereby ascribing the city with an ahistorical character and evoking a sense of the uncanny—a subject rooted in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. An interdisciplinary study of various theories of the uncanny synthesizes a new Los Angeles Uncanny that acknowledges the complexities of urban experiences that are unique to the City of Angels. David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) is a film that fundamentally relies on its setting in Los Angeles for its metaexploration of the implications of the media and entertainment industry. Placing the synthesized theory in conversation with Lynch's film unveils the hidden histories and identities of Los Angeles—the suppression of which, this essay argues, is ultimately responsible for the uncanniness and horror experienced in *Mulholland Drive*.

The uncanny—a concept that intertwines the strange and familiar—has long fascinated scholars, evolving from its origins in German psychiatry and Freudian psychoanalysis to a rich field of study that permeates modern humanities, revealing the eerie intersections between our known world and its hidden depths. The term first originated from psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch in *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* and was then reanalyzed by Sigmund Freud in his essay *The Uncanny*. While the “uncanny” was often translated to mean “unhomely,” the German word for it—*unheimlich*—deconstructed more literally translates to “unconcealed” or “un-secret.” Under this repositioning, Freud describes the uncanny to mean something which “ought to have remained...secret and hidden but has come to light” (224). It is a paradoxical compound of the strange and the familiar—“that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (Vidler 7). As a Freudian concept, the uncanny has been a source for much theory and analysis, the continued augmentation of which now includes many studies within the humanities including architecture, queer studies, film studies, urban studies, etc. These “uncanny studies” have only expanded as experiences of the modern continue to defamiliarize a world once thought to

be understood and “prepare the way for its inevitable return in disturbing, unrecognised form” (Collins and Jervis 4).

Urbanization, perhaps one of the most widely felt phenomena of modernism, continues to shift our construction of cities as they rapidly grow to accommodate increasing populations. This urbanization, despite maximizing the proximity between citizens, has also raised questions about feelings of anxieties, estrangement, and dissociation—experiences and sentiments often attributed explicitly to urban cities (Huskinson 1). The city allows the co-existence of millions of people but produces minimal interpersonal interactions. The urban uncanny, then, might “denote the slippage or mismatch between our expectations of the city, as the organised and familiar setting for citizens...and the often surprising and unsettling experiences it can evoke” (1). These uncanny experiences signal to something dormant and hidden, waiting to expose itself.

My intent with this contextualization of the urban uncanny is its application to David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), a film about an amnesiac woman who later names herself Rita after suffering a car crash in Los Angeles. In this initial scene, we are introduced to Rita (Laura Harring) in the context of the cityscape,

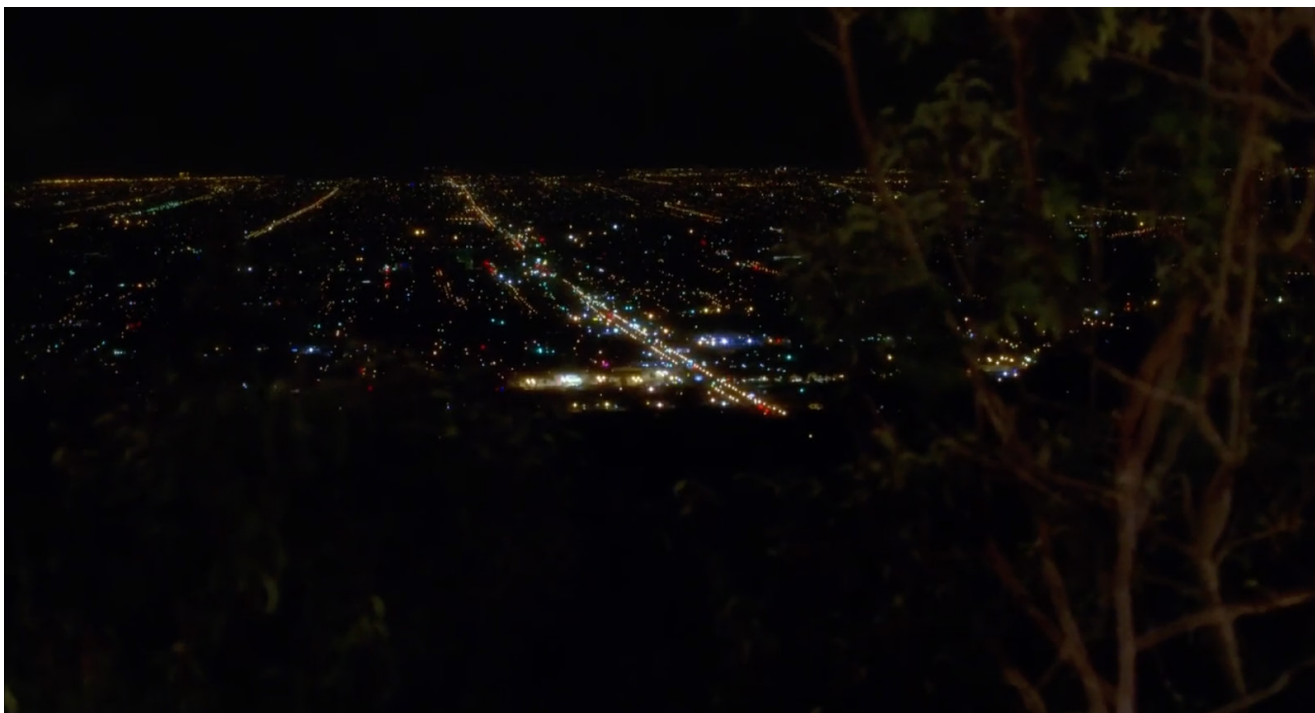


Fig. 1 | Cityscape view from the site of Rita's crash in *Mulholland Drive*, 00:07:16. Universal Pictures, 2001.

which captures the sprawling urban expanse of the city at night. The shot, taken from the site of Rita's car crash, sets the stage for the film's exploration of the uncanny within an urban context (Fig. 1). The vast, illuminated grid of the city appears both mesmerizing and disorienting, highlighting the dual nature of Los Angeles as a beacon of dreams and a labyrinth of hidden truths. The framing of the shot through the foliage adds an element of voyeurism and concealment. It implies that we are peering into a world where much remains hidden beneath the surface, aligning with Freud's notion of the uncanny as something that should have stayed hidden but has come to light—one of the most conspicuous being the mystery of Rita's true identity which triggers her friendship with Betty (Naomi Watts), an aspiring actress who has just moved to the city to pursue her goals. *Mulholland Drive* follows the two women as they attempt to figure out who Rita is. An unconventional movie that toys with the viewer's perception of time, reality, identity, and narrative, *Mulholland Drive* has been subject to much academic analyses. With elements of the mystery, horror, and thriller genres (in addition to the David Lynch branding), it can also be opened up to studies of the uncanny—specifically, in this case, the urban uncanny. Particularly, *Mulholland Drive*'s setting in Los Angeles unlocks a reading of Lynch's movie as an essay film dissecting the role of Los Angeles in the aforementioned urban uncanny. Through this essentialization of the city in *Mulholland Drive* emerges a concept of the uncanny that is especially unique to Los Angeles—interacting with the hidden, unsettling realities beneath the city's historicism, glamorous surface, and architecture.

To first break down why Los Angeles is distinct from other major urban cities like New York, the romanticization of Los Angeles is largely dominated by perceptions of Hollywood and

the city's relationship with the movie camera and filmmaking. This puts Los Angeles in a rather unique position relative to modernism, enforcing a “distinctively post-industrial and post-modern character”—“an exceptional urban paradigm in whose image more and more of the world's urban landscapes are being reshaped every day” (Shiel 16). Upon the shift from the modern to postmodern, Los Angeles displaced Chicago as the epitome of twentieth century urbanism and the “forerunner to postmodern urbanism” (Maher 15).

But despite there being plenty of writing on the connections between the uncanny and modernism and urbanism—with Jo Collins and John Jervis even going as far as to describe the uncanny as a “distinctively *modern* experience” in their book *Uncanny Modernity*—there appears to be little literature on the city of Los Angeles and the uncanny. In Lucy Huskinson's collection of essays entitled *The Urban Uncanny*, there are writings on various urban cities from Budapest to New York, but little to no reference to Los Angeles, which was considered to be an “urban anomaly” for much of its development (15). This paper attempts to remedy that gap. By placing *Mulholland Drive* in dialogue with the earlier-established theory of the urban uncanny, we can analyze how the uncanny of Lynch's film can be traced back to Los Angeles's repressed or overlooked identities and histories in favour of a modernized and romanticized self-image.

Placed in conversation with Anthony Vidler's writings on *The Architectural Uncanny*, we can centre the urban uncanny on the development of urban spaces. The architectural uncanny of urbanism would, according to Vidler, derive from the empty spaces “appropriated” by urbanism and “given over to architecture, which is forced, in the absence of a lived past, to search for posthistorical grounds on which to base an ‘authentic’ home for



Fig. 2 | Dan and Herb inside of Winkie's Diner in *Mulholland Drive*, 00:12:23. Universal Pictures, 2001.

society" (Vidler 13). This ultimately culminates into uncanny experiences reminding us of "possibilities that are latent within, and other perspectives and orientations to life" (Huskinson 3).

This uncanny navigation between one's expectations of the city as a place of organization and its unsettling experiences is most potent in the initial scene at the Winkie's diner. The first clip of this scene unmistakably orients the viewer to its location: Sunset Boulevard, but nothing else really situates the viewer in this particular diner. Any following shot of its interior is relative to the two men we are immediately introduced to seated at a booth, Dan (Patrick Fischler) and Herb (Michael Cooke). Dan initiates the conversation by saying, "I just wanted to come here." Herb, the second man, responds, "To Winkie's?" to which Dan clarifies, "This Winkie's," which, as we already know, is the Winkie's on Sunset Boulevard. Dan, evidently petrified for some reason unknown to us at the moment, then begins a spiel about a recurring dream about a frightening man in the back of the same Winkie's they are dining at, emphasizing his desire to settle his paranoia. Their conversation further emphasizes the centrality of the location to this clip but solely from the perspective of Dan's imagination and his perceived reality.

Through his nightmare, Dan has caught a glimpse of the very mismatch between city and person referenced by the urban uncanny. As the film has already established, Dan and Herb are on Sunset Boulevard, which is one of the most well-known streets in Hollywood and a popular tourist destination. Here, the city has much at stake in upholding its romanticized character. To expose the hidden here would be to remove the city's rose-tinted filter. After Dan recounts his dream and reveals he has come to Winkie's to rid himself of "this god-awful feeling," Herb stands up from his seat at the booth assertively. Once he leaves the shot, the camera

cuts back to Dan's face, filled with apprehension. He pauses before turning his head back over his shoulder to see Herb standing by the cash register, exactly like he had just previously described in his dream. When he turns his head back around to look forward, the dread settles in his face as he closes his eyes in fear. Dan's experience of the uncanny is not just a dream obstructed from reality. It is a "mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming" (Vidler 11). This manifestation of this elision compels both Dan and the viewer to question the boundaries of the real and the unreal in Hollywood's carefully curated narrative (Fig. 2).

While general trends can be determined within the urbanization of most major American cities on the east, they are usually not applicable to Los Angeles. As aforementioned, Los Angeles has been historically considered to be an exception to the metropolitanization of the twentieth century and has been known *more* for straying from the traditional urban characteristics of cities like Chicago, New York, Detroit, Boston, and Philadelphia (Maher 13). Los Angeles' antithesis to other urban American cities contextualized by the centralization of estrangement and defamiliarization to the uncanny already sets it up in a peculiar situation relative to the urban uncanny. Its location in southern California and the dominance of Hollywood on its identity not only place it in a position of estrangement physically but also culturally, which ensued in a contentious process over putting Los Angeles on the map in the early to mid-twentieth century (Shiel 69).

To delve deeper into the earlier mentioned observation of Los Angeles and modernism, because Los Angeles is so heavily associated with filmmaking, and cinema has been a "key social and historical phenomena...symptomatic of modernity," through



Fig. 3 | The back of Winkie's Diner in *Mulholland Drive*, 00:16:15. Universal Pictures, 2001.

transitive property, Los Angeles, then, is the American city most synonymous with modernism and its various stages throughout the twentieth century—an association that has only strengthened as Hollywood has continued to monopolize the film industry even in the twenty-first century (Maher 23). This attachment of the “modern” to Los Angeles has resulted in general critiques and prejudices about its “monotonous placelessness,” “contemporary condition,” “transience and lack of history” (Shiel 15, 16). While Shiel acknowledges the film history in Los Angeles in which early motion pictures are able to conjure memories that no longer exist and that most of us have never experienced, he also points to the city’s history of the reinforcement of middle-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemony in films, which has been contingent on the appropriation and erasure of pre-modern histories of Native, Spanish, and Mexican Californians and an ignorance to residents living under the poverty line (8).

Back at Winkie’s, as Dan and Herb head toward the back of the diner, they pass by a sign labeled “Entrance” with “Use the front door” written above it and an arrow pointing in the opposite way of which they are walking. There are two signs here indicating to Dan and Herb that they are going in a direction they are not supposed to—warning them of the back. The back is intended for things that are not meant to be seen. The two men proceed to go behind Winkie’s anyway. The camera, filmed from Dan’s perspective, gives the audience an overview: garbage cans with overflowing trash—no cityscape, no Hollywood sign (Fig. 3). This perverts the reputation Los Angeles has meticulously attempted to build for itself and foreshadows the impending horror the two men are about to confront. The overflowing trash points to the accumulation of the city’s discarded and repressed elements, both literally and metaphorically. As Dan and Herb move closer to this

concealed area, the mundane and neglected surroundings enhance the uncanny feeling—transforming an ordinary space into one filled with dread and suspense. Simultaneously, upon this collapse between dream and reality, the audience is forced to confront their own assumptions about the city. This is not the Hollywood people like Betty dream of living in. By leading the characters (and the viewers) into this grim setting, Lynch effectively sets the stage for the revelation of the terror lurking in the shadows.

When Dan and Herb reach the very back past the garbage cans, the man from Dan’s dream appears, coinciding with an abrupt muffled sound, before Dan collapses to his death. If this abrupt sound is meant to be associated with the startling presence of the man behind Winkie’s, then we can reasonably conclude it to also delineate the moment we realize the world of dream, intended to be kept separate from reality, is no longer separate from reality. Furthermore, in another conditional statement, if, according to Freud, dreams are channels for unconscious and repressed sentiments, then their physical rupture into reality in *Mulholland Drive* might mean the materialization or exposure of the hidden or suppressed (44). In Dan’s case, placed in the context of the urban uncanny, the man from his dream—who we can deduce by the end of the film to be an unhoused person living behind Winkie’s—represents the sudden rupture from a purposefully fabricated to an unfiltered, unconcealed Los Angeles that threatens the artificial harmony between city and citizen. This figure, much like the trash-strewn alleyway, represents the unwanted and the unseen—elements of the city that defy its cultivated image. The scene’s layout, therefore, is not just a backdrop but an integral part of the narrative that deepens the sense of unease and anticipation, foreshadowing the nightmare that is about to become reality.

From this perspective, Los Angeles' seeming "absence of a lived past" would manifest in the form of an attempted "contemporary memory theater" without a past (Vidler 183, 201). But the urban uncanny's mismatch between the city and its citizens' habitation, predicated upon a "return of the repressed" that forces the ego to confront that past betrays itself via Los Angeles' suppressed histories and identities (Huskinson 2). In short, in order to build its current image of modernity, as the Los Angeles metropolis was being formed, its prior indigenous and cultural histories were forced to go into hiding to institute the "essential complicity of the architect's project and the collective memory from which it derives" (Vidler 204). In place of this repressed history was a modern film history that established Los Angeles as the "narcissistic...self-referential and self-promoting" city that we know today, "driven by the production and consumption of images" (Shiel 15). Not unsurprisingly, this carefully constructed reputation developed alongside the city's just-as-carefully constructed urban space and grid plans that are infamously exclusionary to unhoused residents (Nally). These methodically compartmentalized areas offer suggestions for where citizens can travel to but are often negotiated by those same citizens, once again exposing an uncanny slippage between the city and its inhabitants' lived experiences. In their subjective negotiations of Los Angeles spaces and grids, citizens open themselves to the urban uncanny of the very suppressed identities the city has attempted to keep concealed.

This manufactured perception of Los Angeles, dependent on its relationship to Hollywood and film, is most obvious when Betty first arrives at the Los Angeles International Airport. Her entrance in *Mulholland Drive* is emblematic of an idealized Los Angeles (Fig. 4a). She is literally radiant—a sharp contrast to Rita's introduction, shrouded in darkness and mystery (Fig. 4b). This spotlight on Betty is constant until she visits Club Silencio with Rita. The film's emphasis on light through Betty's experience of Los Angeles is evocative of the historical zoning of filmmaking studios as "light industrial" areas in Los Angeles, which is also, not accidentally, what the city was and still is most associated with. These zones have allowed the filmmaking process to exploit light in both its natural and artificial forms (Martin 52). Here, Betty is the aspiring star still unknowingly subject to the romanticization of Los Angeles and the city's architecture. Thus, the light here highlights, quite literally, its own cruciality in both architecture and cinema. What is meant to mimic a natural spotlight on Betty in this scene then simultaneously evokes a sense of cinematic commodification as she arrives to the city to live a life behind the camera and under the lights.

To clarify, the totality of this characterization of Los Angeles does not make an argument about Lynch's knowledge of Los Angeles history and cultural landscape or his filmic intentions—which would be a disservice to his deliberate ambiguity with his filmography—but rather to advance the essentiality of Los Angeles in *Mulholland Drive* via its unique relation to the urban uncanny.

In one of the final sequences before Betty becomes Diane and Rita becomes Camilla, Betty and Rita go to Club Silencio, located in downtown Los Angeles. In this club, illusions are unmasked and



Figs. 4a & 4b | Betty's and Rita's character introduction in *Mulholland Drive*, respectively, 00:18:37, 00:05:13. Universal Pictures, 2001.

deceptions are revealed—the perfect foundations for the "return of the repressed." As Betty and Rita approach the club, the camera catches an incomplete shot of the US Bank Tower, the tallest building in the area (Fig. 5), seemingly emphasizing the rigid grid these towers are built on, "highlighting a tension between downtown's intensely controlled spaces and the fluidity of Mulholland Drive" (Martin 56). The grid entails the most precise yet repetitive compartmentalization of space. "Los Angeles' grid...in Lynch's spatial pantheon" is a "form of repetition that seduces, circulates, and subverts reality" (56). This subversion of reality is what Betty falls victim to, what Dan's dream exposes, and what the urban uncanny is grounded upon.

To further dissect the relevance of Club Silencio within the context of "the repressed," the club's exposé on illusions might serve as a parallel to the imminent exposure of Betty's presumed fantasmatic life, but it can also serve as a parallel to the urban uncanny that threatens to unveil the city's "repressed" and estrange one from their conceptions and understandings of Los Angeles. As previously mentioned, the urbanization of Los Angeles was built on the suppression of Indigenous, Spanish, and Mexican Californian history—the disclosure of which triggers the urban uncanny and a recollection of "the old city, its old monuments, its traditional significance, which were all seen as being too implicated with the economic, social, political, and medical problems of the old world to justify retention" (Vidler 179). Before Betty and Rita go to Club Silencio, Rita mutters Spanish phrases in her sleep that prompt their journey into downtown Los Angeles in the middle of the night. We can conclude from the announcements made and the singer's rendition of "Crying" that Club Silencio is a Spanish club. Rita's connection to this club can be reasoned

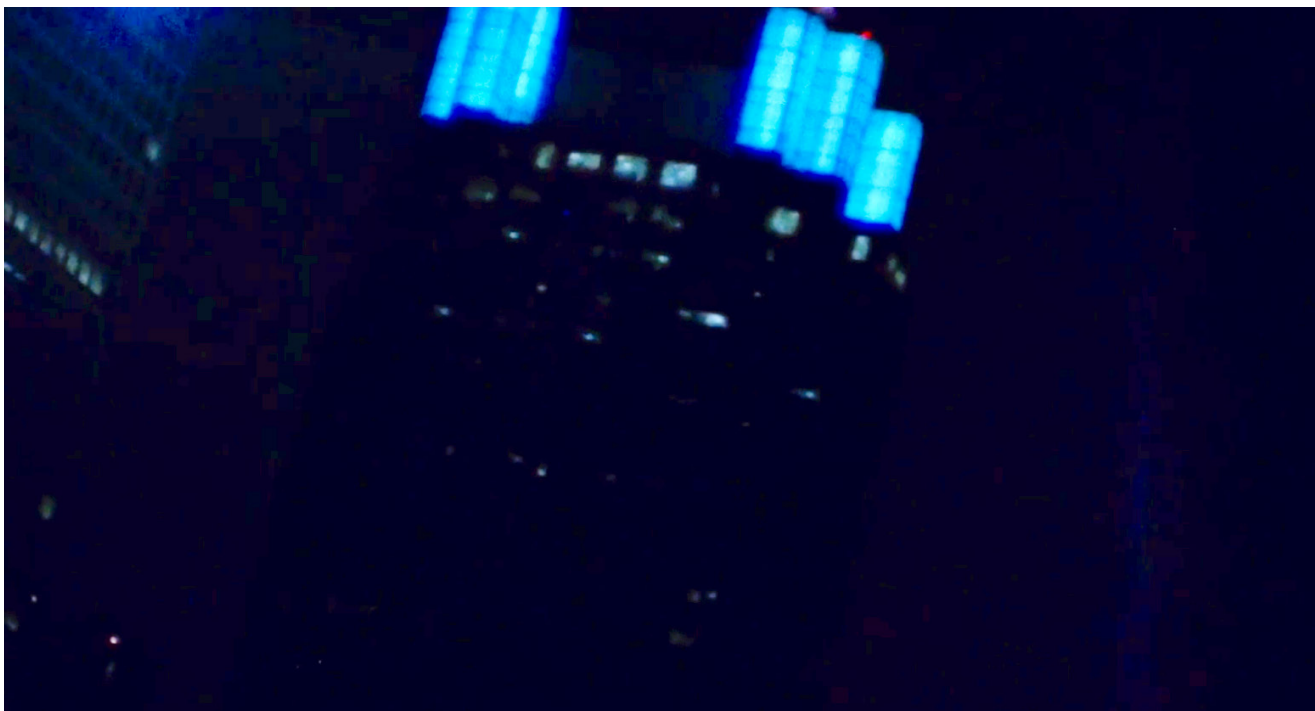


Fig. 5 | During Betty and Rita's drive to Club Silencio in *Mulholland Drive*, 01:44:46. Universal Pictures, 2001.

from her discovered heritage, which, up until this point, has been suppressed by her amnesiac state in Betty's presumed fantasy. She finally realizes her "true voice, and it is a Spanish one" (Martin 60). Here, Rita's forcible repression of her identity by Betty is analogous to the forced suppression of Los Angeles' pre-metropolis histories by Hollywood.

The modernization and urbanization of Los Angeles have synonymized it with Hollywood and the film industry. However, a closer inspection of the city and its situation within society and history reveals additional layers beneath the domination of

modern, white bourgeois Hollywood. By using the urban uncanny to read Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, we can better comprehend urban experiences unique to Los Angeles and thus unconceal what has been hidden through the development of the metropolis. These uncanny ruptures in the city's construction that are initially unsettling and destabilizing to the relationship between city and citizen, however, can also lead to better insights and understandings that open up opportunities for new and more authentic experiences of the city. ■

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