It is widely acknowledged among film scholars that Lynch’s 2001 *neo-noir Mulholland Drive* is richly infused with intertextual references and homages — most notably to Charles Vidor’s *Gilda* (1946), Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958), and Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966). What is less recognised is the extent to which J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s 1872 Gothic novella *Carmilla* has also influenced *Mulholland Drive*. This article focuses on the dynamics of the relationship between *Carmilla* and *Mulholland Drive*, particularly the formation of *femme fatale* Camilla Rhodes (played by Laura Elena Harring), with the aim of establishing how the Gothic shapes the viewing experience of the film. I argue that not only are there striking narrative similarities between the texts, but lying at the heart of both *Carmilla* and *Mulholland Drive* is the uncanny. By drawing on this elusive and eerie feeling, Lynch successfully introduces an archetypal quality both to Camilla and *Mulholland Drive* as a whole, which in turn contributes to powerful sensations of desire, dread, nostalgia, and “noirness” that are aroused by the film. As such *Mulholland Drive* emerges not only as a compelling work of art, but also a deeply evocative cinematic experience. I begin by providing a brief overview of Le Fanu’s Gothic tale and establish its formative influence on later cinematic texts. I then present a synopsis of *Mulholland Drive* before exploring the rich interrelationship the film has with *Carmilla*.

**Carmilla and the Lesbian Vampire**

*Carmilla* is narrated from the perspective of a sheltered nineteen-year-old girl called Laura, who lives in an isolated Styrian castle with her father. After a bizarre event involving a carriage accident, a young woman named Carmilla is left in the care of Laura’s father. Carmilla is beautiful and charming, but she is an enigma; her origins and even her surname remain a mystery. Though Laura identifies a number of peculiarities about her new friend’s behaviour (such as her strange, intense moods, languid body movements, and other irregular habits), the two women are captivated with each other, quickly falling in love. However, despite Carmilla’s harmless and fragile appearance, she is not what she seems. She is a one hundred and fifty year old vampire called Mircalla, Countess Karnstein (also known as Millarca — both anagrams of Carmilla), who preys on adolescent women, seducing them while feeding off their blood as they sleep. In spite of the deep affection she claims to have for Laura, Carmilla is compelled to slowly bleed her dry. This takes its physical toll on Laura who becomes progressively pallid and lethargic, before Carmilla’s true identity is revealed and she is slain.

Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* is monumental, not only for popularising the female vampire, but for producing a sexually alluring creature that actively seeks out and seduces other women. Cinematically, the myth of the lesbian vampire has been drawn on extensively by film makers. One of the earliest female centred vampire movies to contain connotations of same-sex desire is Lambert Hilyer’s *Dracula’s Daughter* (1936). However, it was in the 1960s and 1970s that the spectre of the lesbian vampire exploded on screen. In part a response to the abolishment of Motion Picture Code strictures (Baker 554) and fuelled by latent anxieties about second wave feminist activism (Zimmerman 23–4), films of this cycle blended horror with erotica, reworking the lesbian vampire as a “male pornographic fantasy” (Weiss 87). These productions draw on *Carmilla* in varying degrees. In most, the resemblance is purely thematic; others draw on Le Fanu’s novella slightly more directly. In Roger Vadim’s *Et Mourir de Plaisir* (1960) an aristocratic woman called Carmilla becomes possessed by her vampire ancestor Millarca von Karnstein. In Roy Ward Baker’s *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) Carmilla kills Laura before seducing a girl named Emma whom...
she encounters after a mysterious carriage breakdown.

However, the undead Gothic lady has not only made a transition from literature to screen. The figure also transcends the realm of horror, venturing into other cinematic styles and genres as a mortal vampire whose sexuality is a source of malevolence (Weiss 96–7). A well-known early example is Frank Powell’s *A Fool There Was* (1915), starring Theda Barra as “The Vampire,” an alluring seductress who targets wealthy men, draining them of both their money and dignity (as opposed to their blood), reducing them to madness, alcoholism, and suicide. Other famous “vamps,” as these deadly women came to be known, include the characters played by Marlene Dietrich such as Concha Pérez in Joseph von Sternberg’s *The Devil is a Woman* (1935). With the emergence of *film noir* in the early 1940s, the vamp metamorphosed into the *femme fatale*, who like her predecessors, takes the form of a human vampire who uses her sexuality to seduce her unwitting victims before destroying them. The deadly woman of this era functions as a prototype for *neo-noir* incarnations of the sexually alluring *fatale* figure, whose popularity resurfaced in the early 1980s with productions such as Lawrence Kasdan’s *Body Heat* (1981), a film commonly regarded as a remake of Billy Wilder’s 1944 classic *noir* *Double Indemnity* (Bould et al. 4; Tasker 118). Like the lesbian vampires of 1960s–1970s horror, the *neo-noir femme fatale* is commonly aligned with themes of same-sex desire, as she is in *Mulholland Drive*.

**Mulholland Drive**

Like *Sunset Boulevard* before it, *Mulholland Drive* tells the tragic tale of Hollywood dreams turned to dust, jealousy, madness, escapist fantasy, and murder (Andrews 26). The narrative is played out from the perspective of failed aspiring actress Diane Selwyn (Naomi Watts) and centres on her bitter sexual obsession with former lover Camilla. The film is divided into three sections, described by Lynch as: “Part one: She found herself inside a perfect mystery. Part two: A sad illusion. Part three: Love” (Rodley 54). The first and second segments of the movie are Diane’s wishful dream, which functions as an escape from the unbearable reality that, after being humiliated and spurned by Camilla, Diane hires a hit man to have her murdered. Part three reveals the events that have led up to Diane’s fateful action.

In Diane’s dream she is sweet, naïve, Betty who arrives at her wealthy aunt’s Hollywood home to find a beautiful woman in the bathroom. Earlier we witness a scene where the woman survives a violent car crash and, suffering a head injury, stumbles unnoticed into the apartment. Initially the woman introduces herself as Rita (after seeing a *Gilda* poster on the wall), but later confesses that she doesn’t know who she is. Undeterred by the strange circumstances surrounding Rita’s presence, Betty takes the frightened, vulnerable woman (actually Camilla) under her wing, enthusiastically assuming the role of detective in trying to discover her real identity.

As Rita, Camilla is passive, dependent, and grateful. Importantly, she also fondly reciprocates the love Betty feels for her. But in reality, from Diane’s perspective at least, Camilla is a narcissistic, manipulative *femme fatale* (like the character portrayed by the famous star whose name she adopts in Diane’s dream) who takes sadistic delight in toying with the emotions of others. Just as Rita is Diane’s ideal lover in her fantasy, pretty Betty is Diane’s ego ideal. She is vibrant, wholesome, and has a glowing future ahead of her. This is a far cry from reality where Diane is sullen, pathetic, and haggard with no prospects. Bitterly, she blames Camilla for her failings as an actress (Camilla wins a lead role that Diane badly wanted by sleeping with the director). Ultimately, Diane also blames Camilla for her own suicide. This is implied in the dream sequence when the two women disguise Rita’s appearance after the discovery of a bloated corpse in Diane Selwyn’s apartment.

The parallels between *Mulholland Drive* and *Carmilla* are numerous to the extent that it could be argued that Lynch’s film is a contemporary *noir* infused re-telling of Le Fanu’s
novella. Both stories take the point-of-view of the blonde haired, blue eyed “victim.” Both include a vehicle accident followed by the mysterious arrival of an elusive dark haired stranger, who appears vulnerable and helpless, but whose beauty masks the fact that she is really a monster. Both narratives hinge on same-sex desire and involve the gradual emotional and physical destruction of the quarry, as she suffers at the hands of her newly found love interest. Whereas Carmilla literally sucks her victims dry before moving on to another target, Camilla metaphorically drains the life out of Diane, callously taunting her with her other lovers before dumping her. While Camilla is not a vampire per se, she is framed in a distinctly vampirish manner, her pale skin contrasted by lavish red lipstick and fingernails, and though she is not literally the living dead, the latter part of the film indicates that the only place Camilla remains alive is in Diane’s fantasy. But in the Lynchian universe, where conventional forms of narrative coherence, with their demand for logic and legibility are of little interest (Rodley ix), intertextual alignment with Carmilla extends beyond plot structure to capture the “mood,” or “feel” of the novella that is best described in terms of the uncanny — something that also lies at the very core of Lynch’s work (Rodley xi).

The Gothic and the Uncanny

Though Gothic literature is grounded in horror, the type of fear elicited in the works of writers that form part of this movement, such as Le Fanu (along with Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and Bram Stoker to name a few), aligns more with the uncanny than with outright terror. The uncanny is an elusive quality that is difficult to pinpoint yet distinct. First and foremost it is a sense, or emotion that is related to dread and horror, but it is more complex than simply a reaction to fear. Rather, feelings of trepidation are accompanied by a peculiar, dream-like quality of something fleetingly recognisable in what is evidently unknown, conjuring up a mysterious impression of déjà vu. The uncanny has to do with uncertainty, particularly in relation to names (including one’s own name), places and what is being experienced; that things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity. Though it can be frightening, at the same time it can involve a sensation that is compelling and beautiful (Royle 1–2; Punter 131).

The inventory of motifs, fantasies, and phenomena that have been attributed to the uncanny are extensive. These can extend from the sight of dead bodies, skeletons, severed heads, dismembered limbs, and female sex organs, to the thought of being buried alive; from conditions such as epilepsy and madness, to haunted houses/castles and ghostly apparitions. Themes of doubling, anthropomorphism, doubt over whether an apparently living object is really animate and conversely if a lifeless object, such as a doll or machinery, is in fact alive also fall under the broad range of what constitutes the uncanny (see Jentsch 221–7; Freud 232–45; Royle 1–2). Socio-culturally, the uncanny can be traced back to the historical epoch of Enlightenment. It is the transformations of this eighteenth century “age of reason,” with its rejection of transcendental explanations, valorisation of reason over superstition, aggressively rationalist imperatives, and compulsive quests for knowledge that are argued to have first caused human experiences associated with the uncanny (Castle 8–10). In this sense, as literary scholar Terry Castle argues, the eighteenth century “invented the uncanny” (8).

In relation to the psychological underpinnings of this disquieting emotion, psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch was the first to explore the subject in his 1906 document “On the Psychology of the Uncanny,” though Sigmund Freud and his 1919 paper “The Uncanny” is most popularly associated with the term. According to Jentsch, the uncanny, or the unheimlich in German (meaning “unhomely”), emerges when the “new/foreign/hostile” corresponds to the psychical association of “old/known/familiar.” The unheimlich, which sits in direct opposition to the heimlich (homely) equates to a situation where someone feels not quite “at home” or “at ease” (217–9). Jentsch attributes sensations of the unheimlich to psychical resistances that emerge in relation to the mistrust of the innovative and unusual — “to the intellectual mystery of a new thing” (218) — such as
technological revolution for example. Freud builds on the concept of the unheimlich by focusing on the heimlich, arguing that the term incorporates two sets of ideas. It can refer to what is familiar and agreeable, or it can mean “what is concealed and kept out of sight” (234–5). In the context of the latter notion, the unheimlich connotes “that which ought to have remained secret or hidden but has come to light” (Freud 225). Hence for Freud, who was primarily concerned with the latent content of the psyche, feelings of uncanniness emerge when dark, disturbing truths that have been repressed and relegated to the realm of the unconscious resurface, making their way abstractly into the consciousness, creating an odd impression of the known in the unknown.

Though it is the works of E.T.A. Hoffman that are most commonly associated with the unheimlich, Freud describing the author as the “unrivalled master of the uncanny in literature” (233), Carmilla is equally bound up in dialectics between the known and the unknown; the homely and the unhomely. Themes centring on doubles, the undead, haunted gardens, conflicting emotions fuelled by desire and disgust — of “adoration and also of abhorrence” (Le Fanu 264), and dream-like nocturnal encounters with sinister, shape-shifting creatures predominate. With Carmilla’s arrival the boundaries between the heimlich and the unheimlich become blurred. Though Carmilla is a stranger, her presence triggers buried childhood memories for Laura of a frightening and surreal experience where Carmilla appears in Laura’s nursery during the night, climbing into bed with her before seemingly vanishing into thin air. In this sense, Laura’s remote castle home has never been homely. Disturbing truths have always lurked in its dark recesses, the return of the dead bringing them to light.

The Uncanny in Mulholland Drive

The elusive qualities of the uncanny also weave their way extensively through Mulholland Drive, permeating all facets of the cinematic experience — cinematography, sound score, mise en scène, and narrative structure. As film maker and writer Chris Rodley argues, Lynch mobilises every aspect of the motion picture making process in seeking to express a sense of uncanniness in his productions: “His sensitivity to textures of sound and image, to the rhythms of speech and movement, to space, colour, and the intrinsic power of music mark him as unique in this respect.” (Rodley ix–xi).

From the opening scenes of Mulholland Drive, the audience is plunged into the surreal, unheimlich realm of Diane’s dream world. The use of rich saturated colours, soft focus lenses, unconventional camera movements, stilted dialogue, and a hauntingly beautiful sound score composed by Angelo Badalamenti, generates a cumulative effect of heightened artifice. This in turn produces an impression of hyper-realism — a Baudrillardian simulacrum where the real is beyond real, taking on a form of its own that has an artificial relation to actuality (Baudrillard 6–7). Distorting the “real” in this manner produces an effect of defamiliarisation — a term first employed by critic Viktor Shklovsky (2–3) to describe the artistic process involved in making familiar objects seem strange and unfamiliar (or unheimlich). These techniques are something Lynch employs in other works. Film and literary scholar Greg Hainge (137) discusses the way colour intensification and slow motion camera tracking are used in the opening scene of Blue Velvet (1984) to destabilise the aesthetic realm of the homely, revealing it to be artifice concealing sinister truths that have so far been hidden, but that are about to come to light. Similar themes are central to Mulholland Drive; the simulacra of Diane’s fantasy creating a synthetic form of real that conceals the dark and terrible veracities of her waking life.

However, the artificial dream place of Diane’s disturbed mind is disjointed and fractured, therefore, just as the uncanny gives rise to an elusive sense of mystery and uncertainty, offering a fleeting glimpse of the tangible in something otherwise inexplicable, so too is the full intelligibility of Mulholland Drive kept at an obscure distance. Though the film offers a succession of clues to meaning, the key to any form of complete understanding lingers just beyond the grasp of certainty. Names, places, and identities are infused with
doubt. Not only in relation to Betty/Diane and Rita/Camilla, but regarding a succession of other strange, inexplicable characters and events, one example being the recurrent presence of a terrifying looking vagrant (Bonnie Aarons). Figures such as this are clearly poignant to the narrative, but they are also impossibly enigmatic, inviting the audience to play detective in deciphering what they signify. Themes of doubling and mirroring are also used extensively. While these motifs serve to denote the split between waking and dream states, they also destabilise the narrative in relation to what is familiar and what is unfamiliar, further grounding *Mulholland Drive* in the uncanny.

Since its publication in 1872, *Carmilla* has had a significant formative influence on the construct of the seductive yet deadly woman in her various manifestations. However, rarely has the novella been paid homage to as intricately as it is in *Mulholland Drive*. Lynch draws on Le Fanu’s archetypal Gothic horror story, combining it with the aesthetic conventions of *film noir*, in order to create what is ostensibly a contemporary, poststructuralist critique of the Hollywood dream-factory. Narratively and thematically, the similarities between the two texts are numerous. However, intertextual configuration is considerably more complex, extending beyond the plot and character structure to capture the essence of the Gothic, which is grounded in the uncanny — an evocative emotion involving feelings of dread, accompanied by a dream-like impression of familiar and unfamiliar commingling. *Carmilla* and *Mulholland Drive* bypass the *heimlich*, delving directly into the *unheimlich*, where boundaries between waking and dream states are destabilised, any sense of certainty about what is real is undermined, and feelings of desire are paradoxically conjoined with loathing. Moreover, Lynch mobilises all fundamental elements of cinema in order to capture and express the elusive qualities of the *Unheimlich*. In this sense, the uncanny lies at the very heart of the film. What emerges as a result is an enigmatic work of art that is as profoundly alluring as it is disconcerting.

References


