Ghost Images in Brian de Palma's *Obsession*

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Abstract

Among the numerous ghost stories that punctuate the history of cinema, Brian De Palma's *Obsession* is one of the most compelling. Haunted by the idea of improving on Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, the movie questions on many levels the belief in revenants. It is not by chance that Florence and the church of *San Miniato al Monte* are both the stage and setting of the pivotal scene of the movie: the "resurrection" of Michael Courtland's deceased wife in the person of an art restorer named Sandra Portinari. This specific setting, as well as Sandra's activity, seems to fit perfectly with Aby Warburg's concept of survival and rebirth. Florence, as the cradle of the Renaissance, is the theatre where the rebirth of Antiquity took place historically, while the church houses the cult and belief in the miracle of the Resurrection. The "remaking" of the dead wife, Elizabeth, also happens in front of a pious image that reveals an older painting beneath its first layer. The discovery of a "ghost image" beneath Bernardo Daddi's *Madonna and Child* further underscores the intrigue of the film as a metaphor for restoration or resurrection, becoming at the same time the *mise-en-abyme* of Brian De Palma's art. According to the filmmaker, cinema is an artificial creation, a palimpsest, or a montage. The use of artistic contexts such as Renaissance Florence, Christian analogies, Dante's writings, and Hitchcock's movies add not between does and only reveal the fact that cinema is a montage; it becomes a perfect platform for addressing the paradox of cinematic creation as an illusionistic art of re-animation. These ideas about the artifice of cinema parallel the treacherous set-up in *Obsession*, which has been staged to deceive both the main character, Michael Courtland, and the spectator.

Keywords: animation, icon, montage, revenants, restoration

In a note for *The Mnemosyne Atlas*, Aby Warburg defined his project on the history of culture as a "ghost story for the very adult[1]." For him, the rebirth of Antiquity that takes place during the Renaissance is not only a "fairy tale," it is a story of revenants. As he demonstrated earlier in his 1902 study on the Sassetti Chapel, the "ghost story" finds a specific resonance in the Florentine church of Santa Trinità. The whole setting stages the belief in apparitions and doubles in presenting the metaphorical lineage between Christ, Saint Francis, and Francesco Sassetti. (fig. 1). In what has been defined as an anachronistic "montage" (Didi-Huberman, 2002: 484-486), the antique Bethlehem of the Nativity, the medieval Rome of the birth of the Franciscan order, and the Florence of the Medicis are simultaneously present (Borsook and Offerhaus 1981). The scenes depicted on the apse walls and main altarpiece all reference the idea of rebirth and survival, as in the miracle of Saint Francis, whereby the saint resuscitates or resurrects the mortally wounded son of a Roman notary (fig. 2). According to one of Warburg's footnotes, this rare and unusual scene alludes to the personal miracle of the Sassetti family, namely the "remaking" of the eldest son Teodoro (Klapish-Zuber, 1987: 283-309)[2] who was "miraculously" reincarnated in a second Teodoro, a child born only a few months after his death (Warburg, 1999: 232 , 252, n. 32)[3].

The issues of survival and reincarnation illustrated in the chapel's paintings serve as a case study on the symbolic functions of painted images. Though deeply linked to the cultural context of the Renaissance, the concerns of these images are far from isolated. As proven by another example taken from Vasari's *Lives*, the idea of "*rinascita*" (resurrection) is at the core of the ideology of the modern history of art (Didi-Huberman, 2002: 11; Didi-Huberman, 2005: 53-84). The frontispiece of the 1568 edition of the *Lives* (fig. 3) illustrates this concern concretely by using an iconography reminiscent of the Last Judgement — namely a triple trumpet

1. "Vom Einfluss der Antike. / Diese Geschichte ist märchenhaft / to vertellen [sic]. Gespenstergeschichte f[ür] ganz Erwachsene." The note is dated July 2, 1929. Aby Warburg, *Menmosyne. Grundbegriffe*, II.
2. As demonstrated by Christine Klapisch-Zuber, it was common and a necessary duty at the time to "remake" (*rifare* in Italian) the recent dead by giving his or her name to a newborn child. This symbolic nominal "reincarnation" would in this respect conjure death and ensure the continuity and persistence of the lineage (Klapish-Zuber, 1987: 283-309).
3. "Might not [...] the miracle of Saint Francis's return to life have some connection with the resurrection of Teodoro I, whose death in Lyons was so profoundly mourned by his family, in the person of Teodoro II?" (Warburg, 1999: 252, n. 32).

Fig. 1 Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Episodes from the Life and Miracles of St Francis*, 1479-85, Fresco, Sassetti Chapel, Santa Trinità, Florence.

Fig. 2 Domenico Ghirlandaio, *The Miracle of the Resurrec;on of the Boy*, 1479-85, Fresco, Sassetti Chapel, Santa Trinità, Florence.

Fig. 3 Giorgio Vasari, Fronispiece and final page of the second editon of The *Lives of the Best Italian Architects, Painters and Sculptors*... Florence: Giunti, 1568, woodcut.

resuscitating the arts and artists (Lugon-Moulin, 2005: 11-15). This visual premise also governs the narrative of the *Lives*. In the text, the emblematic figure of Giotto plays a key role, since, by "inventing" the living likeness, this *Trecento* painter initiated the revival of modern painting. Vasari comments: "He alone, although born among inept craftsmen, by the gift of God revived that art, which had come to a grievous pass, and brought it to such a form as could be called good. And truly it was a very great miracle that that age, gross and inept, should have had strength to work in Giotto in a fashion so masterly, that design, whereof the men of those times had little or no knowledge, was restored, completely to life by means of him" (Vasari, 1976: 71).

If the art of the Renaissance can be considered a perfect medium for conveying "ghost stories," yet another medium has taken the lead in modern times. As we will see, cinema is undoubtedly the medium of ghosts. Considered the equivalent of the conjurer's art, filmmaking is deeply anchored in the nostalgia for the evanescent image. Numerous scholars have noted that cinema has become the privileged medium for the repetitive staging of re-animations, re-enactments and simulacra (Tomasovic 2006). André Bazin, for example considers this aspect of cinema in his essay on the *Ontology of the Photographic Image* (1945) as "a basic psychological need in man," and connects the new medium to older ones through its ability to embody life (Bazin, 1960: 4)[4]. Since the cinematic image repeatedly casts doubt on the veracity of figures projected onto the screen, it is at the same time the perfect machine for presiding over their survival. The issue of disappearance and reappearance, death and rebirth, is at the core of the treacherous activity of projecting and re-projecting images (Scheinfeigel, 2008). This can be attested by cinema's ancestor, the magic lantern, whose principal fantasy, as promised by its demiurge developer Etienne Gaspard Robertson, was to make revenants appear (Castle, 1988: 31-37; Scheinfeigel, 2008: 34).

Among the numerous examples of uncanny narratives that punctuates the history of cinema, Brian de Palma's *Obsession* (1976) is certainly one of the most compelling, because it questions on many levels the belief in revenants. The movie tells the story

4. For a comment on Bazin's "ontological" approach, see Frodon 2011. Susan Sontag express a similar idea in her article Film and Theatre: "Movies resurrect the beautiful dead; present intact vanished or ruined environment [...]" (Sontag, 1966: 32).

of Michael Courtland, a real estate developer in New Orleans who suffers the double loss of his wife Elizabeth and his nine-year-old daughter Amy as the result of a fatal kidnapping. Aching to preserve their memory, he builds a mausoleum replicating the façade of the Florentine church of *San Miniato al Monte* on a parcel of land previously marked out to a major real estate development. Sixteen years later, while on a business trip to Florence, the widower revisits the church where he first met his wife. There, Michael encounters Sandra Portinari, an art restoration assistant who strikingly resembles his deceased wife. After a brief courtship, he decides to marry her in New Orleans, but she is in turn kidnapped on the day of the wedding ceremony. Compelled to prevent the reoccurrence of his tragic past, Michael does everything in his power to save his second wife, who in fact was complicit in a complex plot conceived by his associate Robert LaSalle. He finally discovers that the woman he is on the verge of marrying is his own daughter Amy, and that she had been raised and manipulated by LaSalle as a plot for revenge.

We can infer from this narrative that one of its main themes resides in the "resurrection" of Elizabeth through a lookalike, an episode that deliberately takes place in a highly significant setting. This event happens on a very specific stage where the mythical concepts of rebirth and resurrection have strong historical precedents. Florence, as the cradle of the Renaissance, says LaSalle, is the theatre in which the rebirth of Antiquity took place, while the church of *San Miniato* — as with any church — houses the cult and belief in the miracle of the Resurrection. According to De Palma's dialectical strategy, the artistic backdrop of Florence is an ideal world, an enchanting locale for the emergence of simulacra. LaSalle's plot for revenge and Courtland's personal delusions evolve in a setting haunted by artefacts and idealized memories. Florence thus stands in opposition to New Orleans, a city of trauma, where the crude and sinful business of disenchantment and loss is pervasive. Thus by using an ecclesiastical setting and Renaissance Florence as a symbolic frame, De Palma is able to emphasize the uncanny figure of Elizabeth as a mystical or idealized construction[5].

The reduction of Elizabeth to a sacred or idealized image can be measured both in terms of the photographic and painted portraits presented repeatedly throughout the film, as well as Michael's adherence to these images. However, her icon-like status

is already determined during the opening credits through a succession of slides that present her in front of and inside the Florentine church (figs. 4-5). The photographs celebrating the ten-year anniversary of the couple's union are not only idealized memories frozen in 1948, when the couple met for the first time. They also reveal the ineluctable ties that will forever embalm Elizabeth with the sacral environment. When Courtland erects a mausoleum in New Orleans that replicates the façade of San Miniato al Monte in Ponchartrain Park, the church becomes Elizabeth's shrine and consecrated attribute (fig. 6). Against such a backstory, it is evident that the miraculous reappearance of Elizabeth's double sixteen years later can only happen in the original setting of her previous "beatification" and "enshrinement."

The Christian analogy, however, is not confined solely to an architectural frame. The "remaking" of Elizabeth also happens in front of a pious image that is in the process of restoration. Elizabeth's double, Sandra Portinari, is in fact restoring a *Madonna with Child* by Bernardo Daddi. In this scene, Sandra's face is enshrouded in an unreal light and merges with that of the Virgin, while her white overalls call to mind a virginal appearance (fig. 7). This heavy symbolic frame is once again meant to emphasize the miraculous aspect of the apparition of Elizabeth's double. It casts doubt on her reality and associates her apparition as a visionary experience. We understand from Courtland's initial reaction that this spectre seems to be too beautiful to be true. Its reality is that of an icon, like the work Sandra is restoring. When Courtland steps out of the church and is asked by his partner, he is sceptical of the reality of what he has just seen: everything has remained the "same." Back at his hotel, he questions the reality of the photograph he has kept in his wallet as a relic, comparing it with the vision he has just had in the church (fig. 8). The following day, in order to make sure that he was not dreaming, he follows the phantom-like figure of his wife through the streets of Florence and eventually comes to a decision, asking LaSalle to accompany him a second time into the church. What follows alludes to the

5. The concern for architecture in Brian de Palma's movies is a basic root that can be traced out in his storyboards, as he reveals in an interview with Anne Thompson: "I've been doing that [storyboards] for years. I used to draw them, then I used computers programs to draw them, then I used slide programs in order to look at them one after another. Basically it's making little architecture drawings and moving things around within the spaces. I don't think anybody else does it" (Thompson, 2003: 159).

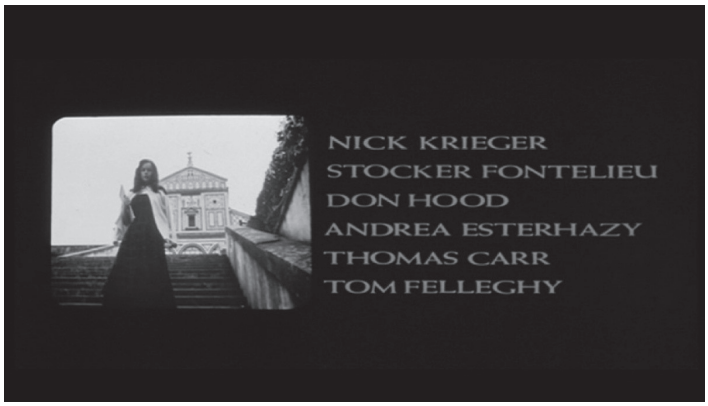

Fig. 4 Brian de Palma, *Obsession*, 1976

Fig. 5 Brian de Palma, *Obsession*, 1976

Fig. 6 Brian de Palma, *Obsession*, 1976

Fig. 7 Brian de Palma, *Obsession*, 1976

Fig. 8 Brian de Palma, *Obsession*, 1976

preconditions for sainthood, which requires the presence of a witness to give credence to a miracle. The witness here is LaSalle, who confirms the miracle of Elizabeth's reappearance, when he voices an eloquent, "my God." [6] Finally, in a third moment, the ghostly vision of Elizabeth takes human shape as Sandra, dressed in black, speaks to Courtland, addressing him with the equivocal question, "Do you like the Madonna?" [7].

Some critics have given this scene the psychoanalytic interpretation of an Oedipal fantasy (Felleman, 2006: 40-41),[8] but the allusion to Bernardo Daddi reflects a more complex issue. The dilemma provoked by the discovery of a "ghost image" — an older model painted beneath Daddi's work — addresses a paradox that not only underlies the intrigue of the movie as a metaphor of restoration or resurrection, but also addresses De Palma's own interrogations on the cinematic medium.[9] First, as revealed by the complete rethinking of the restoration of artworks that took place in

6. The stigmatization of St Francis was considered at the time as a singular miracle, and its novelty provoked hostility and incredulity. The presence of witnesses that are attested in the hagiographical texts and images of the saint was necessary to prove the reality of the miracle. On the modalities of persuasion and legitimization related to the presence of witnesses in San Francis's stigmatization see Arnold Davidson (Davidson, 1998: 101-124).
7. In the original script "Déjà Vu" written by Paul Schrader, the church where Elizabeth's double is appearing is called *Santa Trinità*. It is impossible so far to know whether it was intended to refer to the Sassetti chapel and the issue of revenants that is staged on the walls. The story of St Francis, who is Christ's alter ego, would have been a meaningful subtext. It makes sense however that the name of the church was intended to reflect the ternary structure of the scenario, since Schrader originally planned to continue the story with a third act taking place into the 1980s. On the changes about the final scenario see: (Kouvaros, 2008: 36).
8. Felleman analyzes the episode as a dilemma that Sandra has to face: should she remove the Madonna (the Mother) or restore the Daddi (the Father)? This aspect was already mentioned in the first critics of the movie in 1976. "Schrader and De Palma have loaded their penny dreadful with allusions high and low. [...] The fresco with whose restoration Sandra assists is by Bernardo Daddi; it is a Virgin and Child, whose damaging has revealed an earlier work underneath — which one of them is to be sacrificed for the other? Why such fuss over a lesser master like Daddi, for whom Sandra and the restorers finally opt? Because Sandra's heart, however ironically and ferally, belongs to Daddy. And why the Virgin and Child? Because love between child and mother is what really motivates Sandra. And why is the earlier work that is sacrificed? An anterior life must be abandoned both by Michael and Sandra for the sake of a *vita nuova*. The movie is full of such otiose allusiveness and gamesmanship. Sandra's last name is Portinari — after Dante's Beatrice, of course. A minor character, said to be a bore, is called D'Annunzio after you know whom: another is called Farber, although I can't say whether after Manny or Stephen" (Simon, 1976: 60) "At this point, a scant twenty minutes into the film, *Obsession* becomes compulsion and the Schrader-De Palma plot collapses like a decaying Daddi. That happens to be the name of the artist who painted the mural where a lovely girl, the very mirror of his wife, is stationed. She's restoring the Daddi. Can that low pun be a coincidence? Courtland's too enamored of the miracle, his "second chance," to trifle with such silly considerations" (Brenner, 1976: 162).
9. This issue is also staged in Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), the story of John Baxter, an art restorer who mistakes a fleeting red hooded figure in Venice with his deceased daughter he wants unconsciously to resurrect (Schülting, 1999: 207-211).
10. For a discussion on the history of the restoration of the Early Italian Primitives (Hoeniger1999, 144-161).

the 1970s, the motive here is in tune with contemporaneous debates on originality and authenticity. Silvia Hochfield's article "Conservation: The Need is Urgent" in the February issue of *Art News* in 1976 (Dwyer Modestini, 2005: 30-31) as well as the controversies that took place one year later at the National Gallery in Washington DC show that ideas about the art of restoration were in a state of turmoil (Dykstra, 1996: 202).[10] This is echoed in the interaction between Sandra and Michael in the chapel of *San Miniato*,[11] which reflects the two opposing attitudes of that time. The first position embodies the positivistic attitude prevalent during the 1950s and 1960s, which argues for a complete removal of the most superficial layers in order to return to the oldest design. The second position holds that any restoration is a precocious intervention and should be minimized in order to prevent irreparable alterations. In other words, over-cleaning is unacceptable, as it implies the destruction of a work's narrative structure and readability. It offers no guarantee that the authentic nature of the "original" work has been maintained. This debate becomes even more relevant if we consider it as a metaphor for the false restoration of Elizabeth.

A close look at the *Madonna and Child* reveals that De Palma didn't chose the painter or the artwork by chance (fig. 9). The features of the painting are in fact those of the altarpiece ordered from Bernardo Daddi in 1347 for the church of Florence's craft and trade guilds, *Orsanmichele* (fig. 10). By displacing such a prominent work — or at least a copy of it — from its original location and relocating it into the context of the church of *San Miniato*, De Palma should have been aware of the stakes at hand. It is well known that the painting was intended to replace an image of the Virgin that had adorned a pilaster since 1284 or 1292 but had been destroyed in a disaster (Rash Fabbri and Rutenburg, 1981: 385-388). In order to recall the original miraculous image, Bernardo Daddi deliberately crafted his representation in an archaic style. This "fallacious" revival of the original Madonna based on dugento details (Rash Fabbri & Rutenburg, 1981: 389), was intended to allow devotees to "regain some of the fervor and restore some of the faith that had motivated pilgrims from the

11. [Sandra:] "You see, several years ago… long after the floods… moisture seeped into a portion of the altarpiece… and it began to peel… revealing an older painting underneath. Then the art scholars had to decide what to do. Should they destroy a great painting by Daddi… to uncover what appears to be a crude first draft underneath it? Or should they restore the original… but never know for sure what lies beneath it? What would you do? [Michael:] — Hold on to it. Beauty should be protected. [Sandra:] — Good. That is what the scholars decided to do."

Fig. 9 Brian de Palma, *Obsession*, 1976

Fig. 10 Bernardo Daddi, *Madonna and Child*, 1347, Orsanmichele, Florence

Fig. 11 Brian de Palma, *Obsession*, 1976

late thirteenth century on." (Rash Fabbri & Rutenburg, 1981: 390) This practice of reproducing "the cult image original effectiveness" was common during the 13th and 14th centuries (Nagel & Wood, 2010: 83).

The idea of image restoration also applies to *Obsession*, in that the movie was intended to improve on Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (De Palma, 2001: 53). Like many other films directed by De Palma, it reactivates powerful motives that can be seen in the works of his illustrious predecessor (Leitch, 2006: 251-270).[12] Though this practice continues to be a subject of controversy (Uhlich, 2003; Peretz, 2008: 20), De Palma has tried to justify it — not without some irritation — in terms of visual efficacy: "If I'm attracted to something I shouldn't refuse to use it because Hitchcock was attracted to it too" (Pally, 2003: 106). His attraction to *clichés* is actually an important key to understanding *Obsession*. As noted by critic Robert Cumbow at the time of the film's release, the film's force essentially resides in its multilayered structure (Cumbow & Cumbow, 1977: 22). But be that as it may, the movie also reiterates a belief in the possibility of reactivating some original effectiveness. This happens not only at the level of the narrative — through cultural references to re-animation such as Renaissance Florence, Christian analogies, the writings of Dante (Cumbow & Cumbow, 1977) and Hitchcock's films — but also at the level of the plot.

This is illustrated in a significant scene in the film: Michael Courtland decides to "recast" or "remould" Sandra, or, in other words, to "remake" Elizabeth according to his own desires. This symbolic episode takes place in the civil centre of Florence, more precisely in the *Piazza della Signoria*, near the marble sculptures of Michelangelo's *David* and Baccio Bandinelli's *Hercules and Cacus* (fig. 11). Significantly, Courtland directs this episode of reanimation, teaching Sandra to walk like Elizabeth and showing her the specific allure of Bryn Mawr College, a sophisticated and spectral way of gliding while walking. The passage from the spiritual, sacred frame of the church to the profane, worldly site of the city is an example of the contrasts which De Palma continually draws throughout the film, steering it between past and present, sacred and profane, dream and reality. In this

12. Brian de Palma borrows also motives from other movies, such as *Rebecca, Notorious, Dial M. for Murder, Shadow of a Doubt, and Psycho* (Leitch, 2006: 254).

instance, the opposition is all the more meaningful, as De Palma uses a reversed point of view to indicates this transformation—or conversion. The shot significantly shows the statues from the rear and focuses on their inferior parts. Thus it poses a contrast to the iconic frontal views used in the previous sequences set in the chapel to frame the faces of Sandra and the Madonna. This is also a succinct reference to the myth of Pygmalion. Michael is no longer the passive spectator of a miraculous apparition; he is now the active agent of its reanimation (Stoichita, 2008: 193).[13] But unlike the myth, there is no happy ending; the "emancipation" of Sandra-Amy is nothing but a lure. If she loses her status as an icon in contrast to the statues around her, she is at that moment however experiencing another petrification, as the following scene confirms. After teaching Sandra to walk like Elizabeth, Michael restages the photograph in front of *San Miniato*, re-iconizing or re-freezing Sandra in the position and role performed by Elizabeth in 1948 (fig. 12 and fig. 4).

At this stage it becomes clear that Brian De Palma is ambitiously questioning the modalities of his own medium. Metaphors for the cinematic art, including the way Michael Courtland "directs" Sandra on the *Piazza* and "photographs" her in front of the church, become complete in a further sequence that brings "acting" into play. Here, the main characters decide to act out an archetypal work of fiction by Dante and thus reinterpret their own private love story. The scene takes place a few days after the photo shoot, when Sandra guides Michael into the courtyard of the *palazzo* where Dante's Beatrice lived. This evokes the anecdote of the young poet, who, in order not to importune Beatrice at mass, pretends to look at another woman sitting between them. We see the mystifying Sandra Portinari as Dante's famous Beatrice, the poet's *bella donna*, as she asks Michael to play the role of Dante while she embodies both Beatrice and the "lady of the screen." Amy — as Sandra, Elizabeth, and Beatrice — is indeed the lady of the screen, a façade on which others project their desires. It is through her that Robert LaSalle plans his conspiracy. It is on her that

13. Brian De Palma already restaged the myth of Pygmalion in his short movie *Wotan's Wake* (1962). Stoichita defines Pygmalion as "the mythical animator of a personal phantasm" when he analyzes the transformation that is taking place in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (Stoichita 2008, 192-195). De Palma's sequence with the statues can be compared with the visit to the shoemaker in Hitchcock's movie. Stoichita notices that the focalization on the lower parts of the bodies ironically accentuates the fetishist connotations of Scottie's gaze (Stoichita, 2008: 193).

Fig. 12 Brian de Palma, *Obsession*, 1976

Michael Courtland projects and remoulds his lost ideal, Elizabeth. It is on her that she projects her own revenge against the father who abandoned her. And finally, it is on her that Brian de Palma projects his fantasies of ghosts and ideals formulated by others. As in the case of Bernardo Daddi's painting, which reveals a ghost image beneath its upper layer, she is a palimpsest of layered identities: she is the Madonna, Beatrice, Elizabeth, Sandra and Amy, and all of these characters are embodied by the actress Geneviève Bujold.

This idea is certainly one of Brian De Palma's most significant obsessions, as evidenced in his other films and illustrated especially in his *Femme Fatale* (2002).

Here, De Palma once again questions the issue of pretence through the double character of Laure Ash who appropriates the identity of another woman, Lily, in order to escape the criminal conspirators she double-crossed after a jewel heist at the Cannes Film Festival. Yet as the film's conclusion demonstrates, the story of Laure as Lily is only a dream, an imaginary projection created in imitation of Fritz Lang's *Woman in the Window* (1944). However it is not by chance that Laure's initial appearance takes place in a setting that conjures the different fictions of cinema, television, and painting. In a dark room lit by a TV screen broadcasting Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, her nude body is lying in the pose of Velazquez's *Venus at her Mirror* in front of the TV set (fig. 13), while her face — reflected in the screen — merges with those of the protagonists of the film (fig. 14). This false mirror is once again a clue to the cinematic aspect of the protagonist. She is a cinematic body, whose essence is comparable to a palimpsest. She is a montage like the multi-layered photographic "fresco" shown at the film's conclusion (Smith, 2002: 30).

Obsession is above all a palimpsest and a screen onto which images and ghosts are projected, and this can best be seen both at the beginning and end of the movie. De Palma's presentation of simulacra is essentially related to his view of the equivocal status of the cinematic medium. He is perfectly aware that the art of the filmmaker is the illusionistic art of animation, or, to put it in other words, the art of making "revenants" appear. Both the opening credits and scenes showing the "iconization" and reanimation of Elizabeth signal the process of animation at work, and signify that it resides in a paradoxical and problematic in-between. The opening sequence of the movie cannot be clearer; it begins progressively frame by frame with another projection — a slide show — announcing the forthcoming fiction (fig. 15). This sequence announces the equivocal identity of the female character, while at the same time offers up the *mise-en-abyme* of the filmic projection. Through this flow of still images, it seems to be subjected to a regime of imperfect animation. It is akward and jerky, and in search of the same fluidity that Michael attempts to mould onto Sandra in the midst of the statues of the *Signoria*. This ambiguity of animated images prefigures the film's final sequence, a slow-motion tracking shot that delivers a disrupted flow punctuated by the rhythmic breaks of the neon lights and the architectural frames of the windows (fig. 16). It is no coincidence that this

Fig. 13 Diego Velazquez, *Venus at Her Mirror*, 1644-48, National Gallery, Londres

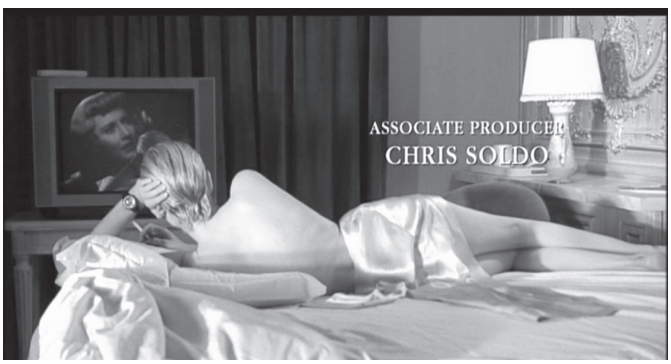

Fig. 14 Brian de Palma, *Femme Fatale*, 2002

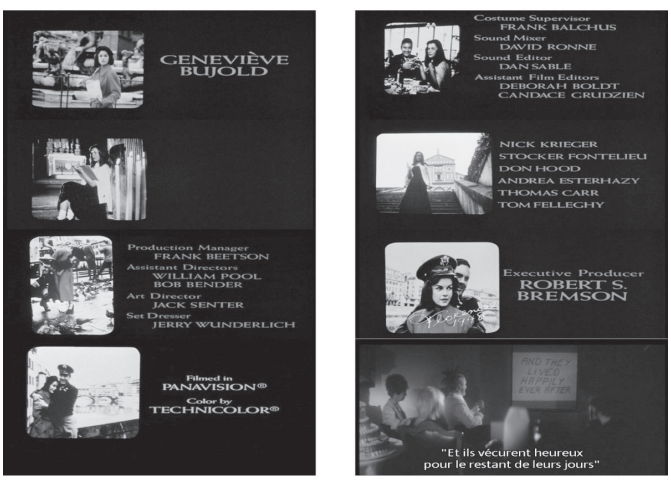

Fig. 15 Brian de Palma, *Obsession*, 1976

Fig. 16 Brian de Palma, *Obsession*, 1976

cinematic effect comes at the very moment Michael, willing to put an end to the treacherous machination, decides to kill Elizabeth's double.

The contradictions and paradoxes that are at stake in this movie — the issue of the double, the dilemma of restoration, or the disintegration of the filmic flow in the opening and closing sequences — reflect a disembodiment of the concept of survival. Significantly, the ascending formula proper to the Renaissance that is, for example, expressed on the walls of the Sassetti chapel (fig. 17) is doomed to forever struggle against its opposite in De Palma's film (fig. 18).

Fig. 17 Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Confirmation of the Rule of St Francis*, 1479-85, Fresco, Sassetti Chapel, Santa Trinità, Florence

Fig. 18 *Brian de Palma, Obsession*, 1976

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