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Cinematic Poe: A Survey of Films Inspired by Edgar Allan Poe and Their Importance in Film History

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CINEMATIC POE: A SURVEY OF FILMS INSPIRED BY EDGAR ALLAN POE AND
THEIR IMPORTANCE IN FILM HISTORY

A Thesis

by

DEVON V. BRADLEY

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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August 2022

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ABSTRACT

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The relationship of Edgar Allan Poe's works, their respective adaptations, and their place in film history remains underappreciated in contemporary scholarship. Additionally, many of the most significant director/auteurs in cinema history have Poe inspired films. This project explores the filmic legacy Poe and his stories share across a survey of significant filmmakers, who have created memorable interpretations of Poe's works. This thesis seeks to consider connections between several well-known Poe film adaptations and what I consider to be their significance in the development of film as a medium over its history. My investigation compares a range of films inspired by and adapted from Poe to discover recurring patterns, tropes, and motifs to contribute to a director's auteur status. Through this work, I propose that what connects these filmic works are their utilization of Poe's themes and his literary celebrity.

DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis work to three people who are closest to my heart and who continue to motivate and inspire me.

To my parents Dr. Victor and Christine Bradley, who have always loved me unconditionally and always encouraged me to go and chase after my dreams, no matter how daunting, and find my joy.

To my partner Albert Monrroy, who has been a constant source of support, encouragement, and love during the challenges of graduate school and life- I truly am thankful for having you by my side.

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To my committee member Dr. Marci McMahon- thank you for your constant motivation to push forward not only with this project, but in my other academic endeavors. You taught me how to navigate the world of literature and performance outside the realms of this thesis and reconcile my academic ambitions with activism. Your support means the world to me.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Debates in Adaptation Studies	5
1.2 What is an Auteur?.....	8
1.3 “The Philosophy of Composition” and Film.....	13
1.4 Guiding Questions.....	14
CHAPTER II. THE FIRST WAVE OF POE PICTURES (1909-1928)	15
2.1 D.W. Griffith, Edgar Allen Poe (1909).....	18
2.2 D.W. Griffith, The Avenging Conscience (1914)	23
2.3 Alice Guy-Blache, The Pit and the Pendulum (1913)	31
2.4 Otto Rippert, The Plague of Florence (1919)	36
2.5 Richard Oswald, Eerie Tales (1919)	42
2.6 Jean Epstein, Fall of the House of Usher (1928).....	45
2.7 James Sibley Watson, “Fall of the House of Usher” (1928).....	50
CHAPTER III. THROUGH EARLY HOLLYWOOD POE AND THE CORMAN-POE CYCLE (1935-1964).....	53
3.1 Edgar Ulmer, The Black Cat (1934)	56
3.2 Lew Landers, The Raven (1935)	62
3.3 Jules Dassin, The Tell-Tale Heart (1941)	64
3.4 Roger Corman, House of Usher (1960)	67
3.5 Roger Corman, The Pit and the Pendulum (1961).....	72
3.6 Roger Corman, Tales of Terror (1962)	75
3.7 Roger Corman, Masque of the Red Death (1964).....	78

CHAPTER IV. CONCLUSION	81
REFERENCES	86
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	90

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1: Poe Pictures Covered	11

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe's stories, full of sophisticated writing and eerie imagery, brought horror down to earth and made us fear the ordinary and the everyday. Poe's popularity also develops from our fascination with Poe himself, not so much as the historical figure but the persona with an evolving popular image. Nowhere does the popularity of Poe, both his stories and his image, become more visible than in the films he inspired. The continued widespread familiarity with Poe's fiction partially results from these film interpretations of Poe's stories. Poe's works has had an immense presence in cinema, particularly in films that aim to imitate or translate Poe's style and tone or to borrow features prominent from his fiction. His presence has made itself felt from the outset of commercial filmmaking.

This paper seeks to consider the connection between several well-known Poe film adaptations and traditional understandings of authorship, or the auteur theory, in cinema. My investigation involves considering many of the most important film adaptations of Poe as a whole and analyzing them as works that contribute to their director's artistic status. I also situate Poe films within film history, of which they play a surprisingly important part, particularly in relation to the dominant traits of the dominant film conventions, known as the Hollywood style of filmmaking. The Hollywood style has formal conventions and contains ideological conceptions

about subject matter, tone, the importance of traditional narrative and other conventions that audiences, worldwide, largely take for granted. Almost all major Poe films engage with, affirm, or critique the Hollywood approach. This project also offers a reading of fascinating issues about the translatability of the works of Poe and by implication questions concerning the ability of literature broader than Poe to successfully adapt into films. This project notes the strange fact that Edgar Allan Poe and his works inspired films by an inordinate amount of the most significant directors in film history. Even stranger, perhaps, is the way many major movements and innovative transformations in film form intersect with Edgar Allan Poe, in one way or another. These range the span, as we shall see, from Griffith inventing the Hollywood paradigm and then various challenges by such movements as German Expressionism, Surrealism, Pop-art, Impressionism and other forms of avant-garde challenges to the Hollywood paradigm. The quality and radical formal techniques associated with films related to Poe seems particularly noteworthy and requires analysis and explanation.

While identifying notable thematic and cinematic elements within the films, I contend that Poe films become adapted to most of the major transformations in cinema. Each film retelling remains unique, linked to the period in which it was produced, but of permanent importance in film history, in the development of narrative cinematic language, and, most importantly, in extremely good films that continue to fascinate. The relationship of Edgar Allan Poe's works to their cinematic adaptations has already been commented on contemporary film scholarship. However, there remains no clear explanation, or even acknowledgment, of the phenomenon that explains why so many major directors in film history create their own take on Poe's stories. My thesis also highlights an uncommented-on distinction between Poe inspired films versus more conventional adaptations by surveying significant Poe pictures throughout

cinema history, beginning with D.W. Griffith and culminating in the 1960s. While there are major significant adaptations up to the present time like Raul Garcia's *Extraordinary Tales* (2013) and James McTeigue's *the Raven* (2012), my study remains structured around how Poe films helped define classical narrative cinema and the Hollywood style and ends with the films of Roger Corman challenging such values. Additionally, I link the history of Poe's literary reception to his appeal, as subject matter, to the greatest directors in film history. The frequency of Poe as inspiration for films can be explained both by Poe's celebrity persona and the accessibility of his prose as well as its power.

In the earlier stages of this project, my preliminary research anticipated utilizing different approaches to defining genre to conduct a classification study of Poe adaptations as a distinct hybrid genre. Through more careful close readings and consideration of the films, a fascinating, yet different set of questions arose, namely in relation to the many directors that created Poe pictures. The question of what connects Edgar Allan Poe to the Hollywood cinema paradigm remain at the heart of my thesis, but my investigation turned toward the productivity of studying Poe as indispensably linked to key moments of cinema history itself. Therefore, in this thesis, I draw upon adaptation studies, film studies, theories of authorship drawing from literature and cinema studies, film history and the history of cinema's avant-gardes to inform the following discussion of the most significant Poe films.

The role of the author, whether in film or literature, receives different treatment in academia compared to popular commonsense approaches to the role of the author, a role much debated in literary studies as well as film studies. Cultural theorist Roland Barthes' influential essay "Death of the Author" contends that "to impose an author on a text is to limit that text's meaning" (Barthes 6). Essentially, the public image of Poe as a celebrity has become linked with the appreciation of

his popular works. Popular culture seems, from his lifetime to the present, to indulge in the ‘literary celebrity’ of Poe whether accurately to his life and character or not. However, we should note that Poe’s literary celebrity and his popular image remains largely fictional and detached from the historic, biographic individual. Dutch popular culture scholars Franssen and Honings note that an authors’ public image often gets appropriated during their lifetime “and even more so after [their] death” (Franssen and Honings 3). Notably, authors have “anything but the last word” (3) regarding their public image; instead, this is shaped by “readers, critics, admirers, and other actors in the literary field,” especially after the author’s death (3). A prominent and influential Poe biography, *Memoir of the Author* (1850), authored by Rufus Griswold, while highly subjective and based on false and negative accounts of Poe, established the foundation on which Poe’s pop-culture image is built. This early biographical sketch started the so-called “Poe-myth,” and continues, especially in the medium of film.

The earliest biographical sketches of Poe were published in his lifetime. Though it remains unknown whether these articles were supplied by Poe himself, Poe scholar Ian Walker in his essay “The Poe Legend” argues that the sketches hint at an intent by Poe to contribute toward the creation of a fanciful romantic persona (Walker 19). Walker alludes to Poe’s first encounter with biographies where “almost every aspect of Poe’s life was altered or fabricated... to mask his real origins and circumstances and to project an image of himself in keeping with his literary ambitions” (19). In short, Poe created a persona for purposes of celebrity status to sell his stories. For many of his contemporaries, Edgar Allan Poe became known as an ambiguous figure whose work and personality aroused conflicting responses. A hit to Poe’s popular image came in Rufus Griswold’s *Memoir of the Author* (1850), the biography mentioned above, which claimed Poe was part mad and his defects were “of character and not circumstance” (22). Griswold gained a

following as a prominent anthologist, editor, and critic in literary circles of the era. In “Memoir,” Griswold wrote of Poe:

Poe exhibits scarcely any virtue in either his life or his writings. Probably there is not another instance in the literature of our language in which so much has been accomplished without a recognition or a manifestation of conscience. (Griswold xlvii)

This conflation of Poe’s short fiction and poetry with his personal life grew into an alternate persona eventually converged with Poe’s celebrity during the birth of commercial filmmaking.

1.1 Debates in Adaptation Studies

Adaptation remains an area of scholarship that has consistently received a great deal of critical attention. Since the advent of radio, film, and television, several writers have experimented with adapting the written word to different media, often taking previously published work from the page and reinterpreting it for the stage or the screen. This follows centuries of literature where commonly folk tales, myths, religious themes and other works freely borrowed, copied, or adapted one version of a well-known story, for example Oedipus, to create different versions of common tales from different sources, which are the early forms of adaptation. Critics, in turn, have debated the nature, validity, and definitions of adaptation, and many important critical works have been written on the subject. Adaptation studies scholar Linda Hutcheon, in her foundational text *A Theory of Adaptation*, observes that “adaptations are everywhere today on the television and movie screen, on the musical and dramatic stage, on the Internet, in novels and comic books, in your nearest theme park and video arcade” (Hutcheon 2).

Essentially, ideas of reinterpretation, reinventing, and re-doing figures in the cultural imagination remain ever-present within contemporary culture.

When one considers adaptation of the printed word, film is usually the first medium that comes to mind to modern audiences. Insofar as adaptation relates to literature, filmed versions of literary works typically receive the most scholarly attention, more so than any other forms of adaptation. To this effect, Hutcheon observes that when narratives are adapted to a “mode of showing, as in film or stage adaptations,” the viewer is automatically “caught in an unrelenting, forward-driving story” (23). The film adaptation of literature moves a reader from “the telling mode” to “the showing mode” (23) and shifts the reader from indirect perception to a more direct method of experience. At present, it seems only fitting that the film versions of novels and short stories are usually the first to be analyzed when theorizing adaptation.

Drawing from these tenets, Hutcheon proposes a classification of adaptations along a continuum based on their relationships with the original sources, locating on one end “forms in which fidelity to the prior work is a theoretical ideal,” and on the other extreme she notes retellings of familiar tales and revisions of popular ones (171). In *Reading the Movies*, William Costanzo quotes George Bluestone, one of the first critics to study film adaptations of literature. Bluestone believes the filmmaker is an independent artist, “not a translator for an established author, but a new author in his own right” (Costanzo 78). Here, I draw a preliminary distinction between a Poe inspired film versus an adaptation. A Poe inspired film involves the presence of recognizable elements such as characters or themes from Poe’s written stories that are transposed into film. The inspired film utilizes certain formal elements to inform its narrative. A Poe adaptation goes one step further. It attempts to closely align itself with Poe’s stories either through paraphrase or a

direct translation of recognizable plot points and devices. I use these two definitions to theorize the phenomenon of the relationship of Poe literature to film retellings.

The genesis of the French New Wave movement in film in the late 1950's began partially in response to debates regarding the nature of literature to film adaptations and also through their development of the auteur theory. Two of the most notable names involved in these discussions, French film theorists Andre Bazin, who while not part of the New Wave was considered a father to the youth, particularly and Francois Truffaut, who himself also theorized adaptations. Their writings and critical judgments concerning adaptation inspired many debates that still seem central to adaptation studies today. Bazin praises adaptations of great literature into cinema and argued against those that dispute their legitimacy that "filmic adaptation was not a shameful and parasitical practice but rather a creative and productive one, a catalyst for aesthetic progress" (Stam 177). This defends adaptation in relation to its many critics, then and now. In his essay "Cinema as Mixed Digest," Bazin additionally criticizes those who lamented the outrages committed against literature by adaptations, instead arguing that adaptation helped to popularize and democratize literature with "no competition or substitution, but rather the adding of a new dimension that the arts had gradually lost... namely, a public" (Bazin 368). If Bazin defended adaptation, then Truffaut rose as one of its main critical opponents, although he only attacked certain types of adaptations while valuing what he consider more authentic adaptations. For example, Truffaut and the New Wave valued Jean Cocteau as a fellow spirit, who created unorthodox but very highly regarded films adapted from the Orpheus myth. Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* took a largely forgotten tale and transformed it into a masterpiece that inspired the considerably weaker Disney animation, which in turn itself spurned Broadway adaptations as musicals. Truffaut's manifesto "A Certain Tendency in French Cinema" distanced himself from

Bazin's open-ended praise of adaptation, instead criticizing the 'tradition of quality' films, which refers to what Truffaut views as formulaic French film adaptations of literary classics. Truffaut criticizes the filmmakers who were receiving critical acclaim at the time for their well-crafted, however pretentious, literary adaptations. He condemned harshly this group of screenwriters and filmmakers who translated the ideas of previous writers, the French "Tradition of Quality," fiercely attacking them for their merely adept filmmaking as he also criticized them for having no personal vision to deepen their films. He felt they were not authentic films but rather glossy fakes.

Since the time of the French New Wave, adaptation studies have steadily moved away from a veristic "fidelity" criteria toward a more theoretically sophisticated "intertextuality" discourse (Stam 31). The intertextual approach refers to the relationships or links that may be found among different texts. However, it remains important to acknowledge the debate around adaptation studies to fully understand its contentious nature in scholarly contexts. In the background of this evolution was a critique of the moralistic language of conventional adaptation criticism, where terms like "infidelity," "betrayal," "deformation," "violation," "bastardization," "vulgarization," and "desecration" proliferated, all implying that the cinema has done a disservice to literature (Stam 41). The French auteur theory that emerged simultaneously with the New Wave played an indirect role in adaptation studies by subverting the various hierarchies – original over copy, literature over film, word over image – that "underwrote," as it were, the devaluation of film.

1.2 What is an Auteur?

The word auteur translates from the French word for "author." The essential idea behind auteur theory is that a director should be considered the author over the film, and the author's

personal vision shapes every film they make and the relation of the films to each other. So, just as in literature an author, for example Shakespeare or Poe, might be seen as the creative influence and force for their works, so great film directors function similarly. This contrasts against those who often critique film as a commercial enterprise allegedly combining multiple talents with no overarching creative unity. The Auteur as a label also functions as judgment about individual directors with those who succeed with their creative vision considered auteurs and those such as the “tradition of quality” directors being viewed as mere craftsmen, or worse. To be an auteur, therefore, goes beyond being a filmmaker who simply directs films. According to the criteria developed by the French New Wave, auteurs make films that are more personal than the average film. Derived from the ideas of New Wave directors Francois Truffaut and Jean Luc Godard as well as the concept of camera-stylo theorized by Alexandre Astruc, auteur theory maintains that the director can be considered the ‘author’ of the film if they achieve unique expressivity. The theory argues that a given film reflects a director’s own artistic vision, hopefully, such as through the inclusion of recognizable themes and visual cues. Supporters of the auteur theory assert that the most cinematically captivating films will have the unmistakable stylistic trademark or personal stamp of the director. Thus, to be considered an auteur by this line of thinking, a consistent artistic identity must be present throughout a director’s filmography.

In 1962, Andrew Sarris, the film critic for the *New York Times*, published an essay entitled, “Notes on Auteur Theory,” in which he delineated the criteria for an auteur director. This included technical competence, personal style, and interior meaning or themes. Later Sarris emphasized that “the auteur theory values the personality of a director precisely because of the barriers to its expression,” referring to the barriers constructed by mainstream Hollywood. Consequentially, Sarris concluded, the role of the film critic was to isolate and evaluate “the

personality of director” (Caughie 48). This analysis distinguishes true auteurs from the metteur-en-scene, a technically proficient film director who does not add personal style to the aesthetic of the film. In his analysis of the works of director Howard Hawks, Peter Wollen warns against an understanding the use of auteur theory to celebrate the idea of personal vision linked to a biographic individual that allegedly consciously controls their cinema. Rather he takes a more structuralist and less biographical and stylistic approach than critics such as Sarris and focuses on structural aspects of a worldview that can be used to decipher films through recognizing patterns and contradictions associated with specific auteurs. Hawks and Ford, he argues, transcend genre and ostensible content and convey series of structural oppositions in their films. It goes without saying that someone like D.W. Griffith or Roger Corman can be viewed as an auteur, but the question lies in what ways. Wollen presents his claim that what distinguishes a great auteur from a lesser auteur is the “richness of the shifting relations between the antinomies in [his] work that makes him a great artist” (Wollen 142). To demonstrate this distinction, with each film, I introduce each director’s accomplishments in filmmaking, after which I conclude if their works involving Poe qualify them as an auteur as part of analyzing the quality of the adaptations. But the important point is that almost all of them are. Furthermore, insight seems to be gained in judgement of these adaptation through close attention to the films and directors than overarching generic similarities. This conclusion was not originally anticipated but my study led me to this conclusion through careful attention to Poe films.

Alexandre Astruc, French New Wave filmmaker and film theorist, elaborates on the expressive possibilities for the director that utilizes the camera and film in general as an artistic vehicle. He literally compares the camera to a pen, arguing that essays, philosophy, science, and all modes of written expression can be achieved through cinema. He elaborates on the work of

cinematic language as “a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts, however abstract they may be, or translate his obsessions exactly as he does in the contemporary essay or novel” (Astruc 1). Cinema, in Astruc’s view, becomes a means of personal expression and ideology for the filmmaker. The camera-stylo, such as the voyeuristic gaze, attains a new level of intimacy, giving the director the ability to directly create and manifest his manifestation of his artistic vision. This is exactly what each one of the directors selected for this survey aims to accomplish. Part of the process of this project involves differentiating between Poe’s authorial intent and the auteur/director’s personal vision.

Table 1: Poe Pictures Covered

Title of Film	Year Released	Director
<i>Edgar Allen Poe</i>	1909	D.W. Griffith
<i>Pit and the Pendulum</i>	1913	Alice Guy-Blache
<i>The Avenging Conscience</i>	1914	D.W. Griffith
<i>The Plague of Florence</i>	1919	Otto Rippert
<i>Eerie Tales</i>	1919	Richard Oswald
<i>Fall of the House of Usher</i>	1928	James Sibley Watson

Table 1 cont.

<i>Fall of the House of Usher</i>	1928	Jean Epstein
<i>The Black Cat</i>	1934	Edgar G. Ulmer
<i>The Raven</i>	1935	Lew Landers
<i>The Tell Tale Heart</i>	1941	Jules Dassin
<i>Fall of the House of Usher</i>	1960	Roger Corman
<i>Pit and the Pendulum</i>	1961	Roger Corman
<i>Tales of Terror</i>	1962	Roger Corman
<i>Masque of the Red Death</i>	1964	Roger Corman

1.3 “The Philosophy of Composition” and Film

The changes frequently made in the film versions of Poe’s short stories can be compared to Poe’s own theories as described in his 1845 essay “The Philosophy of Composition.”

Although many scholars believe that Poe’s essay should not be taken seriously, it proves a fascinating piece of work that provides an interesting insight into how Poe theorized the medium of the written word. Using Poe’s essay as a guide, I frame my discussion as to how film adaptations of Poe’s short stories draw upon elements which Poe considers vital to the success of a written text.

In “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe holds that, as a writer, he constantly strives to be mindful of originality when choosing a subject or constructing a plot. Additionally, Poe asserts that he keeps “originality always in view ... I say to myself, in the first place, ‘Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?’” (Poe, ‘Philosophy,’ 676). When creating a specific effect, Poe stresses that originality is necessary. Poe’s stories concern the fantastic but included within those stories are often dynamic characters with realistic motivations. Although surrounded by specters and monsters, Poe's characters are fueled by realistic desires familiar to his audience and this translates in filmic depictions.

Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories and poetry have interesting features in common with their cinematic counterparts. Many Poe tales and their appearance in film form the subject matter for auteurs with unique creative visions and capabilities. Poe’s stories seem to lend themselves to such innovative adaptations through Poe’s evocative prose, which inspires interesting treatment of subject matter in the films treated here. Poe films often incorporate certain political and socio-cultural references from the time of their production. The stories transcends the differences one

expects from different artists living in a different period of history and society. The recognition of these attributes contribute to a contextual analysis of Poe on film.

1.4 Guiding Questions

This thesis considers the filmic translation of Poe stories as an exercise in creativity. More than simply an inferior “copy” of an original, the adaptation and the inspired film becomes an immensely creative enterprise, a form of writing in itself. This project acknowledges and strives to document the wealth of Poe films through film history to the present moment. This tribute to Poe’s legacy on the screen draws upon an appreciation of Poe. The approach to studying these films adopts an intertextual as opposed to a judgmental approach to adaptations of Poe, often rooted in assumptions about the superiority of literature. Central to my analysis of each Poe film in context are the following guiding questions:

- Can the adaptation stand alone, or is it necessary to reference Poe’s tale constantly to understand the film?
- Does the adaptation capture the story’s formal elements such the theme, characterization, style, tone, and plot of the narrative?
- Are adaptations quality art in their own right?

Adaptations, in this sense, manifest what is true of all works of art. After all, according to Plato, all representations are forms of adaptations, or copies that are on some level imitative of “forms” that transcend the particular and imitate an original realm of ideas. This study of Poe adaptations potentially impacts our understanding not only of film but of literature as well.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST WAVE OF POE PICTURES (1909-1928)

This chapter covers the history of the Poe inspired film, beginning in the early years of cinema. The films examined in this section include: D.W. Griffith's *Edgar Allan Poe* (1909) and *The Avenging Conscience* (1914,) Alice Guy-Blache's *Pit & The Pendulum* (1913,) Otto Rippert's *The Plague of Florence* (1919,) Richard Oswald's *Eerie Tales* (1919,) Jean Epstein's *Fall of the House of Usher* (1928,) and James Sibley Watson's *Fall of the House of Usher* (1928). The pioneering directors of these films utilized the filmic medium in innovative and influential ways to bring the stories of Poe to the screen. However, not all these Poe inspired films cleanly fit into a traditional literal definition of a Poe adaptation. Yet, these films share common aesthetic and narrative features that warrant further analysis as a group. Each film in this grouping qualifies as significant for this specific time in film history through their innovation in narrative cinema. Many of these films also draw upon concepts from avant-garde movements in art, such as German Expressionism, Surrealism, and Impressionism. Based on close readings of key moments in each film, I will argue the wealth of Poe films during the early decades of film history derives from the mythos surrounding Poe's persona and these films stand out as formally significant.

The films selected derive from the early decades of film history. Poe's short stories and their adaption into early film are inextricably linked to the evolution of cinema itself. What

becomes apparent in analyzing Poe films from this era is that there is a genuine lean towards original and innovative formal narrative structures and cinematography. These Poe films represented innovations in early cinema and remain, today, still quite unorthodox in relation to mainstream cinema.

The short stories of Edgar Allan Poe are evocative and known for how the imagery and atmosphere leaps from the page. This power contained in Poe's works seems to need expression for any effective adaptation. One reason his works elicit intense cinematic treatments derives from the accessibility of his prose and his fame as a literary celebrity. Paradoxically, the alignment of Poe with film and the medium of photography appears natural precisely because of what theorist Walter Benjamin identifies as the dual potential of technologies of reproduction. This refers to the ways in which photographic imaging can be used either to serve reactionary or progressive ends. Benjamin also discusses his belief that an original art object possesses authenticity which allows "the idea of tradition which has passed the object down as the same, identical thing to the present day" (Benjamin 103). To apply this concept of reproducibility to Poe, Poe's personal fame has enabled politically diverse, international adaptations of his works and themes. Filmic technologies distort and illuminate reality through utilizing the base of still and moving photographic images. Early filmmakers used technologies of reproducibility to remake Poe from what was perceived as his tarnished posthumous image—the creation of which is usually attributed to Rufus Griswold's infamous obituary of Poe and his preface to Poe's first posthumous collected works.¹

¹ As Scott Peeples explains, Griswold's Preface "became a focus for nearly all published commentary on Poe for the rest of the nineteenth century" (Peeples 210). It extended the verbal portrait in Griswold's notorious obituary of Poe published in *The New York Tribune*. Peeples says, "[a]lthough his accounts of Poe's life are brief, Griswold's influence on Poe's biography is enormous: he exaggerated some of Poe's character defects and invented or enhanced certain key incidents (as well as parts of letters from Poe) to make Poe appear thoroughly depraved," and

When translated to the screen, early films imagined Poe with a tendency toward emphasizing his person rather than his tales. Film historian Kyle Dawson Edwards argues, “by the end of the nineteenth century, Edgar Allan Poe was enmeshed in [a] self-perpetuating rhetorical machination that used his life story as fodder to fuel further scrutiny, speculation, intrigue, and adulation” (Edwards 5). With his works and life, the distinctions between fiction and reality and his life and works get blurred. Early film adaptations reflect this conflation. Poe’s self-reflexive writing and interest in the creative process ensured his centrality to discussions of the American literary tradition within and beyond his lifetime.

Early adaptations indicate intertextuality. All adaptations are intertextual, as adaptation studies scholar Linda Hutcheon contends. Hutcheon emphasizes that spectators “experience adaptations...as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation” (Hutcheon 8). These films exist contextually “with a time and a place, a society and a culture” (xviii). Hutcheon argues that multiple variations of the same texts morph, which resembles “discourse” rather than a “source” (Hutcheon 9). She draws upon the theory of discourse as articulated Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. He claims discourses originate through a material practices and history and gradually and irregularly expand—through the accumulation of “a number of... objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices” which shapes their meaning, application, and notoriety in various fields (Foucault 38). Adaptations, instead of being judged based on fidelity to their source or original texts, should be judged as a process of replication that evolve with changing environments and

while “[s]everal friends of Poe came to Poe’s defense in magazine articles, ... Griswold’s characterization stuck” (212).

form and link up with discourses surrounding Poe. Subsequent waves of Poe films support and showcase this claim.

Yet, an essential question of the early films concerns whether they are adaptations of Poe's works or merely influenced by impressions of his person. Bruce Hallenbeck, a horror film scholar, posits that "the fact they are Poe adaptations now seems incidental" as they are more often studied in the context of "the cinematic avant garde" (Hallenbeck 9). However, despite not all being direct adaptations, they form an essential foundation for discussion of future works. This overview and analysis of Poe inspired works begs the question: if adaptations alter from their original in varying degrees, does that challenge their status as adaptations or are these hybrids merely a reflection of personal aesthetic tastes? This type of response remains informed as not all adaptations are necessarily anti-canonical. Instead, they can reinforce authors like Poe as deserving of their status in the American literary canon by achieving relevance for a new audience.

2.1. D.W. Griffith, *Edgar Allen Poe* (1909)

The centenary of Edgar Allan Poe's birth in 1909 coincided with when more and more filmmakers were looking to literature for plots and themes. Bringing literature to the cinema, filmmakers could help strive to elevate motion picture theaters above the cheap amusement parlors with which they had been associated in order to more effectively attract middle-class audiences. *Edgar Allen Poe* (1909), created by D.W. Griffith, who is the single most important and influential director in early American cinema, embraces a melodramatic fictional retelling of an imaginary, though loosely based on some facts, backstory behind the creation of the poem "The Raven." Griffith's *Edgar Allen Poe* (1909) remains significant to the study of Poe inspired cinema for several main reasons. Most significantly, it establishes a link between Poe and his

work and film from the veritable birth of cinema. Further the film develops an interesting precedent in Poe treatments through conflating fact and fiction, making Poe a figure beyond his literature and a kind of public celebrity.

Poe's public image and posthumous legacy on the screen borrows elements from his popular Gothic tales, thereby not fully breaking from the original literature of Poe. The title cards of the Biograph produced short film promise the audience that the "Picture Story Founded on Events in His Career" will recount the origin of Poe's most well-known poem "The Raven." Called the first film biography by critics like Thomas Carlson, the biographical claim must be applied loosely here. The one-reel short stands out as unique in its narrative construction, freely mixing biographical fact, legend, and art. Following the release of *Edgar Allen Poe*, an astonishing seventeen Poe inspired films premiered between 1909 and 1917, including several more by Griffith himself (Carlson 2). *Edgar Allen Poe* (1909) remains the first film in American film history inspired by Poe and warrants recognition within the genre for establishing a precedent for Griffith's future contributions to narrative cinema.

In the early first decade of the twentieth century, film entered an important transitional period. From its commercial introduction in 1894, the cinematic medium itself attracted through capturing reality. Seen as an extension of photography the early shorts were labeled "actualities" and reproduced short stills of ordinary "actual" life. They featured one shot with a stationary camera and were usually non narrative and non-fictional, although some strayed into fiction. However, by 1909, the demand for fictional imaginative narrative grew within production companies like Biograph, since there was a perception that audiences had grown tired of mere displays of daily life. Faced with the demand for new storylines, many filmmakers turned to the "ready-made" narratives of literature. This borrowing from literature helped to bring about

further social acceptance between the film industry and the masses. Carlson identifies early Poe films as biopics loosely based on the way that Poe's life intermingled with moments from his works which utilize "the collective [public] image of Poe" (Carlson 13). These early films, including *Edgar Allen Poe*, lean towards a biographical narrative by using facts and anecdotes from Poe's real life. It warrants its classification as the first biographical film, though not in a strict sense. Yet, when compared to genre criticism in film studies as defined by theorists such as Dennis Bingham, these films, and Griffith's in particular, can loosely be coined as a melodrama with biographical features. In the introduction to *The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre*. Bingham establishes that "the biopic is by no means a simple recounting of the facts of someone's life...it is an attempt to discover biographical truth" (Bingham 7). Though the basis of Griffith's *Edgar Allen Poe* (1909) finds its inspiration in the real figures of Edgar Allan Poe and Virginia Clemm, the film does little work to establish its historical credibility. Bingham further asserts that the biographical film's objective should be "to enter the biographical subject into the pantheon of cultural mythology, one way or another, and to show why he or she belongs there" (10). In this respect, *Edgar Allen Poe* (1909) proves successful- it draws upon the mythology of Poe's life as interpreted by Griffith and presents it to an audience. Rick Altman in his work *Film/Genre* adopts a similar attitude to the biopic by addressing the issues involved with maintaining a rigid, static definition of genre. If we maintain a strict set of guidelines as to what fits into a category or genre, not all relevant works fit into classical definitions of genre. Ultimately, through close analysis of the film, the film can be classified as a biographical fictional narrative presented as melodrama, though not an adaptation.

Griffith immediately recognized the cinematic possibilities the constructed public image of Poe offered for films. Griffith's place in film history, broadly, comes from his innovations in

pioneering narrative cinema through his use of continuity editing and mise-en-scene. The term mise-en-scène, as used by film historians Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, refers to “the director’s control over what happens in the film frame” (112). This includes setting, lighting, costume and the behavior of the figures in front of the camera. By controlling the mise-en-scene, they contend that the director stages the event for the camera. André Bazin, a renowned French film critic and film theorist, describes the mise-en-scène aesthetic as emphasizing choreographed movement within the scene rather than through editing (Bazin 48). Since Griffith was an actor before he came to film, it comes as no surprise that he carried over his experience from the stage to the screen. Yet, Griffith utilized continuity editing to maintain a sense of continuous action in his narrative and he developed film language so it can clearly tell a story, through editing shots and freeing up space and time, but still clearly to to the audience without confusion. Continuity editing refers to a technique of film editing that piece together shots that present the illusion of the continuous passing of time. The purpose of continuity editing lies within its ability “to tell a story by creating a spatially and temporally coherent sequence of events and actions with the end result of enabling the viewer to perceive a sense of causal cohesion across cuts” (Thompson and Bordwell 122). Further, Griffith’s innovation lies within his ability to manipulate the experience of the audience as they expect the continuity of events in a film and that continuity editing works by substantiating (or violating) audience expectations.

Tom Gunning further praises Griffith’s innovation in narrative filmmaking, arguing that “Griffith’s transformation of filmic discourse constructs a new sort of spectator for film” (Gunning 23). Part of the creation of this new spectator experience came with new expectations. What differentiates Griffith from earlier filmmakers appears in his mastery of characterization as “the access Griffith allows us to characters’ emotion and motivations for their actions define his

particular development of an authorial point of view” (26). Griffith’s own authorial intent did not overstep his appreciation for Poe and his attempts to emulate the same mood from Poe’s works manifested in the introduction of the Gothic to the screen.

Though many of the intertitle cards have been lost to time, the visuals that compose Griffith’s interpretation of Poe more than compensate for the lack of dialogue and descriptive narrative cards. Told generally through visual cues, the narrative develops through settings provided by the remaining intertitles such as “the dingy apartment, the mortally ill wife, the busy publishing house, [as they] tell us exactly what is going on in Poe’s life” (Hallenbeck 9). The plot features a sick Virginia Clemm and a writer’s-blocked Poe in humble settings. In the middle of what appears to be a one room home lies a bed where Virginia rises and returns to, overcome by her illness. The bed centers the viewer’s gaze, so we are encouraged to sympathize with the plight of Virginia Clemm Poe. Her husband rushes into view and grabs his invalid wife’s hands, gesticulating towards the light from the window either to curse it or as an expression of his lack of control over the situation. Suddenly, he realizes that a raven has landed on a bust, and Poe garners the inspiration to write his masterpiece. He dashes off to sell his manuscript to a nearby publishing house, which he does after great difficulty. With his earnings, he buys a quilt for his beloved, races back home, and covers her with it, only to realize the awful truth that she has passed away. Then the film ends.

Griffith’s interpretation of Poe positions Poe’s life and his works as cinematic. Hutcheon describes the process of adaptation as “a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context” (Hutcheon 118). Griffith takes the facts of Virginia Clemm’s death, Poe’s notoriety during his lifetime, and the central image of the raven to create a fictional take on Poe. Both the poem and

the film take the raven as a literal and symbolic incarnation of death. The rewriting of biographical events hints that adaptation goes beyond simple appreciation to play with public images of Poe and his persona.

Griffith largely invented and developed revolutionary storytelling and cinematic techniques, such as continuity editing. Though his short film *Edgar Allen Poe* (1909) borrows from the world of theatre in its use of mise en scene and melodramatic acting, it represents an early stage of Griffith's experiments with the medium of cinema. *Edgar Allen Poe* tells its tragic story economically and without a great deal of flourish but stands the test of time for its significance in helping to establish what would become narrative cinema. Later films would go beyond a simple depiction of the author and his working process or at least his working process as interpreted through Griffith's presentation in the distinctive dramatic style of the early silent film that Griffith helped develop. Yet, the earliest work inspired by Poe proves significant through establishing precedents for the biographical film form in providing one continuous experience of time and narrative. Most significantly, Griffith visually adapts Poe's body, rather than retelling his stories as later pictures would. Griffith incorporates photographic portraiture into the film's moving images to implicitly enact Poe's reincarnation on the screen. *Edgar Allen Poe* demonstrates the symbiotic exchange between literary and cinematic codes achieved in the filmic medium and the multiple, nuanced ways in which the page may be transferred to the screen.

2.2. D.W. Griffith, *The Avenging Conscience* (1914)

Following the release of *Edgar Allen Poe* (1909), Griffith developed an eleven-minute Poe inspired short *The Sealed Room*, loosely drawing on "The Cask of Amontillado." This film, while inspired by Poe's work, shares only one plot point in common with the text: the sealing up

of an individual trapped in a wall. However, Griffith's next project in bringing Poe's texts to life incorporated recognizable aspects of plot from the short stories and experimented with translating the horrors of Poe's literature to the screen.

The premise of *The Avenging Conscience* borrows from, loosely, the storyline of "The Tell Tale Heart," in that both deal with the events leading up to and following the murder of an old man by an unreliable and psychologically unstable narrator. The film deviates from Poe's text by presenting Poe's narrative and reframing it as a cautionary moral tale, which the Poe tale avoids. The plot of *The Avenging Conscience* follows an unnamed young man who falls in love with an unnamed sweetheart. Thwarted by his despotic uncle from continuing his love affair, the young man's thoughts turn dark as he dwells on ways to deal with his uncle. Becoming convinced that murder is merely a natural part of life, he kills his uncle and hides the body. However, the man's conscience awakens as paranoia sets in and nightmarish visions begin to haunt him.

Carlson contends that early cinema, effectively "domesticated" Poe "in ways acceptable to a large middle-class film audience" (Carlson 6). According to Carlson's analysis, these silent films inspired by Poe track Poe's transformation from the "moral reprobate conjured by Griswold" into "the good-hearted, loyal domestic male trying to stay afloat in the world of unequal opportunity and advantage" (12). Griswold's critique of Poe's person plays a role as Griffith attempts to restore a view of Poe as "a familiar and recognizably beset citizen of early twentieth-century America" which evolved into making him into a model of white, middle-class masculinity. Griffith would later be known for *Birth of a Nation*, which was released a year later in 1915. As Carlson notes, Poe "differed from this stock type [of the starving/tortured artist]—

one of D. W. Griffith's favorites—only in his possession of literary genius" (13). The nephew character in *The Avenging Conscience* draws upon the archetype of the tortured artist.

However, *The Avenging Conscience* owes its deepest debt to Poe in the way that it tries to put the viewer within the mind and thoughts of its story's protagonist. In this respect, this stands as a remarkably ambitious work, with Griffith employing all sorts of cinematic feats to enrich the psychological aspects of his tale. Hayes argues that "one of Poe's great strengths as a writer is the psychological complexity of his characters, especially his first-person narrators (Hayes 15). This complexity provides a blueprint for Griffith with which to work and allow for recognition and innovation in the creation of the nephew's paranoia and guilty conscience after he murders his uncle.

Implicitly, *The Avenging Conscience* conflates the nephew with Poe the author. Like Poe's, the nephew's mother died when he was a child. Her death is depicted in the film's opening scene, in which the uncle assumes wardship of the nephew as an infant, leaving viewers to assume that similar to Poe's real life, the protagonist's father was absent and possibly dead at the time. Moreover, the nephew's struggle against his guardian's expectations for his future, and his becoming afflicted with a "Fevered Brain," which leads him to commit murder, are extensions of among the most popularized details of Poe's biography: his quarrels with and eventual disinheritance by his adoptive father, John Allan, and his mental afflictions, which, were represented as symptoms not of Poe's alcoholism and moral of "his own genius, as well as a crass, insensitive society" (Carlson 8). Conforming to this new attitude toward Poe's failings, the film evokes viewers' sympathy for the nephew's predicament and even their understanding of how the nephew is driven to murder

The film makes full use of Griffith's narrative through its use of cinematic language. Tom Gunning claims that, to Griffith, an individual shot, rather than the scene, constituted the central element of cinematic language.² He therefore made use of many cuts and shots. One instance of this mastery of cinematic language comes early in the film. In the build up to the murder, as the nephew stares at the desk that his uncle usually occupies, an almost subliminal flashback transports the audience to the moment when the nephew witnessed the devouring of a fly by a spider. Film historian Vlad Petric asserts that the intertitles and the nephew's acting in this scene, as well as the film's narrative up to this point, indicate Griffith's "develop[ment]" of "the image" and the moment that inspires the nephew to conceive of a plot to murder his uncle (Petric 10). I read this flashback as an adaptation of Poe's lines in "The Tell-Tale Heart" in which the narrator describes spying on the old man under his care, who soon becomes his murder victim: "So I opened [the old man's bedroom door]—you can imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until, at length a single dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell upon the vulture eye" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart," 319). Griffith transforms these lines into a metaphor which justifies the nephew's decision to murder his guardian.

Later, when as the nephew hesitates after drawing his gun, he thinks of his sweetheart, who we see gazing mournfully into the night sky from her bedroom window. This vision of his beloved weakens the nephew's resolve. After successfully concealing the nefarious murder, the nephew appears visibly pleased with his own cleverness, at least until his sweetheart visits. The nephew's eyes widen in shock, and he stares past his beloved. From the bricked-up fireplace we see the ghost of the uncle emerge, reaching out with clutched hands and pointing an accusing

² For more on film language, a great resource regarding early uses of editing and montage is *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* by Sergei Eisenstein (1949).

finger before gripping his own throat. Convinced that he has experienced a hallucination simply because of overtiredness, the nephew goes to bed. He suffers a momentary qualm as he remembers his deceased uncle but shrugs it off and settles down to sleep. But no rest comes to him. Instead, the uncle's ghost enters the room via the window and looms towards the bed as the nephew shrinks beneath the covers. The nephew diagnoses himself with a nervous breakdown and retreats to a sanatorium, from where he returns an unspecified time later, "cured." He eventually abandons his sweetheart after they are reunited and runs home in a panic, as the voice of his "avenging conscience" engulfs him. The use of flashback in these instances contribute to an interpretation of the nephew character as morally dubious and unreliable, like the narrator in "The Tell Tale Heart."

Although not a true adaptation of any one work, *The Avenging Conscience* contains any number of allusions to "The Tell-Tale Heart" and Poe's famous poem "Annabel Lee." The nephew, the protagonist, begins reading a collection of Poe's works. *The Avenging Conscience* follows a character known as the nephew and his descent into guilt and insanity after murdering his uncle, which reminds viewers of the major plot of "The Tell-Tale Heart." However, with the inclusion of a generic love story, it detracts from rather than enriches Poe's already rich narrative. Griffith makes a conscious choice to push an image of the nephew that conflates Poe as a pillar of masculinity and morality. Where Griffith shines comes from his translation of the literary first person into an accessible visual experience of a demented soul. The nephew's state of mind is conveyed by an intertitle that quotes a portion of "The Tell Tale Heart" from its opening paragraph: "I saw all the things in the heaven and in the earth. I saw many things in hell." Later, when the nephew is overcome with remorse over his actions, another intertitle observes, "Conscience overburdened the telltale heart." The Nephew is also driven to near

madness by repetitive sounds that to his tortured nerves are like the beating of the dead man's heart.

The Avenging Conscience contains additional references direct, and indirect, to Poe's writings. The female lead, called the sweetheart in passing, is never named in the text, but the nephew nicknames her "Annabel," referencing the poem "Annabel Lee." Additionally, the state of their mutual passion, first happy and then miserably frustrated, is communicated by means of extensive quotations from the poems "Annabel Lee" and "To One in Paradise." The nephew begins to suffer horrible visions, which he describes via a quotation from Poe's poem "The Bells" where the demons he says are "neither man nor woman; they are neither brute nor human; they are ghouls!" (Petric 45). The walling up of his murdered uncle's body recalls both "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Black Cat." Both texts feature the sealing up of a character into a wall as the climax of their plot. These repeated references to Poe's texts rather than Poe's personage therefore establish an intertextual link between the cinematic depiction and adaptation from its literary sources.

In one instance, Griffith employs religious imagery, diverging from Poe's words. The nephew writhes upon the floor, simultaneously suffering from his terrors and imploring forgiveness. During the nephew's dream, his confession follows his hallucinations of his uncle arisen from the dead and a series of religious images set against an evening sky in chiaroscuro, including several of Christ, haloed and crucified, and one of Moses holding a tablet inscribed with the Commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill." When the fit passes, he staggers to his feet, exhausted but smiling, and evidently feeling that the worst is over. Petric argues that Griffith composed the film's sequences of religious imagery "to visually demarcate the two worlds—the 'real' in which Nephew exists (and suffers), and the 'surreal,' which projects his vision" (16). I

argue that not only does Griffith use religious imagery to appeal to a largely Christian audience, but also absolve the crime before the film's conclusion. Even before the film overtly identifies the murder to be unreal, Griffith creates a covertly sympathetic view of the nephew in his dream

Later in the film, the "stranger" the nephew encounters turns out to be a detective, who rapidly becomes convinced of the nephew's guilt. Simultaneously, the nephew's paranoia begins to grow. Soon, these two plot-strands collide. The Nephew has barely recovered from his night of agonies when the Stranger makes his move, inviting himself into the cottage to "ask a few questions." To this point, none of the tricks used to illustrate the nephew's state of mind function as particularly revolutionary formally, although they *are* effective. It is in a sequence, where the confrontation between the nephew and the detective gets depicted that makes this film's reputation as innovative and shows D.W. Griffith's growing awareness of the narrative possibilities of film technique. As the nephew shifts in his chair, he becomes unable to block from his mind an acute awareness of the ticking of a grandfather clock nearby, plagued by the remorseless swinging of its pendulum. The camera shifts from the pendulum to the nervous nephew and back to the detective and the shots repeat. This quick, swift collection of continuous shots mirrors the nephew's paranoia.

Noticing his suspect's unease, the detective begins to tap his pencil upon the table. This use of diegetic sound or sounds that comes from the setting of the film, indicate to the audience that the detective knows more than he lets on. Indeed, it becomes insufferable to the young man's frayed sensibilities. Finally, the nephew's mind collapses as his "telltale heart" can stand no more. He begins to suffer visions of demons and witches. He envisions himself in the embrace of a skeleton and re-enacts his own part in the murder, before confessing to his crime. A

struggle ensues, and the criminal breaks away, fleeing to his retreat and making a last desperate stand there, as the detective's men close in on him. In the wake of all the horror of his eventual suicide, the camera fades to the nephew waking up in his armchair, where it is revealed, it was only just a figment of his imagination.

It would be almost another two decades before mainstream Hollywood filmmakers would embrace the horrors of Poe's stories. What catches the viewer off-guard about *The Avenging Conscience*, therefore, is not that it turns out to be *just a dream*, but how far it goes before that in conjuring up its horrors, both in diegetic reality and within its protagonist's mind. The sense here is that, while knowing none of the horrors he was crafting were "real," Griffith was able to let himself create freely. It is also noteworthy that the director allows the accumulating darkness of the middle section of his film to have its full effect upon the viewer, and refrains from undermining it in any way.

But ultimately, it is not just the success of *The Avenging Conscience* that matters, but also the magnitude of the film's ambitions. Indeed, at this stage of Griffith's career, the director's imagination seemed to be outstripping the available technology. However, the effects of these scenes is less important than their conception, whereas we see Griffith grasping the potentiality of film as a complete story-telling medium. This, of course, is most graphically illustrated during the joint tormenting of the nephew by the detective and his own conscience through the blurring of diegetic and non-diegetic sound. The brilliance of this sequence, with its use of skillful editing to emphasize and punctuate repetitive *sound*, remains impactful in conveying the nephew's guilt. In this way, although a silent film, Griffith beckons to future cinematic possibilities beyond silent films. *The Avenging Conscience* deserves examination as it is one of the first cinematic treatments of Poe and in establishing the parameters of the American horror film. Like many

subsequent Poe adaptations, this film does not stick to a literal retelling of just one Poe story; instead, it borrows from multiple Poe sources. The film becomes a remarkable achievement in its own right. It would not be until Germany in the 1920s that this kind of psychological horror would be explored as thoroughly again.

2.3. Alice Guy-Blache, *The Pit & the Pendulum* (1913)

The first cinematic reimagining of Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" has largely escaped the attention of Poe scholars and Poe enthusiasts alike. Directed by Alice Guy-Blache, one of the very first women to step behind the camera (McMahan 5), the film is partially lost, with only the first of three reels surviving in contemporary archives. However, the 7-minute part of the surviving first reel and reviews from the time contend that the rest of the film stands out as remarkably horrific for its day. One review from the *Morning Telegraph* on July 27, 1913, says of the film:

The SOLAX Company puts out a feature. Usually they are pretty good-
The Pit and the Pendulum is more than that. Not only is it one of the best features done by the Solax Company but it is a three-part film of which any company might justly be proud... Then come the torture scenes. Here all the horror of Poe's story are fully realized. The huge pendulum sharp as a razor, swings to and fro descending at every stroke. ("Telegraph" B9)

Another review from the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, a prominent theatrical trade newspaper of the time, 1913, provides more detail to the missing contents of the film where it describes that:

some liberties have been taken with Edgar Allan Poe's story, upon which this three-reel feature is founded but altogether it is an excellent production

that very well reflects the haunting horror of Poe's tale. Settings, costumes, and acting are admirable, and the element of suspense is finely maintained.

(“Dramatic Mirror” B6)

The realistic elements of horror are mentioned and qualify this Poe picture as significant for its creation in early cinema.

Alice Guy- Blache established her own company, Solax, which mostly produced shorts. In her later years, she did release one feature-length film, but in the Solax prime, one-reelers were norm. That makes the 1913 adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Pit and the Pendulum” even more remarkable, because it totaled three reels long. Most of the film is now lost and what survives is around half of the first reel, which unfortunately ends just before Poe’s story begins. However, enough external evidence survives to allow some surmises regarding the contents of the remaining two reels. Blache’s interest in realism as well as performance dovetailed with what her biographer Alison McMahan said was Guy’s greatest achievement. Her films, McMahan said, “focused on the psychological perspective of the central characters” (McMahan 3). Gwendolyn Foster, a scholar in film theory, asserts that Guy deserves as much as recognition for her contributions to early cinema despite the fact that:

For the most part, her films have been overlooked by historians because of the incorrect assumption that they represent a footnote to film history, rather than being one of the first major bodies of performative narrative cinema. Indeed, as one of the first persons to direct a film with a narrative structure, and thus to direct actors to convey the essence of the narrative through gestures and actions, Alice Guy is one of the originators of filmic performativity, both in theory and in practice. (Foster 44)

This interest in narrative through developments of the performance of character psychology and innovative cinematography, present in the *Pit and the Pendulum* (1913), solidify Alice Guy-Blache as a key figure in the birth of the fiction film and one of the first auteurs to utilize Poe, his persona, and works as subject matter

Like Griffith's reels, the story of *The Pit and the Pendulum* follows a visual driven plot. Poe's original text subtly structures the horrors of the tale as a dream, while Alice Guy "directly set the action during the time of the Spanish Inquisition and added a narrative framework to establish reasons why the protagonist would be unjustly subjected to such cruel torture" (Hayes 37). Reviewers and critics "went so far as to assert that the film followed Poe's short story with "laudable faithfulness...as the tale itself is really nothing more than a succession of horrors, it was necessary to add a plot, and this has been done with considerable skill" (Bush 13). Unlike Poe's work – a sort of tale in which the unnamed protagonist doesn't know where he is, doesn't know why he's there, doesn't know what's going to happen to him, and is only certain that the men who arrested and convicted him are entirely unconcerned with his ever finding out – Guy's adaptation is quite definitive when it comes to what's going on and why. This turn reflects upon Poe's "Philosophy of Composition" where he highlights the creation of a singular effect to evoke a reaction from the reader. Guy-Blache, by the above accounts, aims to evoke this same quality in her film.

The film begins with revealing its two main suitors, Alonzo, and Pedro, who are both in love with the same woman. Things come to a head when a knife fight breaks out between them. Alonzo wins and he and the unnamed woman marry. Some time passes. Alonzo becomes an herbalist doctor to "treat the poor of Toledo." The revengeful Pedro joins the Spanish Inquisition and begins to plot Alonzo's downfall. He steals a jewel-encrusted relic from the monastery and

hides it in Alonzo's house. When it's discovered missing, he intimates to the abbot that Alonzo might be a witch, contending he used sorcery to steal the reliquary. Pedro leads several men to Alonzo's home, where they discover the missing artifact and wait to apprehend Alonzo on his return.

The surviving fragment ends just as Alonzo enters the room. A couple production stills from the more exciting parts – Alonzo strapped to a table as the pendulum swings closer, the walls closing in and threatening to force him into the pit – can be seen in period advertisements. We can also turn to contemporary reviews to learn how the film ends:

Alonzo and the girl escape from Pedro's men and a chase ensues. They board a boat and nearly make it out of a Spain, but Pedro waylays them in a boat of his own. They're taken before the Inquisition and Alonzo is tortured, but only after Pedro threatens to torture the girl will he confess to the theft. After that, Poe's *Pit and the Pendulum* is retold faithfully, right up to the point that Alonzo is in danger of falling into the pit. In the lady's imprisonment, a British soldier learns from the woman what happened to Alonzo. He frees her and sets out in search of her husband. After being misled by the monks several times, he finds the torture chamber and saves Alonzo from the pit. Also, unlike Poe's story, where whatever the protagonist saw at the bottom was too horrible to record, Alonzo saw a pile of bones with snakes crawling in and out of human skulls. (McMahan 45)

This alteration evokes the religious connotation of the snake, which led to the fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden. Guy-Blache utilizes this association to comment on human nature and the struggle between good and evil.

The film is very careful to distance the Inquisition from the Catholic Church. Alice Guy's Catholic upbringing was no doubt a major influence, as film theorist and biographer Anthony Slide contends, in presenting the Catholic Church as separate from the Inquisition. When it comes to Poe adaptations, earlier films often expand on the story to add filler to the film and make it more visually interesting, which yields different results. Nothing is explained in Guy-Blache's take on *Pit and the Pendulum*- the protagonist is simply caught up in machinations beyond his grasp or appeal. Who he is seems incidental and why he is there is also framed as incidental. Meaningless torture and death appear infinitely more frightening than a jilted lover's revenge.

The focus on horror and torture rather than a happy ending type of narrative could qualify this film as an early experimental art film. Film historian David Bordwell states that "...the art cinema motivates its narrative by two principles: realism and authorial expressivity" (Bordwell 153). Art films deviate from the mainstream, classical norms of filmmaking in that they typically deal with more episodic narrative structures with a "...loosening of the chain of cause and effect" (153). As well, art films often deal with an inner drama that takes place in a character's psyche, such as psychological issues dealing with individual identity, transgressive sexual or social issues, moral dilemmas, or personal crises. According to Bordwell, the dilemmas in these types of films are probed and investigated in a pensive fashion, but usually without a clear resolution at the end of the movie. The protagonists in art films are often facing doubt or alienation, and the camera often depicts their internal dialogue of thoughts, dreams, and fantasies. Guy-Blache utilizes absurd or seemingly meaningless actions to express existential dread. The case of existential dread through torture mirrors the peril of Poe's unnamed narrator in his short story "Pit and the Pendulum." Arguably, Poe's version of "The Pit and the

Pendulum” has never been as popular as some of his other stories, possibly because of its uncharacteristically happy ending. The story ends with the narrator's narrow escape from the pit and his rescue by General Lasalle and the French Army. Yet it shares with all his stories a quality of dread and despair, evoked through the type of language that is the hallmark of Gothic fiction. Stuart Levine, in his 1972 book *Edgar Poe: Seer and Craftsman*, acknowledges that “The Pit and the Pendulum” is “no doubt sensational . . . but it will be remembered that sensationalism was one of the tenets of [Poe’s] critical theory. . . the entire story is designed to produce a single effect [and] the pattern presented [stands out] in its complexity and horror” (Levine 200). The disintegration of the narrator’s sanity in the short story text parallels with contemporary reviews of Guy-Blache’s film treatment. With respect to channeling the singular effect of Poe’s fiction, Guy’s adaptation of Poe succeeds. It also anticipates the different artistic movements in film like Surrealism in the 1920’s and its resurgence in the 1980’s.

2.4. Otto Rippert, *The Plague of Florence* (1919)

Otto Rippert’s *The Plague of Florence* receives credit as having been inspired by Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Masque of the Red Death*. However, other than using the introduction of a human personification of the plague, it evolves into an entirely different type of film. It is the setting of a time before playing out a single scene (the arrival of the Red Death). *The Plague of Florence* falls under the umbrella of the German Expressionism movement in film, which had a very distinctive mood and visual style which contrasts with the film styles of Griffith and Guy-Blache. Film historians David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson describe the essential characteristics of German Expressionism:

German Expressionist cinema... is distinctive primarily for its use of mise-en-scene. German Expressionist films emphasize the composition of individual shots to an exceptional degree. Expressionist films had many tactics for blending the settings, costumes, figures and lighting. These include the use of stylized surfaces, symmetry, distortion, and exaggeration and the juxtaposition of similar shapes. (Thompson & Bordwell 120)

Expressionist films depend highly on mise-en-scene. Shapes are distorted and exaggerated unrealistically for expressive purposes. Actors often wear heavy make-up and move in slow, sinuous patterns. The characters do not simply exist within a setting but rather form their psychology often forms visual elements that merge with the setting. As Expressionism became a popular style, filmmakers utilized it to bring to life the narrative point of view of mad characters. It often functioned to create stylized situation for fantasy and horror stories or historical epics. By rejecting cinematic realism, expressionist films showcase dramatic, revolutionary interpretations of the human condition.

The Plague of Florence follows a seductress, which causes Cesare (coincidentally or not, the name of the hypnotized murderer in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*), the city's ruler, and his son to both fall madly in love with her. The son, killing his father before an order to torture the woman can be carried out, then turns the city's churches into dens of sexual debauchery. Acts of evil and corruption continue unabated until the arrival of Death, who brings with her a horrible plague which to set loose upon the city. *The Plague of Florence* deals with disease of a more historical kind and was released in Germany in October of 1919, right in the center of the 1918 Influenza Pandemic. This film tells a tale of the Black Death and ties it to the popular notion that

it was divine punishment against a decadent and hedonistic society. However, the film does not preach and goes out of its way to establish that there are no heroes, no true representatives of piety and seems to embrace nihilism by the end. Director Otto Rippert and his screenwriter who went on to future fame as a quintessential German Expressionist director, Fritz Lang, dug into history and the wounded psyche of a world reeling from war to produce a story that feels like a frenzied fever dream.

The rich courtesan and illuminating beauty Julia arrives in Florence, Italy, immediately catching the eyes of several powerful men who quickly and nefariously compete for possession of her. Among her suitors are the scheming elderly cardinal who immediately distrusts and fears her, the city's despotic ruler Cesare and his rival, the privileged Lorenzo, a self-proclaimed hedonist, and son of Cesare. The men's scheming and brutish plans turn the city upside down with Florence upended into dens of sexual debauchery, excess and rape. The monk Medardus, living as a hermit in the mountains, suddenly finds himself struggling with an onslaught of unexpected earthly desire after having seen the fair maiden Julia out on a hunting trip. This clashes with his previous sole life mission of piety and purity. The Black Death, meanwhile, in the creepy form of an impoverished, ghoulish young woman, bides her time to soon introduce herself to one and all, peasant and nobleman alike. From the jarringly sudden leering closeups of each of three self-serving men (cardinal, ruler and ruler's son) as they initially spot Julia at the city's religious procession (revealing the underlying grotesque carnival at play beneath the surface pageantry), to the impressive city procession itself, on into the entire rich populace falling into uncontrolled and violent debauchery, the first half of *The Plague of Florence* is chock full of images so cinematically great and stunning that it is an egregious omission that *The Plague of Florence* is not placed on the same pedestal as so many of its fellow silent German

expressionist pictures. Acting first as a condemnation of the scheming male figures standing behind religion, endlessly using religion to serve their own ends while duping the masses to continue to believe in them, *The Plague of Florence* condemns humanity itself, seeing no other outcome than the very end of the world. The film maintains a similar sentiment to Poe's "Masque of the Red Death," where pride and greed led to the eradication of Prince Prospero's court.

The more expressionistic minded second half, as seen through the vivid images of death and destruction, follows the arrival of the Black Death as she strikes down the citizens of Florence. The monk Medardus, ultimately so overwhelmed with desire and jealousy that he willfully murders Julia's lover Lorenzo to have her. With his severe face and popping wide eyes able to almost look torn apart by emotion, as he first, Christ-like, drags a full cross across a meadow, only to violently chop it down in futility as his carnal desires overwhelm. His rejection of his once-worshipped puritanism is indicated by surrounding himself with the city's vice and depravity, only to then repent and escape from the city through the corpse and coffin-ridden catacombs. This poignant fall from grace marks another example of the film's endless pool of powerful settings and imagery. While the story is tragic, the film does not feel depressing or oppressive. Director Otto Rippert begins the film firmly grounded in the reality of the massive sets designed by Hermann Warm and Franz Jaffe. However, once Medardus is introduced, the picture takes a turn for the surreal with religious visions and hellish scenes interacting with reality. One could even go so far as to interpret the last part of the film as a fever dream on the part of Medardus.

Once outside the city, Medardus ministers to victims of the plague and reconnects with his faith. Infected with the disease himself, he has an epiphany and decides the greatest manifestation of his faith would be to return to Julia in Florence and infect her and the others with the disease. He does just as he planned and enters the city, the plague following close behind. In a fit of religious frenzy, he commits an act of mass murder and dies deeply satisfied as the Black Death rages through the city. The idea of weaponizing disease is another ancient concept that has never really disappeared from our culture. Just months before *The Plague of Florence* was made, the Germans were accused of spreading the influenza. At least one high ranking American military officer claimed that the Germans were sneaking into New York via submarine and intentionally infecting theaters with the disease. Such breathless tales are inevitably reworked for the next generation of pandemics. The plague contrasts to questions of sexual freedom. Female sexuality, framed by the costuming of the female courtiers, leads mankind to go astray. I argue the character of Julia functions as Rippert's answer to the classic romantic image of a woman. At the same time, the plague symbolizes repressed sexuality as a destructive force. As the plague takes the form of a female ingenue and Julia as the instigator that unleashes disease, it equates the expression of female sexuality to two opposing binaries: should the filmic woman serve as an asexual, self-sacrificing Madonna or a liberated woman seeking her own path? Rippert explores the possibility of both in his characterizations of both Julia and the plague herself. Germany was depicted as a society riddled by class hatred, in which the sexual immorality of its citizens manifested itself in a voyeuristic enjoyment of horror and suffering on the screen.

Germany in 1919 was a staggeringly brilliant time and place for the early decades of cinema. *The Plague of Florence* is an epic cinematic evocation of it. Though the plague only

really hits in the last twenty minutes of the film's running time, the harrowing imagery of soon-to-be-dead characters stumbling around the violently disease-twisted bodies, like haunted survivors of war, forever scarred by death, is strangely breathtaking. The film's focus is undoubtedly about death. The pessimism is palpable and despite the pious veneer at the end, the condemnation of sin rings hollow. After all, the first victims of the plague are the poorer citizens living in the outskirts of Florence. Germany was reeling from a loss in a war they were supposed to win. Everything that had seemed sure and secure was topsy-turvy with more unrest to come. In such an environment, films like *The Plague of Florence* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* were inevitable. Studying the film in a time of global sickness and unrest is an enlightening experience. However, the bizarre plotting and refusal to compromise are surprisingly invigorating.

The disease in "The Masque of the Red Death" remains fictional, but the planet had been reeling from cholera at the time of its writing. In the tale, a prince escapes with his court and parties the night away in gaudy, multi-colored rooms. Then an uninvited guest arrives, oozing the telltale blood of the Red Death. The prince and his guests are enraged but when they attack the interloper, they fall dead from the disease. "The Masque of the Red Death" sometimes gets credited as the source material of *The Plague of Florence*. While both deal with a fictional pandemic, the exploration of themes of death and humanity are markedly different. Most of the picture is taken up with Florence's descent into hedonism, the flight of the religiously conservative rulers, Julia's seduction of Medardus, his obsession with her and, finally, his wavering between faith and flesh. The details in the film are slightly different from Poe's story, but the issues remains similar, namely that sexual freedom leads to death. The characters in *The Plague of Florence* do not flee to a remote abbey but rather close off the one-percenter section of

the city, leaving the peasants to die. Most significantly, the Red Death in Poe's story was visible to all, and the terror of the story is that Death becomes personified. Death walked among the revelers and upon being unmasked, proved to be noncorporeal, a virus as a ghost. In *The Plague of Florence*, the personification of disease could be read as being visible to Medardus, but she walks among the citizens of Florence undetected until it is too late. *The Plague of Florence* is the closest thing to a 1918 influenza picture that currently survives. Certainly, the diseases do not match but humans are remarkably consistent when faced with mass illness. *The Plague of Florence* is an epic, twisted and strange picture that has been oddly obscure until now. It survives as a film that really could have only been made in 1919. It comes across as a nihilistic visual revel in a decidedly Germanic Florence and the insanity of the plot only matched the madness of the real world. This picture utilizes the metaphor of the Red Death from Poe's tale and adapts the central themes of pride and greed as leading to the fall of man himself into a metaphorical art film.

2.5. Richard Oswald, *Eerie Tales* (1919)

The release of *Unheimliche Geschichten* (*Eerie Tales*) marked the birth of the horror anthology film. Anthology films, also known as portmanteau films, can be described as films that consist of short, autonomous segments running anywhere from a handful of minutes to nearly an hour. In his book *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film*, Peter Hutchings describes two general categories of anthology horror films. He writes, "In the first group are those films in which the separate stories are not related directly to each other" (Hutchings 135). Films such as *Spirits of the Dead* (1968) work as a composite films with several directors dealing with common themes or in this case with Poe stories as inspiration. The second type "connects

its story segments via a link-narrative” (135) – that is, a narrative that unites and simultaneously exists apart from the segments that comprise the bulk of each film. *Eerie Tales* has one director but falls into this first category with its five segments linked by the subjects and treatments of death, murder, ghosts, and madness.

Coinciding with the release of well-known German Expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Eerie Tales* incorporated five stories in its 112 minutes, including the first adaptation of Poe’s “The Black Cat” on the screen. Film reviewer Mark Leeder argues that “if this film came out two years later it would be considered to be part of the German Expressionistic movement... certainly, if the sequences are not expressionistic, they are shot in a manner that is melodramatic” (Leeder 1). However, in contrast with *Caligari* and its predecessors in Poe cinema, *Eerie Tales* was, despite the comments of Leeder, not an Expressionist film. Instead, it went for a more direct approach, presenting its horror in a straightforward, realistic, and physical manner, unlike a psychological, dream-like fashion like its predecessors. *Unheimliche Geschichten* (*Eerie Tales*) is an anthology film consisting of five creepy stories—“The Apparition,” “The Hand,” “The Black Cat,” “The Suicide Club,” and “Der Spuk” (The Spectre). “The Black Cat” is based on an 1843 Edgar Allan Poe story of the same name, with parallels to “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Both are about murderers who cover up their crimes and eventually are driven mad by guilt. This film stands as very noteworthy early horror film as it provides the most loyal adaptation of a Poe story up to that point and provides a blueprint for future Expressionistic films.

The film makes a good case to be considered the first feature-length anthology work in the horror genre. Its stroke of genius derives from that the stories are presented as a single fluid

entity. there is no framing device as in the previous version, so the stories flow one into the next like twists in an already delirious tale. The acting is exaggerated as it is invariably in silent film and particularly expressionist film. Leeder contends “the stories must be stripped to the bare minimum to make time for the body language. It makes the telling almost operatic. But there is enough plot to keep the viewer interested” (Leeder 1). It is surprising how similar this is to the horror films of future decades. It stands as surprisingly contemporary in its filmmaking techniques, production design, and the close attention it pays to facial acting.

The horror starts in a rare bookshop when three people step out of paintings to read horror stories. They periodically appear in wraparound segments and play the leads in all five stories. In “The Black Cat”, a drunk becomes more and more out of control, culminating in the murder of his wife. Not realizing the screams were heard outside, he drags her body into the cellar and walls her up. Next day, the man who overheard the murder visits, and the drunk claims his wife is out of town. Soon everyone in town is saying the drunk murdered her. The witness takes his suspicions to the authorities, who come to search the house. Nothing seems outwardly suspicious till cracks start appearing in the cellar wall. The witness axes an opening, and out jumps the wife’s loyal black cat. What is striking about this version of "The Black Cat" is that it is very similar to the adaptation of the story by writer Richard Matheson and director Roger Corman in the 1962 *Tales of Terror*, particularly in the aspect of the love triangle. Because this is a silent film, the audience cannot hear the cat's cries behind the wall constructed to hide the wife's body--the cat is shown clawing a hole out of it instead. Overall, *Eerie Tales* stands as a highly sophisticated film in both concept and execution and as one of the first straightforward adaptations of a Poe story of film.

Eerie Tales further cements Germany's domination in the genesis of the early horror genre. The legacy of German Expressionism and the films it inspired becomes rather evident in the way this film and future films are lighted. The high contrast and the eerie use of shadow figures all hark to the strange shapes and distorted sets of the old German Expressionist films. Not only did German Expressionism inspire the classic horror films, but it also maintained the eeriness of Poe's aesthetic as directly adapted to the screen.

2.6. Jean Epstein, *Fall of the House of Usher* (1928)

Though not the first of his stories to appear on film, "The Fall of the House of Usher" is perhaps Edgar Allan Poe's most well-known Gothic tale, and arguably the best suited for cinema. Its central themes — the embodiment of individual interiority in physical architecture, the haunted house, the living grave, the unreliable narrator, the tension between what is seen and what is felt, the rampant doublings of character — all seem appropriate to an imagistic treatment. In 1928, filmmaker Jean Epstein produced *La Chute de la Maison Usher*: a masterpiece of early cinema and an adaptation of two of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Oval Portrait." Filmmaker and theoretician Jean Epstein profoundly influenced film practice, criticism, and reception in France during the 1920s and well beyond. His work not only forms the crux of the debates of his time, but also remains key to understanding later developments in film practice and theory (Keller & Paul 210). His work was influenced by the tradition of French impressionistic cinema and the wide-ranging category of horror and Expressionist traditions.

Jean Epstein was prolific in his writings on film theory between 1920 and the late 1940s. His essay “On Certain Characteristics of Photogénie” (1923) and later collection of essays titled “The Intelligence of a Machine” (1945) are the central defining texts for an exposition of his aesthetic theory. Photogénie has become a byword for Epstein’s broader methodology in which movement, emotion, and atmosphere are favored over linear storytelling. Photogénie can be termed a methodology since its core tenets reflect or seek to represent the attitude, stylistic orientation and intention of the filmmaker or artist. The filmmaker who pursues photogénie as a guide seeks images, and combinations of images, that articulate transformation, expression, the close-up, movement, temporality, rhythm, and the augmentation of the senses. Through these tropes and techniques, Epstein claims to produce cinematic works that provide a conduit for the audience to interpret, create and enhance perceptions of the world around them, and their relationships to other beings and objects.

Famous film theorist David Bordwell’s perspective in his book *French Impressionist Cinema: Film Culture, Film Theory, and Film Style* contends that the powerful canons of film historical periodization group together Epstein’s films with the “French Impressionists,” leading scholars to find in them stylistic figures as illustrations of subjective visions. This persistent view of his films has also prejudiced the reading of his theory into an “Impressionist” agenda shared with other theorist-directors of his time. Scholar and theorist Malcolm Turvey, however, points out how Epstein deviates from the techniques of visualizing human perception ascribed to the Impressionist movement. According to Turvey, Epstein sees the camera as an instrument to make visible the interior life of human beings that cannot be seen by the naked eye (Turvey 27). Epstein thought literature and film were closer to each other than theater and film because they

both allowed the development of subjectivity in a similar way. This tendency seems paradoxical if we consider the nature of film itself, which is visual, mechanical and reproducible, but it is also completely understandable if we realize that, for Epstein, this medium became an instrument to reveal something beyond the image and the reproduced object through extreme close-ups and changes in the speed of movement, especially through slow motion.

Similarly, Edgar Allan Poe's literature presents to the reader plots, character psychologies and narrative voicings that all add up to the expression of internal mental states of confusion and anxiety. One could imagine that there is an alignment between Poe's deliberate, thematic, confusion and the necessarily fragmentary, mosaic, and sensorial methods that have been applied by experimental filmmakers, especially in this study of Jean Epstein's own adaptive efforts.

Epstein's *Fall of the House of Usher* follows the Poe short story text closely, albeit with one major difference: Madeleine Usher becomes Roderick Usher's wife rather than his sister as in the original text. This change switches the family dynamics of the plot considerably. The film's aim to create a mood rather than a plot elevates its status as one of the most important Poe films of the early decades of cinema.

The plot of the film follows the plot of the Poe tale. An unnamed narrator pays a visit to the decaying mansion of his childhood friend, Roderick Usher. In Poe's story, Roderick and Madeline are the last of their line and when she suddenly dies, he is inconsolable. His guest tries to distract him but during a dark and stormy night, Roderick confesses that he has heard Madeline trying to claw her way out of her coffin—he buried her alive. Madeline appears and throws herself onto her brother and he dies from the shock. The guest flees as the mansion splits in half and collapses.

Poe's influence on Epstein is no mystery, yet the poet's oeuvre extends much further into Epstein's theoretical project than simply by providing source material for his films and writing. Although Epstein's views on cinema include a reverence that occasionally verges on mysticism, his photogénie remains solidly on display in *Fall of the House of Usher* through the use of slow motion. Epstein describes his use of slow motion in *The Fall of the House of Usher* where:

This film best captures its tragic and mysterious atmosphere through the systematic use of a subtle slow motion and through the ratio of 1.5:1 or 2:1 that not only allows for a precise reading of gestures and expressions, like through a magnifying glass, but also automatically dramatizes, prolongs, and holds them in suspense as if waiting for something to happen. The actor can usually perform anything: he comes in, sits down, opens a book, flips through the pages; only the camera gives him a profound gravity, burdens him with an inexplicable secret and makes him a fragment of tragedy through the simple reduction of the temporal ratio of this performance (Epstein 235).

Another instance of Epstein's mastery comes into his diffusion of mood from Poe's melancholy text. The emotional state of the characters is seen in the nature surrounding the house; the water floods the land, and the trees have no leaves as if they were stuck in an endless fall, the season related to melancholy. Both in Poe's story and in the film's intertitles we are warned that the landscape of the house generated "an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream ..." or "a sense of insufferable gloom" (Poe "Fall of the House of Usher" 317). The writer offers some other keys in this same story as to what hides behind this aesthetic feature, by warning of "an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of sublime ... I was forced to fall back upon

the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us" (Poe, "Fall of the House of Usher" 317). The influence of associative perception contemporary to Poe's time is clear in this passage. In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Epstein secured a slow-motion cameraman to generate an unsettling contrast of two movements, two attitudes, two related personalities - that of the mansion and that of the characters. The importance of this adaptation also lies in this duality, since is not merely about transferring elements but also about a theoretical and aesthetic universe using accessible means.

Epstein's film suspends time in the atmospheric tale of a painter whose actual wife fades as his portrait of her nears completion and contains some striking images that revolve around movement and visuality. Roderick is painting an alarmingly lifelike portrait of his wife Madeleine. His unnamed guest perturbed by the atmosphere of the house, but he is also enthralled with Roderick's library and is unable to see anything past his own magnifying glass. Madeline's death and Roderick's madness unfold in a series of symbolic images, translucent double exposures and the inclusion of symbolic elements—water for Madeline and fire for Roderick—that eventually join forces to strike down the cursed house.

Widely praised, the film was considered by many critics to be, in the words of Henri Langlois, "not only the ultimate expression of ten years of experimentation but their justification." Still, the film had its detractors. Surrealist poet Robert Desnos decried Usher as evidence of Epstein's "lack, or rather paralysis, of imagination." However, Buñuel and Salvador Dali would release *Un Chien Andalou* the following year, and Surrealism would eclipse the Impressionist impulses pioneers like Epstein were already abandoning. But *The Fall of the House of Usher*

remains a landmark, as haunting and personal an adaptation in a literal sense, a synthesis of influence and innovation.

2.7 James Sibley Watson, “Fall of the House of Usher” (1928)

In 1928, an American reimagining of Poe’s story “Fall of the House of Usher” was released, with notable differences from Epstein’s dream-like take. Directed by amateur director and Renaissance man James Sibley Watson³ in collaboration with Melville Webber, the short film abandons a traditional narrative structure in favor of a Surrealist experience. Film historian Scott Simmon writes that what drew the two filmmakers “to adapt Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” [was] because neither had read it in years and so would not be chained to its plotline.... it is hard to make much sense of their film without recalling the outlines of Poe’s story, its atmosphere of mental disorder, and its unrelenting Gothic imagery” (Simmon 1). Their version of “Fall of the House of Usher” disregards coherency in favor of a series of disconnected, often jarring images. The image remains the fundamental mechanism, including shots that were filmed through prisms to create optical illusions and its use of off-kilter camera angles. The story is essentially the same: a traveler arrives at the Usher home to find Roderick and Madeleine are afflicted with a serious family malady. Roderick’s senses have become overly acute, while Madeleine wanders about in a nearly dreamlike state. Ultimately, the story ends tragically, as in Poe’s original tale.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” combines European influences with something home crafted. Watson had seen the German expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* more than once during its 1921 New York City run. Not only do *Usher*’s impossibly angled sets draw from

³ For more information on James Sibley Watson’s other contributions to literature, medicine, and filmmaking, I recommend the following: *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945* edited by Jan-Christopher Horak (University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

that film, but the top hatted, cloaked “traveler” (played in expressionist makeup by Webber) seems to echo the figure of Dr. Caligari himself. Less obvious now is the French influence. Whereas “Caligari” expressed a madman’s consciousness through set design and stylized acting alone, French experimental filmmaking of the twenties typically represented disturbed mental states through elaborate camera tricks and optical distortions.

Starring non-professional actors, including Hildegard Watson as Madeleine and Melville Webber as the ‘mysterious stranger,’ “The Fall of the House of Usher” comes across as virtually non-narrative in its re-imagining of Poe’s tale. While it contains aspects of German Expressionism, I argue that it is more radical in its construction of cinematic space. Expressionism relied on painted sets, seen in medium and long shot to give some sense of an organic space, even if distorted. Here, Watson and Webber utilize few recognizable sets and no recognizable geographic space. It relies, rather, on a dazzling array of often distorted shots, multiple exposures, travelling mattes and animated sequences that allow fragmented glimpses of characters in purely cinematic space. Watson’s high key, chiaroscuro lighting reveals and shrouds objects and characters, again giving audiences few visual cues to orient themselves in his spatial construction.

The film does not make use of written intertitles, and additional difficulties for the viewer arise from the filmmakers’ modern interpretation of the story. Twentieth-century literary critics have argued that Poe’s tale acts out the fears and desires of a single consciousness. The film similarly conflates the two men and the twin siblings and destabilizes the “house” of Usher both as physical building and family tree. In Watson’s version, American cinema had utterly embraced the German expressionist aesthetic. The combination of American charisma and German technical prowess resulted in obsessive images of collapsing staircases and floating coffins. Film

composition and editing are also radicalized: Watson's camera angles transition from the strict verticals and horizontals of other films from the period to favor diagonals.

James Sibley Watson was anything but a radical, belonging instead to 'the right wing of film art' which advocated a strict separation between art and politics. Having been born into the country's hereditary power elite, Watson utilized avant-garde cinematic forms to better communicate what he saw as straightforward facts about local industries, firm in the belief that rational argument would win over any audience. In essence, Poe represented what people wanted to see on the screen, igniting a tradition in film that only gained popularities in the coming decades.

From the beginnings of narrative cinema, it remains interesting to note the prevalence of Poe inspired films and adaptations with the medium's most significant storytellers, auteurs, and directors interested in expanding the nature of film language. In particular, these fascinating films feature directors perfecting their craft and establishing their legacy in film history. By 1928, the cinematic medium had found its voice. Films based on the works of Edgar Allan Poe would start to speak.

CHAPTER III

THROUGH EARLY HOLLYWOOD POE TO THE CORMAN-POE CYCLE (1935-1964)

This chapter covers the Hollywood treatment of Poe from the introduction of sound in the 1930's into the 1960's with the Corman-Poe Cycle collection of films. The films considered in this section include Edgar Ulmer's *The Black Cat* (1934,) Lew Landers' *The Raven* (1935,) Jules Dassin's *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1941,) and Roger Corman's *House of Usher* (1960,) *Pit and the Pendulum* (1961,) *Tales of Terror* (1962,) and *Masque of the Red Death* (1964). These films as a group utilize Poe's persona and writings as a device to market and sell Poe to a wider American audience. While this collection of films link up with Poe in various ways, the successful deployment of Hollywood style filmmaking give these films reputation and standing within the Golden Age. Poe's name was of more value to film distributors as a marketing tool than his works were as direct sources for screenplays. However, I argue that these films as a group warrant analysis not to measure the amount of fidelity to Poe's tales, but rather for their treatment of debates over complex issues raised in Poe's stories. These issues include broadly political, aesthetic, and sexual issues present in Poe tales, which have modern implications. In exploring Hollywood's treatment of Poe, I contend Poe's stories retain their controversy due to his radical approaches to violence, madness, and sexuality.

Poe's fame and reputation developed during his lifetime. His persona gets consolidated in the decades after his death as seen in press articles that focused on the "wild and perverse" nature of his stories, giving him a scandalous appeal. Universal Pictures looked to capitalize off the

success of *Dracula* in 1931 (Palmer & Barton 57). Poe's prevalent public image presented the author as an isolated, morally destitute, and insane genius. The era of these first two Poe pictures occurred during the depths of the Great Depression, which shapes their nature.

Thousands found themselves unemployed. More than ever, Americans needed escape, and it came in the form of the golden age of Hollywood movies. The age known for its screwball comedies, lavish musicals, and westerns also marked the period when Universal Pictures introduced its classic monsters *Dracula*, *the Mummy*, and *Frankenstein's Monster*.

Nearly all of the major Hollywood studios suffered financially during the early 30s, and studios had to reorganize, request government assistance, cut budgets and employees, and close theatres when profits plummeted. Attendance at theatres was drastically affected. Special incentives and giveaways such as 2-for-1 features, dish nights, and other contests and attractions helped to maintain a patronizing audience (Bordwell & Thompson 231). The balancing act for filmmaking consisted of reflecting the realism and cynicism of the Depression period, while also providing escapist entertainment to boost the morale of the public. It explains the tendency of the Universal Poe pictures

1930's Hollywood cinema required filmmakers to navigate obstacles such as the studio system and the infamous Motion Picture Production Code. The gangster pictures and sexually suggestive comedies of the early 1930s provoked outrage from many Protestant and Catholic religious groups. In 1934, Hollywood's producers' association responded by setting up a bureau to review every script that the major studios proposed to shoot. Additionally, the office would screen every film before it was released to ensure that the picture did not violate the organization's Motion Picture Production Code. The Hays Code was the informal name for The Motion Picture Production Code, adopted in 1934. The Code consisted of a set of rules

governing American filmmaking that shaped—and in many ways stifled—American cinema for over three decades, although most film critics since the French New Wave find much power and interest in this previously dismissed period. The contrast between films made before and after the Hays Code shows the impact censorship had on American cinema. The Hays Code arose in response to the gangster pictures and sexually suggestive comedies of the early 1930s that provoked outrage from many Protestant and Catholic religious groups. In 1934, Hollywood's producers' association responded by setting up a bureau to review every script that the major studios proposed to shoot. Additionally, the office would screen every film before it was released to ensure that the picture did not violate the organization's guidelines. Will H. Hays, a former Postmaster General, did not create the Code, but he was the first head of the office of its enforcement, so his name became more-or-less permanently attached to it. Amongst filmmakers, Joseph Breen was the main figure behind censorship, and the Hays Code was also known as the Breen Code.

The Code placed several restrictions on all films produced, distributed, or exhibited by the members of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. The major restrictions included: crime and immorality should never be portrayed positively. All criminal action had to be punished, and neither the crime nor the criminal could elicit sympathy from the audience. It forbade a picture to show any sort of ridicule towards a law or "creating sympathy for its violation" (Bordwell and Thompson 176). Other restrictions prohibited mocking religion (specifically Christianity) and overt presentations or allusions to sexuality. The mere fact that censorship had to be so rigorously enforced in the first place stands as a testament to how (and how often) directors and screenwriters tried to resist it. The Code's restrictions set clear

boundaries that Universal directors like Edgar Ulmer and Lew Landers were not to skirt. Yet, directors found creative ways to work around these limitations.

The first two films discussed in this chapter stand out as rare examples of Code era studio horror with their sometimes-startling depictions of sadism and shock. Significant and still unsettling early works of American studio horror filmmaking, these films demonstrate Poe's focus on creating a singular effect as explained in his "Philosophy of Composition." The Universal films are admittedly campy and not necessarily the most sophisticated and sanitized appearing of Poe films, but they remain quite interesting. The Hollywood tendency of filmmaking, particularly at the time, generally tagged on a neat tidy ending regardless of whether it seemed appropriate or not. Yet, the Code-era directors evoked gorgeous imagery, compelling performances, and spooky moments within the imposed restrictions.

3.1 Edgar Ulmer, *The Black Cat* (1934)

The Black Cat (1934) stands out as one of the most significant horror films from Universal Studios in the 1930s. It became Universal's top-grossing film of 1934. The visually intriguing landmark horror film focused on a tale of European post-war anguish and death and was expressionistically directed by Edgar G. Ulmer. Edgar Ulmer may be most well-known and influential for his film *Detour* that plays a major role in the development of film noir, itself closely related to horror films and German Expressionism. Its theme of the horrors of war would be echoed in his later films. He was obviously influenced by his previous work with German director F.W. Murnau as an apprentice. The film utilizes Art-deco sets by art director Charles D. Hall to evoke a powerful atmosphere for a retelling of Poe's tales.

1934 turned out to be a busy year for Poe pictures. *The Black Cat* (1934) offers a rare glimpse of a Hollywood horror film deeply invested in the traumatic aftermath of World War I. The story displayed the lingering traumatic effects on the lives of the war's survivors. The stark and striking production design evokes the immediate postwar German avant-garde and anticipates the fascist architecture of World War II.

The film's camerawork and use of sound make Ulmer's take on Poe unique. The use of mood appears akin to Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932) or Salvador Dali's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) in some respects. While Ulmer may not have created a faithful take on Poe's tale, he "helped to create and popularize the psychological horror subgenre, emphasizing on atmosphere, eerie sounds, the darker side of the human psyche, and emotions like fear and guilt to deliver its scares" (Niemeyer 56). Upon examination, Ulmer's work remains remarkably consistent in style. Whether the focus is on the psychology of individuals, on contexts of creation and exploration, or on broader images of culture and society, Ulmer creates ambiguous "morality plays," as he himself asserted. (5) The audience must work to discriminate kinds and degrees of culpability within the films' quite complex manifestations of consciousness and motive. John Belton, American film studies scholar and author of *American Culture/American Cinema*, maintains that one should not dismiss Ulmer's characters as puppets, but recognize the difficulty of distinguishing fate from imperfectly conscious motivation. Belton suggests that Ulmer's characters are "powerless prisoners of an irrational series of experiences which they can neither understand nor control," and suggests that "they repeatedly surrender themselves to their intuitive but irrational impulses" (Belton 143). The two main characters in *The Black Cat* reinforce this assertion.

The film's plot revolves around rivalry and revenge. During World War I Poelzig, as commander, turned traitorous and surrendered Fortress Marmorus to the Russians. Werdegast, a fellow soldier, was taken prisoner for fifteen years in a Russian prison camp leaving behind his wife and young daughter. Upon his return, Werdegast found that Poelzig had married his wife, murdered her and then married his daughter who later would also be murdered. The plight of an unsuspecting American couple takes a back seat to the true drama going on between Werdegast and Poelzig.

Some reviewers have considered Ulmer's *The Black Cat* the first American psychological horror film, with dark sexual repression, twisted relationships, and aberrant behavior (not limited to Satanism, necrophilia, sadistic revenge, and murder). Its fantastic architectural settings, expressionistic lighting, interesting geometric patterns and designs, and bizarre sets all add a richness to the strange tale. The two lead roles, Dr. Vitus Werdegast and Poelzig, are characters who experienced bad blood between them due to past betrayals and murder. The original screenplay by Peter Ruric, a semi-autobiographical work, was only loosely "suggested by the immortal Edgar Allan Poe classic" according to the film's credits. All that remains of Poe in the final release is the film's title and the brief appearances of a black cat. The script originally combined Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Black Cat." As film scholar Jason Douglas contends, the final scripts derived from a story by director Edgar Ulmer which contained allusions to English occultist Aleister Crowley and his devil-worshipping activities that made headlines in the nation's press (Douglas 250).

Ulmer's *The Black Cat* is one in a long line of Universal films that are loosely inspired by an immortal Edgar Allan Poe story, which turn out to have little in common with the original literature. One key aspect the film adapts from the story is Werdegast's irrational fear of cats.

Universal Studios exploited Poe's name on several films like *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932) and *The Raven* (1935). This does not stop the films from becoming memorable pieces of cinematic history respectively. *The Black Cat* boils down to the ideological and personal vendettas between Werdegast and Poelzig that stem back to their friendship and eventual betrayal on the Hungarian battlefields of World War I. The most haunting aspect of this Universal classic is its fascistic ideological underpinnings that foreshadow the fierce brutality of World War II. German film theorist Siegfried Krakauer wrote about the relationship of German cinema and German Expressionist films like *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919) which he linked to the rise of Hitler in the 1930s. Krakauer's study *From Caligari to Hitler* contains a history of the German film industry and constant references to the objective political and historical events taking place in German society as well as careful analysis of the thematic material and recurrent symbols of the German film. *The Black Cat* stands out as a horror picture that shows the brutality of war and hints at the rise of fascism in Europe, which by the film's release in 1934, was already in motion.

After meeting randomly on a train, on a dark and stormy night, the Alisons and Werdegast find themselves at Poelzig's mansion, built on the graves of a thousand men. This refers to the building of the mansion upon the foundation of World War I prison Fort Marmarus. Poelzig's mansion functions as an architectural fantasy world of beauty and death. As Werdegast puts it, the mansion's creation stands out as "a masterpiece of construction built upon the ruins of the masterpiece of destruction." The mansion contains a secret second level, comprised of chambers for torture and black mass as well as long corridors of unclear direction decorated with the preserved corpses of women. The house's deepest level lies on a battlefield of the First

World War, choked with the victims of the treacherous architect Poelzig. Notably, the battlefield level remains charged with dynamite that can be set off at the flip of a red switch.

Once safely in Poelzig's mansion, the four characters sit down for dinner. Once Werdegast calls for a toast to the newlyweds, the film's tone noticeably changes. The shadow of a black cat, introduced the ominous tones of Schubert, walks into the dining room. The cat's shadow causes Werdegast to hurl a knife at the unsuspecting feline, killing it. This feline-induced breakdown employs classic Golden Age Hollywood tactics to bring the audience deeper into Werdegast's thirst for revenge against Poelzig.

Extraordinary camera work adds a sinister element to a sexually suggestive scene. As the Alisons share a passionate kiss in the background, the focus adjusts to the foreground. The camera focuses on Poelzig's hand, which reaches and grasps tightly onto the arm of a reclining nude figurine. At the moment of the 'climaxing' crescendo of Franz Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony" and the passionate kiss, Poelzig reacts by gripping the nude statuette. His face is hidden from view, but his lustful expression gets conveyed through hand movement. This scene denotes a conscious effort on Ulmer's part to use figurines in the film to sense the undercurrent of sexual desires of Werdegast and Poelzig.

At the start of a particularly memorable sequence in the film, Poelzig motions to his adversary to take a grand tour and follow him down the staircase inside the house to the cold iron door of the dark cellar. They begin another long descent down a second flight of spiraling iron stairs into the former old Ft. Marmorus, now a tomb-like mausoleum that houses the underground vaults. There, in the chart room for long-range guns, staged in front of a large, illuminated sheet of graph paper, Poelzig flips another light switch. They both view the perfectly preserved, glass-encased, suspended dead body of Werdegast's wife. The wife stands upright in

the glass sarcophagus. Poelzig explains that she had died of pneumonia two years after the war, and he had embalmed her to preserve her corpse after her death while the daughter had also died. Werdegast understandably loses control and threatens to attack. He draws a revolver and prepares to shoot Poelzig. A black cat enters and interrupts the attempt on Poelzig's life, paralyzing cat phobic Werdegast with fear a second time. He jumps back, crashing and collapsing into the glass of the chart backdrop.

The plight of the American newlyweds takes a back seat to the showdown between Werdegast and Poelzig. The showdown reaches its climax when the two rivals wager the American woman's life over a game of chess. Poelzig asks indignantly, "Do you dare play chess with me?" During the chess game, Werdegast and Poelzig talk about the life at stake, with a closeup shot showing Werdegast stroke his fingers along the length of the Queen chess piece. The end of *The Black Cat* comes in a fast-paced sequence of scenes that encompass a Black Mass, torture, escape, and an explosion. Despite the concerns of the Hays Code, Ulmer managed to keep the Black Mass sequence of scenes and the eventual torture of Poelzig in the film's conclusion.

Aside from creating some of the most iconic nightmare monsters in American history, Universal solidified one of the greatest cinematic rivalries of all time—Lugosi versus Karloff. Additionally, Ulmer uses the vehicle of *The Black Cat* as a continuing expressionist assessment of the horrors of war. At the time of the film's production, the Nazi Party had come to power in Germany. Five years later, World War II erupted. However, it becomes striking not only how often the themes of responsibility and fate recur in *The Black Cat*, but also how well they fit in with Ulmer's mise en scene. As an experienced and skillful set designer, Ulmer was an extremely sensitive architect of space in his films. Therefore, it is not surprising how often his

spatial imagination is symbiotic with his recurrent themes of entrapment and war. *The Black Cat* solidifies Ulmer's status as an auteur.

Karloff's Poelzig in particular, constantly brings up the theme of death. After Werdegast's first encounter with the black cat, Poelzig states that "the black cat is deathless, deathless as evil." Later, when the evil architect is trying to trap the American couple, he makes sure one of his henchmen cuts the phone lines, at which he says with a smile, "You hear that? Even the phone is dead." It seems hard to imagine that the cast and crew of *The Black Cat* still had not experienced or lived in a time when the atrocities of World War II had occurred. Yet the preoccupation that Werdegast and Poelzig display towards on the horrors of the First World War only makes the film's anticipation of the next war more haunting.

The Black Cat succeeds as an effective work of horror cinema because it juggles the serious with the whimsical to create macabre entertainment. Lugosi and Karloff turned in some of their best and most original roles, portraying the bitter rivals of Poelzig and Werdegast. Edgar Ulmer utilized the figure of the black cat from Poe's story to make a unique work of cinema. The success of *The Black Cat* demonstrated that Universal did not always need to rely on larger-than-life monsters for their horror hits, in this case relying on characters made gruesome because of realistic events.

3.2 Lew Landers, *The Raven* (1935)

The Raven (1935) draws inspiration from Edgar Allan Poe's famous poem to inform its horror. The film features Béla Lugosi as a Poe-obsessed mad surgeon with a torture chamber in his basement and Boris Karloff as a fugitive murderer desperately on the run from the police. The film disturbed many viewers of the time, and many critics currently agree that it displays

Lugosi's finest non-"Dracula" performance. Lugosi had the larger role, but Boris Karloff received top billing in huge letters as "KARLOFF," with his last name displayed in the fashion that Universal Pictures adopted while Karloff's career was at its height. Bruce Hallenbeck, film scholar, contends that the feature film came on too strong for 1935 tastes, with its themes of torture, disfigurement and grisly revenge, as the film did not do particularly well at the box office during its initial release. . While to viewers today it seems campy and might appear less than serious, its contemporary reception reveals how shocking it was at the time. It even indirectly led to a temporary ban on horror films in England.

The film's director, Lew Landers, began directing features in the mid-1930's. Landers worked for just about every studio in Hollywood during his long and prolific career and directed more than 100 films in a variety of genres, including westerns, comedy and horror films (Hallenbeck 43). However, his first blockbuster effort, *The Raven* (1935) stands out as his best across his oeuvre.

The film begins after a young woman, Jean Thatcher, has been injured in a car accident. Her father, Judge Thatcher and beau Jerry implore retired surgeon Dr. Richard Vollin (Lugosi's character) to perform a delicate operation to restore her to health. Vollin reluctantly agrees and is succeeds. He befriends the spirited and grateful Jean, sharing with her his passion for all things related to Edgar Allan Poe, including his collection of torture devices inspired by Poe's works (such as a pit, pendulum with scythe, and shrinking room). After Vollin reveals his growing love for Jean to her father, the Judge quickly discourages him from the affair. Angered, Vollin hatches a plan when Edmund Bateman (Karloff), a murderer, comes to his door asking for a new face so he may live in anonymity. Vollin asks Bateman to help him exact revenge on the Thatcher's, which he refuses. Vollin performs the surgery, but instead turns Bateman into a disfigured

monster, promising only to operate again on Bateman when Vollin's revenge is exacted. Bateman finally reluctantly agrees. Vollin hosts a dinner party. One by one, the guests are caught in the Poe-inspired traps. Ultimately, Bateman is shot by Vollin as he rescues Jean and Jerry. Vollin perishes in the shrinking room, and the guests escape.

As events gradually spiral out of control, Vollin becomes more and more deranged, and it appears that his love of Edgar Allan Poe extends beyond mere fandom. Although not anywhere close to strictly based within Poe's classic poem, it does have nods to Poe scattered throughout. Additionally, Lugosi is reciting the poem the film gets named after, "The Raven," early in the film, and Jean is seen dancing in a ballet inspired by the same piece. What makes the film significant to the study of Poe pictures derives from its establishment for mainstream Hollywood treatments of Poe's tales. For its themes of gruesome revenge by means of torture and the intentional disfigurement of Bateman, it was exactly what the Hays Code had sought to censor. The value of this film draws from the masterful performance by both Karloff and Lugosi and this recommends this film as an adept and amusing approach to Poe cinema.

3.3 Jules Dassin, *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1941)

Edgar Allan Poe originally wrote "The Tell-Tale Heart" in 1843 for *The Pioneer* magazine and it is generally considered to be one of his best short stories. It has had countless radio, television and film adaptations over the years, dating back to a silent version in 1928. co-directed by Leon Shamroy and Charles Klein. The divide bridged in the filming of Edgar Allan Poe concerns the massive popularity of Poe's writing and the popularity of Poe's mysterious personal life. Because of his stories' length and scenes in addition to his literary celebrity status, the writings of Edgar Allan Poe remained valid. These attributes alone make Poe tempting indeed for any movie producer. But in Poe stories there is often not a lot of action, but

instead, layers of interior emotional depth and often turmoil. Often these films contain sparse dialogue, but instead feature often strong key images when the stories seem entirely internal.

Jules Dassin's *The Tell Tale Heart* (1941) exists as an example of short-form literary adaptations used to fill up pre-feature time on Hollywood screens in the 1930s and 1940s. This happens to be a particularly strong, interesting example of the genre. For one thing, it was the first film for director Jules Dassin, who would go on to become one of the great directors of noirs and crime pictures throughout the 40s and 50s. During his career, he was blacklisted as a communist and driven to France to continue making movies. The story here is very familiar, but Dassin treats it with integrity and burning suspense, making the Poe classic feel new again. The camera in *The Tell-Tale Heart* does not remain static however — the viewer rolls slowly in to towards the subject, and then coming closer yet, on two occasions even closes in so far as to find the petrified man's inner ear. This makes for a unique and unconventional approach to filmmaking. Contemporary *Time* film magazine critic, Richard Corliss called *The Tell-Tale Heart* "possibly the very first movie to be influenced by Citizen Kane ... This short film ... is positively a-swirl in Orson Welles tropes: the crouching camera, the chiaroscuro lighting, the mood-deepening use of silences and sound effects" (Corliss, *Master of the Heist*, 1). "The Tell-Tale Heart" drew upon the inventiveness of Welles' cinematography and his experiments with sound. For Andre Bazin, who would go on to co-found influential film journal *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1951, Citizen Kane represented a new understanding of realism in the cinema, seen in Welles' use of deep focus and long takes. Bazin wrote of *Citizen Kane* as "part of a general movement, of a vast stirring of the geological bed of cinema, confirming that everywhere up to a point there had been a revolution in the language of the screen" (Bazin 42). Dassin made use

what would become his signature style in the cinematography, lighting, and flashback structure in this short film that inevitably influenced his work in noirs in later years.

Dassin, even in this early short film, showed a unique and personal style to match his radical politics. This work only added to his legacy as an auteur. Dassin excelled in his command of genre. His films, regardless of genre, have a consistent look that display an inherent gorgeousness in the shadows. Dassin gained experience as a contract director for MGM pictures such as "The Tell Tale Heart." By the end of the 1940's, Dassin solidified his status as one of the era's foremost talents. However, his leftist political leanings surfaced during the House of Un-American Activities Committee hearings of the early 1950's. Their investigation uncovered that Dassin had joined the Communist Party in his youth. As a result, the radical Jules Dassin was among the many American filmmakers blacklisted from Hollywood. After moving to France, he slowly regained his status as a furiously creative director and re-surfaced to direct such popular hits as *Rififi* (1955), *Never on Sunday* (1960)), and *Topkapi* (1964).

The short film format maintains the integrity of Poe's psychological effect of mood. In the aftermath of the murder, Dassin conveys the mostly abstract horror of the situation — the killer hearing his victim's heartbeat beneath the floorboards — through frequent closeups of the increasingly unraveling protagonist and some brilliant sound design. The room is filled with possible sources of the insistent heartbeat: a clock on the wall, a dripping faucet, a metal pan outside the window with rainwater falling into it. As the young man methodically checks into each of these to eliminate the sound, the pounding on the soundtrack only continues unchecked. Finally, when two detectives arrive to question the young man, the murmuring beat on the soundtrack is carried over even into the music, which pounds with the rhythms of the heartbeat in the drums. This is a potent, interesting approach to a familiar tale, elevated above the average

literary adaptation because Dassin's artistry draws more attention to Poe's psychological effects and the uncomfortable sensations of the protagonist than he does to the actual details of the story.

The significance of this film lies within Dassin's shadowy aesthetic and the glossy beauty of his images. Even in this early short, the auteur displays a unique and personal style to match his radical politics. The murder scene is particularly gorgeous, as the young man sneaks into his tormentor's room with a lamp that he's modified to emit a single narrow beam of light. Dassin shoots the set-up to the murder from a distance, with the beam of light glowing in the darkness, illuminating motes of dust in its path, an iridescent string connecting murderer and victim across the room. As the young man draws closer, the viewpoint switches briefly to that of the old man, who sees a nova of light nearly blinding him, and behind it, barely visible, the intent face of the man who has come to kill him. The murder itself takes place offscreen, with Dassin briskly editing together peripheral details like the old man's hands desperately grabbing at a tapestry on the wall as he gets strangled.

This short film is of interest not just because it serves as a film to learn his craft for Jules Dassin, who went on to make many well-known film noir titles, but because it treats Edgar Allan Poe in a psychological and almost panicky manner. This short outing shares a common spirit with the Vincent Price and Roger Corman films which were to follow.

3.4 Roger Corman, *House of Usher* (1960)

Colorful, macabre, and rich adaptations of Poe's short tales, the "Poe Cycle" was the brainchild of famous director/producer Roger Corman, best known for his work in B-movie horror. Seen as the American answer to England's Hammer Horror, this series of seven films adapted Poe's stories and poems to varying degrees of critical acclaim. Since most of Poe's work

was in the public domain and the common tone/subject matter meant the studio could re-use sets, costumes, and even footage. American International Pictures (AIP), the distributor of the Poe-Corman films, was interested in the cheap bottom line and the profitability of such a series. With horror legend Vincent Price starring in all but one of the films, they are formally significant as a whole and as fascinating film adaptations of Poe. *The Masque of the Red Death* perhaps warrants the title of being the greatest of these films, combining both the title story and “Hop-Frog,” one of Poe's lesser known but quite entertaining stories. With its greater focus on creating a distinct mood and experience over traditional scares and gore, *Masque of the Red Death* turns Poe's original text into the story of a Satanist prince and his debauched, death-haunted court.

By the time Corman filmed *House of Usher* in 1960, the American horror film itself was about to undergo a kind of generational shift. The era of the Universal monster movies was long gone, with its star players like Dracula and Frankenstein getting fresh, blood-red coats of paint from England's Hammer Films. Creature features and more contemporary terrors like the atomic bomb had largely replaced old dark houses and cobwebbed crypts. However, these Poe inspired pictures remained influential to the development of modern horror.

Roger Corman's skills as a filmmaker of genuine artistry, style, and vision came to the forefront when he made his film version of *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Creatively translating the work of one of the great American authors to the screen, he elevated the status of Poe inspired films and fashioned an unsettling piece of atmospheric work that helped facilitate a new era of sophistication for horror cinema.

As World War Two ended and the 1950s rang in, B-Movies grew in popularity as a form of distraction from the looming Cold War nuclear tensions. A B-movie refers to a film which is produced quickly and cheaply and is often considered to have little artistic value. Many B-

movies, and higher-budgeted box office draws, tackled the topic of the fallout from WWII, such as the Japanese film *Gojira* (1954), better known to American audiences as *Godzilla*. Other films discussed the threat of the Cold War and fear of foreign nations, including *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). More recently, Robert Petrucci and Earl Wyszog, in their book *The New Class Society: Goodbye American Dream?* described horror, along with action films, as one of the perennials “escapist genres.” Feminist film scholar Carol Clover wrote a groundbreaking book about slasher films, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. She agrees with famed film critic Robin Wood that horror films challenge social norms and provoke hidden fears and therefore are generally held by the mainstream critics as disreputable. Yet, horror B-movies was where Corman found his niche. HE now gets generally recognized as both an auteur of quite original power and one of the challenges to traditional Hollywood paradigms, through his unconventional formal features, his often-soft-core porn sexuality (although not in these) and his radical social and political subtexts. He represents one of the earliest recognizable Americans influenced by European art films, though his films packaged as low budget cheap, trashy films.

House of Usher proved to be a box office hit for distribution and production company American International Pictures (AIP). The film was a daring departure for AIP as the studio primarily concerned itself with black and white movies to be screened as double features. Due to losing audiences for this form of cinema, AIP decided to put more money into a lavish cinemascope color film. The success of *House of Usher* led the studio to ask Corman for a second Poe adaptation and this started a string of seven films in total, directed by Corman and inspired by the work of Poe. “I myself had no plans to make a second picture,” Corman said years later in *American Masters*. “I simply wanted to make *The Fall of the House of Usher*. It

was a very large success for the company I was working with, and they asked me to make a second picture, and I chose *The Pit and the Pendulum*, so I unwittingly got into a cycle of Poe.” In his pitch, Corman identified the dual appeal of Edgar Allan Poe as a part of the American literary canon but also a fan favorite (Omrod 145). Unwittingly or not, Roger Corman started a horror franchise with a minor masterpiece that is still remembered today.

Roger Corman’s first foray into the world of Edgar Allan Poe tells the twisted tale of the Usher family. The audience gets introduced to the family’s history of mysterious madness through Philip Winthrop, who goes to the Usher mansion in order to bring his fiancée Madeline back to his home in Boston. His romantic intentions are, however, stopped by Madeline’s brother Roderick Usher, who fears their union will continue the family’s cursed bloodline. What Corman and Matheson did with the Poe story “Fall of the House of Usher” was not so much update its setting or characters but retain the psychological complexity and underlying metaphors and themes inherent in Poe’s writing. As in the original story, much of the filmic *The Fall of the House of Usher* is left open to interpretation: an unspeakable relationship between the Usher siblings is strongly implied — perhaps the “curse” that Roderick speaks of — while the house itself can be seen as a living entity that shares the same soul and same moral rot as the inhabitants festering within.

Corman’s use of color in *House of Usher* utilizes not just the blood reds and pitch blacks one would expect. Rich purples, blooming greens and bottomless blues dominate the film. Corman’s use of color set the mood, dictate the atmosphere and seemingly control the characters, luring them to their dreadful fate. The film emphasizes the color red throughout the film to enhance a topic that remained latent in Poe's: sexuality's destructive power. In this case, the color symbolizes the repressed passion and violence in the Usher bloodline. As Roderick rejects the

more positive real world, he hides himself from the world at large and carries on a quasi-incestuous relationship with his sister. He creates his own alternate version of reality. Usher's interest in art shows in his painting of gruesome portraits, emphasizing simultaneously a quality of despair and one of raging, blood-spattered sexuality.

The mansion itself seems to take steps against the character of Philip Winthrop, an updated version of the narrator in Poe's story. The mansion first attempts to kill Winthrop through "accidents" when he states his intention to take Madeline away. The butler notes that Madeline began to appear ill, as if the life was being drained from her, after she returned home from Boston, where she met and fell for Winthrop. Returning to the malignant influence of her brother after experiencing a taste of freedom and perhaps real love is a potent metaphor for a victim of sexual abuse being forced to continue living under the same roof as her attacker. *House of Usher* contains the clearest embodiment of the house as an expression of the personality of its owner in contrast to existing simply as a building. The filmic version of the house includes an enormous crack along the side that creates frequent shakings and a constant threat of collapse. That Usher mocks Philip's suggestion to repair the crack shows how willingly the Poe/Corman protagonist awaits his self-destruction that he foretells.

The second important character the film establishes for the series is Roderick Usher, played by Vincent Price. Usher gets portrayed as a supersensitive aesthete who stands precariously at the center of his world. Like the introduction of the depraved Satanist played by Boris Karloff in Edgar Ulmer's own Poe adaptation, *The Black Cat* (1934), the entry of Usher into the film is rendered by a radical, unsettling technique. Corman uses the whip-pan, the act of panning the camera very rapidly from one subject to another, frequently blurring the images in between the subjects, to indicate the almost supernatural intensity of Usher, who appears and

disappears without warning. The whip-pan symbolizes the loss of control as the camera moves too fast toward an object, creating a hysterical effect on the viewers appropriate to Usher's psychology. His visages seems quite sterile. With his white hair and crimson garments, he resembles a living corpse.

House of Usher functions ultimately as both a thoughtful tribute to the Poe universe and a distinctive reimagining of Poe's themes to appeal to a wider popular audience. The film laid the foundation for the rest of the Poe films to come. AIP's investment paid off as the film was a hit, and both the studio and the audiences wanted more. Over the course of his career, Corman made nearly 400 movies, mostly independent of big studios and on very low budget, but the Poe Cycle would likely be considered his best by most critics. Corman managed to convey Poe's melancholy and sense of terror in films in a lush and colorful way. The films' images seem intentionally larger than life. While there may be similarities between the films, each has a slightly different style, ranging from broadly comedic to darkly tragic. Corman's mix of imagination and innovation in the Poe Cycle changed horror filmmaking forever.

3.5 Roger Corman, *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961)

Following the unexpected success of their first Edgar Allan Poe adaptation, *Fall of the House of Usher*, American International Pictures were keen to go back to what was obviously a winning combination. Corman would be reunited with star Vincent Price and scriptwriter Richard Matheson, as well as most of his original crew, to bring another of the legendary horror author's works to life – his 1842 short story “The Pit and The Pendulum.” Matheson took serious liberties with the classic tale, which features a brief, first-person account of an unfortunate prisoner's torture at the hands of the Spanish Inquisition. Instead, it would become a story that

would echo its cinematic predecessor, exploring similar themes of family, grief and the sins of the father, while saving Poe's original story for its disturbing finale.

The film follows the character of Francis Barnard who goes to Spain when he hears his sister Elizabeth has died. Her husband Nicholas Medina, the son of the most brutal torturer of the Spanish Inquisition, tells him she has died of a blood disease, but Francis finds this hard to believe. *The Pit and the Pendulum* emphasizes a specifically technological brand of torture and dungeon setting, connects it to the Inquisition inspired atmosphere of Poe's tale. Both narratives are about the complex psychology of torture: not only how it operates, but, more perversely, how it fascinates—pulling victims, as well as the vicarious viewer/reader, into a flurry of eroticized pain that is indistinguishable within its machinery of extinction. We know that Poe's narrator is being watched closely, for as soon as the design of having him fall to a horrible fate in the pit is frustrated, “there c[omes] a sound resembling the quick opening, and as rapid closing of a door overhead, while a faint gleam of light flashe[s] suddenly through the gloom, and as suddenly fade[s] away” (Poe, “Pit and the Pendulum,” 496). Poe biographer Kenneth Silverman describes ways in which Poe uses his “characteristic poetic effects” to heighten the audience's sense of the torment the narrator is undergoing:

[T]he captive narrator of “The Pit and the Pendulum” experiences the descending blade by smell and sound, by how it “hissed as it swung through the air.” Poe kept the menacing pendulum aurally present for the reader by deploying hissing words like “surcingle,” “cessation,” “crescent” and “scimitar,” or in such sentences as ‘With a steady movement—cautious, sidelong, shrinking, and slow, I slid from the

embrace of the bandage and beyond the sweep of the scimitar.’ (Silverman
206)

The film, on the other hand, forces members of the audience to identify with the torture subjects not so much through choice of language as through visual and sound effects. This is achieved through masterful cinematography. *The Pit and the Pendulum* qualifies as a great achievement in color mood lighting and the use of the moving camera. The entire picture, except for the short exterior opening sequence, required low-key photography, since everything that took place within the castle was in a somber mood.

The series of flashbacks in which the main character, teetering on the edge of insanity, relives traumatic experiences from his tortured past, function extremely effectively. Realizing that flashbacks fail artistically if they are not well-executed, Corman in collaboration with his cinematographer devised a unique effect that would subjectively convey the character’s horror in dredging up the nightmares lurking in his sub-conscious. these flashbacks have a strangeness, a semi-dream quality — twisted and distorted because they were being experienced by someone on the brink of madness who did not know the full facts or was too shocked to recall them accurately. To provide a definite visual demarcation between the story of the moment (reality) and what had happened in the past, Corman shot the main story in full color and the flashbacks in monochrome. He utilized wide-angle lenses, violent camera movement and tilted camera angles to point up the character’s feeling of hysteria. Further, the edges were vignetted, and a twisted linear distortion was introduced. The result on the screen is one of genuine shock, an almost too-real-to bear nightmare quality starkly suggesting madness and violence.

Like the rest of the picture, the flashback sequences reflect thought, careful planning and imagination. These inventive added story elements elevate the film far above a simple adaptation

as does Price's terrific performance playing both the meek and grief-stricken Nicholas Medina. The film captures the feeling of fear and doom as well as deeply unsettling aspects of Poe's story. The 1961 version of *The Pit and the Pendulum* delivers a cracking tale full of guilt, insanity and brutal betrayal. All of this leads to Corman's film offering extremely radical film techniques (for the time) and creates an aesthetic film that gets ignored due to its seemingly amateurish acting and shots. However, those who dismiss this film, and Corman's others, are missing the value in his unconventional techniques in an age prior to digitally created special effects.

3.6 Roger Corman, *Tales of Terror* (1962)

By his fourth effort, Corman's Poe adaptations were proving popular with audiences. Although they might seem a bit campy by today's standards, they were considered quite frightening for their time and place. Either way, their stylistic and thematic elements make them accomplished films, even if the horror may not seem as visceral as some other horror films. Corman was able to use the series to strengthen his voice as an independent filmmaker, while the films also cemented Vincent Price as a leading star for the genre. The series was considered forward thinking in its approach too, being one of horror's earliest franchises and the importance of this should never be underestimated. The cycle's eight films combined form one of the most consistently strong series in all of horror history. They are similar enough to hang together as a cohesive whole, but different enough to remain engaging. There remains an elegance, sophistication, and undercurrent of political and psychological astuteness in these films that is rarely found in the so-called exploitation cinema or B-pictures of the era. Corman continually tried to mix up the pot as he went along, adding new elements while trying to keep the same overall tone of classic gothic horror, and *Tales of Terror* provides a perfect example of this experimentation.

In 1962, Corman and Matheson signed on Vincent Price to star in *Tales of Terror*, which showcased four different Poe stories in three separate shorts. Corman and screenwriter Matheson strayed from the tradition of fleshing out Poe's short stories into feature length, experimenting with the anthology format to convey both horror and humor and to achieve a greater degree of fidelity to the stories.

The second segment adapts 'The Black Cat' and 'The Cask of Amontillado' into one story. This makes sense because both involve walling in an enemy. In the first the enemy is a cat and, in the latter, the arrogant Fortunato gets walled up. Both drive the narrators mad and both narrators try to make their extreme torture and cruelty seem legitimate. "The Black Cat" marks where Matheson and Corman decided to add a bit of comedy. It gave the audience a bit of break from the suspense and melodrama and ended up being one of the better segments in *Tales of Terror*. The short begins by introducing a man by the name of Montresor Herringbone, who would rather focus on drinking at all hours during the day than attend to his wife Annabel and her dastardly black cat. At his local favorite bar, he meets a man named Fortunato, where the two of them engage in a wine drinking contest. One thing leads to another, and Fortunato and Annabel have a torrid love affair, which Herringbone sees.

One significant scene comes with the introduction of the wine tasting contest. The wine-tasting contest allowed Corman to through unsubtle jabs at gender stereotypes by portraying Fortunato as coded according to the time as gay or flamboyant. Additionally, Montresor's ability to expertly recognize fine wines is not merely a result of his profound alcoholism. Somewhere along the way, the cruel drunk developed an aesthetic appreciation for the grape. Given his choice of a lovely bride and a well-appointed home even in the midst of poverty, it is reasonable to believe that Montresor maintains other powers of observation and appreciation, albeit

diminished by what Poe calls “the Fiend Intemperance” (Poe, “Black Cat,” 224) and a compulsion to display his masculinity. Indeed, this compulsion may be the source of frustration that drives him to drink. Thus, when Montresor realizes his wife and friend have betrayed him, he demonstrates an ability to remain sober and focused enough to plot his horrific revenge.

Interestingly, by giving Montresor a specific motive for his revenge, “The Black Cat” episode departs from Poe’s story “The Cask of Amontillado” in many ways, since Poe never reveals Fortunato’s insult that inspires Montresor’s fiendish plot. Even so, the film accurately recreates Montresor’s cunning nature. As Poe has Montresor explain to his anonymous audience,

You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat.... I must not only punish but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong. (Poe, “Cask of Amontillado, 274)

As in the story, the cinematic Fortunato fatally underestimates Montresor. Although since the movie incorporates “The Black Cat,” Fortunato ultimately faces justice, which may be consistent with Montresor’s monologue to unknown listeners in the tale.

Before Fortunato meets his fate, however, his comic cruelties delight and disturb in roughly equal measure, resulting in an entertaining and thoughtful episode. A more obvious erosion of gender performance than what is associated with Price’s interpretation of Fortunato in “The Black Cat,” whose camp mannerisms queer a traditional performance of heterosexual masculinity. With each episode in this anthology, the Price character decays as a representative of normal sex roles; the literal decay of M. Valdemar in the third episode physically manifests

the progressive dissolution that supplies *Tales of Terror* with an additional layer of psychological dread only intermittently present in the Poe sources.

3.7 Roger Corman, *Masque of the Red Death* (1964)

The seventh film in the Poe-Corman cycle, *The Masque of the Red Death* is the most ambitious in the cycle and illustrates Corman's status as an auteur. It was originally proposed as the second movie in the cycle but in 1960 Corman felt it was too close to Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1958), which makes conscious references to the Poe story in its representation of Death. By 1964, Corman felt enough time had passed for a new, American version to stand alone.

The film *Masque of the Red Death* combines two Poe short stories, the well-known "Masque of the Red Death" and the odd fable of "Hop-frog, or the Eight Chained Orang-outangs." All kinds of psychological ills and moral questions lurk beneath the film *Masque of the Red Death*'s Technicolor surface. Prince Prospero, played by Vincent Price, stalks his castle as the embodiment of pure evil. Unencumbered by guilt or regret, the tyrant serves his own whims first and only. The needs of others, even when they are as primal as the food and shelter his serfs seek within his castle walls, mean nothing.

Many of Prospero's guests aspire to imitate him, but they lack self-understanding. When their host urges them to give in to themselves, they revert to animal-like behavior. Even loyal Juliana, who believes she is one of Prospero's best students, can't make the psychological leap to his level. Chafing against the restrictions placed on 12th-century women, she builds up the

confidence to brand herself a handmaid of Satan in one garish ritual, rather than waiting for Prospero to initiate her. When she wakes from a deeply masochistic nightmare sequence (in which she is penetrated by many daggers), he believes she is born again. She exclaims “I’ve survived my own sacrifice.” She declares herself Prospero’s superior and demands that he take her as a bride. He responds coldly, commanding his falcon to kill her. Her grab for Satanic power and status ends in ignominy as she is clawed to death by a bird a fraction of her size. Despite his posturing, Prospero’s deal with the devil proves just as fragile as Juliana’s when he comes face to face with the Red Death.

Masque of the Red Death was another hit for Corman and American International Pictures, proving that audiences were more than ready for horror movies that went beyond the superficial. Drenched in symbolism and driven by subtext, *Masque* established Corman as a sophisticated and eloquent filmmaker, on a par with any of the genre avant-garde emerging in Europe. The final word should go to the film historian Rose London. London writes:

[A]lthough Corman’s movie lacks the intellectual rigors of Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, its use of the figure of Death, and its ending, where Death’s messengers report to their Master that only the dwarf jester and five others remain alive in all the world, has a quality worthy of Poe and Bergman’s own vision of the plague and the apocalypse. (5)

A film that defies both categories and critics, *The Masque of the Red Death* is a unique work in the field of American horror.

Corman’s instincts about audience tastes and Poe were proven correct by the success of this cycle of movies. This is partly because Corman was not simply retelling the 19th-century

stories on film, although his films relate to Poe's preoccupations including premature death, being buried alive, and things hidden in the cellar. Each of Corman's Poe movies is startlingly contemporary while remaining products for their time. The early 1960s saw continued social upheaval as the Civil Rights struggle intensified and the generation gap grew. Films about the collapse of ancient, incestuous, closed orders, like the Usher family, or the punishment of aristocratic old men who considered themselves above the law like Prince Prospero, who sought to cheat death, connected with a wide audience. The challenges in adapting Poe have come in the recreation of moody atmosphere, morbid preoccupations and gothic style of his stories. Corman, however, was fascinated by the psychological aspects of Poe's work — not only in his disturbed characters, but in his use of the environment that harkened back to an earlier of Romantic poetry. Corman saw that Poe used supernatural elements to deal with themes of insanity, loss, mystery and decay that consumed him. For Poe, the corridors of a creepy castle led into the darkness of the human mind, and Corman was eager to explore these themes with a visual medium.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Edgar Allan Poe remains one of the most popular American authors from the nineteenth century and certainly one of the most adapted into film. While Poe films draw upon the original literature, the resulting pictures include landmarks in the careers of many directors significant to film history. Poe has attracted a wide range of filmmakers: from independents like James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber (who worked in a stable in Rochester) to Experimental filmmakers like Jean Epstein, and finally to iconoclasts like Roger Corman. At the beginning of this investigation, I anticipated that evaluating of formal features discovered in Poe film adaptations would shed light as to why Poe's works encourage a spectrum of artistic interpretations on the screen. Through close readings of the major formally significant Poe films, during the rise and fall of classical Hollywood cinema, I discovered that the films connected to most of the major transformations in cinema.

Notably, this survey focused on significant experimental and Hollywood treatments of Poe. Poe's stories lend themselves to a wide range of interpretations across the globe. Significant filmic adaptations of Poe's stories beyond the chronology of this survey include Alexandre Astruc's *Pit and the Pendulum* (1964,) the collaborative *Spirits of the Dead* (1968,) Jan Svankmajer's Surrealist takes on *Fall of the House of Usher* (1980) and *Pit and the Pendulum* (1981,) Robert Eggers' short film "The Tell-Tale Heart (2008,) and Raul Garcia's animated

anthology *Extraordinary Tales* (2013). Robert Eggers' short film draws comparisons to Jules Dassin's "The Tell Tale Heart" through their directors' command of mise en scene and the framing of the unreliable narrator. Eggers, even in this early short, establishes his own personal style that would later continue to evolve as seen in his major works *The Lighthouse* and *The Witch*, and *The Northman*. His approach to Poe's story "The Tell Tale Heart" contains a distinct voice and painstaking attention to authenticity through details such as lighting and emphasis on sound that qualify him as a unique auteur for our time. Similar to D.W. Griffith's innovation in establishing narrative cinema as a commercial art form, Eggers stands out as one of the pioneers in modern horror cinema.

While acknowledging the phenomenon that many major directors in film history have made significant films based on Poe, my investigation uncovered a link between the classical Hollywood paradigm of filmmaking and the adaptation of Poe stories. D.W. Griffith's interpretation of Poe's works helped develop adaptation and his Griffith's work in film form. His two films along with Alice Guy-Blache's film connected the Poe persona to his works and shaped the dominant fundamental practices of narrative cinema, driven by artistic visions. The survey traced the development of Poe cinema through the significant experimental films of the 1910's and 1920's through the commercial Poe endeavors in the Golden Age of Hollywood and the studio system. In film theory, not every filmmaker in the history of cinema qualifies as an auteur. Yet, all of the major films covered are by generally recognized auteurs. For example, Jules Dassin incorporated his personal style in his short film interpretation of "The Tell Tale Heart." Lew Landers and Otto Rippert creatively incorporated themes, images and plot devices from Poe's tales, but the films do not definitely warrant them auteur status. This study of

significant Poe films link the adaptation of Poe's fiction and persona with the evolution of mainstream Hollywood film form.

As this study has suggested, there are far more complicated messages about gender, sexuality and sociopolitical cultural constructions than originally anticipated. Granted, a considerable number of themes and motifs are reiterated throughout the survey, perhaps enough to make the connection noticeable. Nevertheless, there seems little justification for the claim that these films are lesser works of art, just because they are not faithful to Poe's works. There are more to these Poe pictures than apparent from a cursory viewing. Perhaps it is their links to classic literature and innovation in formal techniques, but clearly the films provides insight into the social politics of the era in which they were made and the way daring film form attempts to convey such complexities.

While this study only examined a small sample of Poe films, the major trends of mingling fact and fiction, in relation to Poe's life, are present in the earliest cinematic adaptations. Many of these films incorporate elements from more than one Poe work. Whether these films are the originators or yet another example in a long line of prior adaptations, there seems to be something inherent in Poe's writings that attracts radical directors and established auteurs alike. I conclude with linking the various films into an organic and interrelated whole. Even when individual films substantially differ from the details of Poe's fiction and poetry, they nevertheless convey a distinct impression of the themes, associated with Poe, whether it be romantic obsession, insanity, or violent deaths that seem avoidable. This observation directly refutes the prevailing critical assessment of Poe adaptations, which tends to emphasize the liberties taken with the details of Poe's output without acknowledging the significant thematic connections

between the films and the fiction. It also assumes their value is only as a surrogate for Poe rather than original artistic or political statements *influenced* by Poe the persona or his writings.

The journey of studying the cinema's relationship to Poe stories and Poe's persona sheds light on broader questions of the nature and range of what should be considered adaptations. While every director has their individual style, central images from Poe remain distinct and recognizable. Nevertheless, the most surprising realization from a close reading of the films, particularly the Corman-Poe series, concerns how faithful the entries are to the spirit, if not the letter, of the source material. While the first couple of efforts have little to do with their sources, this study also demonstrates a surprising degree of fealty to the source material, implying a fidelity to the spirit of Poe. The transposition of devices and themes from Poe's stories make the films particularly effective vehicles of adaptation

Yet even films of later years often to borrow a title and little else from Poe yet are nevertheless informed by an awareness of the thematic and iconographic underpinnings of the author's work. It seems more fidelity develops over time. This seems relevant when comparing films like Griffith's *The Avenging Conscience* to Jules Dassin's "The Tell Tale Heart." Edgar Allan Poe certainly ranks high on the list of literary figures who have become integrated into popular culture, as Mark Niemeyer has demonstrated with his discussion of the T-shirts, mouse pads, coffee cups, football team and Navy minesweeper that have been named in honor of or allude to Poe (Hayes 205-206). However, it is the cinema that "is the single most significant medium to have exploited Poe" (Hayes 216). Poe pictures have promoted interest in and awareness of Poe's place, not just as a figure in horror literature, but among the most influential figures in American literature and popular culture. But, perhaps even more important, as this

study demonstrates, Poe's life and work provide a reservoir of creative material that plays a role in the development of film history, as a whole.

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