

**FROM *THE HOUSE OF USHER* TO *THE LOUSE OF USHER*:  
EXPANSION TECHNIQUES IN FILM ADAPTATIONS OF THE WORKS  
OF EDGAR ALLAN POE IN THE 1960'S AND TODAY**

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When considering the ways in which “expansion” comes into play in film adaptation, one is naturally drawn to the works of Edgar Allan Poe, an author who wrote nearly exclusively very short works (tales and poems) and whose vast appeal among readers, especially those of younger generations, has driven countless film-makers over the past century to try to expand his short written works into full-length feature films. One might think that the sheer number of times each short work by Poe has been adapted, successfully or not, would deter more recent film-makers from once again attempting the task, that they might see themselves as running the risk of beating Poe’s dead horse, as it were. However, the appeal of Poe’s brand of Gothic story-telling and the drive among film-makers to adapt his works appear to be as strangely “unkillable” as his own M. Valdemar or the infamous old man’s forever-beating “tell-tale heart.”

By simply looking at the number of feature films and shorts adapted, by decade, from the works of Poe over the last 60 years or so, one notices a few key trends. Firstly, and not surprisingly, nearly every decade since the 1950’s has seen a greater number of film shorts made than feature films, as shorts by definition require far less “expansion.” Secondly, one cannot help but notice that both shorts and features follow the same trend over time, with two very clear peaks – one in the 1960’s, with 13 features and 14 shorts, and one over the last decade, with 14 features and a whopping 34 shorts (see Fig. 1). Thus, the 1960’s and the 2000’s seem to form two distinct and distinctive “Poe cycles” in terms of film adaptation, and the focus of this study will be to compare the expansion techniques used in each of these two cycles.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note that four of the films counted as ‘features’ in the chart were in fact anthology films or omnibus films – that is, a collection of film shorts tied together either by theme or by an over-riding metanarrative. These films include *Tales of Terror* (Roger Corman, 1961), *Spirits of the Dead* (F. Fellini, L. Malle and R. Vadim, 1968), *An Evening with Edgar Allan Poe* (Kenneth Johnson, 1972), and *Nightmares from the Mind of Poe* (Ric White, 2006). As the focus of this study is the expansion of Poe’s works into full-length features, these films will receive little or no attention, with the exception of *Tales of Terror* as it does provide insight into Corman’s adaptation techniques. Also note that this study focuses on English-language adaptations of the works of Poe, thus leaving aside, for example, a spate of Argentine adaptations in the 1950’s, of Italian adaptations in the 1970’s and of French adaptations in the 1980’s.

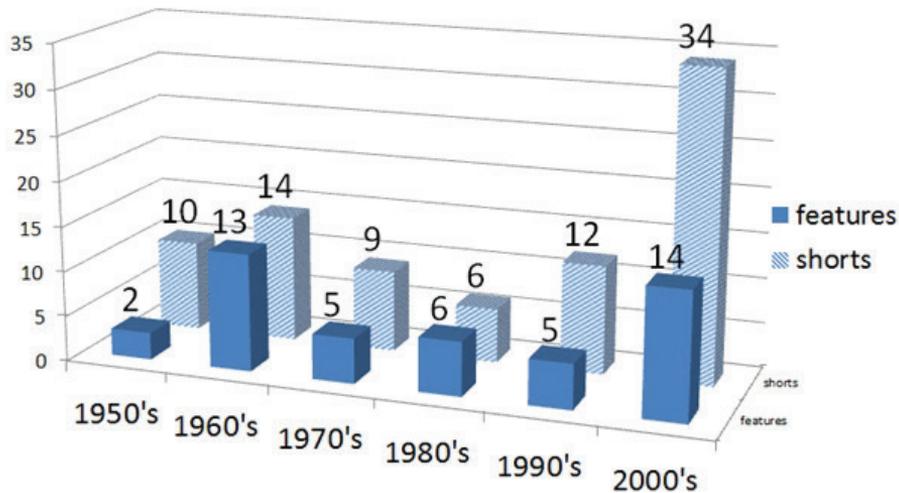


Fig. 1: Film Adaptations of Poe by Decade: Features and Shorts

A closer look at the cinematic devices and expansion techniques used during these two key waves of Poe adaptations (the more recent of which is yet to break) reveals a few noted similarities, particularly in terms of low budgets and B-movie quality, but, more importantly, two remarkably different approaches to expanding a short work through adaptation, as well as two very different notions of “fidelity” to Poe’s work.

### I. Roger Corman’s “Poe Cycle” (1960-1964)

The 1960’s cycle was dominated by one film-maker – Roger Corman, also known as the “King of the B’s” and the master of low-budget horror film. Corman made seven Poe-based features during that main cycle (though another feature would come in 1969 and in the early 1970’s):

*The Fall of the House of Usher* (1960)

*The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961)

*Tales of Terror* (“Morella”, “The Black Cat” & “The Strange Case of Mr. Valdemar”) (1962)

*Premature Burial* (1962)

*The Raven* (1963)

*The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964)

*The Masque of the Red Death* (1964)

Corman's startling Poe-oriented output over those five years was of course driven by box office success (the intake far outweighing the low budgets), and lead him to set up a Poe-adaptation machine that repeatedly relied on the same talents. Hence Richard Matheson did all the screenwriting from 1960 to 1963, with Charles Beaumont and Richard Towne filling in for the last two adaptations. The films were also all produced by Corman's short-lived Alta Vista Productions and distributed by American International Pictures. Most notably, at least in the viewing public's eye, all but one of these films starred Vincent Price (note that Ray Milland stepped in for Price in *Premature Burial*). Thus this series of Poe-oriented films by Corman worked to both showcase and firmly establish Price as "the face of gothic horror" – as the taglines on posters such as the one for *The Masque of the Red Death* clearly suggested (Next to a drawing of Price's face, within which an arabesque collection of bodies writhe in pain, reads the line "Look into this face... shudder... tremble... gasp..."). Also note that reference works often mistakenly list Corman's 1963 film *The Haunted Palace*, also with Vincent Price, as part of this series of Poe adaptations, whereas the film is in fact an adaptation of a story from H.P. Lovecraft ("The Case of Charles Dexter Ward", 1927), but Corman was forced by American International Pictures to use Poe's poem for the title and as an epigraph for the film as a blatant marketing ploy.

In addition to being vehicles for Vincent Price, Corman's landmark adaptations had quite a few other common features that shed light on Corman's specific "recipe", as it were, for adapting and expanding Poe to film.

Most infamously, Corman's adaptations were low-budget affairs indeed (most in the 40,000- to 60,000-dollar range), as made evident by Corman's notorious tendency to recycle certain props for more than one film. For instance, the same gargyle can be found in the torture chamber in *The Pit and the Pendulum* as well as at the devil's altar in *The Masque of the Red Death*. Similarly, the same suit of armor was hustled from the set of *The Fall of the House of Usher* to that of *The Pit and the Pendulum* to that of *Premature Burial*, and the tapestry found behind the "pallid bust of Pallas" in *The Raven* also adorns the walls of the both *The Fall of the House of Usher* and of Prospero's castle in *The Masque of the Red Death*. Most annoying to viewers, perhaps, is the repeated use of the same "burning castle stock footage" that is inserted into climactic scenes in *The House of Usher*, "Morella" in *Tales of Terror*, and *The Raven*.



Roger Corman's "Poe Cycle" 1960-1964

The low budget meant that the works would essentially be dialogue-based teleplays, enhanced by the use of necessarily cheap special effects that are more than quaint by today's standards. These include the "drawn-on" apparitions and ghostly manifestations in *The Raven*, the famously kitsch game of "catch" with Peter Lorre's whining head in *The Black Cat*, superimposed flames on seemingly flame-retardant castles in a number of films, or skeletons that look as if they were borrowed from the local high-school science lab. In spite of the low-budget gadgetry, however, the effect was not wasted on 1960's audiences, who had rarely seen such visual experimentation.

Similarly, there were equally cheap scare-tactics worthy of a haunted house attraction at a local fun-fair. Audiences jumped in their seats at dozens of spiders, snakes, komodo dragons and other assorted reptiles that appear out of nowhere in quick close-up, or at coffins that sprang open to reveal rotting cadavers or spooky skeletons, or, for example, at a wizard's box that contained a dozen gelatinous eyeballs (in *The Raven*). As cheap as these thrills may have been, they were thrills none the less and gave the audience the squirm or the start it had come (and paid) for.

In addition, what are often considered “expressionistic” stylistic effects are frequently noted as a visual feature to Corman adaptations. These included foregrounding somewhat impressionistic or expressionistic paintings in several films (most notably in *The Fall of the House of Usher*), or using colorful costumes for stronger symbolism (as in *The Masque of the Red Death*), or using multicolored, oozing and “psychedelic” transitional effects, often reminiscent of lava lamps (most notably in *The Raven*). Another common visual effect involved the addition of an obligatory dream sequence that became a signature piece of Corman’s expansion technique, as it was used in nearly every film and provided much needed padding for the story. These sequences were set apart from the rest of the film by the use of the now-cliché slow-motion effect or distortion and blur effects; they also relied on artificial fog and dry-ice effects, and were quite often enhanced by Corman’s trademark “blue filter” (to be found most notably in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Masque of the Red Death*).

Most of the above-mentioned devices and stylistic effects were of course not taken from Poe’s works but were Corman’s own additions, designed to expand the material while maintaining what he felt was the tone of the original work. And, in spite of the low-budget and often quaint and/or far-fetched additions, it was indeed a certain “fidelity” to Poe’s works that Corman and his screenwriters were shooting for. This drive for fidelity was clearly asserted, if not trumpeted, by including Edgar Allan Poe’s by-line in each and every title of the cycle (e.g., *Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven”*, *Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum,”* etc...) – and, as mentioned above, this bold-faced claim was even included, against Corman’s wishes, when the source material was not from Poe but from H.P. Lovecraft.

If Corman so protested the misuse of the Poe by-line for *The Haunted Palace*, it is because he saw it as more than a marketing strategy. For him, it was also a commitment to try to remain faithful to the plot, setting and tone of the original and beloved tales. Hence all of the films are period pieces, set either in the early nineteenth century or at a much earlier date (as in *The Masque of the Red Death*), and never varying from the time period in which the original work was set. If the costumes and settings were designed to reaffirm this, they were also intended to create the traditional Gothic atmosphere generally associated, rightly or not, with Poe’s writings. Nearly all the films thus have, in their opening sequences, establishing shots of quasi-identical castles lost in the rolling fog, within which are labyrinthine passageways and dusty halls and basements filled with suits of armor and arabesque tapestries.

In addition, so as to reassert fidelity to the original works and as a corollary to the use of Poe’s name in the title of the film, each film ends with a printed quotation from Poe that appears on screen

before the closing credits, usually the final lines of the tale or poem in question that serve as an epigraph for the adaptation. Hence, from by-line to curtain line, fidelity to Poe's original works is boasted as each film's main feature.

This drive for fidelity would meet its biggest obstacle, however, when recreating the plot and the dialogues, for it is here that Corman had to come up with some expansion devices that would allow, for example, a short written tale to become a full-length feature. It seems that Corman would rely on three main expansion techniques so as to accomplish this: stretching, padding and combination. Firstly, the "stretching" method involved taking a short dialogue scene and adding pauses, sighs, looks and a few extra lines of speech so as to take up more screen time. For example, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, it takes nearly five minutes for young Philip to be taken to Roderick by the hesitant butler, and then begins a drawn-out conversation between Philip and Roderick (on the untimeliness of his visit, on the host's "severe acuteness of the senses," etc...) that goes on for eight full minutes. Secondly, Corman relies on "padding" by adding new plot elements. Quite often this involves adding a long backstory (as in *The Masque of the Red Death* or *The Tomb of Ligeia*) that builds up to the story framed by the original work. Conversely, in the case of *The Raven*, Corman begins with a faithful rendition of the narrative poem that lasts but a few minutes and then dives into a long and far-fetched follow-up story involving magic spells and warring wizards. Of course, nearly every adaptation was to achieve some padding (and popular appeal) through the addition of a love subplot. Finally, when all else failed, Corman and his screenwriters resorted to "combining" short tales of Poe into one story so as to have more original material to work with. Thus the "Morella" of *Tales of Terror* is actually a combination of two tales about coming back from the grave: "Morella" & "Ligeia." Similarly, "The Black Cat" is really "The Black Cat" plus "The Cask of Amontillado," with a tailor-made role for Vincent Price as an expert wine-taster whom Peter Lorre will dupe and wall up in his cellar along with his wife (thereby giving us two walled-up bodies for the price of one). More difficult to spot is the combining done in *The Masque of the Red Death*, the most prominent subplot of which is a quite literal adaptation of Poe's lesser-known tale of bloody revenge on the cruel aristocracy by the (literally) little people of the kingdom, *Hop-Frog*.

Thus, it would be difficult to try to judge how successful Corman was at his professed "fidelity" (and perhaps pointless, for that matter, given the ambiguous nature of the term in modern adaptation studies). Nevertheless, it seems certain that Corman did set out to both expand and remain faithful to the original works, by resorting – sometimes subtly, sometimes brazenly – to the techniques of stretching, padding and combination. Perhaps not surprisingly, these techniques differ greatly from those being used in the current Poe Cycle.

## 2. The Current Poe Cycle (2002-present)

As mentioned in our introduction, the last decade has seen an explosion of Poe film adaptations, both in shorts and in features, pointing to a renewed interest in adapting Poe to the screen a good forty years after Corman's Poe cycle. This new output can be partly explained by the overall trend in making low- to mid-budget horror films, as the number of such films made worldwide has risen in crescendo in recent years, more than quadrupling since 1990, mainly as a result of the availability of new technologies and of the "democratization" of film-making techniques (Lanzagorta). However, it is undeniably a new Poe Cycle that we are witnessing, and although there are a few parallels with Corman's works (most often in terms of budget), a new approach to Poe and to the expansion of his works stands out quite clearly.

Unlike the Poe cycle of the 1960's, the current wave of adaptations is not the result of the work of a single film-maker, but instead a hodgepodge of interpretations by over a dozen different directors and screenwriters. It would perhaps be practical, for the sake of this study, to first discuss the recent adaptations that benefited from a substantial budget, as so few of them did, and because it is only here that we find a few expansion devices reminiscent of those used by Corman.



Recent Poe Adaptations (2002-2011)

### Big-Budget Adaptations

The first example of these high-budget projects is *The Black Cat* (2007) by Stuart Gordon, a director far better known for his blood-splattered adaptations of Lovecraft, such as the cult-classic *Re-Animator* (1985). This adaptation was for the well-funded Showtime series *Masters of Horror*, in which 13 different horror-film-makers are invited to each do one film for the series for each season. At 60 minutes, it is more than a short, and it relies on many of Corman's techniques, though revisited.

Gordon himself claims that his primary goal was to provide authenticity and an exact reproduction of every event in the gruesome tale in all of its gory detail, having at his disposal a budget and special effects team that Corman never had nor could have had. Thus the gouging of the cat's eye and the cruel hanging of the pesky pet are so credible that the "no animals were hurt in the filming" disclaimer deserves top billing in the end credits. The bloody spectacle of the axing and walling up of his wife is also given lurid and disturbing authenticity.

However, Gordon does rely on Corman's "combination" technique to expand the story, though rather than combine "The Black Cat" with another tale, he instead makes Poe and his wife Virginia the two main characters and represents several little-known but actual events from their short life together. He thus combines the tale and Poe biography. In addition, to maintain an air of authenticity, he even devises a reality-dream switch so that he in no way implies that Poe had a penchant for killing animals or his wife. Also note that as a possible tribute to Corman's underfunded masterpieces, Gordon decided to use Irish artist Harry Clarke's early 20<sup>th</sup>-century illustrations of Poe's works during the opening credits – the same illustrations that Corman regularly used for his movie posters. The final connection to Corman lies in the fact that Gordon did indeed aim for "fidelity" in adapting the tale itself, something none of the other recent, feature-film adaptations can claim.

For example, another recent high-budget feature was *The Tomb (Ligeia)* 2009, written by Jon Shirley, who wrote *The Crow* back in 1994 (which was of course very loosely based on the premise of Poe's "The Raven"), here with a nine-million-dollar budget devoted nearly entirely to superfluous special effects. In this film, as in many of the others made recently, the connection to Poe's story is quite strained, to say the least, and it is an example of the decidedly paradoxical method of using *reduction* as a means of *expansion*. In this particular case, Poe's entire story is reduced to the following notion: "Ligeia cheats death by possessing others' souls and inhabiting their bodies." Thus we have Ligeia depicted as a Ukrainian grad student at Tremaine University (an allusion to Poe's second heroine in the tale, Lady Rowena of Tremaine) who is a serial killer who experiments with hypnotizing and torturing her victims to extract their souls for safe-keeping in phosphorescent vials, later mastering the powers

enough to jump from body to body at will. The ties to Poe's original tale are obviously few and far between – in addition to the name of the university, Ligeia's main objective is to physically possess one of her professors and to separate him from his young, decidedly blonde wife, "Ro" (*i.e.*, Rowena), and there is also a cliché shot of a raven taking flight at the tail end of the film. Other than that, the film, rather than a tribute to Poe, is more a rehash of cliché horror techniques (such as the overdone "bathroom mirror scare" revealing someone standing menacingly behind the heroine, or the frighteningly altered mirror image, or the sexual partner who transforms into another woman while in the throes of ecstasy). Towards the end of the adaptation, the borrowing from specific horror films becomes apparent, for if the earlier explicit scenes of torture in the film reminded us of the *Saw* franchise, the latter part of the film, when Ligeia inhabits the soul of a young girl who kills everyone or leads them to their doom in a circular tomb in the graveyard, looks and feels too much like a cheap copy of *The Ring* [Hideo Nakata (1998) and Gore Verbinski (2002)], complete with the child's black, soulless eyes and staggered-action filming techniques.

One of the latest big-budget adaptations is Michael Cuesta's *Tell Tale* (2009), which was produced by none-other than Tony and Ridley Scott and had both a few A-list actors and a whopping 12 million-dollar budget (by far the biggest budget of the bunch). Once again, Poe's tale is greatly reduced to a one-line premise: "The murder victim's heart lives on and pushes the hero to do things he doesn't want to do." Hence, the tale begins with the hero, Terry Bernard, getting a "tell-tale" heart transplant. However, the heart begins to take over his body, and Terry begins to see flashes of his donor's murder and is then uncontrollably sent on a killing spree to avenge his donor's death. Are there any ties to Poe? Not really, except for a quote by the arch-villain (the doctor harvesting organs much like Ligeia, in the previous film, harvested souls), who quotes Poe's tale while he is torturing Terry near the end ("It was the beating of his hideous heart!" he exclaims), and the clever name of the dead donor – Jean Vieillard ("Vieillard" is French for "old man," which was the only way the victim was identified in Poe's tale). This pun would have been more felicitous had the writers not decided to use the fact that the hero had had a French donor to set up an "Oh-my-god-I'm turning-French" device, for Terry suddenly has uncontrollable urges for *escargot* and *blanquette de veau*, as well as a sudden affinity for fine wines and cigarettes, and, much to his fiancée's delight, a surprisingly insatiable libido, thereby giving us a film as ripe with clichés concerning national stereotypes as with cliché horror-film scare tactics.

### Low-Budget Adaptations

Thus, in spite of higher budgets, it is only the film that tried to mimic and improve upon Corman's techniques that in any way did justice to the original tale. However, as noted, a vast majority of the recent Poe adaptations have been low-budget affairs— with a combined budget far below any one of the three would-be blockbusters mentioned above, and some so low – only 10,000 dollars in one case – that they would even make Roger Corman blush. However, be the budget great or small, expansion of Poe's source text is again achieved through *reduction* and *rerouting* rather than through Corman's fidelity-based expansion techniques.

Take for example Hayley Cloake's 2006 *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Here, Poe's tale is reduced to the following general statement: "Siblings Roderick and Madeleine Usher have an unwholesome relationship." Add to this syllogism the minor premise that "Incest and in-breeding constitute an unwholesome relationship" and you get the unhappy conclusion: Roderick and Madeleine Usher are incestuous siblings, the offspring of a long line of incestuous and in-bred fraternal-twin couples going back for generations! Hence, the madwoman our heroine spots in the attic is in fact Madeleine, who is not dead but in hiding because she is pregnant with her brother's child – that is, until she self-aborts and then kills herself and her brother by locking themselves in an isolation tank. Is it the end of the line of incestuous twins? Not so, as our surviving heroine is also pregnant from Roderick, and during the final ultrasound, a new pair of fraternal twins can be seen, much to the viewers' dismay, passionately embracing each other within her womb! Again, there are few legitimate parallels to be drawn to Poe's original tale, though Roderick does suffer from "neurastasia" (i.e., the "over-acuteness of the senses" described in the tale, hence the need for an isolation tank in the film). Instead, most Poe references are mere, quick allusions: for example, the viewer notices that the first of the long line of in-bred siblings were named Edgar and Virginia (as in Edgar Poe and Virginia Clemm), that the heroine initially calls Roderick from a bar call "The Raven" and that Rod's latest book has a tell-tale raven on the cover.

Yet, once again we find far more cliché horror devices borrowed from landmark, popular films – such as a pair of hands that rise out of the bath water to attack our unwitting heroine (borrowed from *Nightmare on Elm Street*), or the altered visions triggered by the isolation tank (borrowed from *Altered States*), or the type-writer scene, in which the heroine discovers that Roderick's book is in fact an incessant repetition of the line "I'll always be a part of you" (more than reminiscent of *The Shining*'s Jack Torrance's "All work and no play make Jack a dull boy").

Then, on an even lower budget we find Ulli Lommel's 2006 *The Raven*, which looks and feels like a homemade slasher film, one in which the singer in an all-girl Goth-rock band is plagued by the dark spirit of the "raven," a spirit which manifests itself *either* as the fatherly figure of Poe himself *or* as a vicious monster – a giant half-raven/half-man serial killer who massacres all of her friends one at a time, stealing their bodies as well and taking them to his giant nest in the woods, where he cuddles with their rotting remains. Here, Poe's original poem is reduced to the notion that "the raven is the messenger of death," but the minor premise in this film-maker's syllogism seems to be "A serial killer is a messenger of death, of sorts," thereby leading to the conclusion that "The raven is a serial killer"; add to this the well-known association "Edgar Allan Poe *is* the 'raven'" and you get "Edgar Allan Poe *is* a giant raven *is* a serial killer" – for those readers who know their logical fallacies, note that this one is aptly called "*reductio ad absurdum*." Once again, Poe's work has been reduced and then rerouted into a cheap slasher film that has more flagrant allusions to landmark horror films than to the work of Poe it claims to bring to the screen – for example, there a quick-scare bed scene in which a knife-wielding hand emerges from within the mattress (à la Freddy Krueger) and a mock-*Exorcist* scene that will have viewers' heads spinning like Linda Blair's.

### **Decoteau and other Homo-erotic "Queer" Adaptations**

If the current spate of Poe adaptations seems to be a rather disparate collection with varying budgets and themes, one must notice that, quite remarkably, over half of the recent low-budget features are part of what appears to be a new trend to "out" Poe – not as being gay himself but as writing tales that provide a tempting vehicle for homo-erotic horror flicks. The American B-horror director and gay rights activist David Decoteau apparently wants to become the gay community's answer to Roger Corman, for he has already done three Poe adaptations in the last few years (and rumor has it a fourth is on the way). Each is, on the surface, a very basic, very low-budget slasher film – except that they are filled with handsome young men passionately kissing each other in nothing but their underwear. Still, the same reduction and rerouting technique is at work here, in spite of Decoteau's incessant use of Poe's by-line in the title.

For example, in his 2007 *Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven,"* the director follows the same fallacious line of reasoning that Lommel employed in her adaptation a year earlier, thereby reducing the poem to the premise "The raven is a messenger of death" and adding the minor premise "A serial killer is a messenger of death" to obtain the conclusion "The serial killer is a giant raven!" Hence we have a *Scream*-like story of a house full of promiscuous young people who will be killed off one-by-

one by a killer dressed up, not as a ghoul as in *Scream*, but as a giant raven. The only blatant tie to Poe is the way the killer tortures the victims by calling them on their cell phones first (again as in *Scream*), though in this case the killer eerily recites lines from Poe's "The Raven." One should also note the *Friday-the-13<sup>th</sup>*-style final pursuit, in which the last victim, on a frantic run from the killer, discovers all of his late friends' corpses carefully set out for him.

If this were not bad enough, Decoteau released *House of Usher* in 2008, a film in which all of Roderick's young and handsome houseguests are haunted and physically molested by the ghosts of the three deceased servants – the plumber, the gardener and the house-painter – though their skimpy costumes (again, only a pair of briefs) do indeed make it hard to tell which is which. Here, Poe's story is reduced to the simple notion that the physical condition of the house reflects the mental and physical condition of Roderick and Madeleine, both of whom are going mad (with desire, granted, but going mad nonetheless). Again, the few quick-scare devices have all been seen before, and we once again find the hands-emerging-from-the-bathwater device associated with Freddy Kreuger, though this time the male hands wander promiscuously over a male torso.

Perhaps not realizing that he had made his point, Decoteau immediately followed *House of Usher* with *The Pit and the Pendulum* in 2009 – yet another cheap, homo-erotic slasher film, in which a house-full of handsome gay men who like to wrestle and make out in their underwear (and stunning gay women this time, who similarly like to make out with each other) are methodically hypnotized and killed by the woman of the house. One notices not only that the killer is a woman, but that she is the only heterosexual in the house, so perhaps she should have been suspected from the very start. Basically, Poe's original tale has been reduced to the disappointingly oversimplified notion that "Some people get a thrill out of torturing others," and the only apparent visual and audial ties to Poe are the innumerable pendulums we see and hear (of the clocks, of objects used to hypnotize victims, and of contraptions on which to torture victims), and a dark "pit" victims imagine descending into when under hypnosis. Again, there are no ties to the plot, to the setting, to the characters, to the mood or to the tone of Poe's work.

Also note that Decoteau is not alone in this attempt to homo-eroticize Poe's texts. For example, 2002 saw the release of Phil Claydon's *Alone*, an extremely low-budget British slasher film that is presented entirely from the point of view of the female killer (the gimmick here being that we only get a fleeting, outside glimpse of her in the last scene of the film, though we experience her murders and sexual encounters first-hand throughout the film. Here, Poe's 22-line poem has been reduced to the idea that chronic loneliness can lead you to "have demons" – and, apparently in this case, to become a blood-

thirsty serial killer with text-book obsessive compulsive disorder and insatiable lesbian lust. The only tie to Poe here is one stapled to the work as an epigraph, as two lines from the poem that refer to chronic loneliness scroll across the screen before the credits. There is absolutely no other connection to Poe.

If this were not enough, there is another very cheap American slasher film that appeared the same year, Michael Kallio's *Hatred of a Minute*, produced by Bruce Campbell of the *Evil Dead* trilogy and with a short cameo by Gunnar Hansen, who played Leatherface in the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in 1984. It is also "based on" a short Poe poem: "To –" – although the entire poem is reduced to two lines that again appear as an epigraph: "Years of love have been forgot / In the hatred of a minute." Homosexual impulses are not the driving force behind the killing spree in this particular film – as the killer is a jealous, heterosexual male in desperate need of anger management training – yet the killer is seen as being plagued by two opposing demons – one good and one evil. The angel of goodness, as it were, is represented as a very affected and openly gay man that the killer-hero unfortunately chooses to ignore, and to follow instead the psychopathic urges of the disturbingly ruthless demon of evil. Thus the cliché angel and devil on a man's shoulders is given an unusual gay twist.

Together, the five films seem to form a coherent movement within the current cycle, with Kallio and Claydon's 2002 works opening the door for Decoteau's bona fide trilogy over the last few years. This new wave of gay-oriented Poe adaptations, in spite of the ridiculously low budgets, will most certainly, nevertheless, become a key research topic in modern queer studies.

### **Tribute or Travesty – Ken Russell's *The Fall of the Louse of Usher***

Of all the recent adaptations of Poe, there is one that stands alone – not only because it is the only musical adaptation of Poe's work, but because it openly sets out to pay a collective tribute to the works of Edgar Allan Poe. That said, the low budget, basely low humor, low morals and shockingly low quality will undoubtedly be a downer to any fan of Poe who actually views the film. Another "low" to add to this list would be in reference to how far director has fallen since the ground-breaking earlier work he accomplished with The Who's 1975 *Tommy*, with *Altered States* of 1980 or even with *Whore* of 1991.

*The Fall of the Louse of Usher* is billed as "a musical, of sorts, by Edgar Allan Poe and Ken Russell" (the shared by-line being in and of itself a travesty), and it is clearly a cheap attempt to make a Poe-themed *Rocky Horror Picture Show* with original music by James Johnston (one of the "Bad Seeds" who played with singer Nick Cave), who here plays Roderick Usher. The feature was filmed at

an incredibly low budget in the director's house and back yard, with a cast made up nearly entirely of family friends and neighbors.

A quick but thorough overview of the outlandish plot brings to light both the strained connections to Poe's works and the disturbing irreverence with which those connections are made. Before the death of his wife Annabel Lee, Roderick was the singer in a band that included both his ill-fated wife and his overly-promiscuous sister Madeleine and whose hits included Goth-rock and rap renditions of Poe's poems "The Bells" and "The Conqueror Worm." The romantic rivalry between his wife and his sister (and Rod's preference for his own sister) was best illustrated by their popular MTV video "Ligeia," in which the sister takes over Annabel Lee's body so as to forever be with her brother. Since the death, however, Rod has been in an insane asylum run by the "mad doctor" (played by Ken Russell himself), as he is accused of murdering his wife Annabel Lee, because her deformed eye had so vexed him that he had to eat it (*cf.* "The Tell-Tale Heart"), but was caught because he had accidentally walled her up with their pet, a small Doberman Pinscher (*cf.* "The Black Cat"). The sexy nurse at the asylum has taken to torturing Rod, notably by setting up a swinging steak-knife-pendulum that threatens to cut off his Viagra-enhanced penis (*cf.* "The Pit and the Pendulum"), and going so far as to force him to wear a humiliating raven costume (so as to show that he is indeed "raven mad"! ). They eventually have sex – during which Rod discovers much to his dismay that she is *entirely* made up of artificial body parts, much like the general in Poe's 1850 story "The Man that Was Used Up." Meanwhile, the doctor's cruel experiments on hypnotizing a dying man so as to keep him alive as his body rots (as in Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar") are cut short when it is revealed that Rod's sister Madeleine is in fact a professional wrestler and prostitute who goes by the name of "Masked Mary, the Mighty Marvel of Manhattan." Rod then escapes the asylum to join her by faking his death and getting temporarily trapped in a coffin (*cf.* "Premature Burial"), but he discovers that his beloved sister Madeleine, the mother of his two children, was actually the one who killed Annabel Lee, as she had programmed a trained gorilla with a robotic brain to tear her to pieces (*cf.* "Murders in the Rue Morgue"). In the afterlife (as Rod kills himself as well), the incestuous pair can be seen frolicking on the House of Usher, which is in fact an inflatable bounce-house for children. The house of Usher then *deflates* rather than "falls," but the line of incestuous Ushers will live on through their children, a young boy and girl who have already been experimenting with sex—with the enthusiastic help of the gorilla! (A "spoiler alert" warning seems hardly necessary here, as the entire film was spoiled before it was even released).

It is thus abundantly clear that the techniques used to "expand" Poe in the two major Poe cycles – that of the 1960's and the one we are in the midst of – are worlds apart. Corman, on the one

hand, sought to somehow preserve the plot, dialogues and mood of Poe's original works, to maintain "fidelity" as it were, despite low budgets and an incredibly tight shooting schedule. To Corman and his screenwriters, Poe's original works were perceived as solid yet malleable wholes that could be stretched, padded or folded into each other to provide enough substance for a feature film while maintaining an imperfect but undeniable fidelity to the source texts. Indeed, few would argue that the Poe by-line in the titles or his being listed as one of the writers of the film was unwarranted, in spite of its appeal to producers and distributors as a marketing tool. As this study has shown, recent film adaptations of Poe rely on a drastically different means of expansion, one that by no means lays claim to fidelity to Poe's original short works, in spite of the recurrent use of Poe's name in the very title of the film. With budgets ranging from ten thousand to twelve million dollars (and with an even bigger blockbuster released in 2012), recent film makers seeking to adapt Poe's short works nearly all opt for expansion through reduction, thereby distilling a written work by Poe down to a single premise, a single line, a single notion, a single catch-phrase, or a mere allusion. The borrowed kernel is then replanted and cultivated into something quite different, indeed. In the current cycle, Poe film-makers have been expanding their one, slim tie to Poe into three types of films: (1) most often, a run-of-the-mill, low-budget slasher film steeped in cliché scenes and devices borrowed from other slasher films – from *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* to *Shining*, to *Saw* and *The Ring*; (2) an attempt to create a new genre of horror film, as with Decoteau's series of homo-erotic adaptations, or with Ken Russell's sorely misguided attempt to make an off-beat musical tribute to Poe; or (3) a big-budget suspense-thriller built around a single notion that was loosely borrowed from a work by Poe, as is the case in Michael Cuesta unsuccessful "tell-tale heart" transplant.

With the noted exception of Gordon's *The Black Cat*, fidelity, or even relative fidelity, to the original texts seems to be a thing of the past. Consequently, all but one of the recent "adaptions" would not even require the screenwriter or film-maker read or re-read the work being adapted, as they rely more on one-line connections to Poe that have become part of the collective consciousness, or of the collective unconscious. Poe has gone post-textual.

Perhaps this drive to forego any fidelity to the original tales can be partly put down to the fact that new film-makers may feel that faithful adaptations have been done to death in the past, by Corman and others, or to the fact that fidelity when adapting Poe seems to have been relegated to the making of shorts rather than features, thereby side-stepping the task of expansion. In any case, the current Poe cycle is in full swing and, one should note, is not yet over. The coming months will see the release of several notable Poe adaptations, which seem to follow the trends set by those films described above. On the low-budget end, there is an award-winning silent film adaptation of "The Gold Bug," which

was made by film students in Wisconsin and which should be released to DVD some time in 2013. In the mid-budget range, a new adaptation of Poe's "Morella" by Adam Ropp is in post-production, the gimmick here being that one of its stars, Tony Curtis, died during the filming while another of its stars died eighty-five years *before* the filming (Ropp has digitally resurrected Rudolph Valentino and given the long-defunct heart-throb a key role). In the blockbuster category, March 2012 saw the theatrical release of *The Raven*, directed by James McTeigue (of *V for Vendetta* and *Matrix* fame) and starring John Cusack as Poe himself, herein transformed into a super-sleuth who, in the last days of his life, is hot on the trail of a bloody serial killer who massacres his victims *Seven*-style—the killer inspired not by the seven deadly sins but by the plots of Poe's own horror tales. Poe thus becomes both an initial suspect in the gruesome murders and then a greater sleuth than his own Dupin or Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, taking on his Moriarty-like evil genius in a fatal battle of wits. By changing the facts regarding Poe's last days, by coming up with as far-fetched an explanation of Poe's 1849 death as one could imagine, and by replacing the author's true-life relationship with his young cousin Virginia with a screen-friendly romance and engagement with a beautiful blonde heiress whom Poe saves *in extremis* from the evil killer's clutches, the filmmakers take as many liberties with Poe's life story as they (and others) have with his tales and poems. Has Poe's biography gone post-textual as well? Just how far from fidelity will adaptations go in this cycle, and how long will this current Poe cycle last? Only time will tell, but certain Poe purists are undoubtedly hoping for a "premature burial."

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