

# The House of Usher as Phantasmagoria

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Throughout the history of cinema filmmakers and directors have found Poe's texts irresistible, and none more than 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' a story first published in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in Philadelphia in September 1839 and republished in Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* of 1840.<sup>1</sup> This short prose text has generated over a dozen filmic adaptations of striking aesthetic and formal variety. The combination of Gothic literary conventions, an emotionally suggestible narrator, and contemporary themes of moral and physical degeneracy provide ample stimulus for creative re-imagining of the fate of the house's inhabitants. This text provokes an unrivalled cinematic experimentalism when compared with almost any other frequently adapted pre-cinematic text, such as the novels of Jane Austen or Charles Dickens. Does something inhere in the story or its mode of narration to inspire this experimental challenge to aspirant directors? This essay will attempt to show by way of close reading that Poe's text is a literary phantasmagoria, a lantern show that invites a specifically cinematic speculation as to the nature of events, the mode of their narration, and the qualities of perception enlisted within the narrative frame that convey scene and action to the reader. The House of Usher—that reticulated system of story, building and family line—projects its oblique images, inciting its viewers to take on the powers of suggestion and to reanimate its bloody chamber in suggestible moving images.

## **Poe's Usher as the Threshold of Allegory**

On first reading, the treatment of theme and character in the Gothic mode makes 'The Fall of the House of Usher' particularly conducive to experimental adaptation. The crepuscular atmosphere of stormy weather

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<sup>1</sup> All citations in this essay are from Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' in *Complete Tales and Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1975), pp. 231-245.

and stark variations in light and dark functions as a fitting backdrop to the plotlines of threatening action and ambiguous motives, and operates as a looming expression of characters' consciousness. Roderick's deeply ambivalent shifting between ennui and animated terror reflects abrupt variations in the flow of narrative time, where the unnumbered days of passivity (reading, lute-playing) are instantly jolted into the rapid catastrophic finale. The afflicted characterisation of both Usher siblings reflects a narrative register imbued with the rhetoric of self-doubt and epistemological uncertainty that saturates the entire record of events, despite its aspirations to detached observation. The Gothic mode is especially conducive to allegorical contemplation, and 'Usher' has been read productively by way of psychoanalysis, economies of gender and sexuality, postcolonial discourse, political economy, and other schematic hermeneutic frameworks. The deeply suggestive narrative tone and subject matter elicit a striking variety of critical opinions concerning the story's abiding preoccupations: the southern Gothic as repressed racial guilt; the politics of reproduction and female bodily agency; the paradox of the split subject; hysteria and the artistic imagination; and so on. 'Usher' embodies and performs a narrative of suggestion, and through this modality provides ample thematic material to tempt such allegorical readings. Yet a number of elements in Poe's text foreclose on any singular reading strategy: the peculiar form of the story as simultaneously a forensic report and projected hallucination; and the complex web of relations between narrator, characters, the architecture of the house and its environment, which confounds any sense of cause and effect. This foundational ambiguity both stimulates innovative readings in the critical scholarship and provokes serial cinematic reiterations of the story's spectral display. Rather than attempt a schematic overview of specific critical responses to the text, it will be more productive, initially, to focus on specific features of the text that provoke such hermeneutic stimulus and innovative cinematic adaptation.

The tale's epigraph provides the first indication of 'Usher' as a suspended narrative: that is, as a narrative bracketed outside of the measurable time of history and social discourse, and as a narrative fusing perceptions of external events (impression) with the powers of suggestion to individual consciousness (expression). Poe quotes from Pierre-Jean de Béranger's song, 'Le Refus'—'His heart is a lute suspended; / Upon the touch it resonates'—but despite retaining the quotation in French, he changes the source quote from the third to the first person. By doing so, the epigraph is transformed from abstracted text residing beyond the

narrative frame, to a gesture of foreboding, situating the narrator's story as a tableau of diaphanous suggestibility that speaks to the reader directly. The decadent tone neatly combines characteristics of Gothic fiction (ennui, hyperaesthesia) with the theme of artistic creativity and its dangers to rational discourse.

The opening sentence provides a formal tableau within the narrative proper, and functions as a kind of establishing shot of the Usher house and estate: it resonates with adjectival foreboding—'dull, dark, and soundless day,' 'clouds hung oppressively low,' 'singularly dreary tract,' and so on. The narrator begins with a description of the scene but quickly suggests a mood of spiritual sympathy with the object of his perception, admitting 'a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit' (231). The structural parallel with Dante's journey into the *selva oscura* in Canto I of *Inferno* is confirmed later by the 'sulphurous lustre' cast upon the narrator's stay in the house (236). The hellish scene suggests spiritual disorientation, but physically resembles the blasted heath of *King Lear* III.iv, recalling that play's singular revelation of 'unaccommodated man.' The echoes of spiritual epic—and perhaps even the *nekyia* / *katabasis* in Book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey*—blend with contemporary expressions of ennui by means of an identifiably Romantic vocabulary. The narrator's sense of environmental melancholy, his vision of 'a few rank sedges' (citing Keats's poem 'La Belle Dame sans Merci') as well as repeated mentions of imagination and the sublime (and the dangers of fancy) distinctly and ironically inflect his speech with Coleridge's aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> The pathetic fallacy—another Romantic cliché—does important work at this early point in the story, establishing the concept of suggestibility and the curious metabolism of sensibility, which mediates between mimesis and creativity, empirical observation and irrational expression: the Mirror and the Lamp.<sup>3</sup> The tarn immediately presents itself as an object of curiosity and dread, as though it embodies and articulates the terrible depths of the imaginative faculty from which absolute separation is

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<sup>2</sup> Numerous other Romantic citations abound in the story: at one point the narrator describes Roderick's sullen expression as like that of 'the irreclaimable eater of opium' (235), a clear titular echo of Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821).

<sup>3</sup> This of course is the title of M. H. Abrams's groundbreaking study of Romantic aesthetics and its figuration of the imagination as an essentially creative faculty, rather than as a function of mimetic response to external stimuli. See M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford UP, 1953).

impossible. This geographic feature, separate from the architecture of the house but part of its destabilising geological underpinnings, presents an index of dread and fear for the narrator, who is repeatedly drawn to its reflective, image-producing surface, as well as its (proleptic) iconicity as vacancy and the scene of annihilation. The image of the tarn, with its 'pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued' (233), externalises an ominous sense of mental and spiritual turbulence in the narrator.

As the *mise en scène* shifts to the interior of the Usher house, the narrator's forensic aptitudes focus upon Roderick's general appearance and condition. His evident ennui and hyperaesthesia, hollow facial features, pale complexion and 'nervous agitation' (234), lends Roderick an apparitional aura. The narrator's potential projections upon his friend bear analogy to the fissure detected in the structure's wall: this architectural fault is an icon of the fundamental split, in every sense, of personal identity, genealogical integrity, perception, and aesthetic expression. Roderick addresses the fatal implications of his 'deplorable Folly,' his 'struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR' (235). He goes as far as to identify the folly of being overtaken by the malevolent *genius loci*: his theory of 'the sentience of all vegetable things' (239) extends to the house itself. The narrator infers its sentience is a function of the arrangement of its stones and the extensive system of fungi holding it together, all the more ominous for being reduplicated 'in the still waters of the tarn' (239). The intermingling of house and watery reflection neatly echoes the suggestive narrative propensity to intensify and distort the documentary record. This atmosphere of projection is literalised shortly afterwards when the narrator reports:

the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion (242).

This hallucinatory aura deflects attention from the curious dilation of time following Madeline's death, during which Roderick and the narrator engage in extended artistic activities. Roderick's musical *impromptu* include the recitation of the song, 'The Haunted Palace' (a poem Poe had previously published) and the strumming of his lute resonates beyond the narrative frame back to the original epigraph. The narrator admits an

admiration for Roderick's abilities in painting: 'if ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher' (237). These diversions complement their extensive reading in chiromancy and other occult subjects, culminating in the narrator's exquisitely misjudged choice of Sir Launcelot Canning's medieval romance, the 'Mad Trist.' This text (the only citation in the story of Poe's invention) induces the confluence of imagination and actuality, with the action of the romance echoing Madeline's revival from the crypt.<sup>4</sup> The uncanny influence of text upon sensibility also recalls the narrator's initial diagnostic assessment of Roderick's letter, in which '[t]he MS. gave evidence of nervous agitation' (232).

Such chirographic diagnostics is itself indicative of a general philological theme throughout the narrative. Roderick's genealogy tells of a ruinous singularity of issue, where 'the entire family lay in the direct line of descent' with only 'very trifling and very temporary variation' over centuries (232): that is, only one male Usher of each generation produces children, ensuring transmission of the family name in a single line of descent that might be cut at any one point. This information bodes badly for Madeline, in that her potential fertility functions as an exception to this natural law of the Usher family tree and thus marks her out for sacrifice. But a subtle textual analogy lurks here too: just as the Usher issue is vulnerable to decadence and dilution, so too any single line of textual descent is precarious. It is open to irrevocable corruption at every stage of its transmission and is denied the wider context of witness texts or versions, conventionally visualised in a stemmatic tree or dendrogram. That both familial and textual lines of descent are represented in tree diagrams evinces their fragility, and gives specific, ironic currency to Roderick's fear of the sentience of fungi and trees mingling with the stones of his family pile.<sup>5</sup> The final apocalypse (*apokalyptein*: to uncover, reveal) of the riven house collapsing into the tarn fulfils the proleptic narrative vision: art, perception, and narrative itself are dangerous experiments in creative imagination, capable of overwhelming the subject's equilibrium and overheating the sensorium with its emanating visions. Conversely, and perversely, Poe implicitly throws down a

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<sup>4</sup> The library replicates the sterile malady of its owner: 'Like the family, the library produces no "collateral issue" or ideas, but reproduces a monomania.' Joseph Riddel, 'The "Crypt" of Edgar Poe,' *boundary 2* 7.3 (Spring 1979): 128.

<sup>5</sup> David Ketterer identifies several of Poe's alphabetical-textual rhizomes in his gymnastic study, "'Shudder": A Signature *Crypt*-ogram in "The Fall of the House of Usher",' *Resources for American Literary Study* 25.2 (1999): 192-205.

challenge to his readers and prospective emulators to dare imagine at the limiting edge of coherent creativity.

### Adaptation and ‘Usher’

The literary form and techniques at work in ‘Usher’ make it especially conducive to adaptation: the profoundly ambiguous status of fact and event, mediated by a suggestible narrative persona; the uncanny chiasmus between narrative speculation and plot; the radical rift in epistemological and perceptual verity; the dream-like suspension of ordinary events in geographic isolation; and the irresistible relation between artistic creativity and spectral apparition. Critics have remarked how Roderick’s artistic pretensions are set in stark relief against the Gothic tale’s generic mass-market appeal,<sup>6</sup> a neat anticipation of its cinematic allure. The story itself engages directly with persistence after death and the concept of haunting (both within the mind and as an external phenomenon): Mark Steven provides an engaging and critically acute account of Poe’s own interment in the story and its critical reception, and whose status as ‘undead’ author might be considered an open invitation for iterative critical and artistic recombination.<sup>7</sup> Steven’s appraisal of the text’s ‘critical afterlife’ is an astute counterpart to questions of its manifold aesthetic iterations in creative adaptation. ‘Usher’ has been subjected to more than a dozen filmic adaptations, but there also exist significant adaptations in other media. Claude Debussy attempted a one-act opera (*La chute de la maison Usher*) in the last decade of his life, to which he contributed the libretto, but it remained unfinished on his death in 1918. Debussy followed Poe’s narrative, but accentuated the incestuous undertones of the sibling relationship and raised the role of the doctor to that of Roderick’s rival for Madeline’s affections.<sup>8</sup> Steven Berkoff’s

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<sup>6</sup> Terence Whalen, ‘Poe and the American Publishing Industry,’ in *The Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (Cary, NC: Oxford UP, 2001), p. 91.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Steven, ‘Movements in the Hollow Coffin: On “The Fall of the House of Usher”,’ *Poe Studies* 44 (2011): 5-15. Poe’s cinematic afterlife is evident in the feature film, *The Raven* (2012) starring John Cusack as Edgar Allan Poe: the writer battles with a serial killer who emulates the modes of killing in his stories.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-François Thibault, ‘Debussy’s Unfinished American Opera: *La chute de la maison Usher*,’ in *Opera and the Golden West: The Past, Present, and Future of Opera in the USA*, ed. John L. DiGaetani and Josef P. Sirefman (London and Toronto: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1994), pp. 198-206.

dramatic adaptation of 'Usher,' first performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1974,<sup>9</sup> centres on Roderick's mental disintegration in his isolated domicile. The visitation of a friend, Edgar, punctuates extended sequences of discourse between the siblings (Berkoff's free invention). Madeline functions as a floating apparition, visible to Roderick and the audience but not to Edgar. Thus the audience is aware of and complicit in Roderick's hallucination, and enters into the zone of guilt-induced psychosis. Julio Cortázar also deploys the plot device of troubled siblings, remnants of a parasitic feudal order, in his 1944 short story, 'Casa tomada.'<sup>10</sup> The siblings are compelled to abandon their ancestral house, beset by mysterious phantasms.

Of the film adaptations of 'Usher' known to exist, four in particular aptly illustrate the variety of approaches inspired by Poe's story. Jean Epstein's 1928 French production is a silent film co-written with Luis Buñuel,<sup>11</sup> which shifts the nature of the sibling relationship to that of husband and wife. The techniques of silent cinema sharpen attention to the nature of perception: the murkiness of the film stock and the folk guitar accompaniment situate the action in a temporally ambiguous rural space, complete with suspicious townsfolk. As well as providing an establishing close-up shot of Roderick's letter **[figure 1]** Epstein gives sharp focus to Roderick's books, his portrait of Madeline, and irruptions of an abstract avant-garde musical score as a means for plot advancement and as symbolic evidence of Roderick's mania as it develops within the Gothic house **[figure 2]**.

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<sup>9</sup> Steven Berkoff, *Agamemnon and The Fall of the House of Usher* (Charibury: Amber Lane, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Rosario Ferré, *Cortázar: El Romántico en su Observatorio*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Literal Books; Río Piedras: Editorial Cultura, 1994), p. 49; cited in Daniel Bautista, 'Popular Culture in the Houses of Poe and Cortázar,' *Intertexts* 14.1 (Spring 2010): 3. See Julio Cortázar, 'House Taken Over,' trans. Paul Blackburn, in *Bestiary: Selected Stories*, ed. an intro. Alberto Manguel (London: Harvill, 1988), pp. 3-7.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Epstein, dir., *La chute de la maison Usher*, 66 mins. (France, 1928).

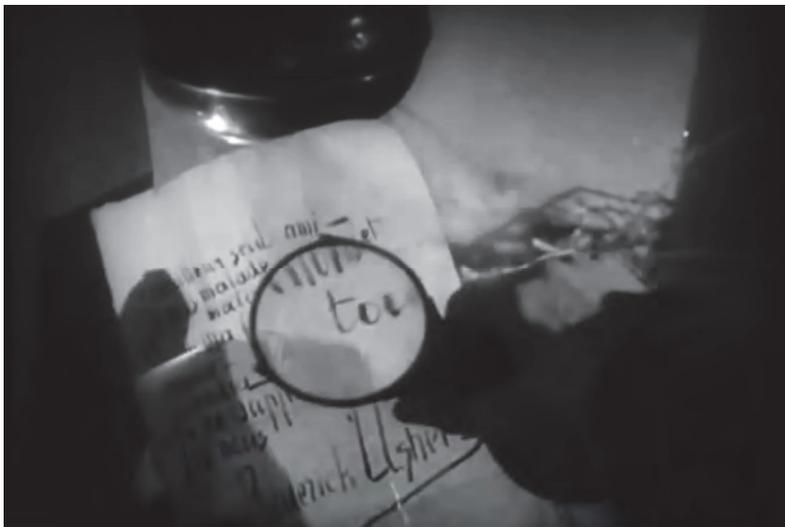


Figure 1. Allan reviews Roderick's letter on his approach to the House in Jean Epstein, dir., *La chute de la maison Usher*, at 2:27.



Figure 2. The falling 'phantasmagorical armorial trophy' on Madeline's cryptic revival (note the piles of open books nearby) in Jean Epstein, dir., *La chute de la maison Usher*, at 58:48.

The film sustains a qualified narrative fidelity in its attention to plot and the props in Roderick's study, as well as the final collapse of the house into the tarn, although the revived Madeline is saved from the house, which is destroyed by fire. By altering the central relationship the film transforms the potential causes of Roderick's mania into that of artistic obsession: Madeline 'dies' exhausted because of her husband's incessant demands that she model for his painting. This emphasis upon optical effects is in keeping with Epstein's famous thesis of the cinema as a process centred upon the visual medium: 'Truly, the cinema creates *a particular system of consciousness limited to a single sense*.'<sup>12</sup> Rumour has it that Buñuel quit the film in protest at Epstein's liberties with Poe's story. Epstein's wilful combat with authorial agency fits with what he elsewhere referred to as the diabolical nature of film-making<sup>13</sup>—neatly literalised in the infernal image of the House's apocalyptic conflagration—and stands as a direct response to Poe's challenge to his readers and emulators, to work at the limits of imagination.

Sibley Watson's much shorter film of the same year attempts a more abstract and avant-garde rendition of the story's themes.<sup>14</sup> The Gothic mode is sustained by virtue of an emblematic score, an opus for organ by Dietrich Buxtehude—although it should be noted that Alec Wilder, *The Impossible Orchestra*, and others have composed scores for the film—as well as the surrealist methods of montage and multiple frame exposure that underwrote the film's critical and popular success.<sup>15</sup> The emphasis on written documents establishes continuity with Epstein's film: the film begins with a montage of Poe's text scrolling in different directions,

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Epstein, 'Magnification,' in *French Film Theory and Criticism, A History/Anthology, Volume I: 1907-1929*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988), p. 240 (italics in original); cited in Malcolm Turvey, 'Jean Epstein's Cinema of Immanence: The Rehabilitation of the Corporeal Eye,' *October* 83 (Winter 1988): 25.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Epstein, *Le Cinéma du diable*, in *Ecrits sur le cinéma*, 2 vols. (Paris: Seghers, 1974-75), cited in Ludovic Cortade, 'Le Cinéma du diable: Jean Epstein and the Ambiguities of Subversion,' trans. Roxanne Lapidus, *SubStance* 34.3 (2005): 3-16.

<sup>14</sup> James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, dirs., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, 13 mins. (MGM, 1928).

<sup>15</sup> Jan-Christopher Horak, 'A Neglected Genre: James Sibley Watson's Avant-Garde Industrial Films,' *Film History* 20.1 (2008): 35.

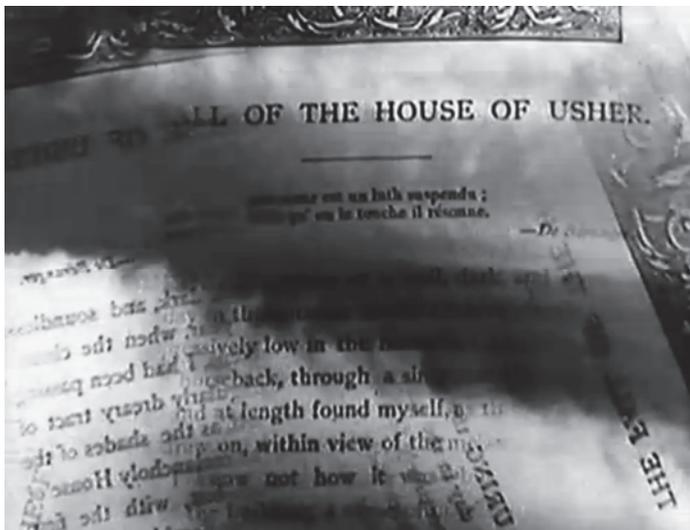


Figure 3. Opening montage of Poe's text in James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, dirs., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 0:25.

stairs in those same skewed angles morph into piles of books,



Figure 4. House interior in James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, dirs., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 7:25.

and luminous letters crowd the air around Roderick's head on the death of Madeline and the destruction of the house. Watson maintains the ambiguity of the Usher siblings' relationship, emphasising the themes of psychological disturbance and suggestibility by way of a set design that directly cites German Expressionist film sets of Robert Wiene, F. W. Murnau, and Fritz Lang, especially in skewed walls, strong chiaroscuro and sustained camera focus on shadows. One scene in which the revived Madeline appears as a sequence of apparitions, perhaps functions as a citation of the time and motion studies that were so popular in early photography and cinema.



Figure 5. Madeline as apparition following Roderick in James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, dirs., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 9:16.

Roger Corman collaborated with writer Richard Matheson and actor Vincent Price on eight film adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe, of which the first was *The Fall of the House of Usher* in 1960.<sup>16</sup> Corman had established a reputation for successful low-budget films in the previous

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<sup>16</sup> Roger Corman, dir., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, 76 mins. (American International Pictures, 1960; MGM, 2004).

decade. The evident economy in set design complemented the ominous expressionism of Price's acting to produce a lurid study in decadence.



Figure 6. Interior decadence and Vincent Price's Roderick in Roger Corman, dir., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 9:05.

Corman and Matheson tinkered with aspects of the plot, characterisation and setting: for example, Roderick tells of the Usher house having been transplanted stone by stone from England to New England. Significantly, Philip Winthrop (a proxy for the narrator) travels from Boston to visit his beloved, Madeline, who has become ill in her ancestral home she shares with Roderick. The family decline is explained as in Poe's story, with specific and sustained attention to the baroque furnishings, plush fabrics, musical instruments and grotesque paintings.



Figure 7. Roderick's aesthetic preoccupations, in Roger Corman, dir., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 10:35.



Figure 8. The Usher portrait gallery in Roger Corman, dir., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 39:18.

The sequence of family portraits functions quite literally as a study in criminal decadence, a warning to Philip to give up his plans for Madeline which is supported by the discreet advice from the servant, Bristol. Philip demurs, responding to Roderick's insinuation that the house inspires evil: 'The house is neither normal or abnormal. It's only a house!' (40:05). Following Madeline's sudden death and interment in the family crypt, Philip dreams of descending into the infernal crypt among the criminally degenerate Usher ancestors,

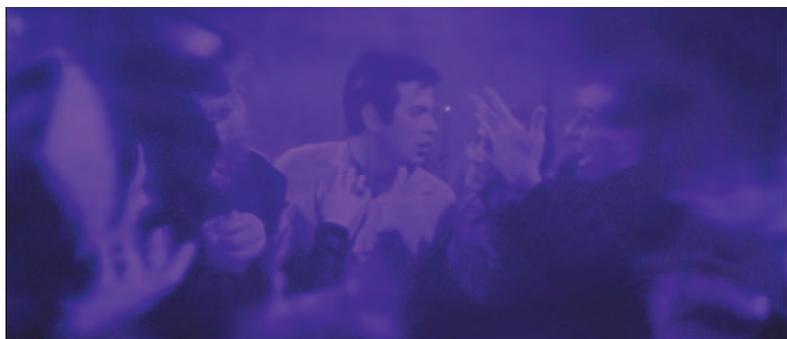


Figure 9. Philip Winthrop dreams of passing among the degenerate Usher dead, in Roger Corman, dir., *The Fall of the House of Usher*, at 59:38.

in a parody of the Homeric *katabasis* or even of the descent of Christ into Limbo after the crucifixion. The final cataclysm has the Gothic mansion burn and sink into the tarn, the fire initiated by dislodged wood from the

fireplace during the siblings' death struggle. By introducing Philip Winthrop as a rival to Roderick for Madeline's affections, Corman and Matheson are able to intensify the incest narrative, and avoid extensive voiceover (as in Epstein's film) or obtrusive framings of Poe's text (as occurs in Watson's film). Corman's significant liberties with the erotic tonalities of the plot align with the basic tenets of Gothic fiction (not to mention low-budget 1960s Hollywood film), particularly the expressionistic understanding of sensory perception. Philip's innate reliability and empirical judgement runs counter to the suggestibility and the blurring of perception and epistemology inherent in Poe's narrator. The bizarre, decadent world of the Usher house is offset from ordinary society (as in Poe), but as an emissary from the modern, rational world he is not absorbed into its degenerate space. This limitation produces a charismatic effect, as though the house itself is the primary character and Roderick and Madeline merely outlandish facets of it.

This rethinking of Poe's narrative in terms of the animating potential in the house is the *modus operandi* of Jan Švankmajer's 1980 stop-action adaptation, *Zánik domu Usherů*, in which the story is narrated in voiceover and the items of furniture enact the plot.<sup>17</sup> Švankmajer adheres closely to the section of Poe's text concerning Roderick's song, the reading of the 'Mad Trist,' and the consequent effects upon his mental equilibrium. The animation of the furniture,<sup>18</sup> and the appearance of a human visage (**figure 10**) and Madeline's name (**figure 11**) in the stone of the house, all echo Roderick's disquisition on 'the sentience of all vegetable things' and the narrator's creeping awareness of the relation between the house and 'its reduplication in the tarn' (239).

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<sup>17</sup> Jan Švankmajer, dir., *Zánik domu Usheru (The Fall of the House of Usher)*, in *The Complete Short Films* (1980; BFI, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Curiously, Poe published a satirical article, 'The Philosophy of Furniture,' in the May 1840 issue of *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, several months after 'The Fall of the House of Usher' had appeared in the same pages. See Jacob Berman, 'Domestic Terror and Poe's Arabesque Interior,' *English Studies in Canada* 31.1 (2005): 128-129.



Figure 10. The “sentience of all vegetable things” transferred to the stones of the House, in Jan Švankmajer, dir., *Zánik domu Usheru* (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), at 6:08.



Figure 11. The House inscribing its call to possess Madeline, in Jan Švankmajer, dir., *Zánik domu Usheru* (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), at 8:37.

By initiating a radical recalibration of the audience's attention to the phantasmic and hallucinatory dimensions of the story, Švankmajer's film gets to the heart of the Gothic discourse that Poe interrogates. The effects of this literalisation—the House itself is deranged, and the furniture is possessed and condemned to suicide (**figures 12-14**)—produces a surrealist theatre for the action: 'he bridges the gap between live-action and animation, proving without doubt that the two practices are not at all separate entities but merely variations within the larger realm of motion picture production.'<sup>19</sup>



Figure 12. Madeline's animated coffin takes her to the crypt, in Jan Švankmajer, dir., *Zánik domu Usheru* (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), at 6:16.

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<sup>19</sup> Maureen Furniss, Review of *The Collected Shorts of Jan Svankmejer*, *Moving Image* 6.1 (Spring 2006): 157.



Figure 13. The furniture of the House flees in terror, in Jan Švankmajer, dir., *Zánik domu Usheru (The Fall of the House of Usher)*, at 14:10.



Figure 14. A wardrobe throws itself into the tarn, in Jan Švankmajer, dir., *Zánik domu Usheru (The Fall of the House of Usher)*, at 14:15.

The crypt, located elsewhere on the estate, physically resembles and alludes to the grotesque theatre of the phantasmagoria with its narrow aperture, dark interior, and compulsively reanimated protagonist. To produce a Gothic melodrama with furniture ‘acting’ in place of human figures is an accomplishment of artistic virtuosity, and provides a potent means for Švankmajer by which to evade Czech state censorship in an act of cinematic resistance to and figuration of that censorship. Švankmajer began his film career during the era of the Czech New Wave but was banned from filmmaking between 1970 and 1977, having been caught up in the repressions following the Prague Spring of 1968. Although he was permitted again to make films in the 1980s, Švankmajer’s lifelong affiliations with the Czech Surrealists posed major problems for the distribution and screening of his films until after the Velvet Revolution in 1989.<sup>20</sup>

There is obvious merit in close study of these (and other) adaptations of Poe’s ‘Usher,’ both as a means of determining the kinds of formal and aesthetic choices made by each director and as a prolegomenon to thinking about adaptive experimentation. Each film reckons with matters of plot fidelity, quotation, characterisation (and costuming and casting), emulations of the Gothic mode, visual equivalents of narrative discourse, and the inclusion and/or representation of music, poetry, painting, and other manifestations of the aesthetic in Poe’s text. Each director makes radical choices of response to and emulation of Poe’s text: Epstein takes liberties with the sibling plot and its thematic and psychological resonances; Watson transforms the Gothic space into an avant-garde expressionist delirium; Corman immunises the narrating figure from dark powers of suggestion; and Švankmajer displaces human agency with the animation of objects.

Rather than measure the relative merits of cinematic adaptations against the premium of fidelity expressed by George Bluestone or Dudley Andrew,<sup>21</sup> these films might be deployed as alternate versions of film’s

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<sup>20</sup> Švankmajer discusses the implications of his aesthetics and censorship in an interview with Eoin Koepfinger, ‘Freedom is Becoming the Only Theme,’ *Sampsonia Way*, 5 June 2012, at <http://www.sampsoniaway.org/blog/2012/06/05/freedom-is-becoming-the-only-theme-an-interview-with-jan-svankmajer/>.

<sup>21</sup> See George Bluestone, *Novels into Film: The Metamorphosis of Fiction into Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P; Cambridge: Cambridge

adaptive agency. Brian McFarlane, Robert Stam and Thomas Leitch have each argued for a need to breach the fidelity impasse in film adaptation theory, not least by crediting literary texts and film adaptations with an index of critical awareness in negotiating their responses to and influences upon their discursive fields.<sup>22</sup> These issues are crucial to the conceptual understanding of cinematic adaptation and the hermeneutic project as it transforms across media and through iterations of a text's 'afterlife.' A renewed focus on Poe's originary text in this adaptive field can offer a way of thinking about the cinematic from the viewpoint of its technological genealogy. Poe's deep engagement with technologies of visual projection is especially evident in 'Usher,' where the story and its mode of narration can be viewed as an experiment in self-adaptation by means of imaginative projection: both within the narrative framework, and in the way the story blurs boundaries of materiality and ephemerality, concept and sensory perception, and empirical actuality and psychological suggestibility. This conceptual matrix is mediated through the very idea of medium: the phantasmagoria.

### Phantasmagoria

Poe's use of the word *phantasmagoria* in 'Usher'—in reference to the 'armorial trophies' (233) reflecting light in the dark hallway, and Roderick's own 'phantasmagoric conceptions' (237)—demonstrates its dual valency as a freighted index of light imagery and architecture, and as a critical view of psychology and sense perception. The word also resonates within the history of image projection: the phantasmagoria was developed in the late eighteenth century from the earlier magic lantern

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UP, 1957) and Dudley Andrew, 'Adaptation,' in *Concepts in Film Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984), pp. 96-106.

<sup>22</sup> For pungent critiques of the concept of fidelity in adaptation discourse, see: Brian McFarlane, *Novel To Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996); Robert Stam, 'Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation,' in *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, ed. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 1-52; Robert Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation,' in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (London: Athlone, 2000), pp. 54-72; and Thomas M. Leitch, 'Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory,' *Criticism* 45.2 (Spring 2001): 149-171.



Figure 15. Combination Helioscopic Lantern, Patent No. 2459,  
electric illuminant, Walter Tyler, London,  
<http://www.magiclantern.org.uk/events/events4f.html>

which itself descended from the ancient technology of the *camera obscura*. This mechanism entailed a dark enclosed space and an aperture through which light was admitted—a cave with a narrow entrance, for example—and in which an (inverted) image would be projected upon the rear wall or surface.<sup>23</sup> The first recorded reference to the camera obscura is that of the Chinese philosopher Mo Tzu in the fifth century BCE.<sup>24</sup> Both Aristotle (in the *Problemata*) and Euclid (*Optics*) refer to this technology, which was refined by medieval Arabic mathematicians such as al-Kindi and Alhazen.<sup>25</sup> The term magic lantern was coined by

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<sup>23</sup> For a concise summary of the extensive literature on the *camera obscura*, see Jonathan Crary, ‘The Camera Obscura and its Subject,’ in *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 25-66.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. IV Physics and Physical Technology, Part I: Physics (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962), pp. 78-125.

<sup>25</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 51. See Book XV 910b-913a of Aristotle, *Problemata*, trans. E. S. Forster, Vol. VII of *The Works of Aristotle*, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927); and Euclid,

Johannes Kepler in his *Ad Vitellionem Paralipomena* of 1604, and made popular by Athanasius Kircher in his *Ars Magna Lucis Et Umbra* ('The Major Art of Light and Shadow') of 1646. In France during the Revolutionary era Etienne-Gaspar Robertson adapted his camera obscura to project images of ghosts, murder victims, and other macabre images, often in Gothic surroundings (**figure 16**):

he began producing [...] elaborate and bizarre spectacles in the crypt of an abandoned Capuchin convent near the Place Vendôme [...] amid ancient tombs and effigies.<sup>26</sup>

Many of his shows would conclude with the visual rhetoric of the *memento mori* in the form of a skeleton of a young woman.<sup>27</sup> One show billed as 'The Night-Mare' depicted a sleeping woman dreaming, with 'a demon pressed upon her chest holding a dagger suspended over her heart.'<sup>28</sup> This figure anticipates Poe's narrator in 'Usher' who feels a similar oppressive presence bearing upon his chest as he tries to sleep: 'there sat upon my very heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm' (241). The figure of Madeline escaping her interment also descends from a familiar trope in the history of the phantasmagoria. Thomas Carlyle in his *French Revolution* figured civil strife as 'a kind of spectral drama,' where Murder is personified in female form, stalking the streets of Paris during the Red Terror.<sup>29</sup>

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*Optics*, in *Greek Mathematical Works, Volume I: Thales to Euclid*, trans. Ivor Thomas (Cambridge, MA: Loeb, 1939).

<sup>26</sup> Terry Castle, 'Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie,' *Critical Inquiry* 15.1 (Autumn 1988): 36.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Cohen, 'Walter Benjamin's Phantasmagoria,' *New German Critique* 48 (Autumn 1989): 97.

<sup>28</sup> Castle: 36-37. Note that the original meaning of 'nightmare' is 'a female spirit or monster supposed to settle on and produce a feeling of suffocation in a sleeping person or animal' (OED). Robertson reversed the gender of spirit and sleeping subject in his shows, perhaps to heighten the effect of vulnerability. Note also Poe's 'incubus' is male in gender.

<sup>29</sup> Castle: 26.



Figure 16. Etienne-Gaspar Robertson's Phantasmagoria in a disused cloister of an old Capuchin chapel, Rue des Champs, Cours des Capucines, Paris, 1797; engraving by E. Morieu, in Robertson's *Mémoires: Récréatifs Scientifiques et Anecdotes*, Paris, 1831, <http://www.magiclantern.org.uk/history/history6.html>

The magic lantern functioned as the technological forebear of various later experimental devices in image projection, among them photographic machinery developed by Joseph Niépce and Louis Daguerre in the 1820s, Eadweard Muybridge's zoopraxiscope (1879), a machine for time and motion studies, Thomas Edison's kinetograph (1890) and kinoscope (1894), and Louis and August Lumière's cinématographe (1895). But during the nineteenth century the phantasmagoria also shifted from spectacular public exhibition to the 'phantasmic imagery of the mind,' altering the language of mental experience into one of hallucination and the spectral:

It conveyed exquisitely the notion of the *bouleversement de tous les sens*: that state of neurasthenic excitement in which images whirled chaotically before the inward eye, impressing on the seer an overwhelming sense of their vividness and spiritual truth.<sup>30</sup>

This new 'metaphysic of interiority,' as Jonathan Crary describes, 'is a figure for both the observer who is nominally a free sovereign individual and a privatized subject confined in a quasi-domestic space, cut off from

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<sup>30</sup> Castle: 29-30, 47-48.

a public exterior world.<sup>31</sup> Roderick Usher's isolation and consequent neurosis is self-evident, but the narrator's suggestibility is the real clue here: from his first description of the house and the sinister tarn he announces a predisposition to infer different registers of disorder (psychological, moral, natural) through the vocabulary of the supernatural. Madeline's apparition—whether 'real' or imagined by the hypersensitive, suggestible narrator and his host—becomes a literalisation of the confluence of mechanical optics (for both empirical scrutiny and entertainment) and a post-Rationalist discourse of mental 'daemonology.' The House of Usher literally becomes a spectral theatre, a magic lantern in which is performed the ghoulish entertainment of the phantasmagoria before a credulous audience.<sup>32</sup>

In her study of nineteenth-century phantasmagoria, Terry Castle sees Poe's stories both as fantastic in the sense defined by Tzvetan Todorov<sup>33</sup>—a performed equivocation between rational and supernatural explanations of narrated events—and as phantasmagorical in their focus on the epistemological problem of apparitions. The links between spectral imagery and the act of reading finds expression in contemporary medical literature, where 'excessive reading—and especially reading books of a romantic or visionary nature—could send one into morbid hallucinatory states.'<sup>34</sup> This fusion of perspective—of reader and narrator—reaches an apotheosis in 'Usher,' a story in which the narrator and his over-stimulated companion seek solace in intensive reading, an activity that ironically heightens their susceptibility to phantasmic suggestion. In 'Usher' and elsewhere, Poe demonstrates adept knowledge of the magic lantern literature in circulation:

Letter IV of [Brewster's] *Natural Magic*, the one most frequently drawn on by Poe, discusses the use of mirrors and lenses in magic lanterns, phantasmagorias, and other apparatuses to produce optical illusions through reflection and refraction of light. Poe was clearly intrigued by the

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<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, p.39.

<sup>32</sup> Fictional and non-fictional texts of a generation before had illustrated the deceptive allure of the new technologies of image projection: Friedrich Schiller deploys the magic lantern as a device for deception in his prose fragment *Der Geisterseher* (1789), as does the anonymous Gothic story *Phantasmagoria; or, The Development of Magical Deception* (1803). See Castle 39.

<sup>33</sup> See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975).

<sup>34</sup> Castle: 56.

mysterious optical and aural phenomena Brewster describes, and borrowed nearly two dozen of them for his stories.<sup>35</sup>

The fantastic equivocations of subjectivity and supernaturalism in the story lend it the positive valency conducive not only to a variety of psychological readings, but also to experimental cinematic representation and emulation. Indeed Joseph Boggs Beale, the pre-eminent lantern-slide artist in nineteenth-century America, produced a series of phantasmagoria slides illustrating Poe's texts [**figure 17**]. This inspiration extends to the mode of the story's telling in ways more literal than figurative or allegorical: 'Usher' is the story of a narrator caught in a magic lantern, a phantasmagoria—not so much a Man *with* a Movie Camera but a Man *as* a Movie Camera. The creative faculty of the narrative function is raised to the phantasmagorical: the narrator conjures the scenario he witnesses, perplexed by its constructed nature and its evident truth.

### Usher as Phantasmagoria

The Gothic narrative of 'Usher' functions as a phantasmagoria, inducing a spectral event through the gradual heightening of psychic and sensory tension. The narrative mode neatly captures the introversion of empirical observation (the Mirror) into a process of expressionistic projection of inner anxieties (the Lamp): a negative aesthetics of Romanticism. The projective tendencies of the narrator and Roderick converge in Madeline's final appearance, and produce fatal consequences for Roderick and a swift conclusion to the narrator's spectral experience, in the tarn's cathartic absorption of the riven house.<sup>36</sup> The text as phantasmagoria also brings into play the visual technology of the magic lantern and the psychological implications of the epistemological and perceptual turbulence witnessed in the events of the plot and the mode of

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<sup>35</sup> James M. Hutchisson, ed., *Selected Poetry and Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* (Buffalo, NY: Broadview, 2012), p. 400.

<sup>36</sup> The architecture of the Usher crypt echoes the Palladian Classicism of the Rotunda at Poe's alma mater, the University of Virginia (a building in which, incidentally, exams were held). Modelled on the Roman Pantheon, the Rotunda presents a converse image to that of the tarn, in its Gothic materialist associations: 'The mutual interpenetration of spirit and matter in Poe's prose drags spirit into the tarn of signifying matter, confines the loftiness of reason in what eventually appears, in Roderick's painting, as a sealed underground vault.' Susan Bernstein, 'The Dome of the Mind: Monticello in Weimar,' *MLN* 123.5 (2008): 981.

their presentation. In this way, the text functions as a suitable phantasmagoria for experimental cinematic adaptation, providing the accoutrements of allegory without its hermeneutic fulfilment. ‘Usher’ inspires cinematic innovation in the most basic way: by simulating the pre-cinematic experience of the phantasmagoria.



Figure 17: Joseph Boggs Beale, *The Raven*, magic lantern slides (set of 12), Philadelphia: American Stereoscopic Co., c. 1890

Following the narrator’s approach to the House of Usher and the story’s establishing shot, the focus rests upon the physical attributes of the tarn: it recomposes the scene just as the magic lantern inverts the image it projects, and offers an entry point into the phantasmagoric space.

It was possible, I *reflected*, that a mere different *arrangement* of the particulars of the scene, of the details of

the *picture*, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to *annihilate* its capacity for sorrowful *impression*; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled *lustre* by the dwelling, and *gazed* down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the *remodelled and inverted images* of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the *vacant and eye-like windows*. (231, italics added)

The vocabulary of mirrors, reflection, and the quality of images—inverted, as the narrator reports—has the tarn become a magic lantern, complete with aperture, and it anticipates the spectral imagery of the phantasmagoria. Indeed the single aperture of the magic lantern bears the same morphology as the single line of descent from father to son in the Usher genealogy, a corrupted provenance that proves fatal. The narrator, having established the tarn as a machinery of visual projection, enters the Usher house through a dark hallway, in typical Gothic style, but which also suggests the eye's ingress via the viewing tube into the space of the lantern: 'the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode' (233). The narrator's progress through the house is as though through the lens of a camera, where Roderick's study is 'large and lofty,' with 'long, narrow and pointed' windows at a 'vast [...] distance from the black oaken floor,' and through which 'feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way' but which do not provide enough light for eye 'to reach the remoter angles of the chamber' (234). We have entered a magic lantern, in which Roderick resides, projecting his infernal images to an audience moved by the powers of suggestion.

The counterpart to Roderick's lantern-chamber is his illustration of the crypt passageway, one of his 'phantasmagoric conceptions' (237). This draws the narrator's sustained attention, who then attempts to render its abstracted form, to have it 'shadowed forth [...] feebly, in words.' This chamber, 'the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device,' is the interior of the magic lantern upon its activation:

No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout,

and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendour. (237)

The Gothic sensorium is illuminated by its ghoulish emanations. The ‘lamp’ of Romantic imagination has become the proto-cinematic projector of wild fancies, in which the reader is as captive as the narrator and his projectionist: Roderick Usher. The actual tunnel to Madeline’s crypt is ‘sheathed in copper’ (240), literalising her interment within a magic lantern, and her performance as a phantasmagoria.<sup>37</sup> The strange suspension of activity during the time of her entombment is given over to reading texts concerned with necromancy and matters of the occult, as though the two men are seeking out viable scripts for future projections. Among Roderick’s ‘wild fantasias’ and ‘rhapsodies’ his poem, ‘The Haunted Palace,’ rehearses the material architecture of the magic lantern. The third stanza has the wanderers view spirits through the palace windows, but upon the fall of the kingdom to ‘evil things,’ the final stanza provides a melancholy coda—befitting the sinister mood akin to Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’—that situates the ‘travellers’ as the fixed audience of a phantasmagoria (239):

And travellers now within that valley,  
Through the red-litten windows see  
Vast forms that move fantastically  
To a discordant melody;  
While, like a rapid ghastly river,  
Through the pale door;  
A hideous throng rush out forever,  
And laugh—but smile no more.

The precision with which Roderick’s song reflects the narrator’s creative architecture of the house-as-magic lantern further blurs the line between narrative suggestibility and the effects of Gothic atmospherics, and anticipates the final apparition of Madeline as the culminating *memento mori* of the classic phantasmagoria. The mutual influence of individual consciousness combines with the literalised space of the proto-cinematic lantern, in which spectral vision is both mirror and lamp, conjured by the

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<sup>37</sup> The crypt’s architecture bears direct influence upon Gothic depictions of ghostly revenants in the fiction of Henry James, particularly ‘The Jolly Corner’ and ‘The Beast in the Jungle.’ See Burton R. Pollin, *Poe’s Seductive Influence on Great Writers* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2004), pp. 36-37.

audience's imagination but produced in the theatrical space of the phantasmagoria.

During the final storm the narrator's atmospheric preoccupations return to figures of projection: 'the under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion' (242). These 'electrical phenomena' are given form by the 'vapor' emanating from the tarn, the initial locus of the reflective mirror and optical source of infernal imagery. Madeline's homicidal attack on Roderick collapses both of them into the hallucinatory history of the House, which, as the theatre of the lantern show, must itself collapse into the dark absence of the tarn upon the raising of the house lights: 'While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder [...] and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the *House of Usher*' (245). The final italics suggest the Gothic convention of the figural closing of the book, but it also marks out the collapse of the ephemeral proto-cinematic light-space of the phantasmagoria. This citation cuts across the various fictive and figural layers of the text (title, family name, architectural edifice and fantastic theatre). It is an index of the strange, ambiguous materiality of the narrative, and an invocation for all its future reimaginations: cinematic, operatic, and theatrical.

## Conclusion

'The Fall of the House of Usher' is at once an essay on adaptation and an exploration of the potential for its own adaptation. By deploying the apparatus of creative imagining—conceptual, formal, psychological, and mechanical / technological—'Usher' anticipates and provides the conditions for its filmic adaptations. In this sense it reverses and explodes the conventional binary of original and copy, and thus diverts hermeneutic attention away from the limited and unproductive zones of adaptive fidelity, quotation, and intersection. 'Usher' provokes an open-ended, experimental array of adaptations, where each iteration discovers the basic premise of the story: that its narrator, projectionist (Roderick), principal apparition (Madeline), and theatre (the House) combine to

conjure the light of the magic lantern out of the darkened space of the tarn, to which, as the performance ends, all must return. 'Usher' is a tableau, a suspension from life, and by virtue of this it affords a meditation upon the processes of its imaginative contemplation.

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