

«THOSE TALES OF EFFECT»: POE'S GOTHIC TALES THROUGH ROGER CORMAN'S CINEMA

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RESUMEN

A pesar de ser considerado el padre del género detectivesco y uno de los precursores de la ciencia-ficción, Poe siempre ha sido especialmente aclamado por sus relatos góticos. El duradero hechizo que aún producen sus cuentos se debe a la enorme habilidad que tenía Poe para crear un efecto sobre sus lectores, logrando así permanecer en sus recuerdos. Tras doscientos años, algunos de sus lectores se han convertido en creadores y han dado forma a los relatos de Poe, proporcionando sus propias interpretaciones de los relatos góticos de Poe. Un ejemplo de ello es el director y productor cinematográfico, conocido por sus películas de serie B, Roger Corman. Poe y Corman comparten el mismo objetivo de producir un efecto duradero en la audiencia sea a través de palabras o imágenes. Por consiguiente, no es de extrañar que, entre las obras más destacadas de Corman, se encuentren sus adaptaciones de los relatos de Poe. Durante la década de los 60, Corman dirigió siete películas basadas o inspiradas en los cuentos góticos de Poe como son *House of Usher* (1960), *Tales of Terror* (1962), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1962), *The Premature Burial* (1962), *The Raven* (1963), *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964) y *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964). Pese a no ser estrictamente fieles a los textos originales, a través de juegos intertextuales e hibridaciones, muchos de los lectores de Poe conocieron sus relatos góticos a través de las adaptaciones que Corman hizo en el cine. Este artículo proporciona una visión panorámica de la importante contribución de Roger Corman en la popularización de los relatos de Poe en el siglo XX.

PALABRAS CLAVE: efecto, relatos góticos, intertextualidad, hibridación, adaptaciones cinematográficas, cultura popular.

ABSTRACT

«'Those tales of effect': Poe's gothic tales through Roger Corman's cinema». Despite being considered the father of detective fiction and one of the forerunners of science-fiction, Poe has mainly been hailed for his gothic tales. The ever-lasting spell of his horror stories is due to Poe's enormous ability to create an *effect* on the readers that keeps on echoing in their memories ever after. Two hundred years later, some of his readers have become creators and have shaped Poe's stories providing their own interpretations of his gothic tales. A case in point is Roger Corman, an American cinema director and producer, especially well-known for his B-series films. Poe and Corman share the same goal of producing an effect on the audience either through words or images. Thus, it is no wonder that, among Corman's



most well-known masterpieces, those based on the tales of Poe's outstand as his most remarkable creations. During the decade of the 1960s, Corman directed seven different films based, or rather, inspired by Poe's gothic tales, such as *House of Usher* (1960), *Tales of Terror* (1962), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1962), *The Premature Burial* (1962), *The Raven* (1963), *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964), and *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964). Even though they are not strictly faithful to the original texts, through intertextual games and hybridisation, many of Poe's readers discovered Poe's gothic tales by means of Corman's cinematic adaptations. It is the aim of this paper to provide a general outline of Roger Corman's contribution to the popularisation of Poe's tales in the 20th century.

KEY WORDS: effect; gothic tales; intertextuality; cinematic adaptations; popular culture.

In his invaluable exegesis about his poetics, «The Philosophy of Composition», in which he described the creative process of his most well-known poem, «The Raven», Poe himself claimed all his textual creations revolved around the effect he aimed to produce in his readers. In this respect, Poe argued:

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*. Keeping originality *always* in view – for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest – I say to myself, in the first place, «Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?» (Poe: 550)

In Poe's own words, originality and the effect to attain became the fundaments on which his creativity depended, especially with regard to those tales which carefully sought to produce a special effect on his readers, that is to say, Poe's gothic tales. Poe declared that horror was not of Germany, thus referring to eighteenth-century gothic novels, but that horror was of the soul, contending his own conceptualisation of horror was timeless. As a matter of fact, his tales still exert an enormous effect over us, thus showing this effect is ultimately what it is all about.

If this last quote is generally attributed to Poe, it could have also been ascribed to cinema director Roger Corman, who wrote an autobiography significantly entitled *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime*. Corman has recently been awarded an honorary Oscar for his career as a filmmaker early this year, and presently, he is widely acclaimed as a cult director. Mostly known as King of the B's, he has produced over 300 films and directed about 50 films, even making appearances in some of them. If for Poe, the effect was everything, it seems that profit is what it has been all about for Corman. As a film-maker, Corman must have seen the correlation between effect and profit in Poe's tales. In this respect, despite his early incursions in western and science-fiction films, Corman will always be remembered for adapting Poe's gothic tales to the cinema through films which range from moderately faithful adaptations to creative reinventions, thus indulging in a priceless fusion of tradition and innovation. Even though Corman's films, and particularly, his adaptations of Poe's gothic tales, did not aspire to excellence, they achieve the effect for which they were created effectively enough.

In this sense, Corman's films should be evaluated through their rentability, through his will to achieve the maximum at the lowest cost and in the shortest span of time. Likewise, as Stephen King already pointed out, «to suggest that Roger Corman was unconsciously creating art while on a twelve-day shooting schedule and a budget of \$80,000 is to suggest the absurd» (2000: 47).

Although some reviewers often scorn Corman for his dubious faithfulness and lack of rigorosity with regard to Poe's original tales, some other critics like Blasina Cantizano or Javier Blasco have regarded the relationship established between Poe and Corman as a providential encounter. If Poe's poetics sought to achieve an effect, Corman's particular conceptualisation of cinema was based on profit, attracting the spectator through his art to entrap him in a sombre and gothic environment. Corman needed Poe to obtain the favour of the masses, and ultimately, make his cinematic adventure profitable. As Corman admits in his autobiography, he started reading Poe at a very young age, confessing his tales impressed him in a remarkable way. Nonetheless, at that stage he could have never imagined he would eventually adapt some of Poe's most well-known gothic tales to the screen:

My studies focused on sciences and math, but I read a great deal of literature as well, including Edgar Allan Poe's «The Fall of the House of Usher», which undoubtedly made quite an impact. It was a class assignment, but I enjoyed it so much I asked my parents to buy the complete works of Poe for a birthday or Christmas gift. Who knew that twenty years later I would bring a half-dozen or so of those stories to the screen? (Corman 1998: 5)

Likewise, Poe also needed Corman to resurrect his gothic fiction in the decade of the 1960s. Even though his tales were no longer published in the periodicals of the time, and he could no longer recite «The Raven» across the United States, Poe's fame could still reverberate through a more effective and contemporary medium, Roger Corman's cinema. In this respect, Corman acquired unprecedented popularity in the cinema industry, while demonstrating Poe still belonged to the culture of masses, thus blurring the slight line that divides the Canon and popular culture.

Many of Poe's tales, as well as an attempted biography, had already been adapted for the screen by European directors such as Jean Epstein and Robert Florey, featuring mythical actors like Bela Lugosi among their cast. In his seminal volume on Poe in the cinema, Don G. Smith (1998) states around 80 different films have been based or inspired by Poe's tales to date. Nonetheless, Corman would eventually become the director to be remembered for adapting Poe to the screen, creating a parallel universe of actors and actresses, scriptwriters and authors, settings and costumes, which became alive in front and behind the camera. Moreover, the American International Pictures, which produced most of Corman's films, was considered to be the American counterpart to the English-in-origin Hammer, since if, in the decade of the 1930s, Hammer Productions had brought to the screen gothic classics such as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* with the recognisable expressionistic traits of the time, in the much more colourful decade of the 1960s, American International Pictures attempted something similar as regards their most popular American classic, Edgar Allan Poe. In this respect, as Jancovich argues:

Roger Corman was directing the first of a cycle of films that were loosely based on the literature of Edgar Allan Poe. These films were made on a small budget but were lavish colour films that used visual excess to create a nightmarish world of melodramatic fantasy, and were clearly made in response to developments overseas (2005: 4).

Nonetheless, taking for granted Corman aspired to rentability, he was not only concerned about Hammer's lucrative success with regard to horror classics as, in order to reach the culture of masses, he knew he had to resort to something else, taking into consideration his own national and cultural context. Stephen King, in his theoretical volume *Danse Macabre*, delineates the historical evolution of the horror genre, assuming it undergoes transformations according to the changes taking place throughout history. In the decade of the 1960s, after the Second World War and the devastating nuclear bombings, plenty of science-fiction films portrayed monstrous creatures which threatened to destroy humanity in retaliation. In this context, Corman decided to go back to the most classic sort of horror, even if as a result of an escapist motivation. However, Corman's films based on Poe's tales often depict family sagas, of noble and aristocratic origins, threatened by invisible dangers to find out that the evil ultimately originates in their own house as a result of its inhabitants' past sins. In this respect, the formula of the classic horror becomes Corman's metaphor to reflect a global and national sense of guilt after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Drawing on Poe's aim in his poetics, Corman also followed the premise of offering the public what they wanted, reaching the culture of masses, and appealing to their shared feelings. In this sense, as Adorno claimed:

The culture industry fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to a plan. [...] The culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above. To the detriment of both it forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousand of years. [...] Thus, although the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious state of millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery (Ashley 1997: 43).

Taking into consideration Corman's seven films based on Poe's gothic tales, some of the processes of transformation from text to screen, from literary to audiovisual language, can be identified and categorised accordingly. Despite the existing differences between both types of language and their inherent characteristics, as well as several intertextual puns attributed to Corman and his scriptwriter, Richard Matheson, some of these films can be considered loose adaptations of Poe's unique texts even though, on the whole, they preserve the original plot, main characters, and particular tone perceived in the tales. In this sense, *Tales of Terror*, *The Tomb of Ligeia* or *The Masque of the Red Death* can be considered as fairly faithful adaptations of Poe's original texts. In some other cases, Corman selected specific episodes and characters from Poe's original tales to create an entirely new text which even

includes features pertaining to other genres through a process that can be denominated hybridisation. As a case in point, Corman's *House of Usher* presents the main plot and characters of Poe's tale under the same title to transform these basic features into a gothic love story between Madeleine and Philip, Poe's unnamed narrator, who must defy Roderick's disapproval to elope and get married.

On other occasions, Corman merely adapted the climax or effect Poe intended to produce in his tales, thus creating an entirely new story, with new characters, and even, a completely different tone from Poe's original text. In this respect, in Corman's *The Pit and the Pendulum*, Matheson transformed one of Poe's shortest tales into an intricate story of adulteries, faked deaths and revenge beyond death, incorporating a multiplicity of new characters and motifs commonly found in classic gothic stories. Likewise, Poe's sarcastic tale, *The Premature Burial*, in which a narrator unfolds his dream about being buried alive, is transformed in Corman's film into an anguishing story of a man obsessed with premature burials and his wife's perfidious plot to drive him mad. Thus, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, as well as *The Premature Burial*, illustrate Corman's processes to translate the climax and the effect of Poe's texts, regardless of the plot, characters, and tone in the original story. Finally, towards the end of his series of films based on Poe's tales, Corman and his team had acquired the habit of working together, having shared the experience of adapting Poe's tales to the screen on several previous occasions. As a result of this companionship and complicity, they felt enabled to parody their own creations as can be perceived in films such as *The Raven*, in which only the first scenes resemble Poe's original poem, as the film later transforms into a satiric and eccentric plot whereby Poe's raven is actually a wizard apprentice who has been transformed into a crow as a punishment, and thus, is able to engage in conversation with the rest of characters. In this particular case, Corman and Matheson resorted to satire and sarcasm to adapt Poe's most popular poem to the cinema. Bearing in mind all these transformative processes, Corman used different methodologies such as adaptation, hybridisation, translation of the effect or the climax, and ultimately, satire in all his cinematic adaptations of Poe's gothic tales.

The first film which inaugurated the fortunate encounter between Corman and Poe was *House of Usher*, which also implied the first collaboration between Corman and his fetishist actor, Vincent Price, as well as his scriptwriter Richard Matheson who, in addition to Charles Beaumont, would write many of the scripts of Corman's films based on Poe's tales. *House of Usher* set a precedent and was the first of a series of seven films which would adapt and transform Poe's gothic tales to show them and popularise them in the cinema. During the first scenes of this first incursion, a handsome young man, Philip Winthrop, arrives at the melancholic House of Usher. Engaged to Madeleine when they were both living in Boston, Philip reaches the House with the aim to take Madeleine back and marry her. Nonetheless, Philip's advances are rejected by Madeleine's authoritarian brother, Roderick. Played by Vincent Price, Roderick suffers from a terrible acuteness of the senses which urges the servant to ask Philip to take off his shoes once in the house. Roderick tries to warn Philip about the danger that the propagation of their family may engender, since their ancestors, both in England and the United States, acquired



fame for their meanness, depravation, and cruelty. Moreover, Madeleine, aware of the Ushers' curse on her brother and herself, the last remnants of their race, vainly attempts to convince her fiancée, taking him to the crypt, showing him her own coffin, and repeating all her family are waiting for her to join the rest of Ushers. Despite Madeleine's warning, Philip insists on taking her away from the House, as he firmly believes Madeleine's pale and tedious complexion is due to Roderick's perfidious influence as well as the evil atmosphere that pervades the House. Some moments before their departure to Boston, Madeleine faints, and ultimately perishes, so that Roderick decides to take her to the family crypt without delay.

Next morning, when Philip makes arrangements to go back to Boston after his fiancée's decease, a servant, Bristol, suggests Madeleine suffered from catalepsy. It is thus Philip realises Madeleine may have been buried alive and decides to descend to the crypt to release her. However, he finds out her coffin is empty. From this moment onwards, Philip undergoes a nightmarish quest to find an enraged and insane Madeleine that deambulates through the intricate passages and secret trapdoors of the House. Roderick, aware of Madeleine's cataleptic condition, justifies his behaviour so as to avoid the propagation of evil. Nonetheless, with her white robes tainted with blood and her infuriated gaze, Madeleine rises from her grave to seek revenge and punish Roderick. While brother and sister fight, the House is set on fire and falls down to its grounds to be ultimately swallowed by the deep waters of the tarn. All in all, Philip manages to escape and the film ends with the last sentence of Poe's tale imprinted on the screen: «And the deep and tank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the «HOUSE OF USHER»» (Poe: 268). This closure seems to refer to Corman's necessity to justify his film is based on Poe's tale, despite its remarkable differences in comparison with Poe's original text.

Corman's licenses with regard to Poe's seminal tale are significant. In the film, Philip impersonates Poe's unnamed narrator who arrives at the House of Usher after receiving Roderick's letter whereby he informs his boyhood friend about the malady that affects his senses. Corman transformed Poe's tale into a gothic romance, including a narratologic formula which would be repeated in many of his forthcoming films: a protagonist, who arrives at an ancient mansion to solve a mystery, advances through a labyrinthine path, surrounded by misty landscapes and hazardous forests, while the villain waits in his mansion to challenge the hero. This plot, together with recurrent scenes such as the final dilapidation of the manor house through a great fire, the pictorial mixture of arabesque motifs or the greyish shots to create a nightmarish atmosphere, will be intermittingly repeated through the series of Corman's films based on Poe's gothic tales. Moreover, Vincent Price, who often played the part of the villain in Corman's films, plays the role of Roderick Usher brilliantly, to the point it becomes nearly impossible to read Poe's tale again without equating Roderick's appearance with that of Price.

In a contemporary review of the film published in *The New York Times*, Eugene Archer pointed at the American International Pictures' good intentions to present a faithful adaptation of Poe's classic tale, even though, according to Archer, the film widely ignores the author's style, as the film pays no attention to Poe's usual ellipsis and powers of suggestion. All in all, in 2005, the United States National

Film Registry deemed Corman's first adaptation of Poe's tales as culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant.

American International Pictures, as well as Corman and Matheson, were fairly surprised by the success of *House of Usher*. At that stage, they had no intention to create a series of films based on Poe's tales. Nonetheless, after such a successful precedent, the second film of the series was announced the very same year under the title of *The Pit and the Pendulum*, which would be later known as *El péndulo de la muerte* in Spain. According to Lucy Chase Williams in her book *The Complete Films of Vincent Price*, the shooting was supposed to be completed in a fortnight with a budget of about one million dollars. On this occasion, Richard Matheson's script consists of a free adaptation of Poe's tale «The Pit and the Pendulum» in which a prisoner is condemned and tortured by the Holy Inquisition to be finally released through providential endeavours. Even though Poe's tale presents an exquisite unity of time and space, Matheson believed that the film should portray the reasons why the protagonist finds himself entrapped in a torture chamber. In this respect, Corman confessed having used one of Poe's shortest tales as an inspiring climax to elaborate a complete story.

The Pit and the Pendulum is set in 16th-century Spain. Even though Poe's tale is set at the time General Lasalle and the French army invaded the city of Toledo in 1808, the events in Roger Corman's film take place in the year 1546 when, as Don Smith claims, the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition lied only a generation in the past (113). Corman probably decided to set the action in the Middle Ages so as to include the characters' evocative Shakespearean costumes as well as to underline the vital role played by Nicholas's father's medieval torture chamber in the film. Not entirely unlike the opening scene in the previous film, Francis Barnard, played by John Kerr, arrives at his brother-in-law's castle to inquire about his sister's sudden and unexpected death. Despite Francis' persistence, Nicholas Medina gives a merely overall account of his wife's death, mentioning that, according to the family doctor, his wife Elizabeth died as a result of a blood disease. Due to Nicholas's strange behaviour, Francis resolves to stay in the castle so as to discover the intricacies of his sister's death. On the very first night Francis spends at the castle, he meets Nicholas' sister, Catherine, and Dr. Leon. As a result of Francis' questioning, the doctor confesses Elizabeth died of a heart failure after witnessing an impressive scene, so that he claims she literally died from fright. The doctor's confession nourishes Francis' suspicions as regards Nicholas. Nonetheless, Catherine, Nicholas' sister, reveals Nicholas' sense of guilt is due to a terrible trauma he suffered in infancy. Nicholas' father, Sebastian Medina, a well-known inquisitor, discovered his wife Isabella and his brother Bartholomew maintained an adulterous relationship. Consequently, Sebastian determined to take them to the torture chamber of the castle and punish them for their sin, torturing them to death. Little Nicholas was accidentally playing in the torture chamber although his father had forbidden him to enter the place. As a result, he witnessed how his mother and uncle were tortured by his own father. After Catherine's narrative, Dr. Leon adds that her mother, Isabella, was not tortured to death, but Sebastian buried her while she was still alive. From that terrible day, Nicholas has been obsessed with the idea of a premature burial to the extent he believes his own wife Elizabeth may have also been buried alive.



During the following days, Francis, Nicholas, Catherine and Dr. Leon witness strange events such as hearing the sharply musical notes of a clavicordium, when only Elizabeth could play it, in addition to the vile destruction of Elizabeth's portrait when her chamber was key locked. Francis believes these are all Nicholas' machinations, especially when he discovers a trapdoor gives way to a passage connecting Elizabeth's chamber with that of her widower. Nonetheless, Dr. Leon asks Nicholas to face his terrors and open his wife's coffin to ensure Elizabeth was not buried alive. Once her coffin is opened, they all witness the corpse's terrified face, her open mouth and her raised hands, which reveals Elizabeth, as Nicholas had anticipated, was buried alive.

On the following night, Nicholas hears his late wife's voice, urging him to follow her to the crypt where her corpse still lies so as to witness how Elizabeth rises from her grave. Overwhelmed by terror, Nicholas faints and awakes to find Elizabeth in Dr. Leon's arms. Nicholas thus discovers Elizabeth had faked her own death to drive him mad and consummate her passionate and adulterous relation with the family doctor. As a result of this realisation, Nicholas becomes insane and believes he is his own father, Sebastian Medina, taking for granted Elizabeth and Dr. Leon are truly his mother Isabella and his uncle Bartholomew respectively, so that he plans to torture them for their sin, enacting again the terrible scenes he witnessed in infancy. Nicholas imprisons Elizabeth in a torture apparatus, while Dr. Leon accidentally falls into a pit. Moreover, Francis, who is looking for Nicholas, enters the torture chamber where Nicholas mistakes Francis for Bartholomew. As a result of Nicholas' beatings, Francis loses consciousness and awakes to find himself entrapped in the pendulum. Eventually, Catherine, aided by a servant, manages to enter the torture chamber and release Francis from the sharp blade of the pendulum. Furthermore, as a result of their fighting, Nicholas also falls into the pit and dies. Before Catherine and Francis abandon the torture chamber, she promises nobody will enter the room ever after, unaware of the fact Elizabeth is truly alive and that she is still imprisoned in one of the torture apparatus. The film ends with a frightful close-up shot of Elizabeth's agony on discovering she will be buried alive.

Corman's *The Pit and the Pendulum* is a magnificent example of Matheson's gift for creating new stories as a result of taking Poe's tale as a point of departure. The film extensively indulges in gloomy atmospheres as well as intricate and complex plots which ultimately mesmerise the audience. Likewise, Matheson's script also alludes to several intertextual links with regard to some other Poe's tales, like «The Oval Portrait», as Elisabeth's portrait presides her chamber. According to Stephen King in his volume *Danse Macabre*, *The Pit and the Pendulum* must be highlighted for exhibiting one of the most bloodcurdling scenes ever which, in his opinion, would change the way to conceive horror cinema in the decade of the 1960s. From King's perspective, the visualisation of Elizabeth's alleged corpse in a pose clearly showing acute terror and despair would set a precedent for «the-everything-counts» formula so as to frighten the spectator. As he admits when describing the profanation of Elizabeth's coffin in Corman's film:

Vincent Price and his cohorts break into a tomb through its brickwork, using pick and shovel. They discover that the lady, his late wife, has indeed been buried alive;

for just a moment the camera shows us her tortured face, frozen in a rictus of terror, her bulging eyes, her clawlike fingers, the skin stretched tight and gray. Following the Hammer films, this becomes, I think, the most important moment in the post-1960 horror film, signalling a return to an all-out effort to terrify the audience...and a willingness to use any means at hand to do it (King: 160-1).

Nonetheless, not only did *The Pit and the Pendulum* imply a change in the horror genre, but it also consolidated the encounter of three extraordinary figures related to the horror genre such as Edgar Allan Poe, Roger Corman and Vincent Price. It was precisely at this stage Corman's fetishist actor began to acquire confidence and identify with the part of the villain, even though this involved he would always be remembered for this sort of role in his career. According to Corman, in an interview with Dejan Ognjanovic, working with Price was remarkably easy:

Vincent Price was a great gentleman and a joy to work with. All I had to do was give him a brief idea of what I wanted with the character, and he understood immediately. It was one of the best collaborations I've ever had (2008: 1).

Nicholas' part, exhibiting traces of madness, suffering and sarcasm, already betrays Price's refined accent, grandiloquent manner, and histrionic performance. Some critics identified Price's tendency to overact as a legacy of his theatrical past. Moreover, once the film was released, many reviews pointed at the hectic rhythm shown in the brief scene in which Elizabeth attracts Nicholas to the crypt until the audience witness how she rises from her grave. *The Pit and the Pendulum* was a blockbuster, and it was also granted better reviews than Corman's previous film. After the premiere, Howard Thompson, from *The New York Times*, pointed out Corman had achieved an uncanny atmosphere of horror, and Matheson's creative plot was compact and logical.

The third of Corman's films based on Poe's tales, as well as the only one in which Vincent Price was not part of the cast, was released in Spain under the title *La Obsesión*, even though its original title made reference to Poe's tale «The Premature Burial». If *House of Usher* implied a free adaptation of Poe's original tale, and *The Pit and the Pendulum* merely sought to recreate the atmosphere in Poe's text, *The Premature Burial* can also be deemed as a recreation which reflects neither the plot nor the tone of its literary counterpart. In Poe's tale, a narrator portrays the experiences of a number of people who were buried alive to find himself in the same terrifying situation and discover he had been dreaming. Poe's sarcastic and humorous attitude is not reflected on Corman's version of the tale. Through a script written by Charles Beaumont and Ray Russell, *The Premature Burial* opens with a magnificent scene in which Guy Carrell, played by Ray Milland, witnesses the profanation of his father's grave to certify he was buried alive after falling into a cataleptic trance. From that initial scene, Guy's obsession lies in being buried alive. Emily, his former girlfriend, played by Hazel Court, arrives at Guy's house to try to convince him to marry her despite his sister Kate's reluctance. Eventually, once the wedding takes place, the couple seems to live happily, even though any reference to death, like a mere bunch of flowers resembling a mortuary token, renders Guy in a state of

profound terror. Likewise, when Emily accidentally plays at the piano the melody one of the undertakers was whistling the day they profanated his father's tomb, Guy suffers a panic attack. With a view to appease his continuous suffering, Guy decides to build a pantheon with a number of facilities to ensure, was he buried alive, he would still manage to escape easily from his coffin.

However, following the advice of his doctor and friend Miles as well as his own wife's reiterated promises, Guy decides to destroy the pantheon, and instead, take his wife to Venice for their honeymoon. Before their departure, some tragic events such as the cat's accidental enclosure behind a wall or Guy's intention to bury his dog when he thought it was dead, increase Guy's terror about a premature burial. Advised by Miles, Guy finally decides to profanate his father's crypt again so as to make sure he was not buried alive. However, Guy discovers the key of the gate which leads to the crypt is missing and he suspects, even if unconsciously, he might have been preparing all these tramps to punish himself for his guilt. Once Guy opens the tomb, a corpse falls onto him and, as a result, Guy falls into a cataleptic trance. As spectators, we witness Guy's funeral as he remains inert, apparently dead, while we listen to his screaming voice claiming he is alive.

While Guy struggles to set himself free, Emily starts showing some interest in Miles, while her father, who is also a doctor, determines to unearth Guy's corpse so as to use it to the benefit of science. When the horrified undertakers open the coffin, they discover Guy is not only alive but he is a mad and enraged man who does not hesitate to kill them. Thirsty for revenge, Guy makes his appearance in his own house to become aware of Emily's perfidious intention to marry him and drive him mad so as to provoke his cataleptic attack and thus get rid of him and marry Miles instead. The film ends with Emily's death as Guy buries her alive as a punishment, whereas Guy is also killed by his sister Kate so as to save Miles' life. Eventually, it is unveiled Emily is wearing in her necklace the key of the crypt that had been missing previously, thus confirming she is the real villain who plotted against Guy's life. Even if Corman's film encloses both the recurrent topic of a premature burial as well as the adulterous wife's Machiavellian plot, critics missed Vincent Price's histrionic performances which sharply contrasted with a milder, even if, tormented Ray Milland playing the part of Guy Carrell. Moreover, the black-humoured and sarcastic narrator of Poe's tale ostensibly differs from the tragic and deterministic fate which haunts Milland in Corman's film.

It is at this stage Corman finds himself at the peak of his creative process as, only four months after *The Premature Burial* was released, he joined his scriptwriter Richard Matheson and his favourite actor Vincent Price, together with outstanding figures such as Peter Lorre and Basil Rathbone, to shoot a new film entitled *Tales of Terror*. This fourth film based on Poe's gothic tales shows an unusual structure as it is divided into three short films, «Morella», «The Black Cat» and «The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar». Despite introducing important changes, especially with regard to the names of some of the main characters, *Tales of Terror* should be highlighted for its faithfulness in relation to the original text.

In «Morella», Lenora arrives at his old father's house after a long time abroad to find him drunk and in despair since his wife's death. Locke accuses Lenora of

causing the death of her own mother, Morella, as the latter died giving birth to her. At night, Lenora finds her father has preserved her mother's corpse, unable to bury her young and beautiful body. Once Lenora discovers her father's secret, she reveals she suffers from a lethal malady and that her end is also very close at hand. As a result of their shared suffering, Locke and Lenora eventually get on good terms. Nonetheless, Morella goes back to life to take revenge and kill her own daughter. Once Locke has covered his daughter's face, he realises her body is moving and she might be still alive. However, when Locke approaches her body, he realises Morella has taken possession of her daughter's body to become alive, while it is Lenora's corpse which decomposes on the bed where Morella's corpse was preserved. The fight between Locke and her back-to-life wife, Morella, sets the house on fire, eventually destroying all the members of the family as the house falls to the ground.

In the next short-film, «The Black Cat», Corman joins both the plot of Poe's tale under the same title and those of «The Cask of Amontillado» and «The Tell-Tale Heart». In «The Black Cat», Montresor, played by Peter Lorre, is a miserable drunkard who scorns his devoted wife Annabelle and laughs at her affection for a black cat. During the course of a wine-tasting event, Montresor meets a foremost wine taster, Fortunato Luchresi, played by Vincent Price, who escorts the inebriated Montresor back home and meets his wife. Eventually, Fortunato and Annabelle become intimate until Montresor becomes aware of their adulterous relationship. With a view to take revenge, Montresor invites Fortunato to taste his renowned Amontillado, which he has poisoned previously. Still lying dormant, Fortunato awakes to find himself trapped and about to be walled up alive next to Annabelle's corpse. Some time later, two policemen arrive at Montresor's house to investigate. Montresor feels self-confident and proud of his deed and so he hits the wall of the cellar to show its solidity. Meanwhile, he hears the deafening voices of the couple which torment him out of his guilt, while the policemen cannot hear anything, as happens in Poe's tale «The Tell-Tale Heart». Montresor's knocks finally wake up the black cat, which was also accidentally interred together with Fortunato and Annabelle. After hearing the cat's meow, the policemen knock down the wall to find the corpses of the missing couple.

Finally, in «The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar», suffering acutely as a result of a painful disease, Valdemar, played by Vincent Price, employs a famous hypnotist, Carmichael, to alleviate his pain through mesmerism. In the midst of one of his trances, Valdemar dies even though Carmichael refuses to release him for some months until Valdemar's wife, Helen, accepts to marry him. While Carmichael menaces Helen to give in to his wishes, Valdemar rises from his bed and attacks Carmichael while his body decomposes, thus proving he has been dead for months. As a result of this terrifying experience, Carmichael dies of fright, while Helen is rescued by Valdemar's physician.

Corman admitted having shot these three short-films in three weeks, reusing previous settings and footage taken from *House of Usher*. Even though the film was not highly acclaimed, *Tales of Terror* portrays memorable scenes. As a case in point, there is Montresor's nightmare in which he dreams his late wife and Fortunato behead him and play with his head as if it was a ball. Moreover, the close-up shot of Valdemar's



decomposing face as he attacks Carmichael is also impressive. In order to give the impression of Valdemar's face melting away, a mixture of glue, glycerine, corn starch and make-up paint was heated and then poured over Price's head. Later on, Price would admit the mixture was so hot he could only stand it for a few seconds.

In 1963, Corman released his most eccentric film with regard to Poe entitled *The Raven*. Corman's particular adaptation of Poe's poem «The Raven» transformed it into a comedy of horror to join, once again, his scriptwriter Richard Matheson and his fetishist actors Vincent Price, Peter Lorre, Boris Karloff, and Jack Nicholson, the latter being the young son of one of the American International Pictures' managers. In *The Raven*, Price plays the role of Dr. Erasmus Craven, a hopeless widower who perpetually mourns the wife of his young and beautiful wife Lenore. One night, as he is pondering in his study, he hears a knock and immediately thinks a visitor wishes to see him. In clear resemblance with Poe's poem, Craven eventually discovers his visitor is a raven that, on opening the window, flies into the room to land on the bust of Pallas. Corman's version is faithful to Poe's original poem until the raven starts speaking, confessing he is truly a wizard apprentice named Dr. Bedlo, played by Peter Lorre. Bedlo unveils the talented, but evil, wizard Scarabus, played by Boris Karloff, transformed him into a raven. Well-aware of the fact Craven used to be a renowned magician, Bedlo begs him to help him become a person again. Despite Craven's initial reluctance, he finally accepts when Bedlo sees Lenore's portrait and lets Craven know he has seen his wife in Scarabus' castle. Craven thus accompanies Bedlo so as to seek revenge, as Craven believes Scarabus has taken possession of his late wife's spirit. Thus, Craven and his daughter Estelle, together with Bedlo and his son Rexford set for the castle. On their arrival, Scarabus transforms Bedlo into a raven again and challenges Craven to a magic duel. At the castle, Craven is visited by his wife Lenore who reveals she faked her own death to move away and live with the ambitious Scarabus. Nonetheless, Craven manages to defeat Scarabus in the magic duel, and as a result, Lenore pretends she was under Scarabus' spell. In a burlesque final scene, Craven approaches Bedlo, still under Scarabus' spell, shuts his beak and recites the well-known lines from Poe's poem «quothe the raven, never more».

With regard to the shooting of *The Raven*, Price admitted having had a hard time while performing nearby a living snake during his magic duel with Boris Karloff. Moreover, Matheson included an intertextual pun as regards Peter Lorre's name in the film, Dr. Bedloe, which clearly refers to the main character's name in Poe's adventure tale «A Tale of the Ragged Mountains». Moreover, it is also worth noticing the interpretative duel between two prominent actors of the genre, Boris Karloff and Peter Lorre. According to Corman, Lorre's interpretative technique, which led him to improvise his lines continuously, enraged the methodical actor Boris Karloff, who conversely used to memorise all his dialogues carefully. In addition to the satiric short-film «The Black Cat», pertaining to *Tales of Terror*, *The Raven* is arguably the most burlesque of Corman's adaptations, as well as his most unfaithful version, as only the initial scene of the film bears some resemblance with Poe's poem. Nonetheless, in a recent interview some years before he died, Vincent Price highlighted the acute satiric tone which can be identified in most of Poe's tales and which has often been unfairly disregarded:

When they decided to use me for a series of Poe pictures, I sat down and I read Edgar Allan Poe, and I found out something which I suppose in the back of my mind I'd been told at some time, but I really didn't realise: that about 70 percent of Poe's work is satiric. It is NOT horror. It is not thriller. One that is called «The Sphinx» ends up a very funny thing, and there are a great many of Poe's poems – actually many more than straight Gothic tales – that involve horror, but which also have a comic twist at the end which is alleviating. And this, I decided, should be added to Poe. If I am going to do a Poe picture, I must add that essential twist of Poe's character (Plath 2007: 4)

In 1964, two other films inspired by Poe's tales came to light, *The Tomb of Ligeia* and *The Masque of the Red Death*. *The Tomb of Ligeia* has often been considered as Corman's best and most faithful adaptation of all of his series based on Poe's tales and poems. Set and shot in England, with a predominantly English cast, except for Price himself, *The Tomb of Ligeia* should be highlighted for its realism and verisimilitude in comparison with the intricate plots of Corman's previous films. On this occasion, Price plays the role of Verden, an eccentric widower, who leads a tormented and isolated life after his wife's death. He is also sight-impaired and needs to wear some dark spectacles which endow him with a gloomy appearance. In the initial scene of the film, Verden attends Ligeia's funeral, while the priest rejects to bury her in holy ground as she had not been baptised. Verden admits he ignores his late wife's date of birth as well as her age. On Ligeia's gravestone, only the date of her death is engraved followed by the epitaph «nor lie in death forever». In due time, Verden meets Lady Rowena Tremanion, who passes on horseback by Verden's abbey with her friend Cristopher. Rowena finds Ligeia's grave and suffers an accident when, significantly, her horse sees a black cat and gets frightened. By chance, Cristopher recognises his old friend Verden, and he insists on taking Rowena to his abbey to bandage her ankle. Rowena feels attracted towards the mysterious widower, and they finally agree to marry. When Rowena lives in the abbey as Verden's wife, she notices an evil presence and doubts whether Verden's first wife is truly dead. The date of Ligeia's death mysteriously disappears from her grave and, while Rowena undertakes a hypnosis session, Ligeia takes possession of her spirit. Eventually, it is revealed Verden spends most of his nights in a separate chamber, lying next to Ligeia's corpse and indulging in a series of necrophilic intercourses since, before dying, Ligeia hypnotised Verden to submit him to her will, in clear resemblance with Poe's tale «The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar». Rowena pretends to be Ligeia so as to release Verden from her spell. However, Verden attacks Rowena mistaking her for his first wife. Finally, Cristopher saves Rowena while, one more time, the abbey is set on fire and falls down over the inert bodies of Ligeia and Verden. On this occasion, many reviews complimented Corman's gothic atmosphere, as well as the film's outstanding English setting, with several shots of Stonehenge, where Verden and Rowena spend their honeymoon.

In the very same year, Corman directed the last of his series of film adaptations of Poe's gothic tales, *The Masque of the Red Death*. Despite its theatrical and even psychedelic aesthetics, it has often been acknowledged as one of Corman's most faithful adaptations. Written by Charles Beaumont and Wright Campbell, the



film is set in a medieval European village whose inhabitants are subjected to Prince Prospero's authoritarian feudal power. Played by Vincent Price once more, Prospero visits the village and sets eyes on one young Christian girl, Francesca, whom he kidnaps and takes to his castle. Before leaving the village, Prospero witnesses an old woman dying of the red fever. Consequently, Prospero decides to gather all the nobility of the village and its surroundings in his castle so as to avoid the red fever. As a fervent disciple of the devil, Prospero encourages his noblemen and ladies to take part in masquerades and feasts where depravity and immorality run free. At one of the balls in Prospero's castle, a male dwarf and a young girl dance while the guests witness the scene. This episode is significantly reminiscent of Poe's tale «Hop-Frog», in which a dwarf takes revenge after his master's abuse. On another occasion, in the dancing room, Prospero notices one of the guests is all in red. Mistaking his guest for the devil, Prospero approaches him and beholds his own face as he removes his mask. The red guest claims that, if somebody looks at Death on the face and beholds his own face, it means his soul is condemned. Despite his vain attempts to escape, the Red Death exerts its power to devastate Prospero's kingdom. Corman's adaptation exhibits a metaphoric discourse and a dream-like atmosphere, as well as it includes many important and symbolic references to Poe's original tale, such as the clock's chimes in Prospero's castle, which highlight the passage of time, the colourful rooms of the castle, which echo the different stages of life, and the pervasive presence of the Red Death at the beginning and the end, which confers a cyclical structure to Corman's film. Moreover, the Red Death's appearance in the film clearly resembles Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, which was shot only some years prior to Corman's *The Masque of the Red Death*.

It is also worth mentioning Corman's *The Haunted Palace* which, even if it has nothing to do with Poe's poem in «The Fall of the House of Usher» except for its title, is actually based on Poe's fervent admirer H.P. Lovecraft and his novel entitled *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*. Later on, even without Corman as a director, Vincent Price would also appear in two more adaptations of Poe's tales or poems as is the case with *The Conqueror Worm*, directed by Michael Reeves, whose plot bears no resemblance with Poe's poem, and *The Oblong Box*, directed by Gordon Hessler, which is loosely based on Poe's tale under the same title.

All through his career, Corman extensively proved Poe's talent to attract the audience in his film adaptations through intricate plots, unfaithful adaptations, gothic settings, recurrent scenes, reused footage, and especially, a group of veteran actors of the genre, among whom, Vincent Price arguably became the most well-known. His roles as Roderick Usher, Nicholas Medina, Fortunato, Valdemar and Prospero led him to be identified with the part of the tormented villain. In a recent interview some years before he died, Price admitted that, as well as Corman, he encountered Poe at a very young age and immediately noticed a clearly manifested humorous tone which pervades all through his tales so that, as an actor, Price felt the need to imprint Poe's grotesque quality on all of the characters he played. As he began to work with Corman repeatedly to adapt Poe's tales, Price's performance became more grandiloquent and overacted to the extent he played his own character, thus deconstructing and parodying his own role. Well-aware of Price's charisma, other

cinema directors such as Tim Burton noticed Price was also a character of his own, whose persona would be closely related to Poe ever after. As a result of this noticeable parallelism between Poe and Price, Burton created his short-film *Vincent* as a personal homage to his favourite actor. In Burton's short-film, Price narrates the main events of a story whose protagonist bears a close resemblance with Edgar Allan Poe, despite the fact his name is Vincent, as a clear extratextual reference to himself, thus blurring fact and fiction. Likewise, in the very same year Burton's short-film was released, another prominent admirer of Vincent Price's, Michael Jackson, asked him to recite some terrifying lines for his popular song «Thriller». Moreover, in the video under the same name, directed by another well-known horror director, John Landis, there are explicitly visual references to Price. When Michael and his girlfriend leave the cinema, an advertising poster of the film *House of Wax*, in which Price played a major role, is exhibited at the entrance, as well as a poster of Corman's film *The Masque of the Red Death*. Furthermore, the film that is presumably on in the cinema, «Thriller», is featuring Vincent Price as the main actor, as the neon advertising on top indicates. This intertextual hybridisation significantly goes beyond the screen, and the domains of literature and cinema to reach the world of music and video clip.

If Price acquired fame through Corman as an actor, Matheson also became a notorious writer. Apart from writing most of the scripts of Corman's films based on Poe's tales at a remarkably hectic pace, Matheson was also highly acclaimed for a magnificent vampire novel entitled *I am Legend*, which has also been recently brought to the cinema. Moreover, many of the actors and actresses in Corman's films became fairly popular, even if some of them would be identified with their roles in horror films for the rest of their careers. Some of them such as Hazel Court, Myrna Fahey, Barbara Steele, Joyce Jameson, Peter Lorre, Boris Karloff, Ray Milland and Basil Rathbone, as well as contemporary highly-acclaimed actors like Jack Nicholson and directors such as Jonathan Demme and Martin Scorsese, worked with Corman in their early careers.

This intertextual interplay which goes beyond the screen confirms the parallel and creative universe Corman created taking Poe's tales into account. Similarly, another contemporary director, born in Chile, Narciso Ibañez Serrador became Corman's counterpart in our country as he adapted some of Poe's tale for television. Ibañez Serrador, in his TV series *Historias para no dormir*, which was released in the decade of the 1960s for the first time, but has been on subsequently, not only drew on Poe but also on Corman's films to adapt tales such as «The Premature Burial», «The Black Cat», «The Cask of Amontillado», «The Raven» or «Berenice» and transform them into TV short-films under the titles of «El pacto», «El tonel», «El cuervo» or «El trapero». As a case in point, Ibañez Serrador's «El tonel» is based on both Poe's «The Black Cat» and «The Cask of Amontillado», as Corman did in his short-film «The Black Cat» as part of his film *Tales of Terror*. Thus, both directors agreed on blending the plots of these two tales as both feature characters that are eventually walled up. As for Ibañez Serrador's magnificent short-film «El cuervo», he portrayed a sympathetic and tragic biography of the last days of Poe's life, portraying his young wife Virginia's death, his addiction to alcohol, and his extenuating struggle to earn a living.

To conclude, through faithful adaptations, loosely-adapted versions, or entirely new stories inspired by Poe's tales, Corman managed to bring Poe's concern with the final effect to the screen. If Poe resorted to the murders described in the periodicals of the time to write his tales and earn some dollars, Corman resorted to Poe to shoot and direct some films which, even if with a remarkably low budget, became blockbusters and still attract fervent admirers nowadays. On many occasions, Corman made excuses for his unfaithfulness with regard to Poe's original texts, claiming it was nearly impossible to adapt a few pages of text for the standard running-time of a film.

Nonetheless, both Poe and Corman shared a common interest in producing an effect either on the readership or the audience. Thus, so as to silence some of the voices that have complained about Corman's lack of rigorosity and his concern about profitability, Poe himself stated in his critical review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* that all stories that aspire to create an effect should only be judged for their capacity to produce the effect for which they were intended at the moment of their creation. This principle may have also been written by Corman himself:

And here it will be seen how full of prejudice are the usual animadversions against those tales of effect, many fine examples of which were found in the earlier numbers of *Blackwood*. The impressions produced were wrought in a legitimate sphere of action, and constituted a legitimate although sometimes an exaggerated interest. They were relished by every man of genius: although there were found many men of genius who condemned them without just ground. The true critic will but demand that the design intended be accomplished, to the fullest extent, by the means most advantageously applicable (Poe: 567).

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