

Edgar Allan Poe and his influence on modern horror movies

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks into the important presence of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories and poems in modern horror stories between 1960 and the present. It shows how even movies that are plot vice a distance from Poe lends from the environment of Poe and allows Poe a presence in the movie. This paper looks at some misconceptions about the interpretation of Poe's life and how it has been depicted in both biographical. It shows the influence of Poe on the modern horror genre and the niche interest groups who identify with an attraction to the macabre. Poe, himself, was and is known as the master of the macabre, a title he earned because of his direct access to universal fears in his stories. This paper concludes that Poe's influence on modern horror movies is essential and almost a must when ideas for the genre are formed, Poe seems to have become the foundation for the development of stories of horror. The paper also looks at the adaptations of Poe's life and determines that his life often seems synonymous with his stories. This paper claims that Poe was ahead of his time and that his stories show a highly evolved foresight into the genre of horror and gore.

Keywords

Edgar Allan Poe, Horror, Movie, Modern, Gore and Goth

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Introduction

About 211 years ago the author Edgar Allan Poe was born and the beginning of a life that has had a grand influence on modern entertainment begun, from the beginning full of devastation and intrigue. Poe's parents were traveling actors from Boston, USA. Poe lost both his parents within three years both of his parents. Poe was adopted by tobacco merchant John Allan and his wife Frances Valentine Allan in Richmond, Virginia. He was separated from the rest of his family who was placed with other families around the USA. Poe's foster father John Allan wanted Poe to become a businessman and become the heir of his own tobacco empire. Poe on the other hand wanted to become a new Lord Byron. This evident from Allan's ledger sheets that reveal poetic verses scrawled in Poe's handwriting and show his disinterest in the tobacco business [1].

The strained relationship with his foster parents did not stop here by 1826 Poe had to leave his new home in Richmond because he had been accepted to the University of Virginia, he was a model student and far supposed his fellow students, unfortunately, Mr. Allan had not made sure he was properly funded and Poe soon found himself in financial problems. Poe started to gamble in an attempt to get more funds that would allow him to stay at the university. This attempt failed and Poe had to return home. Upon arriving home, he found that his fiancée, Elmira Royster had accepted a proposal from another man. Poe felt distanced from the environment he now found himself in and left the Allan home to seek his destiny as a poet, an endeavor largely accomplished but never enjoyed [1].

The losses of Poe's life had just begun, the intense emphasis of gore and glume that was presented in his early life became the beacon that eliminated his poetry in the latter part of his life and continued to be present throughout his life. The style of Poe has been described in various terms, gothic, gore,

horror, and even at times macabre but there is also a hint of biographical elements of his life present in his poem. Poe changed the genre of horror by adding psychological terror to his tales and it is through this terror that movie makers today are compelled to the poetry of Poe [2]. Poe's visual ability to create a vast sense of dread and fear without depicting elusive bloody murders and severed bodies has inspired multiple generations of movie-makers. There are two parts to the story of Poe, one is his poetry and one is his life. Both have equal elements of the style that defines Poe. The loss of his parents at an early age, the extradition from the Allan family, the loss of his wife Virginia Clemm, and the constant battle with poverty, drinking, love affairs, and gambling in his life are elements of great inspiration for visual entertainment. His stories roam within these elements but are added to the elements of suspense and drama needed to keep readers on the edge of their seats [3].

This paper will look at Poe's work in two parts, first; the visualizations made inspired Poe's actual life. Movies that are clear interpretations and with the added suspense a horror movie needs but non the less basic biographies. Although Poe's life is far from the intensity of his stories it was filled with a certain amount of explicitness that can be grounds to create a foundation of a story. Maybe particularly his death has been the source of much speculation for visual story makers. The second part will be on visualizations of his work. These poems are often the source of inspiration to horror movie makers because they incumbents the core elements of primal psychological fears that we as people are born with. It is stories like "The Raven" (1845), "The Haunted Palace" (1845), "Annabel Lee" (1849), and "For Annie" (1849), which have captivated people since they were published and inspired people from all over the world. Although an American icon in literature his reach is not limited to the USA, even before his death in 1849 his work was already popular in various parts of the world. Summaries in many languages from Spanish to Japanese

could already be found in early 1846 [4].

Movies inspired by the life of Edgar Allan Poe

From the very beginning of Edgar Allan Poe's life, he faced adversaries. Born in 1809 he never had the chance to know his birth father, a traveling actor, who abandoned his family. The following year Poe's mother died of tuberculosis leaving Poe and his siblings orphaned. After being fostered by the Allans, Poe was neglected in all sorts of areas. His foster brother was spoiled in all possible ways while Poe was left supported emotionally or financially, even though the Allan family had received a large inheritance from Poe's uncle none of it would be shared with Poe. The Allan family would make large loans in Poe's name leaving him in further debt. Poe had to join the military to make ends meet. Not being fit for the military he was later thrown out of the service. Before he went to university Poe had fallen in love with Sarah Elmira Royster, and was engaged to her by the time he left for the University of Virginia. Sarah's father did not approve of the engagement and convinced Sarah to pursue other prospects for marriage. As Poe had to return unsuccessful from University, he found that Sarah had re-engaged, leaving Poe with a broken heart [5]. By the time Mr. Allan died Poe was not included in his will and again Poe was left out of the possibility to prosper financially and had to continue his life in poverty, despite becoming a bestselling author and having a job at a well-renowned publication. Poe never managed to escape the confines of poverty. Poe later fell in love with his cousin Virginia Clemm, whom he married when she was only 13 years old. The couple lied about her age on the marriage certificate, after her death at the age of 24, Poe fell into a deep depression from which he never recovered. After the death Virginia went through a string of failed romantic relationships, scared by the loss of Virginia he was no longer able to commit. A short engagement to poet Sarah Helen Whitman ended because of his heavy drinking. He then returned to his earlier engagement with Sarah Elmira Royster, who had become a widower at the time, and they planned to marry once again. Unfortunately, Poe died before they could get married. Last but by no means least there is the matter of Poe's death. It is not possible to determine the cause of Poe's death. His death certificate has perished. Poe disappeared for 3 days where nobody heard from him or saw him, only to be found in the poor area of Baltimore confused and lost. His last words spoken were recorded as both mysterious and have been subject to much speculation; "Lord help my poor soul.". The cause of death is unknown although rabies, syphilis, epilepsy, and brain swelling related to alcoholism have all been cited as possible causes [5]. Although research does not suggest a consistent pattern of depression and suicide as a cause of death, there does exist linguistic evidence suggesting the potential depressive episodes in Poe's life, these episodes were present during the years of Poe's greatest success, and following the death of his late wife [6].

Poe's life was the main inspiration for his work, it can be argued that the two can not be separated because Poe himself took his own life as the main inspiration for his work. This paper does not want to or aim at disputing this but will instead look at the influences of his life in modern

visual interpretation. It must though be said that the influences of Poe's life are as apparent in modern music, theater, and art as it is in modern horror movies.

With a life as flamboyant as Poe it can be difficult to determine what movies are directly influenced by his life. This paper will take two movies that are inspired by Poe's life in a way that his life is depicted directly either as a biography or in a sense of script inspiration.

The first movie we will look into is the 2009 biography "Edgar Allan Poe: Master of the Macabre" directed by Liam Dale and starring Jack Roberts. In the full embrace of the gothic theme, Poe's is known for, this documentary begins with a reading of one of Poe's most famous poems "The Raven" although the reading seems adapted and is not a correct reading of the original poem the effects are apparent, the populist view on this poem and the aim at a younger audience makes for what this documentary is; entertainment rather than accuracy. We see a fireplace with a raging fire and gory organ music is playing in the background while a man is fighting sleep in front of the fireplace. A silhouette of a gothic church is seen with bats flying towards the viewer and another silhouette of a graveyard is shown all while the reading of "the raven" continues, the scene ending with the silhouette of a raven sitting on a branch, and the title of the documentary is flashed on the screen [7]. As a presentation to someone's life to be of this nature is on par with the main perception of Poe. If it is fair to the legacy of Poe is for another discussion. The deep voice of Jack Roberts tells the story of Poe, all the while the gothic organ music follows the story throughout. The documentary takes us on a journey into the childhood of Poe, emphasizing again the gore and gloom of this part of the writer's life and not keeping to an accurate portrayal of Poe's childhood. Liam Dale wants us to be in suspense and to do so almost makes it a story of fiction rather than on the life of Poe. It is for this reason I include this movie as one of the two that are inspired by Poe's life rather than as a movie about Poe's life. The documentary was highly criticized when it came out, it was meant as a celebration of Poe and was planned to air on his 200-year birthday. Poe fans are though not that easy to impress and the audience of the documentary were brutal in their review of the movie, with one writing:

"This biography was terrible. They spent as much time going off on tangents - Shakespeare, Defoe, Black Sabbath, Charlie Chaplin, Laurel, and Hardy - as they did talking about Poe. I thought we'd never get past his childhood. And there was also wrong information, the most grievous being the reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "short story" called The Scarlet Letter being about the Salem Witch Trials. How could a program with numerous people involved get that wrong? At least one person who worked on the show must have read The Scarlet Letter. Furthermore, the narrator was not only monotone but could not recite poetry so that it even sounded like poetry. I did learn a couple of things about Poe, but overall, this film was as bad they come." [8]

"Edgar Allan Poe: Master of the Macabre" is in many ways a fictional movie but we must not forget the main point of this which is that the legacy of Poe even in 2020 is apparent and evident made clear by the movie. It underlines that the poet has relevance in our visual literature today that in a sense unprecedented, the poetry of Poe is dear to the hearts of many although the poems were crafted over 200 years

ago, we are still at a point in time where even an inaccurate documentary can be the subject of quarrels in our society and it is for that reason “Edgar Allan Poe: Master of the Macabre” is relevant to this paper. “Edgar Allan Poe: Master of the Macabre” is not in its description a modern horror movie but becomes it because it distorts the life of the author.

The Raven, directed by James McTeigue, starring John Cusack, Luke Evans, Alicer Eve, and many more, was written by Michael Hallows Eve. The film begins with Poe on a park bench, beneath a tree limb holding a large, malevolent raven. It must be noted that the movie is not about Poe’s life but is in fact a detective movie revolving around Poe’s and the mystery of his death. In this movie, labeled a thriller, Edgar Allan Poe joins a detective to hunt a mad serial killer who’s using Poe’s poems in a string of brutal murders. When a mother and daughter are found brutally murdered Detective Emmett Fields finds out that the crimes look suspiciously like the murders described in horrible detail in the local newspaper stories written by Edgar Allan Poe. As Poe is questioned by the police, another murder occurs, as with the first one, which is similar to Poe’s story. We are introduced to the possibility of a serial killer is on the loose, who is using Poe’s poetry as inspiration for his killing spree, the police asks Poe to help catch the killer. When it seems like someone close to Poe may be murdered, the suspense becomes even higher and Poe tries to take over the investigation before it’s too late [9]. The movie is different from “Edgar Allan Poe: Master of the Macabre” as it in no way tries to illuminate itself as a biography but stays in the realm of fiction inspired by the life of Poe. Heavy in symbolism and perpetually filmed in dark corners or at night it encumbers the essence of Poe’s writing but shows a personification of Poe which differs from the common view. In “The Raven” Poe is depicted as an almost comical character, almost as a village fool. It must also be mentioned that Poe’s poetry seldom has graphic bloody murders but stays in the area of psychological terror, whereas this movie inspired by the life of Poe, depicts the gory bloodshed of a speculated serial killer. This is important because it is evident that the movie lets itself be inspired but does not in any way try to claim accuracy of events in Poe’s life. Poe is introduced in the light of a hero who seems to have an intellectual insight into the mind of the serial killer through his own dark mind. This relationship of the artistic mind and the psychopath is a story often aimed by the moviemakers. The difference between most movies and “The Raven” is the introduction of the character Poe. Poe in “The Raven” is not the poet we know but rather a fictional character named Edgar Allan Poe, the elements of comparison are that this character is an author and that this character is the writer of Poe’s real work. It is beyond doubt that the life of Poe was an inspiration for this movie using elements of his life story such as his last words. The movie was nominated for 5 awards:

1. World Soundtrack Awards; Category: Discovery of the Year.
2. Rondo Hatton Classic Horror Awards; Category: Best Film,
3. Golden Trailer Awards; Category: Best Horror TV Spot.
4. Fright Meter Awards; Category: Best Actor and

Best Cinematography

It failed to win any of its nominations [10]. On the basis of its nominations, it is clear that the movie industry saw it as a horror movie rather than how it was labeled. Considered a medium box office success with a worldwide grosses income in its first year of around \$30 million, and opening in 2,203 theaters worldwide [11]. The movie elevated interest in Poe amongst a younger audience and revived the legacy of his poems.

Movies inspired by the work of Edgar Allan Poe

In preparation for this paper, the authors found more than 100 movies claiming to be inspired by the work of Edgar Allan Poe. It is indisputable that the influence of Poe in the horror genre is significant. It must be emphasized though that it is the later works of Poe that has been most inspiring to movie makers. Poe’s work after 1839 seems more appealing to modern horror fans than his earlier work.

1. The Black Cat (1845)
2. The Fall of the House of Usher (1839)
3. The Murders in the Rue Morgue (1841)
4. The Pit and the Pendulum (1850)
5. The Raven (1845)
6. The Tell-Tale Heart (1843)

The six stories above are the stories that are most frequently adapted into movies. The tell-tale Heart has been adapted into film more than 14 times making it the most frequent horror story of Poe that has been turned into a movie. As this paper is meant to outline the influence of modern movies it will only consider movies made after 1960. It is also important that we distinguish between a movie that is adaptations directly from the original stories and movies that are vaguely inspired by Poe’s stories. When considering the latter, the margin of horror movies widens. An example of this is the 1994 movie “The Crow”, written by John Shirley and David J. Schow, directed by Alex Proyas and starring Brandon Lee. As musician Eric Draven and his fiancée are getting ready for their wedding they are brutally killed by members of a violent gang. One year after their death, Eric rises from the dead and taking the features of the Crow, known as a supernatural being looking to revenge the death of his fiancé. Finding the murders responsible for the killing and he murders them all, Eric hunts down the head of the gangsters and kills him as a final act of revenge [12]. An added horror about this movie was the accidental shooting and subsequent death of Brandon Lee during the filming of the movie. The Crow is based on the comic book by the same name which was heavily inspired by the poem “The Raven” by Poe [13]. This constellation of inspiration is evident in a huge number of horror movies, Poe’s tentacles reach far and wide into horror movies and have the ability to this day to thrill and excite audience worldwide.

Looking at the direct adaptations “The Black Cat” has been made into film 3 times and has been used as inspiration to numerous short films and TV series. The latest adaptation of the story was the Italian produced Gatto nero (The black cat) from 1981. It was written by Biagio Proietti and Lucio Fulci, and directed by Lucio Fulci. In Gatto nero we follow the psychic Robert Miles who uses his ability to communicate with his black cat. Robert uses his cat to take revenge over his enemies. When a reporter takes notice of

cat-scratching at the scene of the crimes she becomes suspicious and confronts Robert with her suspicion. The cat does not like this and begins reversing the mind control in order to revenge the action of Robert. The similarities the Poe's "The Black Cat" are apparent. In the original story, Poe describes the insanity of a man and how a cat revenges his bad deeds by luring him to kill his wife. *Gatto Nero* is set in a modern setting which spins a new angle to the influence of Poe. Unbeknownst to Poe, his work has become timeless, black cats have always been surrounded with superstition, the use of this medium allows Poe to scare all generations [14]. In "The Fall of the House of Usher" from 1839, Poe attacks the quintessential elements of goth and horror, the haunted house, live burials, and the dreary landscape. The perfect elements for the modern horror movie. The story was adapted in the 2003 movie "Descendant" written by Kermit Christman and Margot Hartman and directed by Kermit Christman and Del Tenney. The movie takes place 100 years after Poe had written "The Fall of the House of Usher" where a descendant of Poe and also writer becomes possessed by Poe's ghost. Although the story seems far from the original there is no doubt it is inspired by the classic tale of Poe, all the elements of "The Fall of the House of Usher" are replicated in "Descendant". The haunted house, the dreary environment, and the presence of possible mental illness. Though it could be argued that many horror stories have this storyline; the presence of Poe in this movie distinguishes the presence of the source of inspiration [15].

The 1971 adaptation of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* written by Christopher Wicking and directed by Gordon Hessler, originally written in 1841, is one of the few attempts to make a direct interpretation of Poe's story. The story, which takes place in Paris, France, is leaning on a more detective orientated style but keeps the horror elements intact. Although properly considered one of Poe's more absurd stories for its time the presence of the animal kingdom murder can be considered quite the scoop in its time. The Victorians are known for their fascination with natural science and in that sense, Poe was at the forefront of his time. The movie never really became popular with most people happy about the general plot but feeling ridiculed by the abrupt ending which to many seemed rushed and without meaning. The movie was heavily advertised as being closely related to the original story but was blamed for not keeping to the original script [16]. The pit and the pendulum from 1991, written by Dennis Paoli and directed by Stuart Gordon, turns the original horror story by Poe, into an epic hero story. The story revolves around the time of the Spanish inquisition takes hints from Poe's original plot. Where Poe takes his plot directly into the psyche of a person incarcerated, the movie expands its reach of the inquisition into the minds of a whole society. The presence of Poe is again obvious as the characters and the mood it adapted from the original story, the plot on the other hand, which clearly on Poe's behalf was to illustrate the struggle of man and religion, are not present in the movie [17]. There are many movies like the above mentioned, categorized in the B-movie sector of the film industry. One thing they have in common is the devoted followers they have. The mere presence of Poe's intellectual horror genre elevates these movies to the status of a cult. The movies so far mentioned

all have that in common. When it comes to larger productions we must look to some of Poe's most popular stories today and none are more popular than the tell-tale heart. With more than 14 movies and a ray of TV adaptations, this story has found a home in the entertainment industry like no other Poe story. The highly suspenseful story has captured the minds of many creative people and the psychological plot is almost made for a horror movie. In a largely unknown short-film adaptation from 2014, written and directed by James Cotton, a modernization is introduced. The movie revolves around a nurse who gets more and more agitated by an old woman's "dead" eye and ends up murdering her. This reversal of gender and the more direct connection between murder and victim adds a more modern and surprising element to the story. In Poe's original short story, the fall into insanity is cleverly depicted through narration and a slow realization of no option, the character allows us to be part of his journey into insanity and we almost feel a kinship with him. The short-film from 2014 seems to try to add a relationship to the characters allowing, as with Poe's original, us to become invested in the insanity and feel a sense of empathy for the graphic nature of the killing. As a tool of entertainment, the idea of feeling a connection between the viewer/reader and the worst characters is a highly difficult task, but none the less being able to do so is a sign of true talented storytelling [18].

Conclusion

Edgar Allan Poe's stories might not be the favorite of all literature and visual literature lovers, but his imprint in the horror genre is indisputable. More than 150 Movies, short-films, and TV-series were uncovered during the research of this paper, to have a direct connection to Poe's poem and short-stories, maybe not as exposed as other great authors through time, but as a niche area of entertainment, he has been able to collect a large following within this genre. Fashionable trends, as goths and splatter-film enthusiasts, have long had Poe as a role model, an inspiration, and a person who seems to have an insight into their world and mindset. Fans of the genre cannot ignore the presence of Poe and a "Godfather" of the medium that inspires their interest. Poe might have been before his time but it must also be mentioned that he did benefit from the Victorian fashionable interest in the macabre. The time was a time of exploration into the occult and the unknown, but we cannot deny his depth and timeless mind exploration. His deep understanding of the alternative plays an important role even in today's vast selection of gore and gristly movies. Although the borders are constantly pushed to introduce innovation in the horror world, the foundation of the psychological fear has almost not changed, what scared us 200 years ago also scares us today. Poe was able to tap into that fear because of a life of fear and mental problems, his talent was his ability to bring these fear to the broader public and enable them to identify with these areas of life they may never be able to understand. If people like Poe did not have the courage to share with us their trouble and tribulation they would continue the feeling of being ostracized. Having a centered outlet of the emotion of the group who truly feels different because of an interest in the macabre would create a divide in our society. Poe's life work offers solitude for

these people and creates an understanding of it in the broader population. Poe's influence in modern horror movies is of larger importance than we might think because it offers a bridge between the "norm" and "the strange" allowing us all to be of mutual grounds.

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