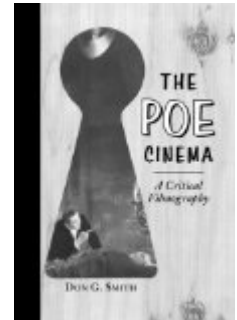


Don G. Smith. *The Poe Cinema: A Critical Filmography.* Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998. vii + 307 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7864-0453-7.



Reviewed by Michael Strada

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As the first book to examine all 81 feature films derived from the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, Don Smith's critical filmography represents a solid reference work. Entries include all the intellectual hardware expected in such a volume: title, date, studio, cast and credits, running time, plot summary, contemporary critical and popular reactions, plus the author's critique of each film. Poe titles most often adapted to the screen include *The Tell-Tale Heart* (10 times); *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, and *The Black Cat* (9 times each); and, *The Raven* (8 times). Slightly more than half of these originated in the United States, with Britain, France, and Italy leading the European countries also producing Poe-inspired pictures.

The recidivism rate in these 81 Poe adaptations runs high. The sinister leading actors (Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, Vincent Price, and Lon Chaney, Jr.) not only appear regularly—but often together—in a manner akin to filmic incest. Almost as surprising are the actors of stature found in supporting roles here; they include the likes of James Mason, Ray Miland, Basil Rathbone, Eric

von Stroheim, Peter Lorre, Jack Palance, and Jack Nicholson. The many still photos that populate the pages of Smith's book serve to illustrate a serial record of near-nameless pretty faces of helpless female victims. Since 77 of the 88 Poe films were released prior to 1975, don't look for the concept of female empowerment in even the loosest Poe adaptation.

The still photographs work well to create visual links with the bewildering number of efforts to translate the brooding, haunting, and melancholy spirit of Edgar Allan Poe to the screen. This well researched and carefully documented anthology dissects its subject matter from a variety of useful angles. Despite his love for the mythical world conjured up by Poe, the author proves able to distinguish objectively between those film versions that are true to the original and those that are not.

Smith is at his best when he ventures under the hood in an effort to explain the psycho-philosophical roots of his subject: be it the personality of Poe himself, the motivations driving filmmakers, the nature of the horror genre, or Smith's own

fascination with Poe's macabre world. In the Introduction, Smith writes that "Since I was an only child who inherited a rather melancholy personality, Poe proved to be an ancient mariner who grabbed and mesmerized me on contact." Whenever the author takes such risks, this anthology comes alive. Any topic as melancholy as Smith's begs for an exploration of its etiology. For example, how can we account for the firmness of horror's grip on the human imagination?

A wise colleague of mine believes that reviewers should assess the book that an author has written, not a tangential one existing only in the imagination of the reviewer. Because Smith has completed the task established at the outset, he well may be entitled to the reader accepting his product as representing a full day's work. However, Smith abandons enough promising lines of thought in the text to warrant notice. The introduction provides barely two pages of background information on Poe's life and his fiction. Surely anyone as profoundly gifted at clutching pain from the jaws of comfort is much too fascinating to dole out so stingily. Similarly, The afterword, with barely a paragraph of analysis, introduces an intriguing debt of gratitude to Poe expressed by filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock, then disappears. Since the book's center of gravity throws its weight around mostly by reviewing individual films, an opportunity to balance the scales somewhat by focusing on the bigger picture slips away from Smith in the conclusion.

Professor Smith's work arrives at a time when not only card-carrying horror aficionados sense that this genre enjoys a loftier status than in the past. Present-day reviewers demonstrate much less of the condescending antipathy characteristic of reviews in *The New York Times* a generation or two ago, as chronicled here by Smith. Certainly the box office successes recorded by many recent horror pictures belies popular approval. The way in which this genre is steeped in the readily accessible symbolisms of unnatural death also renders

it amenable to psychological or political deconstruction by postmodernists. The status of Poe's fiction, on the other hand, has been robust for nearly a century. While some may accuse Vincent Buranelli of hyperbole for referring to Poe in his 1977 biography as "America's greatest writer--and the American writer of greatest significance in world literature," Poe has seldom lacked critical acclaim. As distinguished a literary figure as Harold Bloom edited a volume in 1985 congenial to Poe's memory. Poe's body of work deserves to inspire screen adaptations, and Don Smith's book helps to separate those that remain faithful from those that do not.

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