CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	The cinematic texts of Edgar Allan Poe: from the written word to digital art
Authors	Gil Curiel, Germán
Publication date	2012-11-01
Original Citation	Gil Curiel, G. (2012) 'The cinematic texts of Edgar Allan Poe: from the written word to digital art', FilmAsia 2012: The Asian Conference on Film and Documentary 2012. Osaka, Japan, 2-4 November. Japan: International Academic Forum (IAFOR)
Type of publication	Conference item
Link to publisher's version	https://iafor.org/proceedings/conference-proceedings-the-inaugural-asian-conference-on-film-and-documentary-2012/, http://iafor.info/archives/offprints/filmasia2012-offprints/FilmAsia2012_0179.pdf
Rights	© 2012, Germán Gil Curiel.
Download date	2026-11-16 09:51:31
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/3924

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

The Cinematic Texts of Edgar Allan Poe: From the Written Word to Digital Art

By Germán Gil-Curiel, Lecturer in Film and Contemporary Society in Britain at The Sino-British College, Shanghai

Introduction

Debates on the encounters between literature and cinema have for a long time focused on the different ways in which each convey interiority and subjectivity, the argument being that literature is better suited for these purposes since film inevitably shows, thus it is better suited to convey external action (Kroeber 2006). The argument is presented in such a way that the cinematic and the literary are made to oppose each other, supposedly bringing about diametrically different aesthetic experiences of subjectivity and consciousness, and contrasting perceptions of reality outside oneself, with a focus on the way space, time and perception are rendered on film and in literature (See for instance Gil-Curiel 2013).

In this piece however my key tenet is that art is either a total artwork or not art at all. By total artwork I am here referring to the idea often attributed to Richard Wagner, but that can in fact be traced back to Friedrich Nietzsche, that literature, theatre, music and painting would all be brought together by a kind of art that would encompass all of them, referring, at that time, to opera. This idea was later retaken by Riciotto Canudo and other early film theorists, arguing that such an artwork would in fact be cinema. For in cinema, the argument ran, theatre, music, literature, painting, dance and even architecture 'all found (…) an efficient way of understanding themselves and of co-operating with each other creatively' (Ruíz 2007, 9), helping each other, as it were, to bring out the best in each one of them. For most of the 20th century, however, these ideas were much marginalised as film studies struggled to establish itself as a discipline in its own right, and as universities sliced up knowledge into separate fields in accordance with dominant epistemologies of the day. Nevertheless, recently the view that knowledge is in fact inherently interdisciplinary and the convergence that digital media have brought about have thrown the intermediality of cinema into sharp relief, allowing other forms of thinking about the nature of art and the relation between cinema and literature and the other arts and media. My contention is thus that there was always cinema in certain works of literature, and literature in many films, and that indeed, all pieces of art that deserve that name implicitly contain all the other arts.

In the paragraphs that follow I shall first explain what I mean by 'total art' and then point to the cinematic features in three pieces by Edgar Allan Poe that Jean Epstein drew from to create his *La Chute de la maison Usher* (1928) (*The Fall of the House of Usher*). I then move on to the literary features of Epstein's film, to show the way literature and film—and in some cases, music and painting as well—are interwoven in a complex kind of work that we might call 'a total artwork' of sorts.

The Total Artwork

In Classical times it was believed that art imitated nature but that each art was a separate and distinctive activity. By the 19th century, apparently, the belief that the arts contained certain correspondences began to take hold, as all the arts have certain features in common and in some ways resemble each other. This belief was encouraged by experimentation with synaesthesia. Wagner famously proposed the *Gesamtkunstwerk* should be understood as a work of art which combines music,

drama, poetry, mime, painting in décor, and so forth, to create a coherent and meaningful whole. Ideally, he added, all should proceed from a single creative hand. More recently, 'an aesthetic ambition to borderlessness' (Finger and Follett 2011, 3) has been proposed as a way to define what the total artwork is about.

Several examples spring to mind. Peter Greenaway's project to turn nine classical paintings into a kind of cinema by writing dialogue for their characters and projecting various illumination schemes on them is a notable one, for, as he contends, 'cinema is nothing if it is not to be considered as the manipulation of light'. (Greenaway 2010, 4) And he further notes: 'the language used to describe painting is often the language used to debate cinema, and vice versa' (Greenaway 2010, 4). Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* is part of Greenaway's hybrid project.

The musical project a 'Theatre of Voices' is another example. It is an ensemble founded by baritone Paul Hiller in 1990, which focuses on early and new music. The vocal concept, as the name of the project suggests, is eclectic, involving theatre. And beyond the purely artistic realm, the practice has made considerable inroads in the cultural industries, such as fashion. The late fashion designer Alexander McQueen became famous for innovative shows that drew their inspiration from cinema and literature, indeed staging versions of Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' in which the clothes were turned into the main protagonists. Beyond the West too, we can also mention the *Chinese Symphonic Picture: Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival*, amalgamating the aesthetics of music, painting and cinema; and also, we can consider the 'Visual Music' of Chinese composer Tan Dun. Today however I shall focus on much earlier instances of such border crossings, namely the cinematic features in the literary tales of Edgar Allan Poe, and the literary features of the film *The Fall of the House of Usher*, made after his tale by Jean Epstein in 1928.

The Cinematic in Poe

The first way in which cinematic features are evident in many of the tales of Edgar Allan Poe is of course the theme of light. My analyses here refer to three tales: 'The Oval Portrait' (1842), 'Ligeia' (1838), and 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), all of which were drawn from by Epstein in his making of his homonymous film. And all of these have features that we may call 'impressionist' after the movement in painting—and later also in cinema[1]—whose main aim was to render the effects of light on objects rather than the objects themselves. Just as impressionist painters were particularly concerned with the transitory effects of light, and interested in depicting the fleeting impression from a subjective point of view, so is Poe in these three tales. Like the painters, and the filmmakers after them, Poe was not interested in a precise representation, but rather on enabling the perception of the spectator, that is, subjectivity, to be the cornerstone of his philosophy.

In 'The Oval Portrait' the anonymous traveller that is the protagonist takes temporary refuge in a small apartment in a remote turret of an abandoned castle. The room is richly decorated, although antique and in a decayed condition. The most remarkable feature though, is 'an unusually great number of very spirited modern paintings in

[1] If impressionism flourished across painting and cinema, so did surrealism, and surrealist painter and director Luis Buñuel was in fact Epstein's screenwriter for 'The Fall of the House of Usher.'

frames of rich golden arabesque' (Poe 1982, 290). As he could not sleep, he decided to contemplate those pictures, while alternately reading from a 'small volume which had been found upon the pillow, and which purported to criticise and describe them' (Poe 1982, 290). At midnight, he finds a remarkable picture of a beautiful lady. Once the narrator has displaced the candelabrum to have more light for his reading, he discovers the oval portrait to which the title alludes.[2] Light here plays a crucial role, as a pictorial and cinematic component. Thanks to the movement of light, the reader, from a different perspective, is able to discover the painting with the narrator. Interestingly, he moves the candelabrum as a means to keep reading, but instead of finding the page, what he finds is a painting: 'I thus saw in vivid light a picture all unnoticed before' (Poe 1982, 290). Later, it is revealed it is the portrait of the painter's wife, who, as the Madeline Usher of Epstein's film, died the instant his portrait of her is finished.[3] Vagueness, suggestiveness, and the use of light, all features of impressionism, are crucial to the encounter with this portrait:

> It was a mere head and shoulders, done in what is technically termed *vignette* manner; much in the style of the favourite heads of Sully. The arms, the bosom, and even the ends of the radiant hair melted imperceptibly into the vague yet deep shadow which formed the background of the whole. (Poe 1982, 291)

This is in fact an image carefully brought to the screen by Epstein.



(Still 1: Portrait)

In Poe's tale, Roderick, the master of the House of Usher, invites his friend—the anonymous narrator—to spend some time with him in his property. Roderick has been suffering from a deplorable state of anxiety and he needs his help. Presently, his friend will know that Lady Madeline—Roderick's twin sister and beloved—suffers

[2] After the narrator discovers the portrait of the girl, this action of 'gazing' becomes the key verbal function. Another key author of the supernatural, Théophile Gautier, who had initially been trained as a painter, uses the same discursive procedure. In Gautier—like in Poe—this function of contemplating visual art allows the viewer/spectator into 'a transcendental knowledge' (Gil-Curiel, 129).

[3] Malcolm Turvey has interpreted this immobilisation of the painter's wife as an attempt on the part of Epstein to capture what Henri Bergson called 'the instant', that is, perception as a series of static, discrete states, which the human mind then combines together, and on this account is regarded as 'inherently cinematic' (Turvey 2011, 98-101).

from a strange disease that eventually kills her. Then the body is entombed in a vault before being buried. Soon afterwards, however, during a stormy night, both friends will realise that she is still alive.

Roderick Usher happens to be a painter, as well as a musician. Regarding painting, 'vagueness' and 'pure abstraction' are the key features cited as the ones that make Roderick's pictorial gloomy pieces, comparable to 'the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli' (Poe 1982, 237). Roderick's paintings become the idea itself: 'If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher.'



(Still 2: Vagueness)

Besides, the 'spirit of abstraction' of his paintings is so 'vivid' and intense, that words are not able to give an accurate idea of their mysterious and powerful influence onto the viewer (Poe 1982, 236-237). This is the case, as well, with one of his 'phantasmagoric conceptions', a 'small picture [that] presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device,' the chamber, it will later become apparent, where Lady Madeline—his sister and beloved—will be buried alive. The narrator's vivid and powerful pictorial descriptions by means of ekphrasis materialise, so to speak, the paintings. However, considering that the picture's referent is nonexistent, the image described literarily becomes itself a pure subjective object, as it happens in a cinematic image of a picture.

The second way in which Poe's works are cinematic has to do with the way they convey the movement of a painted image, thus prefiguring cinema. The oval portrait discussed above is a remarkable work of art, not only because of its intrinsic qualities, but because through a 'momentary entertainment' the head seems to be 'a living person', a picture 'in an absolute *life-likeliness* of expression' (Poe 1982, 291). Thus painting leads to a 'living image', alike to a cinematic image. In fact, when the painter had finished his portrait, frightened by the disturbing image, he exclaimed: 'This is indeed *Life* itself!' (Poe 1982, 292).



(Still 3: Portrait 2)

Another such instance takes place in 'Ligeia'. In this tale, the narrator's wife, Ligeia, dies prematurely because of a sudden and mysterious illness. During her agony she becomes obsessed with the idea of reincarnation. Soon after she dies, the widower, devastated, marries again but very soon the new wife, Lady Rowena Trevanion, of Tremaine, in turn also becomes ill and she too dies. When her funeral is being prepared, as the widower keeps vigil on the body overnight, alone, he realises that little by little his dead wife seems to revive, repeatedly showing signs of life. Finally, at dawn, the body comes back to life, but it is not his second wife but Ligeia herself.

The strongly cinematic scene takes place at the bridal chamber of an abbey the widower purchased when he married for the second time, and being a literary image, it is worth quoting it at length:

> The lofty walls, gigantic in height (…) were hung from summit to foot, in vast folds, with a heavy and massive-looking tapestry […]. The material was the richest cloth of gold. It was spotted all over, at irregular intervals, with arabesque figures, about a foot in diameter, and wrought upon the cloth in patterns of the most jetty black. But these figures partook of the true character of the arabesque only when regarded from a single point of view. By a contrivance now common, and traceable to a very remote period of antiquity, they were made changeable in aspect. To one entering the room, they bore the appearance of simple monstrosities; but upon a farther advance, this appearance gradually departed; and, step by step, as the visitor moved his station in the chamber, he saw himself surrounded by an endless succession of the ghastly forms (...). The phantasmagoric effect was vastly heightened by the artificial introduction of a strong continual current of wind behind the draperies—*giving a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole*.' (Poe 1982, 661, my emphasis)

In other words, the static figures of the tapestry give the impression of movement according to the visitor's own movement in the chamber, as a kind of multiple anamorphosis. As the tapestry seems to become animated not in a linear succession of images, but rather as a pixillated screen whose shapes shift according to light, it is my contention that this literary image would seem to prefigure even digital art.

The third and very important last way in which Poe's works are cinematic that I shall discuss here is the way music features in them. While the role of music as a key

component of cinema, not subordinate to the image but in fact on an equal standing with it is relatively new, dating from the work of theorists such as Michel Chion (1994), who pointed out that the cinematic image is never viewed on its own but always with its sound, or Claudia Gorbman (1987), who further investigated the crucial role of music in the diegesis, these contentions are now firmly established. In fact, the master of the House of Usher improvises some long sad dirges, as for instance a bizarre adaptation of 'the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber' (Poe 1982, 236); also his improvisations on the guitar, the only sound that his ear can tolerate, some *impromptus*, in which improvised notes and 'rhymed' words constitute his 'wild fantasias', and the reader practically gets to hear them while they are described (Poe 1982, 237). This way, music interweaving with verse leads to the rhapsody 'The Haunted Palace', whose function—music and poetry within literature—is to poeticise the narrative.



(Still 4: Improvisations)

Indeed, it is no coincidence that in his essay 'Edgar Poe e il cinema', Bernardino Zapponi, screenwriter for Federico Fellini, describes the work of Poe in musical terms. His key insight is the notion that Poe's short stories are not as much suspense tales as they are works of sustained pitch. Of Poe's work Zapponi says: 'suspense, which could be attractive to filmmakers, is, however, more apparent than real. The march toward death does not build to a crescendo, but is a single sustained note which disturbs us deeply though its persistence' (Stubbs 2006, 208). I would concur, and its main tonality, I would add, is tragic.[4]

The Literary in Epstein Cinematic version of Poe's work

We shall now turn to the literary features in Jean Epstein's work on Poe. Epstein had a remarkable influence on the evolution of French cinema, and his work, often drawing from German expressionism, has already received much well deserved attention (Turvey 2011). My contribution here relies on the concept of 'cinema of poetry' as theorised by another major film director, critic and theoretician, Pier Paolo

[4] Music score in the digitally mastered version of Epstein's *La Chute de la maison Usher* (2001), selected by Roland de Candé and Renée Lichtig, includes a remarkable choice of adaptations of medieval music from the albums: 'Les musiciens de Provence'; 'Musique au temps des Croisades'; 'Musique de Troubadour' and 'Harpe Médiévale.'

Pasolini in 1965. For I contend that Epstein's *Usher* is in Pasolini's sense an instance of poetic cinema, and that herein lies its literary connection with Poe's work.

There is much poetry in Poe's prose, in more than one sense. Even his narrative is frequently searching for a poetic effect, as when, for instance, the narrator says in 'Ligeia':

> (…) in truth, the character of my beloved, her rare learning, her singular yet placid cast of beauty, and the *thrilling* and the *enthralling* eloquence of her *low musical language*, made their way into my heart by paces so *steadily* and *stealthily* progressive that they have been *unnoticed* and *unknown*. (Poe 1982, 654, my emphasis)

Poe's characters are often poets, as is Ligeia, author of 'The Conqueror Worm', included in the tale, and Roderick Usher, who wrote the rhapsody 'The Haunted Palace', also a poem, and a symbol of pure abstraction[5]. Moreover, in Poe, music, image and language are frequently related, by means of poetry. It may still be a commonplace to think of cinema as a primarily visual art, as mentioned above. However, those images can also have a rhythm, colour and texture, even sound, and there is of course the verbal language. All these construct meanings that convey a huge range of feelings and emotions, exactly as poetry does. To Walter Pater, 'Poetry aspires to the condition of music'(Drabble 2000, 769-770). This theory of pure poetry dates from the middle of the 19th century. Edgar Allan Poe was hinting at it in the *Poetic Principle* (1850; 889-907), and Charles Baudelaire, who was much influenced by Poe, referred to it in his *Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe* (Baudelaire [1857] 1976). Thereafter, the idea that pure poetry was a form of music gradually developed. Thus, the theories of pure poetry are closely associated with symbolism and symbolic poets.

But what exactly is meant by a cinema of poetry? Pasolini contended there is an entire world in humanity that expresses itself mainly by means of images, and that world is, he thought, the world of dreams. Because cinema's language is mainly visual, it too partakes from the world of dreams. And despite its deployment in the service of 'prose narrative', that is, genre films, cinema retains, always, because of its predication on imaging, some vestige of its original oneiric, poetic nature. But there is more to the poetry of cinema than its pictorial, oneiric origins. Pasolini put it thus: 'If I (…) make the comparison between a Hollywood commercial [film] and a film by Godard or *Les créatures* by Varda, I see there is a technical and linguistic difference.[6] Instead of a distinction between the commercial cinema and the art cinema, I would like to propose a distinction between the cinema of prose and the cinema of poetry.

[5] Many of Poe's poems, including 'The Raven' 'Annabel Lee' 'The City of the Sea'. 'The Conqueror Worm' and 'The Haunted Palace', have been adapted into films. Considering the key tonality of the Tragic that characterises his whole work, cinematic adaptations of Poe's texts are somehow invariably subjective, conveying melancholic, distressing and poetic atmospheres.

[6] When Pasolini refers to 'Cinema of poetry', he refers specifically to works of cinema defined as 'art cinema.' (Michelangelo Antonioni, Bernardo Bertolucci, Jean-Luc Godard, Glauber Rocha, etc.) (Rhodes 2010, 149-150).

The distinction is not one of value—it is a technical one' (quoted in Rhodes 2010, 155). For

> (…) whereas the writer has at their disposal the words that already exist in a dictionary, the filmmaker is deprived of such a lexicon […] There is no dictionary of images. There is no pigeonholed image, ready to be used. The director's activity cannot be linguistic; it must, instead, be stylistic. (Quoted in Rhodes 2010, 148)

To Pasolini then art cinema, on the basis of the successful deployment of an individual style—and what could there be more subjective than style—is poetic in the sense of setting the image free from its more obvious meanings, in the same way that poetry sets, as it were, language free from its denotative meanings, enabling connotations to link into metaphor, allegory, and ultimately, total freedom of the image, emancipation. Thus, 'whereas art cinema has often been dismissed as by turns decadent, apolitical, or middle-brow, Pasolini's theory of the "cinema of poetry" asks us to consider the art cinema as a privileged medium of political filmmaking'(Rhodes 2010, 144).

My contention is thus that Epstein renders an oneiric, poetic version of the whole of Poe's universe in his work entitled 'The Fall of the House of Usher.' First of all, as I mentioned above, Epstein liberally draws from several works, aiming for a general feel or atmosphere rather than a mere adaptation of the 'Usher' tale as such.



(Still 5: Atmosphere)

Second, he deploys techniques that enable the visual realisation of suggestiveness and evocativeness from Poe's prose and poetry. Poetry, literature, music, panting, theatre and cinema all share these techniques, and all have a place in Epstein's film, which is built around images out of focus, backlight, *sfumato*, chiaroscuro, twilight and half-light, superimposition, slow motion, and a gloomy mise-en-scène which connotes the tragic.



(Still 6: Roderick)

But above all, its is the symbolic quality of Epstein's 'objects', his cinematic and musical images, that make the poetic in the sense of imprinting to them a style that is clearly personal and that seeks to free the images from their literal, denotative meanings into connotation and dream. In 'Ligeia', the narrator finds Ligeia or her image in 'the commonest objects of the universe'. The narrator refers to that feeling as follows:

> (…) when Ligeia's beauty passed into my spirit (…) I recognized it [that sentiment] (…) sometimes in the survey of a rapidly-growing vine—in the contemplation of a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a stream of running water. I have felt it in the ocean; in the fallen of a meteor. I have felt it in the glances of unusual aged people. (Poe 1982, 656)

And also that transcendental analogy takes place through music and literature: '(…) by certain sounds from string instruments, and not infrequently by passages from books' (Poe 1982, 656).



(Still 7: Guitar)

In 1928, Epstein himself described filmmaking in the following terms:

> [Cinematic] technique today can lie entirely in the relation between images… It is simple to write a Poe film, as Poe himself wrote: "There exist, without any doubt, combinations of very simple, natural objects which have in them the power to move us." But which objects? Above all, not macabre ones. Horror, in Poe, is due more to the living than to the dead, and death itself is a kind of enchantment, and life also a spell. Life and death have the same substance, the same frailty. Just as the spell of life is suddenly broken, so death becomes undone. (Epstein 1928)

Epstein's phrase: 'write a Poe film…' all but suggests my contention that the cinematic has always been latent in Poe's œuvre. Indeed, to what extent is the text and the film in Poe just pure visual experience, subjective experience, oneiric experience, since time, space and causality are broken down? Zaponni contended that Poe is generally present in his tales as the informing psyche. It is thus in this sense that I contend Epstein rendered a literary—because of poetic—and artistic—because it contains music and painting in its poetry—version of Poe. Every little detail in Epstein's work is profoundly symbolic, not unlike the symbolism that as a movement took hold simultaneously in the other arts.

Let me finish with a quotation from filmmaker Raúl Ruíz, who has been long concerned with poetry and painting in cinema.

> What is a symbol?
> It is to say one thing and mean another.
> Why not say it right out?
> For the simple reason that certain phenomena tend to dissolve when we approach them without ceremony. [E. Wind, quoted by (Ruíz 2005, 6)]

Indeed. And through his symbolic cinema of poetry, Epstein certainly managed to approach Poe's universe in such a way that it did not dissolve. Its always already cinematic aspects finally became cinema, on the screen. In sum, in Poe's tales, cinematic features related to visual art, perspective and light prefigure not only cinema but also digital art. And Epstein's adaptation of Poe's narrative incorporating poetry, music and painting from the literary text, is an extraordinary example of this artistic interbreeding.

Works Cited

Baudelaire, Charles. *Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe.* Vol. II, in *Baudelaire. Œuvres complètes*, by Charles Baudelaire, edited by Claude Pichois, 319-337. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, [1857] 1976.

Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sounds on Screen.* Translated by Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Drabble, Margaret. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature.* Edited by Margaret Drabble. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Epstein, Jean. "Photocine." 1928.

Finger, Anke, and Danielle Follett. “Introduction.” In *The Aesthetics of the Total Artwork*, edited by Anke Finger and Danielle Follett, 1-25. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.
Gil-Curiel, Germán. “From Page to Screen.” In *Impure Cinema: Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches to Film*, edited by Lúcia Nagib and Anne Jerslev. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013.
—. *The Early European Supernatural Tale: Five Variations on a Theme.* Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2012.
Gorbman, Claudia. *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music.* London: British Film Institute, 1987.
Greenaway, Peter. *Veronese: The Wedding at Cana.* New York: Charte Books, 2010.
Kroeber, Karl. *Make Believe in Film and Fiction: Visual versus Verbal Storytelling.* London: Palgrave, 2006.
Poe, Edgar Allan. *Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe.* London: Penguin Books, 1982.
Rhodes, John David. “Pasolini's Exquisite Flowers: The CInema of Poetry as a Theory of Art Cinema.” In *Global Art Cinema*, edited by Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, 142-163. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
Ruíz, Raúl. *Poetics of Cinema.* Translated by Brian Holmes. Paris: Dis Voir, 2005.
—. *Poetics of Cinema 2.* Translated by Carlos Morreo. Paris: Dis Voir, 2007.
Stubbs, John. *Federico Fellini as Auteur: Seven Aspects of his Films.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006.
Turvey, Malcolm. “Epstein, Bergson and Vision.” In *Eruopean Film Theory*, edited by Temenuga Trifonova, 93-107. London: Routledge, 2011.