



The Unknown © 1927 WB

The Fall of the House of Usher (1928)

Saturday 19 March 2022

Performing Live: Stephen Horne and Elizabeth-Jane Baldry

The term “French impressionism” is mostly associated with painting, but there was a loose school of filmmakers in the twenties going by the same name. The works of Epstein, Dulac, Delluc and L’Herbier often featured diffuse or distorted images, sometimes motivated by scenes of delirium, drunkenness, dizziness. They covered a gamut from the straight narrative film to the wild experiment. Most often, they were narratives with experimental elements, motivated by the delirium that overtakes the characters.

Jean Epstein, working often with his sister Marie, was perhaps the finest of these filmmakers, and his adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* finds a perfect motivation for its hazy, dreamlike imagery in the nightmarish, irrational world of Poe’s fiction.

Poe has been adapted for cinema promiscuously since the days of D.W. Griffith, but filmmakers have often struggled to match a filmic style to his irrational, quasi-surreal stories (superfan Dario Argento calls them “non-Cartesian,” if that’s any help). Though Poe anticipates the horror movie by writing weird tales in an appropriately weird style, to create a thick, disorienting atmosphere in which the impossible can happen and seem natural, his stories usually lack conventionally motivated heroes and villains. Roger Corman, adapting this same book in the sixties, had to convince his producers to back it by saying it was a monster movie, in which *the house is the monster*.

Though future surrealist film maestro Luis Bunuel worked as an assistant on this version, Epstein disparaged surrealism and indeed fired the mouthy Spaniard midway through production for dissing filmmaker Abel Gance (who makes a cameo appearance as a tipsy bar customer). Rather than shooting strange events in a straightforward style, as Bunuel would do, erasing the distinction between waking and dream, Epstein seems more inclined to impose a dreamlike effect on everything, with filters, double exposures, slow motion and spectral, gliding camera movements combining to oneiric effect, enhanced by smoke, mist, reflections and other devices that blur or distort, as when the protagonist reads a letter using a magnifying glass.

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Epstein also favours detail shots to tell the story, eschewing the full-figure compositions so common in silent cinema in favour of fragments – hands, feet, faces and objects – assembled in the edit to create inescapable connections, everything seeming close-up and unquestionable, as in a dream. Spaces are created not so much through wide master shots, but through little bits of film that add up to a portrait that exists only in our imaginations: in this sense, Epstein is quite Hitchcockian, at a time when Hitchcock was barely known. Close-up of a man looking. Close-up of what he's looking at. The eyeline creates a sense of the total scene, the relationship between spectator and object, but we never actually see this.

As Hitchcock showed, it's a technique peculiarly suited to creating tension, and this proto-horror film creates considerable chills and suspense by making us put the pieces together in our heads. When Epstein does shoot a wide shot, he goes to extremes, so that the figures are dots in a landscape or dolls in cavernous chambers. Then suddenly they're massive, disembodied heads staring at each other with some kind of intense emotion...

Epstein's adaptation anticipates later genre entries to a remarkable degree: the scene where staff and customers in a wayside inn react with alarm and suspicion to the hero's stated destination at the titular house, has reappeared in countless Dracula movies to the point of parody.

Usher has always been a popular tale to adapt: besides from Corman's drive-in version with Vincent Price, there's the experimental-expressionistic take by Americans James Sibley Watson & Melville Webber, which appeared the same year as Epstein's, a semi-animated version by Czech surrealist Jan Svankmayer, and a creaky but spooky semi-professional version made in Britain in 1950. It doesn't seem essential for the filmmakers to decide what the story means, and Poe is at pains not to tell us. But simply by following the irrational narrative, in a sufficiently stylish and mysterious manner, the piece works its magic. Epstein is true to the tale, and rather than expanding it with irrelevances to turn the short story into a feature, he unfolds the events at a suitably somnambulistic pace, which never gets dull because everything is just so sinister, so strange...

Not that Epstein didn't have strong views on what made Poe work. He objected to Baudelaire's translations, claiming the French decadent poet mistook "innocence" for "ghastliness." And so here, the morbidity is second to the beauty. After all, Epstein liked to insist that the dead in Poe's works are "*only slightly dead.*"

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By **David Cairns**. *David is a filmmaker, writer, academic and critic who blogs at Shadowplay dcairns.wordpress.com*

Director. Jean Epstein | Adapted for Screen and Written by. Luis Buñuel and Jean Epstein | Cinematography. Georges Lucas and Jean Lucas | France | 1928 | N/C PG | French intertitles with English surtitles | 1h 3m

With: Jean Debucourt, Marguerite Gance, Charles Lamy, Fourniez-Goffard, and Luc Dartagnan.

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