Evert Jan van Leeuwen, *House of Usher*
(Auteur Publishing/Liverpool University Press, 2019)

The 'Devil's Advocates' series from Auteur Publishing, a series of books each focused on a single horror film, gives authors a set of affordances (such as discretion about how to approach talking about the movie), with a set of constraints to match (most obviously, a short length). Evert Jan van Leeuwen's contribution, on the American International Pictures film *House of Usher* (dir. by Roger Corman, 1960), is somewhat lighter on production history than some others in the series. However, the trade-off is that it features more textual analysis than most in the series, including some approaches to the film that I had never considered. On the whole, it is an informative read, but might work best when paired with some of the biographical and oral-history material out there on Corman, to produce a more holistic view of the film, especially with regards to Corman's business practices and the longer arc of his career.[1] That said, there is good material in the book on Edgar Allan Poe and his original story, 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), as well as some valuable material that considers the film as a youth movie at the moment of that genre's ascendancy.

Poe's story was first published in 1839, and Corman first read it in high school around 100 years later (p. 11). Van Leeuwen notes that Corman read it alongside pulp science fiction and horror, as did many others his age, and that the sensibilities of Romanticist gothic horror and exciting contemporary genre fiction therefore became entwined for him (p. 11). The ability to work from historical trends in the context of contemporary tastes was a constant for Corman. His cycle (as a producer) of post-*Bonnie and Clyde* gangster pictures for New World Pictures in the 1970s, such as *Big Bad Mama* (dir. by Steve Carver, 1974) and *The Lady in Red* (dir. by Lewis Teague, 1979), are a case in point, where thrillers from the hard-boiled crime genre of the Depression Era are made anew for young audiences with a taste for exploitation cinema.

Towards the end of the book, van Leeuwen shows how *House of Usher* was calculated to appeal to youth audiences, whose interests had come to be served not only by prior Corman films, including the then-recently released beatnik shocker *A Bucket of Blood* (1959), but also by movies featuring young, brooding actors such as Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (dir. by Laszlo Benedek, 1953) and James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (dir. by Nicholas Ray, 1955). Beyond the good looks of Mark Damon (as Philip Winthrop) and Myrna Fahey (as Madeline

[1] See Beverly Gray, *Roger Corman: Blood-Sucking Vampires, Flesh-Eating Cockroaches, and Driller Killers* (AZ Ferris Publications, 2013); *Roger Corman: Interviews*, ed. by Constantine Nasr (University Press of Mississippi, 2011); and the documentary *Corman's World: Exploits of a Hollywood Rebel* (dir. by Alex Stapleton, 2011).

Usher), the frustrated situation of Vincent Price's Roderick Usher had its own appeal. Van Leeuwen notes that 'the plot encourages the presumed adolescent audience to sympathise with Price's misfit, despite the increasingly unhinged state of his mind and appearance' (p. 73). Price achieves this not only with his performance, which stresses big gestures and agonised facial expressions (p. 74), but also with the whole set-up of Usher's curse. As van Leeuwen puts it:

> This sense of imprisonment in the family home must have struck a chord with adolescent audiences who were probably at the cinema to get away from their parents. The daily life experienced by Roderick would be the very nightmare future scenario teenagers would be dreading: a life of 24/7 domestic imprisonment brought about by the wrongs of the fathers. In teenage terms Roderick has been grounded indefinitely, which must make him sympathetic. (p. 73)

While Corman's own sympathies with youth issues would only become more extreme and switched-on over the course of the next decade (culminating with the drug-centric narratives of *The Trip* (1967) and *Gas-s-s-s-s* (1970)), he shows himself at this stage to be able to make something as esoteric as a Poe short story relevant to the teens of his day.

Two other areas of van Leeuwen's analysis deserve specific praise: his handling of the plot and its relation to the screenplay (and along with it, his discussion of Richard Matheson's adaptation of Poe's story); and the visual style of the film, which perhaps more than anything accounts for the movie's longevity, and its eventual inclusion on the United States National Film Registry of the Library of Congress. Van Leeuwen deals with the strange plot of Poe's tale early in this book, noting its atypical structure. Instead of horror's usual staging of disruptions to the status quo, he sees Poe's story as structured around 'lengthy introductions leading to the revelation of a horrific or darkly wonderful tableau' (p. 23). In adapting the story, one of the challenges discussed is the narrative externalisation of some of the interior horrors and anguish experienced by Philip and Roderick, which the author shows to be recalibrated to suit filmic monologues and a talking through of experiences (pp. 42-43). Corman also retains Poe's sense of the story as about suppressed familial revelations that come bursting forth, in this case through lush colour cinematography.

Like other books in the 'Devil's Advocates' series, this one makes good use of small frame grabs presented in sequence. In the passages exploring the film's *mise en scène*, these are especially helpful. I particularly liked the contextualisation of visual elements from *House of Usher* next to other Corman films like *War of the Satellites* (1958), or in terms of Romantic art works, such as when van Leeuwen compares the matte paintings in the film to works by Caspar David Friedrich (pp. 45-54). Despite his penchant for showmanship and exploitative

money making, Corman emerges here as an erudite man, able to make visual references to *vanitas* compositions, and to allude to expressionist paintings while also indulging the morbid fantasies of the audience in more directly unsettling ways.

With Corman recently passing away at 98, a work like *House of Usher* seems even more remarkable for its maturity, despite it being made by a director who was then barely in middle age, and who clearly had young audiences in mind at a time when that market was just emerging. Corman continued to chase youth audiences later in his career, though often tried to reconcile it with his literate sensibilities, as in his last film as a director, *Frankenstein Unbound* (1990). Corman was so long lived that his career continued as these audiences steadily fractured into ever more niche fandoms, and as the ritual of teen movie going underwent several revisions, from drive-ins, to multiplexes, to video-store outings, to homebound streaming. Despite this, his legacy will continue to be understood as pioneering for this demographic.

This is a fine contribution to the 'Devil's Advocates' series and, when supplemented with other work on Corman, helps elucidate this key phase in his endlessly fascinating career.

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