

# ***The Fall of the House of Usher***

By Scott Simmon

*From the National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPF) Treasures of the American Archives DVD program notes, by permission of NFPF and Scott Simmon*

American avant-garde cinema arose in the 1920s when inspired amateurs schooled in other arts turned to film. “The Fall of the House of Usher” is the most renowned and technically accomplished work of these pioneers.

The two collaborators, James Sibley Watson Jr. and Melville Webber, came to filmmaking from diverse, revealing backgrounds. Watson received his medical doctorate in 1923 and published the influential U.S. literary journal “The Dial” throughout the 1920s. Among frequent contributors to “The Dial” was poet e.e. cummings, who wrote an early scenario for this film (as well as for Watson’s unfinished “The Dinner Party” [1925]). Webber was an art historian at the University of Rochester, in New York, specializing in medieval frescoes. He designed and painted the striking sets in a barn behind Watson’s Rochester home. The team’s only other released film, “Lot in Sodom” (1933), carries further “Usher’s” hints of forbidden desire, from incest into the homoerotic. After World War II, Watson brought his medical and filmmaking interests together into a strange series of comic X-ray films.

“The Dial” also published groundbreaking reappraisals of Edgar Allan Poe. The two filmmakers claimed that they chose to adapt Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” because neither had read it in years and so would not be chained to its plotline. Be that as it may, it is hard to make much sense of their film without recalling the outlines of Poe’s story, its atmosphere of mental disorder, and its unrelenting Gothic imagery: In a decaying castle surrounded by a dank, mirrored lake live the morbidly nervous Roderick Usher and his sickly twin sister, Madeline.



*Herbert Stern as Roderick Usher is tormented by mysterious sounds and visions. Courtesy National Film Preservation Foundation.*

Their tale is told and dimly comprehended by the unnamed narrator, a boyhood friend whom Roderick has summoned. When Madeline soon dies—or seems to die—they entomb her body. On a stormy night, “cracking and ripping” sounds and a “shriek” from below convince the panicky Roderick that “we have put her living into the tomb!” The shrouded, emaciated figure of Madeline appears at the door of Roderick’s book-strewn study, falls upon him, “and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse.” The aghast narrator has time only to flee the castle before it begins to crumble. By the light of the moon, he watches it sink forever into “the deep and dark tarn at my feet.”

The film was made without written intertitles, and additional difficulties for the viewer arise from the filmmakers’ modern interpretation of the story. Twentieth-century literary critics have argued that Poe’s tale acts out the fears and desires of a single consciousness. The film similarly conflates the two men and the twin siblings and destabilizes the “house” of Usher both as physical building and family tree. The obsessive images are collapsing staircases and floating coffins.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” combines European influences with something home crafted. Watson had seen the German expressionist film “The

Cabinet of Dr. Caligari” more than once during its 1921 New York City run. Not only do “Usher”’s impossibly angled sets draw from that film, but the top-hatted, cloaked “traveler” (played in expressionist makeup by Webber) seems to echo the figure of Dr. Caligari himself. Less obvious now is the French influence. Whereas “Caligari” expressed a madman’s consciousness through set design and stylized acting alone, French experimental filmmaking of the twenties typically represented disturbed mental states through elaborate camera tricks and optical distortions. Indeed, such a style animates the more celebrated 1928 version of Poe’s story, Jean Epstein’s feature-length “La Chute de la maison Usher.”

In an article of the same year titled “An Amateur Studio Picture,” Watson argued that such European modernist styles could carry a filmmaker only so far. He proposed returning to the “old tricks” of the camera, even to Hollywood studio techniques, but using them selectively to craft a personal vision that was proudly “amateur.” With its sophisticated camera effects and superimpositions accomplished on Watson’s handcrafted optical printer, “The Fall of the House of Usher” challenges Hollywood on its own terms.

#### *About the Preservation*

French avant-garde filmmakers of the twenties built a network of cine-clubs and theoretical journals. American counterparts tended to be more isolated figures whose work was less noticed even at the

time. Perhaps in consequence, most silent American avant-garde cinema has been lost or survives only in reedited or 16mm reduction copies—and these were often saved, ironically, by European film archives. One happy exception is the films of James Sibley Watson Jr. whose early works (including the unreleased and incomplete films) have been preserved from their original 35mm nitrate negatives at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. Watson’s optical printer is also housed in the collections.

#### *Further Reading*

The groundbreaking anthology about the forgotten origins of U.S. avant-garde filmmaking is “Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945” edited by Jan-Christopher Horak (University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). It includes one of the few published essays on Watson and Webber, by Lisa Cartwright.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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