

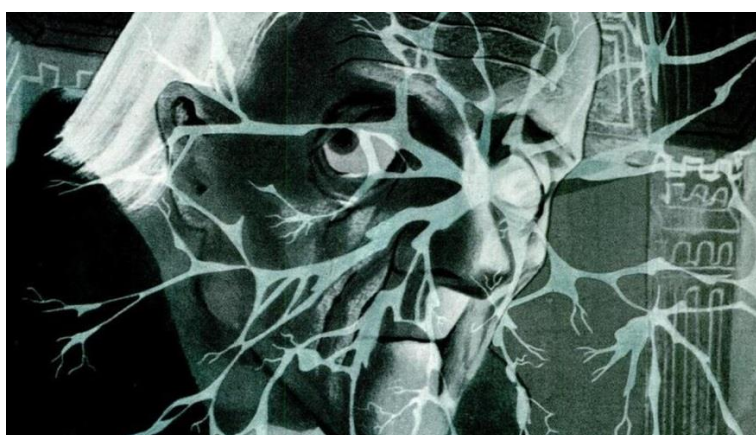
The 19th British Silent Film Festival



An evening of Edgar Allan Poe silent film adaptations

Wednesday 13 September at 8pm-10pm

St Mary De Castro Church, Leicester



Bryony Dixon, the BFI's silent film curator, presents an evening of Edgar Allan Poe silent films, with sound and music from Phil Carli, Neil Brand, Stephen Horne and John Sweeney.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809 -1849) master of the macabre has inspired filmmakers for generations. His particularly evocative stories and poems conjure up imagery that unsettles us – their ghostlike, gossamer quality of hideous things not quite seen or only seen in our peripheral vision, present an irresistible challenge for filmmakers. These silent films (and one sound) are linked by one of Poe's obsessions – the idea of premature burial. Poe knew a lot about death – his mother died in her early twenties of TB as did his foster mother and then his wife (and cousin) Virginia at the age of only 24. In his works the theme occurs again and again - Madeline in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the old man in *Tell Tale Heart* and the man in *Prelude* are all buried, if not quite alive then still undead. It is the nebulousness of these boundaries that creates the fear in the reader or viewer. As we know the scariest films are not necessarily the one's that show us horrifying things but one's where we can't quite see and don't quite understand.

Running Order:

On being buried alive: Edgar Allan Poe on film – an intro with readings from the author by Bryony Dixon, *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1953) 8mins, *Prelude* (1927) 7mins, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928) 14 mins, *The Tell Tale Heart* (1928) 22 mins

The Tell-Tale Heart (US, 1953)

Directed by Ted Parmelee, Production Company: UPA, Producer: Stephen Bosustow, Based on the short story by: Edgar Allan Poe, Designer: Eugene Berman

Cast: James Mason

Fantastic fifties animation of Poe's famous story with words beautifully spoken by James Mason.

***Time Magazine* 14 September 1953:**

The Tell-Tale Heart is the seven-minute tour of a madman's mind. Based on Edgar Allen Poe's chilling short story, powerfully narrated in a voice just this side of frenzy by Actor James Mason, the film is one of the first attempts to use the animated cartoon to tell a psychological horror tale.

Moviegoers may be more dazed than frightened by its explosion of colour and form, by the haunting transformation of staring eyes into milk pitchers and tables into tombstones, as the madman murders to find peace and then hysterically confesses his crime to three iron-faced (and sometimes headless) policemen.

Extracts from *Star*, 1 May 1954

I have just seen a film thriller in which not a single actor appears. It is a cartoon adaptation of Edgar Allen Poe's macabre tale The Tell-Tale Heart made by Disney's chief rival Stephen Bosustow.

But there is nothing joyous about the Tell-Tale Heart which is showing at the Rialto.

The British censor has given it an adults-only certificate and I am not surprised. Though it lasts only seven minutes they were among the most terrifying I have ever spent in a cinema. Bosustow's drawings- some of them mere abstract patterns – bring a chill fascination to Poe's story of the murderer who imagines he hears the heart of his victim beating beneath the floorboards.

Prelude (UK, 1927)

Directed by Castleton Knight, Screenplay by Castleton Knight

Castleton Knight wrote and stars in this short adaptation of Poe's story 'Buried Alive' – to be played with Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C sharp minor.

The Fall of the House of Usher (US, 1928)

A Melville Weber Production, Directed by James Sibley Watson, Screenplay by Melville Webber, Cinematography by James Sibley Watson, Art Director: Melville Webber

A short silent adaptation of Poe's famous horror story "The Fall of the House of Usher". It tells the story of a brother and sister who live under a family curse using unusual camera angles, prisms to split the images and double exposures.

Extracts from *Films and Filming*, September 1976, p.40:

Made in 1928, The Fall of the House of Usher is a free and extremely condensed version of Poe's short story, more a fantasia on its thematic content than anything else more concrete. In design, it is strongly influenced by the German Expressionism of Caligari and the like, though what sets there are are used with considerably more freedom; in fact, it is when the filmmakers reach out into pure abstract that the work achieves a fluidity denied it during the more formal (and generally uninspired) set-pieces – like the opening dinner party – inserted as little more than a device for advancing the plot.

***The Tell-tale Heart* (US, 1928)**

Directed by Charles Klein

Production Company: N.F.L.

Producer: Maurice Barber

Screenplay by Charles Klein

Cinematography by Leon Shamroy

Sets by Charles Klein

Cast: Otto Matiesen (The murderer), Charles Darvas, Kurt de Surberg

A silent telling of the tale in the avant garde style of the previous film that clearly owes a debt to the expressionist design of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*



Extracts from *The Film Spectator*, 9 June 1928, p.II:

The Tell-Tale Heart, one of Edgar Allen Poe's short stories, has come to the screen. Maurice Barber presents it, but it might have been presented by the author himself, if he were still in the flesh, for it has the stark realism of Poe's pen, his cold precision, his unrelenting exactitude. It uncovers another screen genius in the person of Charles F. Klein, who conceived the idea of filming the story, who adapted it to the screen, built the sets and directed two reels.

The story is of a madman's recital of a murder he committed, and is told as if the madman tells it. Otto Mattiesen is the murderer, and he gives a truly magnificent performance, one of the most superb bits of super-dramatic acting that it has been my good fortune to see on the screen. The combined art of Klein and Mattiesen is so impressive that the picture is robbed of the horror and gruesomeness of the facts it deals with, although it offers no compromises with the original.

Practically all the action takes place in one setting, which is distorted until almost weird, its mood matching admirably that of the story. Charles Darvas and Kurt de Surberg contribute intelligent performances as representatives of French law. As symbols of the law they move and speak in unison, cleverly bringing out the stolidity and unimaginative routine of the legal machine. The Tell-Tale Heart should be a valuable addition to any program presented to an audience that contains a fair percentage of people of intelligence.

Programme notes compiled by Bryony Dixon and Jenny Stewart



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