

**THE HORROR OF MISREADING: POE'S LITERARY
INTENT AND THE PROBLEM OF CONTEMPORARY
ADAPTATION¹**

Petru Ștefan IONESCU

1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia, Romania

Email: petru.ionescu@uab.ro

Abstract

This article reconsiders the problem of fidelity in adaptation by focusing on Edgar Allan Poe, a writer whose works present unique challenges for cinematic interpretation. Poe's fiction is less about plot than about atmosphere, ambiguity, and the aesthetic principle he termed the "unity of effect." His narratives demand a confrontation with mortality, madness, and existential dread, while deliberately resisting moral didacticism and ideological overlay.

Through comparative case studies—Roger Corman's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964), Federico Fellini's *Toby Dammit in Spirits of the Dead* (1968), and Mike Flanagan's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023)—the article analyzes how filmmakers negotiate Poe's intent. Corman's gothic stylization and Fellini's surrealist modernism preserve Poe's existential and aesthetic core, while Flanagan's reimagining reframes Poe's stories as corporate morality tales imbued with controversial cultural ideology. This shift illustrates how

¹ Article History: Received: 02.09.2025. Revised: 30.09.2025. Accepted: 01.10.2025. Published: 15.11.2025. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution License CC BY-NC 4.0. Citation: IONESCU, P.Ș. (2025). *THE HORROR OF MISREADING: POE'S LITERARY INTENT AND THE PROBLEM OF CONTEMPORARY ADAPTATION*. *Incursiuni în imaginar* 16. *IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR/ L'IMAGINAIRE ET LES ADAPTATIONS DU TEXTE LITTÉRAIRE/ LITERARY ADAPTATIONS AND THE IMAGINARY*. Vol. 16. Nr. 2. 29-47. <https://doi.org/10.29302/InImag.2025.16.2.1>. No funding was received either for the research presented in the article or for the creation of the article.

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

contemporary adaptations risk transforming Poe into what he most resisted: a moralist.

The argument is grounded in Linda Hutcheon's and Robert Stam's adaptation theory, Noël Carroll's philosophy of horror, and Harold Bloom's account of "misreading." It contends that fidelity to Poe must be measured philosophically rather than textually: what matters is whether an adaptation sustains Poe's confrontation with the uncanny and the inescapability of death. By reframing Poe within adaptation debates, the article demonstrates how fidelity, far from being an outdated criterion, remains essential for certain authors whose works are defined by an uncompromising philosophical core.

Keywords: Poe; adaptation; intentions; fidelity; misreading.

1 Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe remains one of the most read and yet most frequently misunderstood figures in world literature. His tales of madness, obsession, death, and decay have inspired generations of filmmakers, but cinematic responses to Poe vary widely in how they approach the task of adaptation. For Poe, literature was an aesthetic enterprise, not a vehicle for moral instruction or political commentary. His theoretical writings, particularly *The Philosophy of Composition* and *The Poetic Principle*, emphasize the "unity of effect," wherein every artistic element must contribute to an overwhelming mood of beauty and terror. To adapt Poe, then, is to translate not merely narrative content but a philosophical core: the confrontation with mortality, existential dread, and psychological fragility.

This article contends that fidelity in adaptation—so often critiqued in theory—remains crucial in Poe's case. While scholars such as Linda Hutcheon and Robert Stam highlight the creative freedoms inherent in adaptation, Poe's works resist ideological overlay and moral simplification. Drawing on Harold Bloom's reflections on influence and Noël Carroll's philosophy of horror, this study explores three cinematic approaches: Roger Corman's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964), which channels Poe's fatalism through gothic stylization; Federico Fellini's *Toby Dammit* (1968), which reimagines Poe's existential anxieties in surrealist form; and

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

Mike Flanagan's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023), which – simply stated – reframes Poe as a corporate morality tale set in a very contemporary world of cultural ideology.

Mike Flanagan's Netflix miniseries represents both an ambitious adaptation and a fundamental misreading of Edgar Allan Poe's literary vision. While the series successfully captures certain atmospheric elements of Poe's work, it transforms his carefully crafted exploration of psychological deterioration and moral ambiguity into a contemporary morality tale about corporate greed, systemic corruption, and cultural activism. This transformation reveals a profound misunderstanding of Poe's artistic and philosophical intentions, reducing his nuanced examination of human psychology to a more conventional narrative of good versus evil. By analyzing the series through the lens of Poe's original aesthetic philosophy and thematic concerns, this essay argues that Flanagan's adaptation sacrifices the essential ambiguity and psychological complexity that define Poe's greatest works in favor of social commentary that is fundamentally antithetical to the author's artistic vision.

By situating these case studies within adaptation theory and Poe scholarship, the article demonstrates that fidelity, understood as philosophical authenticity rather than literal replication, is essential to preserving the enduring power of Poe's literary vision.

2. Poe's Literary Theories: The Primacy of Aesthetics and the "Unity of Effect"

To understand the extent of the miniseries' departure from Poe's intentions, one must first establish the foundational principles of Poe's aesthetic philosophy. In essays such as *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846) and *The Poetic Principle* (1850) Poe articulated his theory of the "unity of effect," setting forth guiding principles for art and arguing that every element of a literary work should contribute to a single, overwhelming emotional impact upon the reader. This principle extends beyond mere technical construction to encompass a philosophical commitment to psychological verisimilitude and

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

the exploration of extreme mental states. Poe was unusual among American writers of his time in that he was a self-conscious theorist of literature focusing on the idea of the primacy of aesthetics and unity of effect. For Poe, literature was not a vehicle for moral instruction, religious edification, or social critique; it was an aesthetic enterprise, aiming to create beauty, intensity, and emotional resonance.

This emphasis on aesthetics over didacticism sets Poe apart from the Transcendentalists (e.g., Emerson and Thoreau) and other American writers invested in literature as a moral force. Poe was openly critical of what he regarded as the naïve optimism and moralizing tendencies of his contemporaries. Instead, his works sought to uncover truths about the human condition that were unsettling, ambiguous, and resistant to moral resolution.

Poe's Gothic fiction is characterized by its focus on individual psychology rather than social critique. His protagonists typically exist in isolation, removed from broader social contexts, allowing for an intensive examination of consciousness under extreme duress. The original *Fall of the House of Usher* exemplifies this approach: Roderick Usher's decline occurs within a hermetically sealed environment where external social forces are deliberately excluded. The house itself becomes a psychological metaphor, reflecting the protagonist's mental state rather than serving as a symbol of institutional decay.

The philosophical underpinning of Poe's work rests on his exploration of what he termed "perverseness" - the human tendency toward self-destruction that operates independently of rational motivation or moral consideration. This concept, developed across stories like *The Imp of the Perverse* and *The Black Cat*, suggests that human behavior is driven by irrational impulses that cannot be explained through conventional moral frameworks. This philosophical position places Poe's work in fundamental opposition to didactic literature that seeks to deliver clear moral lessons.

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

3 Themes of Existential Dread and Psychological Complexity

Poe's fiction often dramatizes the instability of human consciousness. Stories such as *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Black Cat*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher* embody psychological states of paranoia, obsession, guilt, and madness. These are not merely gothic thrills; they are explorations of consciousness itself, anticipating later psychological literature from Dostoevsky to Freud. Poe's narrators are unreliable, fractured, and consumed by internal contradictions. The horror in his works often arises not from external forces but from within—the mind's own abyss.

The Masque of the Red Death exemplifies Poe's existential vision. Here, the inevitability of death intrudes upon human attempts at denial, excess, and escape. Prince Prospero's efforts to isolate himself from plague and mortality only underscore the futility of human arrogance before the universal reality of death. Poe's insistence on mortality as the ultimate reality, unsoftened by religious consolation or moral allegory, reflects his commitment to facing the darkest truths of human existence without ideological buffers.

4 Poe's Artistic and Societal Vision

Poe's vision of art was deeply individualistic and often anti-mainstream. In both his criticism and creative work, he resisted the prevailing utilitarian view that literature should serve moral or civic purposes. He instead argued for a type of art for art's sake *avant la lettre*, a position later echoed by the French Decadents and Symbolists (e.g., Baudelaire, Mallarmé) who hailed him as a precursor.

Socially, Poe was skeptical of the democratic optimism pervading mid-nineteenth-century America. While writers like Whitman celebrated the vitality of the American republic, Poe often portrayed society as corrupt, hypocritical, and shallow. His satirical tales, such as *The Man That Was Used Up* and *Some Words with a Mummy*, reveal his suspicion of progress and technological triumphalism. For Poe, the social order was neither

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

inherently good nor redeemable—it was subject to the same decay, absurdity, and moral corruption as the individuals within it.

5 Harold Bloom and the “Anxiety of Influence”

In his theory of the “The Anxiety of Influence”, Harold Bloom (1997) places Poe in a complex position within the Western canon. Bloom admired Poe’s imaginative force but often questioned his intellectual depth. For Bloom, Poe was not a philosophical system-builder but a poet of primal psychic energies, whose works express archetypal fears and desires. While Bloom’s critical stance toward Poe can be dismissive—he once suggested Poe’s greatness lies in his influence on greater writers such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé—this very influence underscores Poe’s originality.

Bloom interprets Poe as an originator of gothic archetypes that resonate with unconscious psychic structures: the haunted house, the double, the premature burial, the obsession with death and beauty. In this sense, Poe becomes a mythmaker of modernity, his works embodying anxieties that transcend historical context and remain culturally resonant. This way, his groundbreaking and enduring work preserves all its original intentions only if accurately adapted; otherwise, his role as a mythmaker of modernity and master of the *Grotesque and Arabesque* is in danger of being irreversibly diluted into an ideologically framed misrepresentation. Poe’s adapted work can thus become irrelevant to the author’s true intentions and convey a distorted message to contemporary audiences.

6 Poe’s Literary Intent, Philosophical Core, and the Problem of Adaptation Fidelity. From Literary Theory to Cinematic Practice

Poe’s literary intent, rooted in his aesthetic theories and existential concerns, poses unique challenges for film adaptation. His works are not primarily plot-driven but rather meditations on mood, atmosphere, and psychology. The “unity of effect” he championed demands that every detail—tone, rhythm, imagery,

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

even punctuation—contributes to a single overwhelming impression. Transposing this into cinema requires not simply retelling a story but translating its philosophical essence: the confrontation with madness, death, ambiguity, and beauty.

Thus, the question of fidelity in adaptation is especially critical with Poe. If fidelity were understood narrowly as adherence to plot or dialogue, then many adaptations could claim success. But if fidelity means preserving Poe's literary and philosophical core, the measure becomes more demanding. Filmmakers must ask: does the adaptation reproduce not merely what happens in the story but what Poe intended his readers to feel, confront, and endure?

Poe rejected the idea of literature as moral instruction or ideological critique. His art was about creating aesthetic intensity and exposing psychological truths. This means that adaptations which overlay his stories with overt political or social agendas (however timely) risk betraying his intent. To recast Poe's tales of existential dread into didactic allegories of capitalism, morality, or progress is to reinsert the very didacticism Poe rejected.

On the other hand, adaptations faithful to Poe's aesthetic and philosophical concerns—madness, decay, mortality, the uncanny—can reinterpret his works creatively without distortion. Fellini's surrealism or Corman's gothic stylization succeed not because they reproduce Poe literally, but because they channel his underlying vision of beauty, terror, and existential confrontation.

7 Adaptation Theory and Poe's Case

Linda Hutcheon (2006) in *A Theory of Adaptation* argues that adaptation is always an act of "re-creation," dialogic rather than reproductive. With Poe, this means fidelity cannot be about slavish reproduction but about meaningful engagement with his existential and aesthetic core.

Robert Stam (2004) in his *Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation*, cautions against "fidelity discourse," yet Poe's case illustrates that some degree of fidelity is crucial: otherwise the

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

work ceases to be Poe and becomes a contemporary product wearing his name.

Noël Carroll (1990) emphasizes in *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, horror's philosophical role in forcing audiences to confront existential dread. Corman (1964) and Fellini (1968) succeed because they preserve this philosophical confrontation; Flanagan falters when dread is displaced by ideological critique.

The theoretical frame applied here draws heavily upon Linda Hutcheon's concept of adaptation as an interpretative dialogue rather than mere reproduction. Hutcheon argues that adaptations should ideally engage meaningfully with the source text's central thematic concerns. In this context, meaningful adaptation involves careful preservation of Poe's existential, psychological, and philosophical core. A successful adaptation need not rigidly reproduce narrative details but must maintain fidelity to essential thematic and philosophical truths.

Furthermore, Noël Carroll's seminal work *The Philosophy of Horror* highlights that authentic horror fiction, exemplified by Poe, forces audiences to confront profound moral ambiguity and existential terror. Carroll emphasizes that genuine horror transcends superficial scares, providing instead philosophical reflections on human nature and existence. Thus, adaptations reducing Poe's narratives to contemporary ideological critiques or mainstream entertainment undermine the genre's profound philosophical potential.

This theoretical perspective elucidates precisely why Corman's adaptations retain cultural and philosophical relevance, while Flanagan's ideological reinterpretations diminish Poe's universal existential resonance. It is not that Flanagan's ideological critiques lack validity - indeed, they resonate with contemporary cultural discourse - but rather that Poe's authentic narratives embody philosophical inquiries into human existence that transcend specific historical or political contexts. Reducing Poe's stories to social critiques restricts rather than expands their interpretive and philosophical scope.

8 Three different types of adaptations

In this article we distinguish between three different approaches to the adaptation of Poe's literary works into film.

First, we analyze Roger Corman's *Masque of the Red Death* (1964): while not literal reproductions, they remain faithful to Poe's core philosophical anxieties - mortality, decadence, moral corruption, existential terror. They sustain the "unity of effect" by immersing viewers in a claustrophobic, fatalistic aesthetic consistent with Poe's vision. This would be the most faithful adaptation of Poe's literary, philosophical, and psychological intentions.

The second type of film adaptation discussed in the paper is Federico Fellini's *Toby Dammit* (1968): here, Poe's themes are transposed into a modern context (celebrity culture, alienation), yet the existential essence remains intact. The surrealist style, while not Poe's own, becomes a cinematic analogue for his psychological landscapes. Fidelity here is not literal but philosophical and aesthetic.

Although culturally corresponding to contemporary concerns and ideology and cinematically spectacular, Mike Flanagan's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023) stands in complete contrast to the previous adaptations and to Poe's intentions. This adaptation could be characterized as formally sophisticated but ideologically reoriented. Poe's existential and psychological terrors are subordinated to contemporary critiques of corporate greed and capitalism. In terms of fidelity to Poe's original artistic and philosophical intent, such works fall short, precisely because they instrumentalize Poe's narratives for purposes external to his vision.

9 The Importance of Thematic Fidelity and Philosophical Authenticity

The comparison between Roger Corman's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964) and Mike Flanagan's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023) highlights a significant critical issue in adaptation studies: the necessity of thematic fidelity and philosophical

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

authenticity. While contemporary adaptations frequently subordinate Poe's narratives to contemporary aesthetics and ideological mainstream currents, faithful adaptations like Corman's respect Poe's original existential explorations and philosophical insights.

Maintaining this fidelity is not a limitation but a profound respect for literary and philosophical depth. Authentic adaptations preserve and amplify Poe's complex narrative worlds and philosophical vision, providing audiences with meaningful encounters with timeless existential truths. Contemporary filmmakers, while creatively interpreting Poe, should strive to retain his core philosophical essence, recognizing Poe's enduring literary significance lies precisely in his universal psychological and existential resonance, independent of shifting political or ideological paradigms.

To adapt Poe is to grapple not just with gothic plots but with an entire aesthetic and philosophical worldview. Fidelity, in this sense, means preserving the uncomfortable confrontation with mortality, madness, and ambiguity that defined Poe's art.

Corman achieves fidelity by visually amplifying Poe's themes within gothic stylization.

Fellini achieves fidelity by transposing them into modern, surrealist form without sacrificing their existential weight.

Flanagan undermines fidelity by overlaying Poe's core with contemporary ideological concerns, thereby diluting his timeless vision.

Thus, Poe becomes a test case for adaptation theory: he shows why fidelity cannot be dismissed as naïve. For some authors - Poe especially - the preservation of philosophical and aesthetic intent is essential if adaptation is to remain authentic.

10 Roger Corman's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964): Fidelity through Gothic Stylization

Roger Corman's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964), starring Vincent Price, is often hailed as the most sophisticated of Corman's "Poe cycle." What makes it exemplary is not slavish reproduction of Poe's text but its fidelity to Poe's aesthetic and

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

philosophical core. Corman translates Poe's atmosphere of existential dread into film through *mise-en-scène*, color symbolism, and Price's charismatic yet morally decadent performance.

One of the most striking techniques is Corman's use of color to visualize the allegorical spaces of Poe's tale. The sequence of colored chambers—each room representing a stage of life and culminating in the fatal black chamber—mirrors Poe's allegorical meditation on mortality (Poe, 1984, pp. 267–273). Cinematically, this becomes a choreography of color and camera movement, immersing the viewer in a sensory experience of inevitability and dread. This visual strategy exemplifies Poe's "unity of effect" (Poe, 1984; Hutcheon, 2006, pp. 141–145): every cinematic element contributes to the overarching mood of inescapable mortality.

Vincent Price's portrayal of Prince Prospero provides another close alignment with Poe's intent. Price embodies the aristocratic cruelty, decadence, and intellectual arrogance that Poe associated with the futility of human pride. His performance reflects Poe's depiction of moral corruption, but without moralizing retribution. Instead, it dramatizes existential futility (Carroll, 1990, pp. 158–160).

Corman also uses cinematic rhythm to maintain Poe's atmosphere. The pacing is deliberate, echoing what Robert Stam (2004, pp. 12–16) identifies as the adaptation's challenge: preserving the source's aesthetic tempo. The editing style avoids abrupt shocks; instead, it builds tension through inevitability, mirroring Poe's narrative cadence.

The climax—in which Prospero encounters the Red Death—visualizes Poe's existential fatalism. Instead of sensational violence, Corman stages this encounter as haunting inevitability. The Red Death, cloaked and calm, embodies universality rather than vengeance (Bloom, 1998, pp. 85–86). Corman thus preserves Poe's philosophical core: death is not punishment but the ultimate equalizer.

Critically, Corman shows how stylization and fidelity can coexist. His gothic artifice—lavish colors, ornate sets, stylized performances—does not betray Poe but channels his aesthetic.

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

Indeed, this artifice becomes the cinematic analogue of Poe's stylized prose (Leitch, 2007, pp. 15–18). In adapting Poe, Corman proves that fidelity means preserving the philosophical unity of effect, even when formal details are transformed.

11 Federico Fellini's *Toby Dammit* in *Spirits of the Dead* (1968): Surrealism as Philosophical Fidelity

Federico Fellini's "Toby Dammit," part of the anthology *Spirits of the Dead* (*Histoires Extraordinaires*) (1968), adapts Poe's satirical tale *Never Bet the Devil Your Head*. Fellini's version is not literal; he transforms Poe's story into a surreal meditation on celebrity, alienation, and death. Yet despite this radical formal innovation, Fellini remains faithful to Poe's existential-philosophical essence: the futility of pride, the inevitability of death, and the confrontation with inner emptiness.

The central character, Toby Dammit (Terence Stamp), is a washed-up actor lured to Rome with the promise of a Ferrari. Fellini uses disorienting camera angles, grotesque lighting, and a cacophonous soundscape to immerse viewers in Toby's psychological disintegration (Clover, 1992, pp. 21–25). This aligns with Poe's technique of unreliable narration and psychological descent (Peeples, 2013, pp. 115–118).

Fellini translates Poe's allegorical devil into a haunting cinematic figure: a small, eerie girl with a ball. Rather than a traditional satanic figure, she personifies mortality—innocent yet inexorable. By reimagining the devil this way, Fellini sustains Poe's theme of inevitability while infusing it with modern symbolic resonance (Stam, 2000, pp. 65–66).

The Ferrari becomes a symbolic device representing consumerist promises of transcendence. Yet in the climactic sequence, Toby's reckless drive leads to decapitation—a grotesque fulfillment of Poe's satirical punchline. Fellini stages the crash with surreal, nightmarish visuals: flashing lights, distorted reflections, grotesque spectators. The effect recalls Carroll's (1990, pp. 164–168) insistence that authentic horror relies on uncanny confrontation rather than shock spectacle.

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

What distinguishes Fellini's adaptation is how surrealism functions as fidelity. Poe's prose already verges on dream logic; Fellini visualizes this in cinematic terms. His Rome is not realistic but a stage for existential dread (Shohat & Stam, 1994, pp. 155–160). In this sense, Fellini demonstrates what Hutcheon (2006, pp. 142–148) calls adaptation as “reinterpretation,” engaging the original's philosophical vision through new aesthetic forms.

By modernizing Poe's tale into a parable of celebrity and alienation, Fellini shows that adaptation can innovate radically without betraying the source's core. His Toby Dammit embodies Poe's archetypes of obsession, despair, and inevitable collapse (Bloom, 1998, pp. 90–92). The result is not betrayal but expansion: Poe's existential concerns transposed into the symbolic register of twentieth-century cinema.

12 Flanagan's Usher and the Politics of Representation: Ideological Mainstreaming in Adaptation

In stark contrast to Corman's faithfulness, Mike Flanagan's recent Netflix adaptation of *The Fall of the House of Usher* exemplifies how contemporary adaptations frequently diverge from Poe's original literary purpose. Flanagan, acclaimed for his contemporary reworkings of classic horror, openly adapts Poe's symbolic narrative into a politically charged critique of modern capitalism, corporate corruption, and systemic injustice.

While Flanagan's series possesses artistic merit in isolation, the significant ideological reframing risks fundamentally misrepresenting Poe's central thematic elements. Poe's original narrative revolves around psychological horror, madness, existential isolation, decay, and family degeneration—symbolizing the inescapable fate of human mortality and internal moral disintegration. Flanagan's reframing shifts focus onto explicitly external, sociopolitical commentary, reflecting current ideological anxieties rather than Poe's timeless exploration of internal psychological dread.

This shift reflects Robert Stam's critical observation about adaptation fidelity: the ideological reshaping of a narrative can, even unintentionally, reduce complex literary texts to simplistic

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

moral allegories or contemporary commentaries. Flanagan's interpretation foregrounds explicit social criticism at the expense of Poe's subtle exploration of existential dread and moral ambiguity. Thus, Poe's psychological and philosophical complexity is considerably diluted.

One of the most conspicuous aspects of Mike Flanagan's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023) is its overt commitment to diversity in casting and characterization. The Usher family and their associates represent a wide range of ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations, a striking departure from the claustrophobic, insular households of Poe's fiction. This inclusivity aligns with the broader cultural mainstream of the early twenty-first century, in which the entertainment industry has sought to foreground representation as both an ethical and marketable imperative (Ahmed, 2012, pp. 21–45; Hall, 1997, pp. 13–30). While laudable in intention, this strategy raises questions about ideological fidelity: does such representational expansiveness enrich Poe's narratives, or does it recast them into vehicles for the prevailing political orthodoxy of our time?

Adaptation theory provides a useful lens here. Linda Hutcheon (2006, pp. 7–12) reminds us that every adaptation is an act of interpretation situated in its cultural context. For Flanagan, that context is one in which political correctness, diversity, and progressive values have become not just artistic choices but cultural expectations. Representation in this series functions less as a natural extension of narrative necessity and more as what Robert Stam (2000, pp. 64–72) calls an “ideological reframing”—where the adaptation reflects contemporary social concerns more than the existential anxieties of the source material. The result is a narrative in which identity politics intersects with gothic tropes, sometimes enhancing accessibility but often flattening Poe's ambiguous horror into sociopolitical allegory.

The ideological function of diversity becomes especially apparent when considered against Poe's original aesthetic of hereditary insularity and decay. In tales such as *The Fall of the House of Usher*, horror emerges from the claustrophobic enclosure of a family line collapsing inward on itself, symbolizing psychological fragility and existential inevitability (Poe, 1984).

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

Flanagan's Usher family, by contrast, is dispersed across identities and orientations in ways that diffuse this claustrophobia. The focus shifts from existential collapse to corporate corruption and social critique. The horror of inevitability—death as universal, inexplicable, and unredeemable—is replaced with moralized punishments mapped onto characters who conveniently embody recognizable “types” within today's discourse of privilege, greed, or exploitation.

This tension speaks to what cultural critics have identified as the didactic impulse of contemporary mainstream media. Whereas Poe rejected didacticism, refusing to moralize or align with dominant ideological positions, Flanagan's adaptation embeds diversity and representation in ways that clearly signal alignment with the progressive mainstream. What some audiences may welcome as inclusivity, others may interpret as ideological indoctrination—a cultural orthodoxy that adapts all narratives to reflect the politics of the present (Shohat & Stam, 1994, pp. 145–150; Žižek, 2008, pp. 1–26). In this view, Flanagan's *Usher* becomes less a meditation on mortality and madness than an allegory of contemporary Western liberal values.

The danger of this approach is twofold. First, it risks reducing Poe's existential ambiguities to moral clarity, undermining his refusal of consolation and his commitment to ambiguity (Bloom, 1998, pp. 85–87). Second, it situates Poe within a cultural discourse that may date quickly, tethering his timeless exploration of human fragility to the contingencies of contemporary ideological fashion. Noël Carroll's (1990, pp. 158–160) philosophy of horror emphasizes that authentic horror derives from confronting the inexplicable and the uncanny; when horror is subordinated to ideological reassurance, its philosophical force is diminished.

To be sure, there are counterarguments. One could claim that diversity allows Poe's themes to resonate with wider audiences and reflects the pluralism of contemporary society. Yet the question remains whether such inclusivity deepens or displaces Poe's vision. By expanding Poe's insular, fatalistic worlds into politically resonant morality tales, Flanagan risks transforming Poe into what he most resisted: a writer of lessons

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

and moral allegories. From a critical standpoint, this suggests that fidelity to Poe requires resisting not only commercial imperatives but also cultural mandates of ideological conformity, lest adaptation collapse into didacticism under the guise of inclusivity (Leitch, 2007, pp. 207–236).

13 Conclusion: Adaptation, Fidelity, and Poe's Philosophical Core

The conclusion can be drawn that the case studies discussed in the article converge and yet diverge to illustrate three distinct approaches:

Corman: fidelity through stylized translation, preserving Poe's existential fatalism.

Fellini: fidelity through surreal reinvention, updating Poe while honoring his psychological and existential themes.

Flanagan: deviation through ideological overlay, replacing Poe's ambiguity with contemporary political allegory.

The comparison underscores why fidelity to Poe's philosophical core matters. Poe's works are not just gothic entertainments; they are profound meditations on mortality, madness, and the fragility of consciousness. Adaptations that honor this core, whether through gothic stylization or surrealist modernism, preserve Poe's legacy. Those that overwrite it with external ideological agendas risk turning Poe into something he fundamentally resisted: a moralist.

The three case studies of Corman, Fellini, and Flanagan illuminate the central problem of adaptation fidelity in relation to Edgar Allan Poe. While adaptation theorists such as Linda Hutcheon (2006) and Robert Stam (2004) caution against a simplistic obsession with fidelity, Poe's work presents a unique challenge. His stories are not primarily plot-driven but depend on mood, ambiguity, and what Poe himself called the "unity of effect." This means that fidelity, for Poe, cannot be reduced to textual reproduction; it must instead preserve the aesthetic and philosophical core of his work—his relentless focus on mortality, madness, decay, and existential ambiguity. When this core is maintained, adaptations can diverge formally or contextually

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

without betrayal. When it is displaced, however, the result is a film that may be socially or politically resonant but ceases to be recognizably Poe.

Roger Corman's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964) demonstrates Hutcheon's notion of adaptation as "re-creation in dialogue" with the source. Corman does not replicate Poe's text but channels its philosophical fatalism through color, mise-en-scène, and Vincent Price's performance. In terms of Bloom's critical framework, Corman can be seen as an "authentic inheritor" of Poe: anxious not to misread but to extend Poe's vision through a different medium. Similarly, Federico Fellini's *Toby Dammit* shows that radical formal innovation—surrealism, dissonant soundscapes, and modern settings—can still achieve fidelity if it preserves Poe's central existential concerns. Fellini, like the French Symbolists who canonized Poe, embraces his rejection of moral didacticism and intensifies his psychological and metaphysical anxieties in a modern idiom. Both Corman and Fellini thus exemplify the adaptability of Poe's vision across cultures and cinematic traditions when the philosophical core remains intact.

In contrast, Mike Flanagan's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023) illustrates the limits of Stam's skepticism toward fidelity criticism. While Stam rightly argues that no adaptation can be a "transparent transfer" of literature into film, Poe's work shows that fidelity matters—not to plot, but to philosophical essence. Flanagan's series exemplifies what adaptation theorists call "ideological appropriation": it overlays Poe's narratives with contemporary critiques of capitalism and corporate corruption. While this may resonate with current audiences, it displaces Poe's refusal of didacticism and his central concern with existential dread. Noël Carroll's insight into the "philosophy of horror" helps clarify the stakes: horror, at its core, is about confronting the inexplicable and the uncanny. Flanagan's ideological clarity undermines that confrontation, replacing terror with moral reassurance. His Usher family does not collapse under the weight of existential fragility but is punished for corporate sin—a different story entirely.

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

This tension between fidelity and appropriation speaks directly to Harold Bloom's *anxiety of influence*. Bloom (1997) viewed Poe as an archetypal figure whose imaginative force generated entire traditions—from Baudelaire's Symbolism to the surrealists and psychoanalysts. For Bloom, Poe's originality lies less in philosophical system-building than in his archetypal evocations of death, madness, and decay. It is precisely this archetypal force that makes fidelity essential. To adapt Poe is not merely to borrow his plots but to preserve his archetypes—haunted houses, uncanny doubles, inescapable mortality—and their underlying existential weight. Corman and Fellini achieve this by reimagining archetypes without moralizing them; Flanagan betrays it by instrumentalizing them for ideological critique.

Ultimately, the comparative analysis underscores a crucial point: adaptation fidelity for Poe must be measured in philosophical rather than literal terms. Successful adaptations can be gothic (Corman) or surrealist (Fellini), but they must preserve the unflinching confrontation with mortality, madness, and ambiguity that defines Poe's art. Unsuccessful adaptations may be visually impressive or narratively engaging, but by subordinating Poe's existential vision to contemporary ideological agendas, they risk reducing him to a moralist—the very role he consistently resisted. This synthesis affirms that Poe's work is not infinitely malleable; it demands respect for its philosophical essence. Only then can adaptations continue to disturb, provoke, and resonate with audiences in ways that remain faithful to Poe's genius.

References:

- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Durham, Duke University Press.
- Bloom, H. (1997). *The anxiety of influence*. Oxford University Press.
- Bloom, H. (1998). *Edgar Allan Poe*. Chelsea House.

IMAGINARUL ȘI ADAPTĂRILE TEXTULUI LITERAR

- Carroll, N. (1990). *The philosophy of horror: Or, paradoxes of the heart*. Routledge.
- Clover, C. J. (1992). *Men, women, and chain saws: Gender in the modern horror film*. Princeton University Press.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage.
- Hutcheon, L. (2006). *A theory of adaptation*. Routledge.
- Leitch, T. (2007). *Film adaptation and its discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Peithman, S. (Ed.). (1986). *The annotated tales of Edgar Allan Poe*. Avenel Books.
- Peebles, S. (2013). *The afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe*. Camden House.
- Poe, E.A. (1984). *Complete tales and poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. Vintage.
- Shohat, E., & Stam, R. (1994). *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media*. Routledge.
- Stam, R. (2000). Beyond fidelity: The dialogics of adaptation. In J. Naremore (Ed.), *Film Adaptation*. Rutgers University Press.
- Stam, R. (2004). *Literature through film: Realism, magic, and the art of adaptation*. Blackwell.