Three Evil Masters: George A. Romero, Dario Argento, Edgar Allan Poe, and *Two Evil Eyes*

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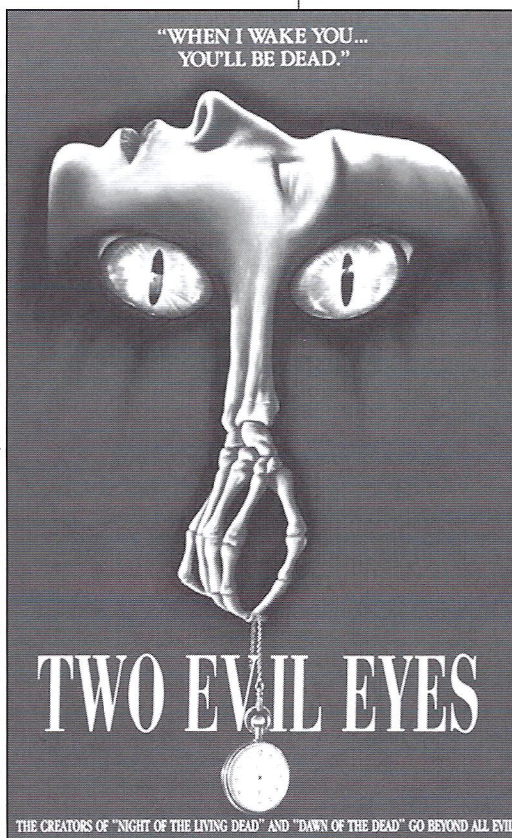
Note: The following article was adapted from the forthcoming book *Murder By Design: The Unsane Cinema of Dario Argento*, written by Troy Howarth, and due from Midnight Marquee Press in 2020.

As far back as the silent era, with films like *Unheimliche Geschichten/Eerie Tales* (1919, directed by Richard Oswald) and *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett/Waxworks* (1924, directed by Paul Leni), filmmakers have been drawn to the possibilities of the short form of storytelling in genre cinema. There's something to be said for the anthology format: if you don't like one segment, you needn't fret—there's another segment coming your way in just a few minutes. On the downside, most horror anthologies are uneven; it can also be said that horror films work best through a gradual accumulation of mood, something which is very difficult to achieve in the short form context. That hasn't stopped many of the most gifted directors affiliated with the genre from giving it a go, however.



In 1945, Ealing Studios released the first major British horror film of the post-war era: *Dead of Night*. It was an enormous popular success and it helped to set the template for so many of the horror anthologies which followed. Roger Corman's *Tales of Terror* (1961), Mario Bava's *I tre volti della paura* (1963, known in the U.S. as *Black Sabbath*), and Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* (1964), demonstrated that it was possible to do very special things with the anthology format, while a series of horror omnibus films from England's Amicus Productions (including *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors*, 1965, and *The House That Dripped Blood*, 1971) kept the format alive and well with audiences through the 1970s. In the 80s, George A. Romero and Stephen King collaborated on *Creepshow* (1982), and the result was a bona fide box office hit. Romero followed it up with an anthology TV series called *Tales from the Darkside* (1983-1988), which lead to the inevitable *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* (1990).

Thus it was in 1989 that Romero, then cooling his heels after the arduous struggles he had endured on *Monkey Shines: An Experiment in Fear* (1988), received an unexpected offer from a close friend and colleague. Dario Argento, then reigning as Italy's master of horror and suspense, was looking to expand his business empire into the American marketplace. As such, bringing America's original master of horror to the screen seemed an ideal project to realize such an ambition.

Argento's life-long obsession with Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) prompted him to come up with something new and, for him, radically different. He had refused offers in the past to direct adaptations of works by the likes of Agatha Christie and Stephen King on the grounds that he wanted to write his own material—but for his new film he would adapt Poe . . . and that was just the tip of the iceberg. The Poe project was originally conceived as a TV series. "I had the idea in mind for a TV series for some time. Different international directors would direct a series of episodes based on the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. [. . .] I then thought that I could make a documentary about his life [. . .] With a little crew of just two people, I filmed everything that had a relation to him: his home, the street where he fell and was run over by a carriage, the room at the hospital where he spoke his last words: 'Lord, help my poor soul!' Sadly, that project was also dropped."[1]

With the TV series and documentary projects dead in the water, Argento decided on a new approach: it would be a portmanteau picture, with each segment being directed by a major figure in the horror genre. The original plan was to get George A. Romero, John Carpenter, and either Clive Barker or Stephen King on board to write and direct segments; King was actually considering doing an adaptation of "The Tell-Tale Heart," but his unpleasant experience in making *Maximum Overdive* (1986) dissuaded him from taking part in the picture. Carpenter was tempted, but he was already developing a sci-fi movie called *Pincushion*, which ultimately fell by the wayside; not long after, he was signed by Warner Bros. to direct the high-tech comedy-suspense film *Memoirs of an Invisible Man*, which filmed in early 1991 following an extensive pre-production schedule. One wonders if he had participated, whether he would have ended up scoring the entire picture himself. Romero, already an honorary part of the Argento filmmaking family thanks to *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), on which Argento had helped to secure some all-important financing in addition to handling the film's European release, remained attached—but Argento thought of getting Wes Craven on board and turning it into a film in three parts. It soon became apparent that trying to negotiate and schedule three different directors to make three segments was more trouble than it was worth, so the decision was made to divide the film in two parts.

For his segment, Dario initially planned to do a politicized take on "The Pit and the Pendulum" before he finally settled on "The Black Cat." From his point of view, the story had never been properly translated to the screen—but one can't help but wonder whether this was a his subtle way of throwing shade at Lucio Fulci, who made his own version (*Gatto nero/The Black Cat*) in 1980. Whatever his motives, Argento enlisted his collaborator Franco Ferrini (who had already co-written the scripts for *Phenomena*, 1984, and the Argento production of *Dèmoni/Demons*, 1985, among others) to help him with writing the script, which would be fairly awash in references to Poe's entire body of work. Romero, meanwhile, was keen on adapting "The Masque of the Red Death." Neither Dario nor his younger brother, producer Claudio Argento, were happy with his choice and it seems there were some communication issues early on which made things a bit tricky for Romero. As time went on and more and more concerns were voiced about his potentially costly treatment for "Masque," Romero relented and settled on the more obscure "The Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar," which had nevertheless already been filmed in 1961 as part of Roger Corman's *Tales of Terror*. As luck would have it, it was Poe's only story to deal with the living dead—and the fact that Romero, master of the zombie film, was now translating it for the screen delighted Dario. The project was formally announced as *Edgar Allan Poe*, with Argento and Romero's names prominently displayed to hook potential theatrical distributors; it finally changed to the more evocative *Two Evil Eyes* (*Due occhi diabolici*). Romero had been looking forward to going to Rome to make his first Italian film, but Argento had other ideas: he wanted to use *Edgar Allan Poe* as his way of breaking into the American film scene. Commercially, it made sense—his most recent films (*Opera*, 1987, and *La Chiesa/The Church*, 1988, which he produced for Michele Soavi) hadn't been securing American exposure, except for home video, and if it panned out as he had hoped, it could have helped him to expand his business empire. Pittsburgh became the agreed-upon location: it had been Romero's base of operations for many years, and he had access to full crew of technicians and artisans who would be ideally suited to working on the movie.

The crew would be a mixture of Italian and American (and quite a few Italian-American!) talents. Romero's chosen director of photography was Peter Reniers, while Argento favored using Giuseppe ('Beppe') Maccari, the long-time camera operator for the great Giuseppe Rotunno (*The Leopard/Il gattopardo*, 1963, etc). Much of the remaining crew would be culled from Romero's regular list of collaborators, notably makeup effects master Tom Savini, who had risen to prominence as a celebrity in his own right thanks to his work on Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, as well as such popular slasher fare as *Friday the 13th* (1980) and *The Burning* (1981). As it happens, Savini was already a big fan of Dario's work, so the opportunity to collaborate with him was something of a dream come true. To minimize the difficulties with regards to the language barrier, Argento hired local Pittsburgh Playhouse director Ken Gargaro to act as a go-between with the actors; he also helped them to better adapt their lines into English, which allowed Dario to focus on his preferred interest in the visuals.

Production on Romero's segment got underway on the 10th of July 1989. There were some technical difficulties early on, but Romero persevered and managed to keep to the agreed-upon schedule of 22 shooting days, at which point he took his material and worked with his old friend Pasquale Buba (1946-2018) in assembling a rough cut. While Romero was at work in the editing room, Argento started his 32 day shoot and finished on September

12th—a mere five days after his 49th birthday. With Romero's initial edit already in place, Argento and Buba worked together on assembling "The Black Cat"—it would be his first time putting together a feature without Franco Fraticelli since *Four Flies on Grey Velvet* (1971), and as fate would have it, Fraticelli would not edit any more of the films directed by Dario Argento.

"The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" was first published in December of 1845 in two separate publications: the *Broadway Journal* and *American Review: A Whig Journal*. The story is related by an unnamed narrator who tells of his friend Ernest Valdemar, who is dying from tuberculosis. The narrator is experimenting with hypnosis and asks Valdemar if he would consent to be hypnotized at the moment of death in order to see what might happen: Valdemar consents and within a short period, his time of death is at hand: the hypnotist puts him under a hypnotic spell, leaving him in a state of suspended animation for a matter of months. The narrator and the attending physicians continue to monitor Valdemar as his body remains inanimate and icy cold, though his spirit remains active and reports on what he is able to see in the great beyond. Valdemar begs to be put out of his misery and the narrator complies; as soon as the trance is ended, Valdemar's body finally succumbs to the several months of delayed decay.

Romero's adaptation depicts Valdemar (Bingo O'Malley) as a ruthless business tycoon with a trophy wife named Jessica (Adrienne Barbeau). Jessica conspires with her lover, Dr. Hoffmann (Ramy Zada), to keep Valdemar in a state of suspended animation in order for them to get their hands on his vast fortune.

Unfortunately, Romero's half of *Two Evil Eyes* is its Achilles heel. It starts the film off on a sour note, though in fairness, even switching the order of the stories would be problematic. It's not that it's a bad piece; it's just awfully bland. It plays out like a soap opera with some macabre elements—*Dark Shadows* for the more permissive 90s, perhaps—and while Romero works in some of his usual commentary on greed and consumerism (notably when the policeman played by Tom Atkins quips, "Rich people. The sick stuff always turns out to be rich people."), it doesn't do much to overcome the overall air of déjà vu. Romero's take on the material is simply too predictable, and the finale doesn't pack nearly the same Grand Guignol punch as the one in Roger Corman's earlier adaptation. Barbeau adds some shading to her role, ensuring that she's more than just a scheming bitch, at least in the early scenes, but Zada is hopelessly wooden as her paramour. It's always a treat seeing Atkins (Barbeau's co-star in several films, including John Carpenter's *The Fog*, 1980), but he has far too little screen time. Overall, it emerges as slick, impersonal, and blandly inoffensive—precisely the opposite of Romero's best work.

No such accusations can be leveled against Dario's half of the film. The truth of the matter is, Romero simply didn't feel the same sort of passion for the project that Argento had; perhaps if he had been able to indulge his dream to go to Italy to film, it might have inspired him more—or if his "AIDS parable" take on "The Masque of the Red Death" hadn't been shot down as too expensive. But the difference in approach between the two filmmakers is obvious from the very first images of "The Black Cat." Photographer Rod Usher (Harvey Keitel) specializes in "still life" photography—of a violent nature. He's called to a crime scene where a woman has been severed in two by a pendulum. Argento uses the same kind of fluid, prowling camerawork he had perfected in *Opera*, as the camera crawls along at floor level, observing Usher and the police as they dispassionately survey the gory crime scene. Always looking for an arresting image, Usher sets off the pendulum to get some "action shots," and naturally Argento can't resist the opportunity to strap the camera to the pendulum, providing the audience with a dizzying point of view shot of the action. The link between Usher and Dario is obvious: they're both visual stylists in their own ways, and they both focus on the macabre.

The difference between the Argento and Romero segments isn't just down to visual flash, however. Romero's segment plays out like a workmanlike update of a respected literary property: it hits all the major points while working in some personal observations, but it generally comes off exactly as what it was: a gun-for-hire assignment. On the other hand, Argento, who had long avoided doing adaptations of other people's work, throws himself into the task of bringing Poe to the screen with gleeful abandon. His segment is literally loaded with references to Poe's canon of work—some of the references are more obvious than others, but those who aren't in tune to the references can still enjoy the piece as a standalone work in its own right. Those who are familiar with Poe and his output will definitely enjoy spotting all the various references, which demonstrate an obsessive, almost encyclopedic knowledge of the great writer. For Dario, "The Black Cat" isn't just a simple adaptation: it's an opportunity for him to express the love, admiration, and gratitude he had felt for so many years for his favorite author.

The story's protagonist—unnamed in the 1843 original—is named in honor of the hyper-sensitive anti-hero of "The Fall of the House of Usher." In other respects, however, Argento let it be known that the character was based on Ascher Fellig (1899-1968), who is better known as Weegee. Born in the former Austro-Hungarian Galicia, he immigrated with his family to New York in the early 1900s—at which point his name was Anglicized as either Arthur—or Usher. He became famous for his vivid, artistic portraits of crime scenes—and his distinctive voice actually inspired the voice used by Peter Sellers when he played the title role in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). Though updated and embroidered-upon to suit the purposes of his own adaptation, Usher is depicted with much the same character arc as the protagonist of the original short story. His relationship with his paramour, Annabel (Madeleine Potter), initially seems positive and loving. This changes, however, when she introduces a new member to their household: a black cat. Usher tries to befriend the cat, but it is hostile in return. He develops an irrational paranoia and even objects to having it sleeping with them in the same room. "What if it decides to jump up here in the middle of the night and claw my eyes out?" It's not far removed from the old wives' tale about cats stealing the breath from people as they sleep and it denotes a latent paranoia in Usher that starts to spiral out of control as his drinking starts to escalate.

Harvey Keitel (born 1939) is perfectly cast as Usher. His intense screen presence and ability to disappear into the skin of the characters he portrays provides Argento with one of the most perfectly realized characterizations in any of his movies. Argento and Keitel weren't necessarily a match made in heaven—Keitel is a serious "method" actor, while Argento tends to regard actors as a necessary evil—but they appear to have worked mostly harmoniously on the picture. Keitel was actually no stranger to offbeat Italian genre films—he had just recently pinch-hit for a mutinous Klaus Kinski in *Grandi Cacciatori* (shot prior to *Two Evil Eyes*, but released after it, later in 1990), taking over as the lead for part of the movie when the infamous *enfant terrible* walked out on the production—but in this instance he was on more familiar terrain, while Argento was at the disadvantage where the communication factor was concerned. Keitel's tendency to ad lib in the moment reportedly did irk Dario at times, but no matter: his performance is electrifying and galvanizes the whole piece.

"The Black Cat" is one of Argento's finest pieces of work, but for whatever reason it seldom gets the respect it deserves. It could be that the film's anthology format is to blame: Romero's opening story gets the film off on the wrong foot, and by the time Argento's segment rolls around, many viewers have already checked out mentally. This is indeed a great pity, as it shows the director at the peak of his game. The story is a fascinating study in self-destruction as a selfish and paranoid sociopath succumbs to his baser instincts and destroys almost everything he touches. His opening comment in the voice over narration is telling: "Perversity is one of the prime impulses of the heart." Usher doesn't go down the rabbit hole of violence and murder in order to save himself; instead, he's motivated by a perverse desire to destroy himself—and instead of committing suicide, he'd sooner prolong the agony and take everybody else along with him. Keitel's expert performance anchors the film in psychological reality, while the supporting performances are also nicely judged. The use of camerawork is almost as audacious as it had been in *Opera*, making nonsense of the notion that Argento had his artistic wings clipped by the mechanics of the American movie-making system.

Two Evil Eyes received its Italian theatrical release on January 25 1990. Initial numbers were promising—in early February it was still in the top 10 at the Italian box office, holding its own against the likes of *When Harry Met Sally* and *Sea of Love* (both 1989)[2]—but it ended up sinking like a stone. It was Argento's first bona fide flop at the Italian box office since *Le cinque giornate*, ranking at number 49 for the 1989-1990 box office season; that was just enough to put it ever-so-slightly ahead of Eddie Murphy's flop *Harlem Nights* (1989), which came in at 50, but it was a very poor showing indeed compared to the likes of Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) and *Dead Poets Society* (1989), which claimed the number 1 and number 2 slots, respectively.[3] In the U.S., a small outfit named Taurus Entertainment put it out on a limited run in October of that year, but it barely made a ripple; Argento's plan to conquer the American market was not off to a good start. On the plus side, the picture was not massively expensive—the budget was in the $9 million range—so it certainly recouped its investment, but it wasn't the sort of major box office hit Dario and Claudio had been hoping for, either. It would eventually make its way to France in 1992, but in most markets, once more, it was consigned to direct-to-video status.

With the release of Blue Underground's deluxe remastered edition Blu-ray, now is as good a time as any to revisit the film and savor its charms. Romero, of course, left us in the summer of 2017—and while Argento is still going strong in the final year of his 70s, whether or not he will have the opportunity to direct any more films remains to be seen. *Two Evil Eyes* serves as a reminder of a bygone era of genre filmmaking when it was considerably easier to take such talents for granted.

Notes:

1. Argento, Dario, *Peur* (France: Rouge Profond, 2018), p. 289.
2. *Variety*, February 21 1990, p. 19.
3. http://www.hitparadeitalia.it/bof/boi/boi1989-90.htm