

## **From the will to live to European witchcraft: The evolution of Edgar Allan Poe’s *Ligeia***

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The complicated affair between the cinema and the genius of Edgar Allan Poe goes back almost to the beginning of the cinema itself. As Mark Neimeyer points out in *Poe and Popular Culture*, “[s]ince almost the first decade of the twentieth century, directors have been turning to Poe for inspiration, adapting his works with greater or lesser faithfulness” (Neimeyer, in Hayes 2002: 216). Some of the works have enjoyed better popularity than others, being apted and re-adapted many times by different directors in different time periods, such as *The Fall of the House of Usher* or *The Tell-tale heart*; others, such as *The Golden Beetle*, did not<sup>1</sup>. Among this vast number of adaptations of Poe’s works, a very original, innovative short story *Ligeia* seems to remain rather obscure. Apart from being an excellent representative of Poe’s work, *Ligeia* is also noteworthy for its remarkably intense, almost oppressive, dark atmosphere and, first and foremost, a truly unique main character, the titular Ligeia. Ligeia is a tremendously interesting creature who, by the sheer power of her will, is able to overcome death—not simply by reviving her own corpse, or not even by possessing a living body, but by means of appropriating and transforming a body of another. Without background, history, place of origin or even last name, neither decidedly good or evil, Ligeia is mystery incarnate. All those properties make both the character and the story intriguing and quite exceptional as far as its potential for being adapted to the horror genre is concerned.

The two most distinguished film adaptations of *Ligeia* are *The Tomb of Ligeia*, directed by Roger Corman in 1964, and Michael Staininger’s *The Tomb* from 2008, initially titled *Edgar Allan Poe’s Ligeia*, (only later the title was changed). Both titles differ significantly, mainly plotwise, but also in other aspects, to an extent much greater than one would expect solely due to the over forty years of time gap between them. In *The Tomb of Ligeia*, the last Poe film directed by Corman which starred Vincent Price, Verden Fell, a wealthy man, mourns his late wife Ligeia. A few months after the funeral, Verden meets Lady Rowena Trevanion, whom he seemingly falls in love with and shortly marries. Over time, Rowena is haunted by her predecessor's unfriendly spirit, suffering nightmares and witnessing bizarre incidents (Hogan 1997: 218). By contrast, Michael

1 See The Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com))(DOA: 8 May April 2011).

Staininger's debut production<sup>2</sup>, *The Tomb*, is more than unorthodox in its approach. It is the story of a young scholar and writer, Jonathan Merrick, who quite literally falls under the spell of a foreign post-graduate student Ligeia Romanova. Bewitched, he abandons his fiancée Rowena Templeton and goes to Ukraine, where he marries Ligeia only to discover that she is, in fact, a witch who steals people's souls and keeps them in a container in the basement. All of this she does to escape her curse—a terminal illness, the same one that claimed her mother at a young age. The curse, as we learn at the beginning of the movie, is a price for the power. When Jonathan realises that his wife is controlling him and tries to leave, Ligeia throws herself from a tower. Shortly after her death Rowena comes back to Jonathan and they marry. Ligeia's spirit, in the meantime, possesses the caretaker's niece, whom she uses to get close to Rowena and steal her body and her place as Jonathan's wife.

The differences between those two films that I am concerned with are not those resulting from the time gap, the setting or the remade storyline. What I intend to focus on in this paper are instances and manifestations of two peculiar mechanisms typical for today's cinema, specifically horror cinema. One of them consists in simplifying the ambivalent—overexposing every shade of grey until it is either black or white, and the other aims at eradicating all vagueness, striving for explicit explanation of every action and every event.

The ways in which the character of Ligeia is shown in both productions differ significantly in many aspects, and only few of those differences are related to the fact that *The Tomb* is set in modern times. For the sake of clarity I shall refer to the respective versions of Ligeia as Lady Ligeia for the character from the 1964 film, and Ligeia the Witch for the character from the 2008 production. Admittedly, in case of *The Tomb of Ligeia* we rely more on the way Ligeia is described and remembered rather than actually presented on screen; undeniably, we naturally tend to rely on our intuitive knowledge of the short story, filling in the blanks. Nonetheless, even the barely residual presence of Lady Ligeia is enough to provide sharp contrast between her and Ligeia the Witch. I would not go as far to claim that they are antithetical, but they most certainly represent opposite values. Lady Ligeia is portrayed and described as majestic, intellectual and impressive, whereas Ligeia the Witch represents carnality, manipulation and deception. She is defined by the lies and the tricks she uses to manipulate the people around her: Jonathan, chancellor Burriss or her henchman Eddie. The moment in which Jonathan finally sees through her deceit is the pivotal point of his relationship with Ligeia:

2 See interview with Staininger: <http://spookshow.tv/midnight-spookshow-michael-staininger-interview/> (DOA: 30 May April 2011).

JONATHAN: Tell me something, why did you marry me?

LIGEIA: Because I love you.

JONATHAN: Bullshit. You married me for my money. I could support your work if the university failed you. I know. (*The Tomb*, 2008)

Lady Ligeia, in turn, is defined by the unforgettable impression she left on her husband. Regardless of whether or not we assume that this impression was imprinted into his mind by means of her powers as a hypnotist, Verden Fell is clearly unable to put Lady Ligeia out of his mind. He does not want to abandon the abbey where the memories of his wife linger, nor even let anyone near her grave. For him, the abbey still resonates with her presence:

VERDEN: In a sense, Ligeia became the abbey. She never entered or left a room, never walked down the darkest passageway without somehow illuminating it like a single moving candle. Like a blind man, I could sense her presence, but I could not see her. And even in the most trivial objects and actions. Her voice in the rustle of draperies, the lightness of her footfall in the fluttering of a moth's wing against a closed window pane. Even at the end, she seemed to have vanquished death. She smiled and said, "I will always be your wife... your only wife. I have willed it." (*The Tomb of Ligeia*, 1964)

Ligeia the Witch exercises power over others by means of magic, whereas Lady Ligeia influenced people by her will alone. Those seemingly minor constructional differences in character reflect on something far more significant, i.e. three major concepts existent in the story that are directly associated with the character of Ligeia, and the way they are presented. Those concepts (or themes) are: love, belonging, and death. Each of the three is either drastically changed or omitted altogether.

The first *The Tomb of Ligeia* follows the original plot of the short story rather closely in the sense that Verden Fell meets and marries Lady Rowena some time after his wife Ligeia's death. Whether he harbours any warm feeling towards Lady Rowena remains debatable; after his initial hostility he does seem to display certain affection to her, but then he grows distant and detached again. Still, it is clear that Rowena fills a place left by Ligeia; she is not *the* wife nor is she the mistress of the house. When Lady Ligeia returns, she takes back the place which is, so to speak, rightfully hers. In *The Tomb*, on the other hand, it is Ligeia who enters Rowena's world, and she does so still alive. It is Rowena, not Ligeia, who is engaged to Jonathan Merrick and enjoying the blissful reality of a happy couple in love. In *The Tomb*, Ligeia is an intruder, an unwanted guest who steals Jonathan Merrick from Rowena by foul, contemptible means such as spells and mind

control. It is Ligeia who does not belong, not Rowena; she does not belong to the man that she bewitches, nor to the world that she enters, not even to the country she is in before Jonathan buys back her ancestral mansion in Ukraine.

Another concept related to the character of Ligeia is the protagonist's passionate, almost unhealthy love for her, as well as Ligeia's own devotion, which in Poe's words "amounted to idolatry." Roger Corman's *The Tomb Of Ligeia* is more ambivalent on this matter. Although Verden's attitude is irresolute at times, it is clear that he cannot face Ligeia's death. He still feels her presence in the abbey, and is unwilling to leave the place of her burial. Despite marrying Lady Rowena he is still haunted by the memory of his first wife, his behaviour grows strange, erratic and even sinister. It can be speculated whether Verden's love for Lady Ligeia was real or evoked by Lady herself (as she was, allegedly, a hypnotist), but certainly the feeling appears to be more mature and profound than the sickly, reluctant obsession with which the protagonist is cursed by Ligeia the Witch. In case of *The Tomb* the element of love between the protagonist and Ligeia is nearly completely removed from the story. Jonathan Merrick approaches Ligeia the Witch because she has cast a spell on him, making him unable to resist her and causing him to be unfaithful. As soon as he realises that, he does not want anything to do with her; even her suicide leaves him more or less indifferent. It is not only on protagonist's side that love is completely eradicated in Staininger's production—also on Ligeia's side it is, at best, debatable. Confronted by Jonathan, she declares that she loves him, but she tries to keep him with her not with her feelings, but with another spell. *The Tomb* replaces higher feelings with witchcraft and carnal obsession. The only love portrayed in the film is the love between Jonathan and Rowena. Their connection is the stronger one, the purer and the legitimate one. In this scenario, it is Ligeia, not Rowena, who is the unwanted and unloved one. With Jonathan's later resentment, the original dynamics of obsession and longing, so characteristic for the story, are completely reversed and overthrown.

Both Corman's and Staininger's version of Ligeia are defined by one more important theme: the theme of death. In *The Tomb of Ligeia*, the audience is introduced to Lady Ligeia when she is already dead; her personality and demeanour are constructed by her husband's remarks and memories. When Verden recalls how passionately Lady Ligeia clung to life, his words about her will to live, juxtaposed with her absence in the story, emphasise the extremity of the two **values** defining her character:

VERDEN: Ligeia's will was as fierce as her... as her body was frail. Outwardly calm, even placid she nevertheless pitted herself against death with a passion words are impotent to convey. As her body progressively wasted, she seemed to turn to the very stones of the abbey for renewed strength, as if they could sustain that burning desire for life... only for life, that ravaged her as much as the fever of disease (*The Tomb of Ligeia*, 1964)

The “burning desire for life” is precisely this which characterises Lady Ligeia best. Upon falling ill, she agonizes over the inevitability of death, at the same time stating defiantly that “[m]an need not kneel before the angels. Nor lie in death forever, save for the weakness of his feeble will” (*The Tomb of Ligeia*, 1964). Her will to prevail establishes her as the victor, not a victim. Ligeia the Witch, in contrast, is not a conqueror but a fugitive, because fear of death differs significantly from thirst for life. In *The Tomb*, Staininger’s Ligeia is trying to escape the untimely death she is cursed with from the beginning. Throughout the film, she becomes ever more obsessed with finding “a way” to prevent her fate as she is getting weaker and weaker, not only physically, but also mentally. Unable to find the strength to fight within herself, she does not hesitate to take away the life of others just to avoid death herself:

LIGEIA: I want to do what no one in history has accomplished. Not with magic nor science, but a combination of both. I have extracted the essence of the human soul and contained them. With the black magic of my ancestors, I will bind them to my own soul. They will make my spirit powerful enough to go where I will it. Since the dawn of man, death has claimed every mortal soul, like I saw it did my mother’s. I will not share her fate, but I must work quickly.  
(*The Tomb*, 2008)

Not only the attitude of both characters is different, but also their method and the limit of their abilities stand apart: while in the end Lady Ligeia transcends her own demise, Ligeia the Witch is only capable of jumping from body to body. In the conclusive moment, Corman’s Ligeia animates and adjusts Lady Rowena’s body, making it her own. Staininger’s Ligeia forces her spirit into Rowena’s body, proceeds to change her appearance and behaviour, dyes her hair, but in the end she must constantly fight to maintain the identity Lady Ligeia established so easily.

The portrayal of the character of Ligeia in *The Tomb* is a product characteristic of what may be loosely classified as modern horror cinema of America, where complex beings and characters of unclear origin and motivation are not welcome. Ligeia the Witch might not resemble Edgar Allan Poe’s Ligeia much, but her conventionally ‘evil’ characteristics and actions do fossilise into a mainstream American characterisation of a model horror antihero—or antiheroine, to be precise. In contrast to Lady Ligeia, who can be described as sinister, jealous or possessive, Ligeia the Witch is clearly evil and immoral; she uses witchcraft to bewitch Jonathan, she steals people’s souls, she kills. Her moral alignment is evident just as her history and goal are definite. Staininger’s portrayal of Ligeia perfectly illustrates the two aforementioned mechanisms: the simplification of all that is neither completely white or completely black, and of all that is obscure and not clear-cut. The

black-and-white formula of good and evil does not permit shades of grey. Vagueness is not satisfactory, everything must be understandable. Events and characters must fall onto one side or the other. In *The Tomb of Ligeia* Lady Rowena, despite her good nature and affection for her husband, is neglected and misled by him, while Rowena Merrick is rewarded for her love for Jonathan Merrick with reciprocity. When Jonathan, in turn, is seduced by Ligeia, it is shown beyond doubt that he does so prompted by Ligeia's spell, and not because he is, for example, bored with Rowena or because he might be prone to such behaviour. However straightforward as far as story is concerned, *The Tomb of Ligeia* leaves a few unexplained points, offering a conclusion which is, as David Hogan points out, "purposely ambiguous" (Hogan 1997: 218). For example, no one else is present when Ligeia makes her final appearance, and it is unclear whether she really appeared before Verden, whether she exists inside his mind or outside it. Similarly, Lady Rowena's encounters with Ligeia's ghost (or presence) can be interpreted both ways. Although the multiple points of view reduce the probability of all the occurrences being just imagined by Verden and Rowena, some **ambiguity** persists, allowing for doubt and overall artistic blur of the story. *The Tomb*, on the other hand, outwardly aspires to provide an answer for every question the plot might raise. The final scene, showing the Vaslov's niece smiling, is immediately supported by the effect of her eyes darkening, which the audience can recognise as the sign of being possessed by Ligeia's spirit.

It is interesting to note, as Hogan points out, that in case of *The Tomb of Ligeia* the "studied ambivalence" of the film results from the director's faithful approach to "the essential flavor of his source material," which allows the film to convey "the original author's intent" (Hogan 1997: 218). Additionally, *The Tomb of Ligeia* benefits from retaining all the elements of what Isabel Pinedo calls in *Postmodern elements of the contemporary horror film* "the postmodern paradigm." According to Pinedo, "the postmodern paradigm blurs the boundary between good and evil, normal and abnormal, and the outcome of the struggle is at best ambiguous" (Pinedo in Prince, 2004: 94). *The Tomb*, on the other hand, despite being a later production, returns in many ways to "classical paradigm," in which "[t]he boundary between good and evil, normal and abnormal, human and alien, is as firmly drawn as the imperative that good must conquer evil, thus producing a secure Manichean worldview in which the threats to the social order are largely external and (hu)man agency prevails, largely in the figure of the masterful male subject" (Pinedo in Prince, 2004: 89). Distancing itself from the postmodern design in favour of the secure, "bleached" story set within firm boundaries, *The Tomb* aims at creating a reliable fantasy existent in a world of, in words of Mike Frank, "reductive and schematic morality of popular entertainments":

A sense of the world as somehow divided between two forces, one good and one evil, is spoken especially vividly in the stories we tell each other. Our novels, songs, tabloids, and, of course, movies often exploit our disposition to see the world in terms of good guys and bad guys white hats and black hats, even an occasional evil empire. As we willingly suspend our disbelief in certain formal conventions in order to participate in the illusion of film or theater, so the innocent pleasure of moral clarity leads us to suspend our disbelief in the reductive and schematic morality of popular entertainments. (Frank in Norden, 2007: 38)

In attempt to provide that pleasure of moral clarity, the formula of *The Tomb* shifts from the classical set of values and elements to the postmodern one and back. Although it retains some postmodern elements (i.e. the “monster” is not defeated, and the horror is located in everyday contemporary world), it does, in the end, take a decisive turn back to the clear-cut classic values that allow the “secure Manichean worldview” to prevail. The monster is not defeated, but at least it does not threaten our perception of the world with its obscene moral ambiguity.

The ambivalence, or rather lack thereof, is another distinguishing quality of *The Tomb*. Despite the fact that, as Stephen Prince argues, “ambiguous terms are the stuff of horror films, which base their appeal on portraying the intermediate categories whose anomalies elicit horror and anxiety to the extent that they escape established social classifications” (Prince 2004: 122), Andrew Nelson insists in *Traumatic Childhood Now Included: Todorov’s Fantastic and the Uncanny Slasher Remake* that overall ambiguity does not reconcile well with this particular genre:

Horror, like all fiction, favors certainty over ambiguity [ . . . ]. This may seem an odd assertion to make about a genre that is, again, regularly classified and examined on the basis of its elicitation of an affective response in the viewer—specifically, feelings of apprehension and doubt (two words that are often synonymous with uncertainty). Yet regardless of whether bizarre and horrific happenings are earthly or otherworldly in nature, the vast majority of horror films leave no question as to which of those two polarities is the definite cause of the uncanny event. (Nelson in Hantke 2010: 115)

In *High Concept Thrills and Chills: The Horror Blockbuster* Stacey Abbott draws attention to the relationship between the horror film and the consumer market, emphasising the impact of production, distribution and exhibition of the film, as well as the Hollywood blockbuster demands and expectations, on the horror genre. Abbott points out that many recent changes within the genre are either related to or brought about by “high concept style,” orientated towards effective marketing and exploiting the blockbuster potential of a film:

The 1990s produced two key periods in which the horror genre was moved out of niche markets and pushed into the mainstream. [ . . . ] The attempt to appeal to general audiences and to manipulate the

genre to suit the demands of other media, results in horror no longer being the priority but simply one way of reading and responding to the experience. [ . . . ] [T]here continues to be a taste for horror within the mainstream and a place for the genre within the top end of the box office and at the multiplexes. (Abbott in: Conrich 2010: 41)

Large budget, simple premise, popular music soundtrack and special effects, as well as bold images, which can be extracted for marketing purposes, are all characteristic of a high concept-style, easily comprehensible and marketable film (Abbott in: Conrich 2010: 27). In contrast, unclear story, ambivalent **resolutions**, mentally anguished or dubious characters do not seem to make up a commercially attractive cinema production.

The mechanisms of simplifying the ambivalent and eradicating the unclear are both worth attention inasmuch as the process behind them is not merely a product of modern cinema or a simple remake tool. Those mechanisms are characteristic to horror cinema in its mass-culture nature and wide-audience approach, conventional rather than artistic, safe rather than experimental. Additionally, the matter of the ratings administered to films by the MPAA (and corresponding rating systems in other countries) obviously plays a role in this situation. On their official website, the Motion Picture Association of America, lists the following ratings: G (general), PG (Parental Guidance suggested), PG-13 (Parents Strongly Cautioned, as some Material May Be Inappropriate For Children Under 13), R (Restricted, Children Under 17 Require Accompanying Parent or Adult Guardian) and NC-17 (No One 17 and Under Admitted). Since the age of an average moviegoer falls between 12 and 39 years, with the group aged between 12 and 24 years comprising almost one quarter of the total of all moviegoers (<http://www.mpa.org/policy/industry>), many producers decide to keep their productions within the PG-13 range, and thus avoid a marketing suicide. This phenomenon can be usually observed with consecutive installments of long-running series, such as *The Terminator* series, the last part of which, *Terminator: Salvation* [1973], and remakes such as the 2006 remake of the Japanese psychological horror *Pulse* [2001], the 2009 remake of the Korean *Tale of Two Sisters* [2003], or the recent remake of the British *The Wicker Man* [1973]. The original, darker, more disturbing, often morally ambivalent plot elements were reduced or simplified to fit the “magical” PG-13 threshold. The ratings, however, are not the main issue, as the adaptations discussed in this paper demonstrate: *The Tomb of Ligeia* is rated “12” in the United Kingdom (suitable for children aged 12 and above, a certificate similar to the PG-13 rating: <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/>), whereas *The Tomb* is rated “R” in the United States for “some sexual content, language, violence and brief drug use” (<http://www.mpa.org/ratings/what-each-rating-means>). The tendency to simplify and overexpose everything that does not fit neatly into the black-



and-white, good-and-evil category is not conditioned by the box office alone—the expectation of global audience, not only international, but also coming from all kinds of social and intellectual backgrounds, requires a certain amount of cut-backs on the part of the story depth and nuances. It also automatically diminishes the potential of such an abridged story line to carry any other content other than the plot alone. Unfortunately, in case of Edgar Allan Poe, such an approach seems devastating, as his unique narratives thrive exactly on obscurity and ambivalence. Ambiguity is essential to the Gothic and necessary for real horror. To function, those genres must keep the audience unsure as to what it is that is going to come out of the dark. Without the element of uncertainty, we approach *The Tomb* as if it were an adventure-fantasy production. We do not anticipate or dread; we cheer for the protagonist to stand up to the dragon instead of wondering whether the dragon is really all it seems to be.

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