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POE'S BIOPICS: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE AUTHOR IN D.W. GRIFFITH'S *EDGAR ALLEN POE* AND JAMES MCTEIGUE'S *THE RAVEN*

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Abstract: Literary biopics often reinforce romantic images regarding the creative process, emphasizing biographic and author-centered approaches to literature previously denounced by Roland Barthes

(1977). Curiously, one of the most famous critics of such romantic conceptions, Edgar Allan Poe, has himself been a victim of this very same treatment, his literary production being taken as part and result of his controversial biography in a number of works. This article analyzes two biographical films, or biopics, about the renowned poet, D.W. Griffith's *Edgar Allen Poe* (sic) (1909) and James McTeigue's *The Raven* (2012). The analysis of these works indicates that both reinforce the merge of the artist's life and oeuvre, as well as the blurring of borders between fact and fiction, author and character, high and mass culture, thus contributing to the characterization of the biopic as a fitting example of historiographic metafiction. (Hutcheon, 1988).

Key words: Edgar Allan Poe; Literary biopics; Historiographic metafiction; Author; Adaption.

Resumo: Cinebiografias literárias frequentemente reforçam visões românticas quanto ao fazer artístico, reiterando a visão biografista e a centralidade do autor há muito denunciadas por Roland Barthes (1977). Curiosamente, um dos mais célebres críticos de tais concepções românticas, Edgar Allan Poe, viu-se vítima desse mesmo tratamento ao ter sua produção literária apropriada como parte e reflexo de sua controversa biografia em diversas obras. O presente artigo debruça-se sobre dois filmes biográficos, ou *biopics*, acerca do célebre poeta, *Edgar Allen Poe* (sic), de D.W. Griffith (1909), e *O Corvo*, de James McTeigue (2012). A análise das obras aponta que ambas reiteram a fusão entre vida e obrado artista, bem como o apagamento das fronteiras entre fato histórico e ficção, entre autor e personagem, alta cultura e cultura de massa, contribuindo para a caracterização do gênero *biopic* como um dos mais bem-acabados exemplos de metaficção historiográfica (Hutcheon, 1988).

Palavras-chave: Edgar Allan Poe; Cinebiografias literárias; Metaficção historiográfica; Autor; Adaptação.

The celebrated American writer and critic Edgar Allan Poe lived a short and melancholy life, surrounded by death, poverty and losses, circumstances which may have inspired the creation of some of his most famous works, particularly his highly popular gothic tales and poems, such as *The Raven*. Even though he only lived forty years, for he was born in 1809 and died in 1849, he was a very prolific writer: his extensive work comprises pieces that go from poems to short stories, essays, literary reviews and even a brief novel.

Poe's themes were also quite diverse, feeding an extensive oeuvre that ranges from satirical and humorous pieces to suspenseful and mysterious ones, along with dense philosophical treatises. Despite this variety, though, Poe's works revolving around gothic themes and topoi became so popular that have almost overshadowed his "lighter" writings, the narrative poem *The Raven* probably being the most notorious of such cases. Defined by the author himself as a work of an intentionally melancholic tone, the poem tells the story of a lonely man haunted by memories who, while reading, almost falling asleep at night, sees a raven entering his chamber. Intrigued, he addresses the bird, and, to every question he makes, he hears the bird reply "Nevermore". Impressed by the unusual situation and under the influence of depressive and superstitious thoughts, the man immediately relates the bird's single and repetitive response to the cause of his own lasting sadness: the premature death of his deceased beloved named Lenore and his expectation of ever meeting her again. The entire narrative poem, which is 108 verses long, was carefully composed by Poe with the intent of creating a melancholic atmosphere, as the poet informs us in his essay *The Philosophy of*

Composition. To reinforce that effect not even the choice of the bird saying that particular word was left to chance, but it was a deliberate and calculated measure that took into account phonological and semantic features that granted both the intended melody and symbolic content the poet wanted to convey. The acclamation of *The Raven* has been such, even because of Poe's own account of its creation in the aforementioned essay, that it is neither an accident nor a surprise that two movies made to tell Poe's life would somehow appropriate and focus on the poem. D.W. Griffith, the great American director of the early days of the film industry, celebrated the artist in a short film named after him: *Edgar Allen Poe* (1909). More recently, James McTeigue chose to pay homage to the writer through a reference to his most iconic work in the biopic *The Raven* (2012). Both films not only celebrate Poe's cultural legacy, but they do so by recreating the somber atmosphere found in the poet's masterpiece and by intertwining it with facts from the author's biography.

Many movie directors have already taken the challenge of portraying writers' lives in the cinema, more often than not mixing up the authors' biographical records with their fictional works. As such, 'these films make up a subcategory of the highly popular biopic genre, the literary biopic', as defined by Indrusiak and Ramgrab (2017). However, taking into consideration the postmodernist assumption that History is a masternarrative and, as such, as flawed, partial and incomplete as any given narrative, there will always be gaps to be filled and points of views to be explored, which can be easily accommodated by fiction, sometimes the biographee's own. Thus, biopics have a dual role, for they can be seen as 'a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap

between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context' (HUTCHEON, 1988, p.118), a trait intensely explored by postmodernist art, particularly by that which Hutcheon defines as historiographic metafiction, 'works which are intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages' (1988, p.5).

No biography is ever fully known, but Poe's life and mostly his death have been and maybe will always remain mysteries to the world. Therefore, when exploring his life history in the cinema, whether in full-fledged biopics or in adaptations of his fiction seasoned with bits and pieces of biographical information, movie directors and screenwriters have often turned to his works for coincidences and correspondences to the puzzles and gaps of the author's biography, attempting to build a cohesive narrative out of the scattered pieces of factual information we have access to through the few reliable historical records left. In this respect, Poe's cine-biographers are not alone, for this blurring of fact and fiction, as well as of author and character, is a trademark feature of the contemporary literary biopic. Interestingly enough, this exercise in appropriation and deconstruction of hegemonic historical discourses paradoxically reinforces a romantic conception of literature according to which 'The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us.' (BARTHES, 1977, p.143).

The paradox posed by contemporary biographical films that celebrate the authorism denounced by Barthes and romantic

conceptions of literature is even heightened in the case of a biographee such as Poe, a critic who, back in 1846, teased his fellow men of letters by stating that '[m]ost writers – poets in especial – prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy – an ecstatic intuition – and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes' (POE, 1846). In this respect, Griffith might be spared from criticism, for his film predates the structuralist debunking of the godlike author in about half a century. McTeigue's seemingly anachronistic tribute, however, may be at odds with literary theory of structuralist orientation, but it is in tune with the recent boom of artistic works which depict authors as characters, a phenomenon Franseen and Hoenselaars (1999) raise to the category of genre, one in which two authorial voices – the contemporary artist's and that of the biographee – are combined to produce a text that openly and proudly displays its intertextual nature. In so doing, these metafictional works establish an interesting "tug of war" with the centrality of authors' voices. On the one hand, they appropriate literary pieces into new productions, highlighting the inescapable intertextual nature of literature – and of art in general – which demystifies the notion of originality as primacy. On the other hand, however, they celebrate the individual whose voice is being appropriated. As a result, they bring the author's oeuvre closer to new and larger audiences by exploring its contemporary and universal appeal while also stressing the uniqueness of the writer's genius, an interesting amalgam of postmodernist and romantic features.

By reconciling high and mass culture, the literary biopic brings subjects usually circumscribed to academic settings out to the big

public, or, as previously stated ‘down the ivory tower’ (INDRUSIAK AND RAMGRAB, 2017). Hence, they give more and new publics the opportunity to get acquainted with and to read the works by writers portrayed in the movies, which means that these films perform ‘important extra-cinematic work, that of bringing the ‘original’ artwork to a new kind of attention’ (ANDREWS, 2013, p.369). Positive as it may be for feeding readership and even for ‘granting authors afterlife’ in new cultural polysystems (INDRUSIAK, 2013), this popular appeal of biopics may be one of its most controversial traits, for conservative readers usually resent seeing writers of undisputable prestige represented as flawed, idiosyncratic people, or as Bingham (2010) puts it, in ‘warts and all’ representations. Not to mention the fact that readers sometimes react negatively to choices in casting which result in an association of prestigious literary names to the looks of performers known for commercial and entertaining films rather than artistic ones. But the survival of artworks and of canonical authors depends more on the existence of a public than on the opinion of a few demanding critics. So, if ‘resurrecting historical authors as characters’ (FRANSSEN AND HOENSELAARS, 1999, p.11), having them interact with creatures who inhabit the authors’ fictional worlds or emphasizing their human traits is what grants popularity and the maintenance of reading publics, why not?

There are biopics based on the lives of many different writers; in most cases fictional embellishments are necessary simply because “[a] life of reflection, observation, composition and self-abstracting literariness does not self-evidently offer the sort of cinematic dynamism and narrative pulse usually considered the staple fare

of the movies.” (BUCHANAN, 2013, p.3). However, if there is one writer whose life history seems to be a very fertile source for action and mystery-packed biopics, that is Edgar Allan Poe. We do know who he was, what he wrote and some of the facts that made him have a very hard, tragic life despite his accomplishments as a man of letters. The coincidences between some of his personal tragedies and those found in his gloomy fiction, as well as the puzzling circumstances of his death, feed both readers’ fantasies and scholarly investigations as to the degree of interconnectedness between life and work. As a result,

[n]ot only does Poe’s life – or rather, the textual evidence related to it – provide raw material for a number of good narratives, ranging from anecdotes to the three dozen or so full-length biographies; biographical evidence and speculation provide an important set of intertexts that complicate and expand the effects Poe’s works have on us. (PEEPLES, 2004, p.41)

The existence of so many biographical works has inevitably brought about different perspectives of Poe, as well as much speculation inspired by his somber tales. In the 1930’s and 1960’s, a number of Poe’s gothic works were adapted onto the movie screen as horror stories filled with blood and torture. These productions used central events and characters from Poe’s stories to build narratives that replaced the original shady tones and melancholy atmospheres of the literary tales for a whole new gory scenario. The popularity of such movies helped consolidate Poe as a dark pop icon, an image that has also been explored and reinforced by the editorial market and by other media, such as

TV, comics and videogames. Nevertheless, this is only one side of Poe, whereas

[...] there are many posthumous Poes, constructed according to the demands of academic, publishing and film industry. And within the realm of traditional biography, some effort to make sense of Poe's death, if only speculating about his last thoughts or connecting those thoughts to his fiction or poetry would seem nearly inevitable. (PEEPLER, 2004, p.159)

As a result, the public usually reads his works as a product of his personal experiences, an approach to literature which not only resists Barthes' "death of the author", but also reinforces the gothic traits of his works – such as the presence of haunted places, supernatural themes and the way his stories "entertain by means of "curdling the blood," (HAYES, 2004, p. 78) – through association to a tragic, cursed life. According to Neimeyer, these associations began as soon as Poe was dead, and since then

the public has not been fascinated by Poe's biography (and the distortions of it) in isolation from his writings. The persistent identification of the two has accounted for much of Poe's popular attraction. This interpretation was not only picked up by many early popularizers of Poe, including Charles Baudelaire in France, but has been incorporated into many productions of popular culture. (2002, p.211)

D.W. Griffith's 1909 short film, *Edgar Allen Poe*, is a good example of such popular culture productions, since it incorporates the interpretation of *The Raven* as being an echo of Poe's own history. The six-minute long film shows us a desperate Edgar Allan

Poe (Barry O'Moore) around his sick wife, clearly inspired on the difficulties Poe is said to have gone through while his wife, Virginia, was ill and nearly dying. The ill omens brought by her disease seem to inspire him: while taking care of her and fearing to lose her, Poe sees the image of a raven, which prompts him to write. The image of the bird is both a clear reference to the scene in the poem when the bird taps on the student's door and a metaphor for Poe's inspiration knocking on his, a didactic way of connecting life and literature, but also a key to the symbolic reading Poe's poem demands. Beside his beloved wife's death bed, the poet sits down to write the lines that would be his literary masterpiece. After writing it, Poe leaves home in a rush and takes his new work to an editor, only to be rejected at first. Another editor, though, seems to like the poem and pays for it. The poor writer, then, relieved for finally getting some money to help his sick wife, goes back home carrying a basket with food and a blanket for her. Only, when he touches her hand after covering her up with the blanket, he discovers she is already dead on her bed. That is the moment when he sees the raven once again and, desperately mourning her death, lets himself fall over her corpse.

Griffith's short narrative presents us Poe as a melodramatic hero who finds inspiration out of the blue in his darkest moments without any greater efforts to write, a recurrent romantic topos. Though melodrama and romantic traits abound in Poe's fictional works, one cannot help noticing the irony of a biographical film that stresses such characteristics at the expense of the biographee's own poetics, the defense of methodically, precisely and painstakingly elaborated literary compositions, principles

which later became the foundation of so-called “theory of the effect”. As has already been established, however, biopics are not exercises in literary theory.

This was the first film ever to portray Edgar Allan Poe’s life and works on the screen, but it would be soon followed by other ones. D.W. Griffith adapted yet another of Poe’s works onto the screen with the silent movie *The Avenging Conscience* (1914), in which two of Poe’s writings were merged: *The tell-tale heart* and *Annabel Lee*. The movie tells the story of a young man who falls in love with a girl, but his uncle will not allow their relationship. The young man goes mad, kills his uncle and walls up his body. The police come by and start asking questions, which the man’s restless conscience does not allow him to answer convincingly, betraying him. This early adaptation of Poe to the screen was one of the first horror movies, reinforcing the writer’s association to all things macabre while also establishing the trend of mixing events and characters from his vast fictional oeuvre.

Since then, many other filmmakers have taken interest in adapting Poe’s life and works to the screen, particularly his gothic tales, which have fed the ever-growing market of horror productions. American director Roger Corman, in association with the famous Hollywood star Vincent Price, built a long and successful career out of adaptations of Poe’s works, such as *House of Usher* (1960), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), *Tales of Terror* (1962), *The Raven* (1963), *The Haunted Palace* (1963), *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964) *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964). Corman also directed *Premature Burial* (1962), which did not count on Price’s renowned image as a popular horror icon. A skilled adapter, Corman brought Poe’s plots

closer to the viewing public, adding elements in order to make the short narratives long enough to last over an hour as well as slightly humorous elements so that the movies would appeal to audiences wider than those only focused on morbid scenes, a touch that the satirical Poe would have probably approved. The director's efforts proved valid, for the films are still celebrated both as adaptations of Poe's work and as cult horror films.

However, D.W. Griffith and Corman were by no means the only ones to adapt Poe onto the big screen. According to Paul Woolf, "Poe is the most filmed American author of the nineteenth century" (2007, p.43), his literary legacy has become an important part of the history of cinema. More recently, George Romero and Dario Argento directed *Two Evil Eyes* (1990), two stories that loosely adapt different tales by Poe, mostly *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* and *The Black Cat*. Corman, Price, Romero and Argento are household names in contemporary gothic and horror culture, and the fact that their names have been closely associated to Poe's is clear indication that the poet's taste for the grotesque has overshadowed his anarchic humor, his sharp criticism and his formal obsession, at least within pop culture. Therefore, a recognizable representation of Poe as character would hardly be that of the competent editor, of the skillful and methodical writer, or of the harsh and satirical literary critic.

In this sense, James McTeigue's *The Raven* (2012) brings some innovation to Poe's representation on screen. Certainly, the director's move towards a modernized Poe is not an isolated case; since Griffith's casting of Barry O'Moore as the melodramatic poet, Poe's image has been explored by TV shows such as *The*

Simpsons, The Following, Altered Carbon, South Park, on a Beatles album cover as well as on countless mugs, T-shirts and popular collectible items, whereas references to his name have been just as numerous and diverse. Aware of the cultural ubiquity of his central character, McTeigue does not break away from the strong tradition of associating the poet's life to his gothic tales. His feature film appropriates elements not from one, but from many of Poe's most famous short stories, such as *The Murders in the Rue Morgue, The Pit and the Pendulum, The Masque of the Red Death, Premature Burial, The Tell-tale Heart*, among others. The storyline is quite simple and explores more than one cliché from crime films: after a number of murders committed in Baltimore are found to reproduce the circumstances of some of Poe's fictional assassinations, the poet (John Cusack) joins forces with the local Police to help find the manic and stop the incriminating crime wave.

Despite some gruesome scenes and the nature of the story events, McTeigue's thriller does not follow Corman's and Romero's horror styles. What the film proposes is basically a detective story that intertwines Poe's life and death with events from his stories, only this time the poet is not a helpless and suffering victim of personal tragedies, but an active, obstinate and intelligent man who fights for love and, ultimately, for his own life. Though the film is absolutely fictional and bears no commitment to historical accuracy, by focusing on the man behind the legend, instead of simply attempting to place him in his own terrifying plots, it allows for the emergence of a more plausible Poe, a true flawed and complex human being skillfully performed by John Cusack. This "believable" portrait of Poe ought to be celebrated

as a breakthrough in the representation of the poet for mass consumption not only for what it does to his image, but also for its realistic account of the hardship of the literary craft and of the instability of the editorial world. In addition to this, there is another commendable feature in McTeigue's work, one that is not only fresh and creative, but which also greatly contributes to the recognition of Poe's literary genius: the representation of the writer as the precursor of the detective story.

In academic circles and among specialized critics, Poe is known for having created this genre. According to Peter Thoms (2002, p.142), Poe's work with such stories was, in fact, "engineering the structure of detective fiction – the movement from mystery to solution". The three crime stories featuring detective C. August Dupin, (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Mystery of Marie Rogê* and *The Purloined Letter*) were the first of their kind and silently revolutionized literature, influencing the creation of the famous Sherlock Holmes, by Arthur Conan Doyle, Hercule Poirot, by Agatha Christie, and virtually all "cerebral" detectives of contemporary fiction. This connection is not so widely known, however, so it is rather refreshing to see McTeigue not only associate Poe to "tales of ratiocination", but reinforce the influence his original stories had in Western culture by depicting the poet not so much as the intellectual and indolent Dupin, but as an active, willful and impatient amateur detective that reminds us of Sherlock, a choice in tune with the recent revival of Conan Doyle's celebrity creation. Such crossings and contaminations are typical of postmodernist culture, and "if Poe is alive and well in the ether of postmodern meta-popular culture, it is because his

image, his life, and his words are so firmly anchored in the many dimensions of popular culture” (NEIMEYER, 2002, p.207), not only for the gothic stories he authored, but for having created the detective genre as we know it.

MacTeigue’s *The Raven* also reinforces how Poe’s fame grew greater and faster in Europe than in America, mostly in France, due to Baudelaire’s translations of his poems. In an early scene, Poe is in a bar in Baltimore and challenges the men around him to complete the verse “quoth the raven”, promising a drink to whoever gets it right. The only one who recognizes the line is a French man, who not only closes it with “Nevermore”, but also praises the poem as his favorite. Therefore, with a simple and seemingly irrelevant scene, the movie opens by establishing an image of a Poe dislocated in America who finds his place among European writers, a representation that echoes Poe’s own critical writings as well as academic studies that emphasize the poet’s strong affiliations to European literary traditions.

Despite its light-hearted and adventurous tone, which clearly aim at entertaining rather than “educating” the public, MacTeigue’s biopic recuperates yet another historical – and literary – fact of considerable relevance within Poe studies: the reference to Rufus Griswold. In the movie, Griswold is one of the first victims of the murderer who is attempting to frame Poe, and his name is recognized by the poet as a literary critic with whom he engaged in several disagreements. According to many biographers, Griswold was, indeed, pretty much Poe’s rival in his life, yet he became Poe’s literary executor and wrote a(n) (in)famous obituary upon the poet’s mysterious and tragic

death in which he claimed that Poe often wandered the streets, either in “madness or melancholy”, mumbling and cursing to himself, was usually drunk, easily irritated and envious of others. Even though the obituary was written under the pseudonym “Ludwig”, Griswold’s identity was soon revealed in a letter to Sarah Helen Whitman (Poe’s fiancée at the time of his death) in which he declares he was never a friend of Poe’s. Griswold’s maligning obituary

can be considered as the first and perhaps the most important treatment of Poe’s biography in popular culture since it was reprinted in the only available American edition of the author’s works for decades after his death. Furthermore, in its willful lack of accuracy, one can see it as an “adaptation,” rather than an objective account, of Poe’s life, even if Griswold was convinced that the overall impression he was giving reflected a certain reality. (NEIMEYER, 2002, p.209)

If a document such as an obituary is found to be so inaccurate in its representation of the biographee to the point of being perceived as an “adaptation”, MacTeigue’s slightly ludicrous fantasies of a detectivesque Poe should be spared the demands for factuality. If nothing else, the film sides with other creative and laudable attempts to undo the damages of Griswold’s memoir, which did have an impact on Poe’s reputation and kept him out of the big print for some time.

Therefore, though the biopic treatment may reinforce romantic and anachronistic views of the author and of literary creation on the eyes of scholars and critics, it cannot be denied that it does contribute to increase the writer’s popularity by bringing his

writings to the knowledge of new reading publics and teasing them with entertaining yet plausible historical fiction. After all, no text, therefore no author, survives without readers, and Poe's mysterious life, his taste for the suspense and the controversies he raised feed different but equally avid publics:

Poe's machine-like intellectualism would make him "a greater favorite with the scholars than with the people", but as it turned out, the people would gravitate toward the more romantic image of Poe writing while high on opium or allegorizing his own tortured psyche in passionate poems and macabre tales, while late nineteenth-century scholars were increasingly drawn to Poe the engineer. (Duyckinck *apud* PEEPLES, 2004, p.16.)

Basically, Edgar Allan Poe's work contains enough popular elements to draw in big audiences and to be turned into highly successful commercial movies. But it also contains sophisticated literary features to feed sound scholarly and critical studies. 'In short, Poe continues to fascinate a wide range of readers and popular culture continues to reinvent him because Poe's work took off in so many directions, which is why "*everything leads to Poe*".' (PEEPLES, 2004, p.152). In this sense, Griffith's and McTiegue's productions complement each other and allow us to glimpse into the complex character we came to know simply as "Poe": a loving, melodramatic, tragic figure who was also a difficult, demanding, outspoken alcoholic with a knack for solving puzzles. Will we ever know which portrait is more accurate? Probably not. Fortunately.

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