

THE INTRUDER

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In 1928, James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber adapted *The Fall of the House of Usher* into a short amateur film, translating Poe's classic gothic tale of incest, catalepsy, and an ossifying bloodline into a form that was distinctively abstract and modern. They took broad poetic license with Poe's text, maintaining the author's central metaphor, that the crumbling and ruinous estate of the Ushers was symbolic of the end of their legacy. Watson and Webber's approach allows for a refreshing lack of obedience to the written word and frees up the story to assume a dynamic, interior dimension, which lends it the texture of a nightmare. The most significant departure that the filmmakers have taken in their staging of this story is to transform the visitor, who in Poe's text is the narrator and central witness, into a mystical, antagonistic presence. In Poe's text, the visitor's voice is a shelter for the reader, a station of sanity in a fable of desolation and madness; the visitor first sets the tone of Poe's text by describing the looming manse as melancholy, a source of "insufferable gloom." In the 1928 adaptation, this visitor, played by co-director Melville Webber, is an ignoble trickster whose first appearance coincides with Madeleine Usher's illness and death. He is an interloper, but he is also an extension of the spooky, magical atmosphere that preexists him in this space, implied by canted angles, limitless rooms, and disembodied hands. His face, painted in the style of the Frescoes of Tavant, suggests both the distance of the Romanesque and the contemporaneous vanguard of German Expressionism. This visitor is an elastic presence, and at the height of Roderick Usher's oneiric trance, his face vanishes, and he becomes simply a top hat and a pair of gloved hands.

In the tale of Usher, the visitor is a witness; in this film, he is a conductor of the weird terrors that emerge from the pitiless depths of the house. Like Dr. Caligari, this figure embodies opposites: much as Caligari was both the benevolent doctor and the evil medicine show barker, the visitor is both a passing traveller—trapped by circumstance—and a menacing catalyst. In the closing moments of the film, he slips away, into the night, fleeing the crumbling house, his top hat silhouetted by the light of the moon. In Watson and Webber's version, none but the moon bear witness. ■

A video essay companion to this feature can be found in the online edition of MSJ 7.2 at: <https://vimeo.com/759537588/f036f62354>

Image from *The Fall of the House of Usher*, directed by James Sibley Watson Jr. and Melville Webber, James Sibley Watson Jr. and Melville Webber Studio, 1928.

