

1988

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#### Recommended Citation

von Gunden, Kenneth (1988) "Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat" on Film," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 6 , Article 15.

Available at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies\\_eng\\_new/vol6/iss1/15](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol6/iss1/15)

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## EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE BLACK CAT" ON FILM

Kenneth Von Gunden

*The Pennsylvania State University*

"For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence." With those lines, Poe's narrator begins his tale of madness and murder. "The Black Cat," published in the *United States Saturday Post*, 19 August 1843, has not only been one of Poe's most enduring works but also one of the most filmed.

Reasons for the popularity of "The Black Cat" are many: some obvious, some obscure, and some eminently arguable. The story is popular among filmmakers, despite its interior nature, because it is a riveting tale of a precipitous descent into nightmare and filled with dreamlike archetypal signposts—like black cats. The mad teller of the tale is much like a tortured sleeper, eerily impotent in the face of obstacles which, like all such nightmarish roadblocks, frustrate and confine him like a fly trapped in amber.

Poe fascinated moviemakers from the very beginning of the motion picture era. In 1909, a hundred years after Poe's birth in 1809, the then-relatively-unknown D. W. Griffith directed a 450-foot silent "biopic" for the Mutoscope and Biograph company called simply *Edgar Allan Poe*. Herbert Yost played Poe and Linda Arvidson (Mrs. Griffith) played Virginia Clemm.<sup>1</sup>

The 6 February 1909 edition of *Moving Picture World* notes that the film begins with Poe opening a window to get air for his dying wife, Virginia, whereupon a raven flies in and perches on a bust of Pallas. Poe dashes off his poem "The Raven" and sells it for \$10. Buying food and medicine, he rushes home only to find his wife dead. After a title appears saying "My God, she is dead," Yost falls across the cot in despair. The film is noteworthy as Griffith's first attempt to pay homage to Poe, and for Billy Bitzer's moody photography.

In 1912 The Eclair/American Standard Co. filmed the two-reel *The Raven* at their studios in Fort Lee, New Jersey. The 30-minute film starred Guy Oliver, an actor who closely resembled Poe. "Poe" falls asleep and dreams of scenes from his short stories—many of which had not yet been written at the time he was composing "The Raven." But this ploy made audiences aware that he had written "The Black Cat" and "The Gold-Bug," among others.

In 1914, D. W. Griffith filmed one of the truest-to-Poe adaptations of "The Black Cat" and other Poe works. One writer believed that "the

really unique" feature of *The Avenging Conscience* was "that it is based on a number of Poe's poems and stories" forming a "Poe mosaic, and it projects Poe on the screen in a way that had not been done before and has not since."<sup>2</sup>

Noting that Griffith used all or parts of "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," "William Wilson," "The Mystery of Marie Roget," "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Cask of Amontillado," "Annabel Lee," "To One in Paradise," "The Bells," "The City in the Sea," and "The Conqueror Worm," the writer called *The Avenging Conscience* "a masterpiece of adaptation" and "a model of how a screen-treatment can respect literary material, yet translate it into forms of movement and imagery independent of literature and peculiar to the cinema."

An opening title card by Griffith states that the film was "Suggested by Edgar Allan Poe's story of 'The Telltale [sic] Heart' and by certain of his poems of the affections," adding that his intent was a "humble effort to express, in motion picture form, Poe's conception of the psychology of conscience, the great safeguard of human righteousness."<sup>3</sup> Referring to Griffith's preachy preface to the film, another writer characterized "William Wilson" and "The Black Cat" not as the murder mysteries they technically are, but as "conscience stories."<sup>4</sup>

As the story begins, the nephew/protagonist (Henry B. Walthall) has been raised by his wealthy uncle (Spottiswoode Aiken) to be a great writer and a scholar. The nephew is in love with a village girl (Blanche Sweet), but the uncle disapproves of her and calls her a man chaser. With his nephew's best interests at heart, the uncle forbids the two lovers to see each other again.

The nephew, whose sweetheart reminds him of Poe's "Annabel Lee," is heartbroken and angry at his uncle's cruel dictum. Seated in his uncle's library, the nephew is seen reading a volume of Poe's works, and Griffith reproduces the opening paragraph of "The Tell-Tale Heart" on a title card. Then follows a full-screen close-up of Walthall, who continues reading, followed by a cut to the opening lines of "Annabel Lee":

It was many and many a year ago  
In a kingdom by the sea  
That a maiden lived, whom you may know  
By the name of Annabel Lee  
And this maiden she lived with no other thought  
Than to love, and be loved by me.

As the nephew grows increasingly resentful of his uncle, Griffith intercuts between scenes and texts from Poe to suggest the youth's

unhealthy psychological motivation. After observing insects and a spider devouring each other, the nephew strangles his uncle and walls up his body in the fireplace. An Italian (George Seigmann), a "disreputable foreigner" (as a title card calls him), witnesses the murder and blackmails the youth.

His guilt weighing upon him, the nephew is grilled by a detective (Ralph Lewis) in the uncle's library. One of the most remarkable evocations of sound in a silent film follows as the youth breaks down: Walthall hears the thumping of his uncle's heart and Griffith intercuts among the nephew, the detective, the rhythmic beat of the pendulum of the clock, the detective's foot on the floor, the screeching of an owl outside the window, and the tapping of the detective's pencil (which a title card likens to "the beating of the dead man's heart").

As the nephew collapses in guilt, a title proclaims: "Conscience overburdened by the telltale heart." Rigid with horror, the nephew experiences an insight into the Poesque "mystic mid-region of Weir" in a sequence that poet Vachel Lindsay says "takes a higher demoniacal plane reminiscent of 'The Bells.'" Walthall opens a door to confront the "ghoul-visions," which follow Griffith's next title card from Poe: "They are neither man nor woman;/ They are neither brute nor human;/ They are ghouls . . . ." This mixture of Poe phantasmagoria and Griffith climactic artistry climax the nephew's nightmare. Overcome by his guilt and the horrific images he's seen, including his uncle's accusing ghost emerging from the fireplace, the nephew hangs himself. Seeing his swinging body, the boy's sweetheart subsequently hurls herself off a cliff. Then we discover that all has been a horrible dream suffered by the nephew. The principals reconcile, and the film ends with the happy honeymooners featured in a whimsical fantasy sequence of the sort Griffith would soon use in *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*.

Griffith's cinematographer recalled the director's instructions for the spider sequence in the film: "Get me a spider, weaving her web/ to snare unwary blunderers/ in the night." As Brown later explained, "I didn't mind being instructed in verse. I was used to it. Griffith was up to his eyebrows in Edgar Allan Poe, who was the inspiration for *The Avenging Conscience*, and he couldn't help speaking in iambic pentameters of a sort, thanks to his love of Shakespeare and *his hope of being a poet himself someday*"<sup>5</sup> [emphasis mine].

Griffith used this sequence, in which a spider in a web devours a fly and ants in turn devour the spider, for the inspiration behind "the birth of an evil thought" as the nephew observes that nature is "one long system of murder."

Poet Lindsay said of these shots that "Their horror and decorative iridescence are of the Poe sort. It is the first hint of the Poe

hieroglyphic we have had, except for the black patch over the eye of the uncle, along with his jaundiced, cadaverous face."<sup>6</sup>

Completed, *The Avenging Conscience* was full of visual magic—special effects, double exposures, special filming devices, extreme character close-ups, symbolism, and expressionistic images. Many of these devices Griffith was using for the first time. These experiments, perfected and polished, would appear in the director's later work. Griffith reserved the final cut on *The Avenging Conscience* until an audience's reactions told him what had to be taken out. After a final hectic day of shooting, Griffith took seven or eight reels of the film to Pomona for a sneak preview on 16 July 1914. The first-night audience in the big Clune's Auditorium responded overwhelmingly favorably to the film. Satisfied with what he had wrought, Griffith could immediately commence production on his next film—*The Birth of a Nation*.

*The Avenging Conscience* opened at the Strand in New York City on 2 August 1914. A review in the 7 August 1914 *Variety* noted that "Artistically, Mr. Griffith has put on a beautiful picture in 'Conscience.' It lives up to his reputation, from scenes and situations to photography." Certainly, the film's beautifully-conceived high-contrast lighting anticipated and, perhaps, influenced the German Expressionist films of the teens and twenties. Concerned with psychological motivation and the mental state of the protagonist, *Conscience* prepared audiences for the better-remembered *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), which itself would influence film, and horror film especially, in the years to come—including Ulmer's 1934 filming of *The Black Cat*.

In 1919, the German-made *Fünf Unheimliche Geschichten* (*Five Sinister Stories*) drew upon Poe's "The Black Cat," "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether," and Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Suicide Club" to produce a silent film, which starred Conrad Veidt as Death, Reinhold Schuenzel as the Devil, and Anita Berber as a prostitute. As one writer noted, "The same material was altered and modernized in 1932 by director Richard Oswald for a talkie which was released in the U.S. [in 1940] as *The Living Dead*."<sup>7</sup> Oswald's *The Living Dead* begins with the story of "The Black Cat," but the murderer escapes and develops into a Mabuse-type supercriminal who turns out to be the sinister force behind the other stories.<sup>8</sup>

The year 1934 saw the release of Universal-International's *The Black Cat*, a Boris Karloff/Bela Lugosi vehicle, which was an entertaining mishmash of satanism, sadism, necrophilia, and murder which, in its own campy way, is true to Poe's spirit.

Director Edgar G. Ulmer, a master of the "B" film, told an interviewer why his film had little to do with Poe's tale except for the title: "The Edgar Allan Poe story is not a story you can dramatize." Ulmer added that the film's visual sophistication reflected "my Bauhaus period."<sup>9</sup>

Ulmer's film career began in Germany, where he worked on Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) and where he was F. W. Murnau's production designer before that unique position had a name.

Leaving Germany for Hollywood, Ulmer made silent Westerns for Universal. When Ulmer took a story treatment he'd written to Carl Laemmle, Jr. which would employ Lugosi and Karloff at the same time in the same picture, Laemmle gave him the go-ahead to produce a script. Ulmer and Laemmle had also decided that *The Black Cat* would be filmed in the German Expressionistic style initiated by *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in 1919. Ulmer chose a young writer named Peter Ruric to write the final script. As "Paul Cain," incidentally, Ruric wrote mystery stories for the often-lurid *Black Mask* magazine.

The film begins with Vitus Verdegast (Lugosi) and a young couple (David Manners and Jacqueline Wells) aboard a train. A shuttle bus accident causes the two young people, Lugosi, and his major domo Thamal (Harry Cording) to go on by foot. They stumble upon a fortresslike chateau, Marmaros—Lugosi's original destination.

Inside, they meet the gadget-filled chateau's owner and designer, an engineer named Hjalmar Poelzig (Karloff). [See Photograph 1] Later we learn that Karloff is a mad genius who built his chateau on the ruins of a fort he betrayed to the enemy in wartime. He keeps the bodies of young women—one of whom is Lugosi's late wife—preserved in glass crypts. Frightened silly by a black cat, Lugosi throws a knife at it and kills it. [See Photograph 2] He justifies this strange behavior by explaining that black cats are the "living embodiment of evil."

Now married to Lugosi's daughter, Karloff is also the head of a sacrificial devil cult; and he plans a dark fate for Miss Wells. [See Photograph 3] She soon becomes the center of a strange sexual tug-of-war, encompassing her, her husband, and Lugosi and Karloff.

Insane with rage after discovering the body of his daughter, Lugosi disrupts the cult's plan to sacrifice Miss Wells and pursues Karloff into the cult leader's vast underground labyrinth. Lugosi and his servant Thamal capture Karloff, disrobe him, and stretch him on a rack. "Did you ever see an animal skinned?" Lugosi asks. "That's what I'm going to do, tear the skin from your body—slowly—bit by bit." While Karloff screams in pain, Lugosi, laughing madly, flays the skin from his body with a sharp scalpel (seen only in shadow). When Lugosi tries to help Miss Wells escape, Manners misunderstands his intent and shoots him. The mortally-wounded Lugosi limps to a wall switch.

Facing the dying Karloff, he announces, "Five minutes—and this switch ignites the dynamite. Five minutes and Marmaros, you, and I—this whole rotten cult will be no more . . ." As the young couple watches from outside, the whole fortress is blown apart in a gigantic explosion.

Shot in nineteen days for just under \$100,000, the film is a rare (for the thirties) look at sexual repression and fanaticism. Universal, disturbed by the "unhealthy" emphasis of the film (Lugosi's character was originally just as sex-obsessed and cruelly manipulative as Karloff's), allotted \$6500 for retakes and new scenes. In the new version, Lugosi's Verdegast became more a hero and less a leering lunatic.

Although Ulmer must get the bulk of the credit for *The Black Cat's* superior visual look, he was aided greatly by the work of cinematographer John Mescal, who was later to be acclaimed in regard to his filming of the 1935 *The Bride of Frankenstein*. As in all his best work, Ulmer's use of screen space is disturbing in its suggestiveness. His abstract compositions leave almost as much out as they detail in. As one critic noted, "For Ulmer, a few sticks of wood in primary shapes, dressed with a modicum of essential props, when photographed in shadows that respect no natural light, can create a world cognizant of the legitimacy of nightmare, of encompassing despair unable to muffle the cries of profound spiritual pain."<sup>10</sup> Ulmer's *The Black Cat*, then, is worthy of comparison to Poe: its examination of madness exuberantly embraced places it among the last great horror epics of the 30s, the last gasp of the evocative if mannered German Expressionism that is so close to the Poesque.

"The Black Cat" was also the basis of Roadshow Attractions' 1934 release, *Maniac* (also known as *Sex Maniac*). This six-reel sex-and-horror film, produced and directed by Dwain Esper, used much of Poe's plot, as well as mad scientists, nude women, and a rape on camera. It starred Horace Carpenter and Phyllis Diller and played burlesque grind houses for years. The villain is given away by a black cat.<sup>11</sup>

Universal released another version of *The Black Cat* in 1941 which had nothing to do with either the Poe story or the 1934 version. Directed by Albert S. Rogell, this 70-minute filming starred Basil Rathbone, Hugh Herbert, Gale Sondergaard, Broderick Crawford, and a painfully young Alan Ladd. Bela Lugosi had a small role playing the film's red herring menace, an old caretaker.

A review noted that "A short story by Edgar Allan Poe caused the picture to be made. Poe may not be so much at fault, however, as those who took his yarn in hand [and] moulded it into a 70-minute bore . . ." Typical of the film's dialogue is this witticism: "Everything around here is for the cats, that's why the place is going to

the dogs."<sup>12</sup> The film is played for laughs with Hugh Herbert as a bumbling antiques expert and Crawford as an anxious real estate dealer who's allergic to cats. At one point, Crawford says of Basil Rathbone—then playing the great detective in a series of programmers—"He thinks he's Sherlock Holmes." A black cat, whose presence is explained as foretelling death, accidentally sets the murderess on fire at the conclusion.

At least three of "The Black Cat" filmic incarnations have been shorts. With the help of USC students, director/producer William C. Jersey made a 15-minute-long, 16-millimeter version in 1956 which was narrated by William Munchau.<sup>13</sup> In 1960, Braverman Films released a 22-minute animated version narrated by Basil Rathbone and directed by Frank Marvel. Using illustrations by John Lemmon and music by Arthur DeCenco, this color short is considered by many to be one of the best versions ever made.<sup>14</sup> If the USC and Braverman films are so true to Poe, then it is almost certainly because the story seems incapable of maintaining a full-length feature. "The Black Cat" is a single scream of anguish and madness—not a sustained tale. Its focus is limited and its characters few, and the shivers it contains are not the sort that can bear the weight of "plot." For this reason, the shorter efforts—freed of the necessity to flesh out and expand that singular note of insanity into a longer, unified work—retain Poe's emphasis and dramatic intensity.

Roger Corman's 1962 trilogy *Tales of Terror* also contains a short segment, one fashioned by screenwriter Richard Matheson from "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado." Starring Peter Lorre and Vincent Price, it was the first of Corman's tongue-in-cheek treatments of Poe. As Montresor, a swollen pixie of a man, Peter Lorre is perfect as the husband cuckolded by his wife (Joyce Jameson) and her lover, Fortunato (Price). [See Photograph 4] Insanely jealous, Lorre entombs his wife and Fortunato alive behind a cellar wall, unaware he's also bricking up a third party—Pluto, his wife's black cat. After a psychological-fantasy sequence in which he imagines his dead wife and her lover ripping his head off and playfully tossing it around, Lorre is undone by Pluto's mewing from behind the cellar wall.

Corman's filming of "The Black Cat" captures some of the atmosphere, mood, and psychological nuances of Poe's story—partly because Corman, master of the four-day quickie, took more time and paid more attention to his work on the Poe pictures. As he told two interviewers, "With a three-week schedule on the Poe pictures, I had a little more time to work with the camera. And also, I felt the subject matter lent itself to that."<sup>15</sup>



The Poe-inspired films kept coming through the 60s. In 1966, Hemisphere/Falcon International released a 77-minute *The Black Cat* written and directed by Harold Hoffman. More gore than Poe (it featured a hatchet driven into a young woman's head), this filming's only relationship to the Poe story is that a man believes a black cat, which he accidentally walls up, to be the evil incarnation of his murdered father.<sup>16</sup> In 1968 Toho Films released *Kuroneko (Black Cat)*, a horror film by Kaneto Shindo set in twelfth-century Japan. The souls of two women raped and murdered by roving Samurai make a pact with evil spirits which allows them to return as avenging monsters. Luring their unsuspecting prey to their home, the women tear out the warriors' throats. While not really having much in common with Poe's story, the film is highly imaginative and atmospherically photographed.<sup>17</sup> Yet another version—also called *The Black Cat*—was released in 1984. Filmed in 1980 on British locations and Rome studio interiors and directed by Lucio Fulci, this latest incarnation concerned a series of deaths in a small British village. As it turns out—rather improbably—the black cat of a Mr. Miles (Patrick Magee), an experimenter in the paranormal, is responsible for the killings. Thus, this film, like so many of the others, has little in common *literally* with Poe's story.

Thus, Poe's image-laden prose has found a perfect marriage with film. His tales of psychological horror and madness transfer well to the screen—where dream-like images seduce us and activate our sense of wonder. None of us is truly innocent, and as long as we continue to plot murder most foul in the darkest recesses of our imaginations, Poe's "The Black Cat" will continue to inspire filmmakers.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Films in Review*, October 1961, p. 462.

<sup>2</sup>*Films in Review*, November 1951, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Williams, *Griffith: First Artist of the Movies* (New York, 1980), p. 58.

<sup>4</sup>Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York, 1915), p. 121.

<sup>5</sup>Karl Brown, *Adventures with D. W. Griffith* (New York, 1973), p. 37.

<sup>6</sup>Lindsay, p. 125.

<sup>7</sup>*Films in Review*, October 1961, p. 466.

<sup>8</sup>*Films in Review*, December 1961, pp. 634-635.

<sup>9</sup>Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn, eds., *Kings of the B's* (New York, 1975), pp. 388-389.

<sup>10</sup>McCarthy and Flynn, pp. 148-149.

<sup>11</sup>*Films in Review*, January 1962, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup>*Variety*, 30 April 1941, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup>USC Catalog, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup>Walt Lee, *Reference Guide to Fantastic Films: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror* (Los Angeles, 1972), p. 37.

<sup>15</sup>McCarthy and Flynn, p. 307.

<sup>16</sup>Lee, p. 37.

<sup>17</sup>John Stanley, *The Creature Features Movie Guide* (Pacifica, 1981), p. 28.

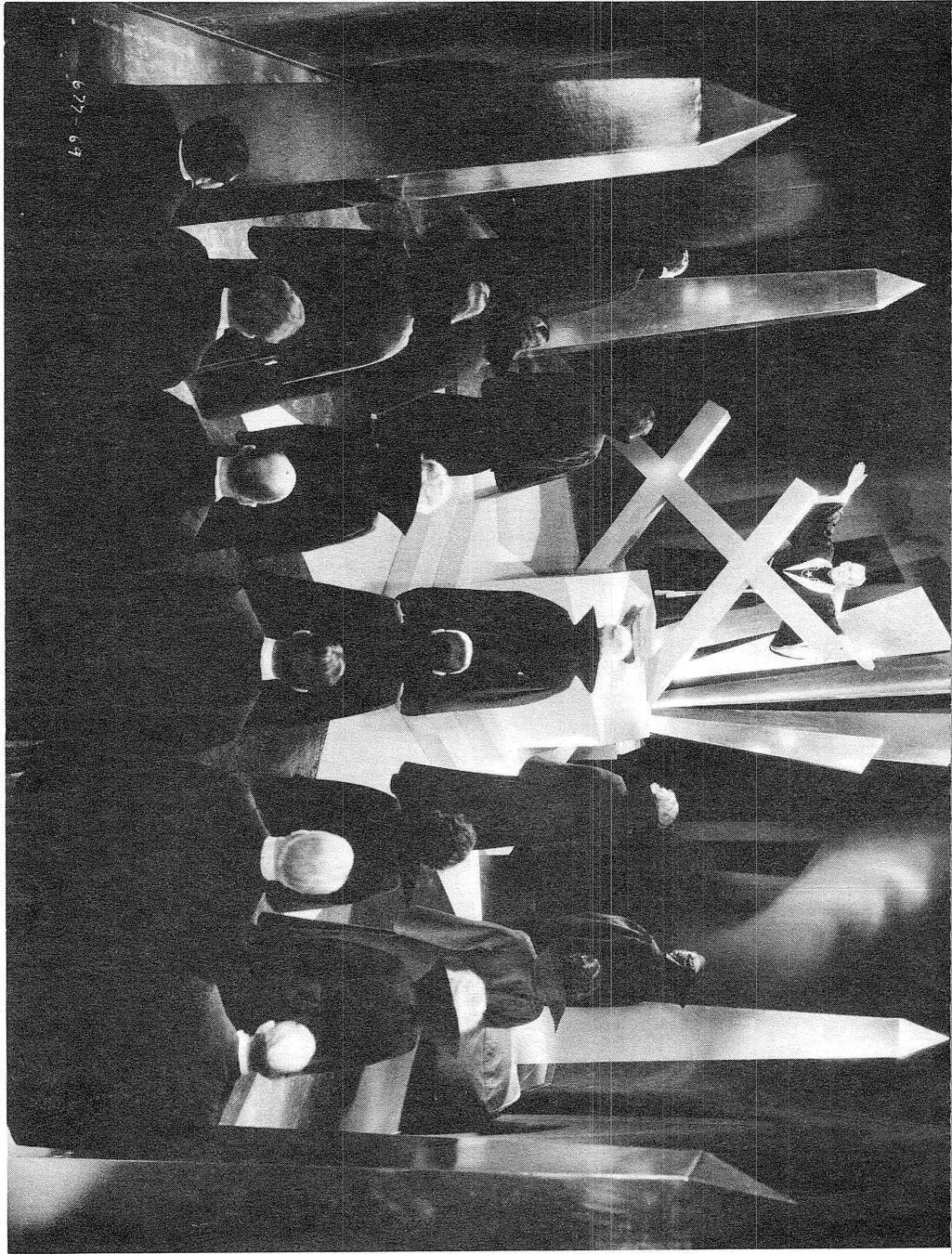


Photograph 1



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Photograph 2



Photograph 3



Edgar Allan Poe's

**TALES OF TERROR**

In the Case of the Black Cat

Starring Vincent Price, Peter Lorre, Paul Robeson

Screenplay by Richard Amberg

A James H. Hansen Production

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**Photograph 4**

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