

# Background Radiation: The Symbolism of Film in a Creative Work

---

Jack Fanning

College of Arts and Sciences

Creative Writing: Fiction

Research Week 2024



# Weird Fiction

- Difficult to define.
- Distinct from the Gothic and supernatural literature.
- Early authors include Edgar Allen Poe, M.R. James, and Algernon Blackwood.
- “a dark fantastic (‘horror’ plus ‘fantasy’) often featuring nontraditional alien monsters (thus plus ‘science fiction’)” Miéville, 510

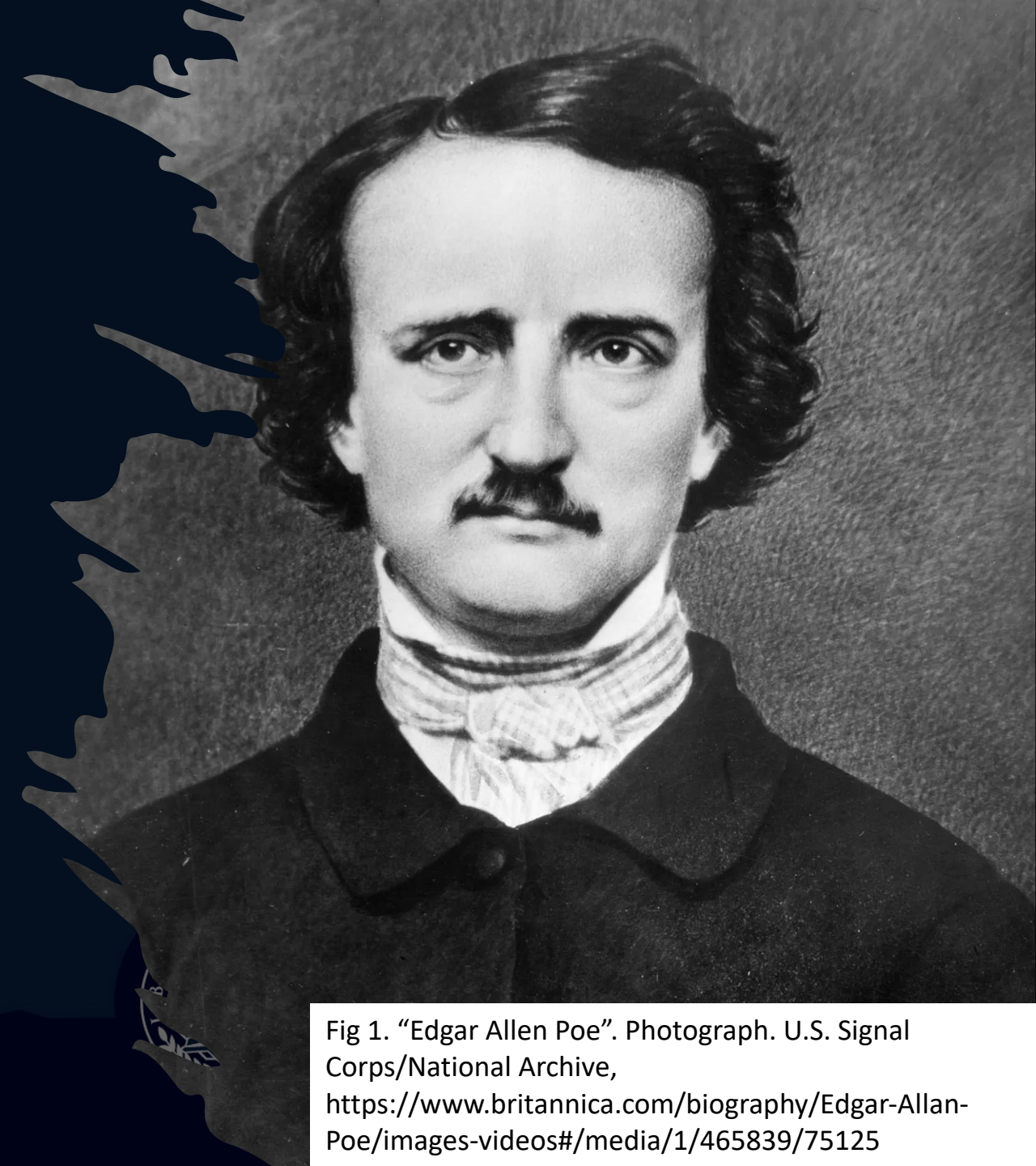


Fig 1. “Edgar Allen Poe”. Photograph. U.S. Signal Corps/National Archive, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edgar-Allan-Poe/images-videos#/media/1/465839/75125>

# Inspirations and Influences

- The Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka
- House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski
- The City and the City by China Miéville
- City of Saints and Madmen by Jeff Vandermeer

- Awe and fear as a way of undermining the quotidian (Miéville 510)
- Focus on the “numinosity under the everyday.” (Miéville 510)

“A classic understanding of the weird story might be summarized as follows: At first nothing at all happens. The characters are bathed in banal and beatific happiness, adequately symbolized by the family life of an insurance agent in an American suburb. The kids play baseball, the woman plays the piano a little, etc. All is well.

Then, gradually, almost insignificant incidents accumulate, dangerously reinforcing one another. Cracks appear in the glossy varnish of the ordinary, leaving the field wide open for troublesome hypotheses. Inexorably, the forces of evil enter the setting.” (Houellebecq 18)

# Lovecraft and the Weird

- A monolithic figure in Weird Fiction
- Codified theory on the Weird
- “a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature...” (Lovecraft)
- “Lovecraft’s awe, for example, is inextricable... from a racism so obsessive it is a hallucinogen.” (Miéville 511)

# Weird Fiction as Atmosphere

- "Atmosphere, not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction... a *vivid picture of a certain type of human mood...*" (Lovecraft)
- "In Lovecraft's key work, "The Call of Cthulu," there is no story, only the slow uncovering, from disjointed information and discarded papers, of the *fact* of the Weird..." (Miéville 512)

# Weird Fiction as Reactionary

- “Horror writers are reactionaries in general simply because they are particularly, one might even say *professionally*, aware of the existence of Evil.” (Houellebecq 62)
- “Easy Weird Fiction writer has her or (more usually in the haute phase) his own particular mishigas... The great Weird Fiction writers are responding to capitalist modernity entering... a period of crisis.” (Miéville 513)
- “Fear from afar, preceded by repulsion — it is what generates indignation and hatred.” (Houellebecq 61)

# Research Questions

- How can I create atmosphere in this story?
  - How can I implement film in a way that creates a vivid picture of a type of human mood?
- How can I navigate the reactionary nature of horror?
  - How can classic film capture a current period of crisis?



# Story Context / Methodology

- Haiden is struggling with the death of his girlfriend in a tragedy he was present for.
- Haiden's grief and loneliness make him the ideal prey for a cosmic entity that appears as static.
- Film as something that was once relational and is now obsessive.
- Film references that juxtapose the idealized state of fiction with human tragedy.

# The Sound of Music

- The infiltration of Austria by the Third Reich.
- More specifically, the children sing goodnight at a party where it becomes apparent that they are surrounded by the Nazi party.

The static appeared on the same day that the new couple moved in across the way.

Haiden noticed neither. Whether that was on purpose or not, not even he could say. Instead, while his coffee dripped and the formless couple in raincoats moved boxes, Haiden had his eyes fixed on the planter, on the balcony.

The parsley and basil had long since decayed, leaving limp plant matter behind. The only thing still thriving in the wooden box were the small, hand-painted supports planted alongside the herbs. And the cockroach, of course.

Haiden couldn't really see the cockroach, but he knew it was there all the same. He could sense the barbed legs, the high-gloss carapace. He knew that the moment he looked away the antennae would wave.

*So long, farewell, Auf Wiedersehen, goodbye,* he hummed to himself.

The longer he stared at the mess of decay, the more taut his focus became. His skin began to itch, the fine hairs on his arm twitching.

# It's a Wonderful Life

- George Bailey brings gifts to the Martini's new home in a show of community.
- Neighborhood and community as the cure for loneliness and callousness.
- “Remember, no man is a failure that has friends.”
- Clarence Odbody as a cosmic entity.

Looking out the window, he saw the couple still trucking boxes in one at a time. In his deepest self, he felt a longing to be the kind of neighbor he saw in movies. To open the window and ask if they needed help, an extra set of arms.

“Bread that this house may never know hunger,” he quoted under his breath. “Salt, that life may always have flavor. And wine, that joy and prosperity may—”

His screen — which was to say his glasses — flashed white to remind him that the timer was over. To tell him to return to the table. Which he did.

Still, out of the corner of his eye he watched the couple. He watched as one of them tripped and sent a box tumbling into the muddy flowerbed. He watched the other run to help. He heard their laughs, muffled and distant and shining all the same.

# Neptune's Daughter

- “Baby It’s Cold Outside.”
- A case of mistaken identities.

When he was finished with work, he closed down his holo-tab and returned his glasses to their normal, sight-assistive state. He walked over to the shabby little bar he had bought at a flea market and felt memories crawling over him like locusts.

“A drink, my dear?” he’d once asked. He had been doing his best Cary Grant.

“Oh I really shouldn’t,” she had answered, lips pursed, coquettish. “A lady shouldn’t drink with a man after dark. It’s improper! What would Mother think?”

“Well, Mother isn’t here now, is she, darling?”

“Why I dare say she isn’t...”

Haiden bit his thumb. The pain silenced the memories. For now, at least. He found that the more he tried to shake them off, the stronger they returned the next time. Still, a Sisyphean task was better than the hot tears that threatened to spill out. Those were just pain.

# Singing in the Rain

- Gene Kelly's obsessive nature.

He tossed a frozen potpie into the microwave, drew the curtains, and switched on the old projector. She had used to joke that if he could, Haiden would have had them subscribed to some esoteric cable package. He had never argued, because he knew it to be true. But he could never find one that would service their apartment, and instead opted for streaming services that offered a facsimile of channel-surfing. 24/7 streams of whatever they offered, playing at random.

He scrolled through until he caught *Singing in the Rain* right as Donald O'Connor was running up the wall. Haiden turned the volume up just above what was comfortable. Then, taking alternately freezing and burning bites of potpie, he settled into his nightly routine.

“He had a hundred-degree fever filming this scene,” Haiden said to the empty room as Gene Kelly began swinging on lampposts. “And they had to move the filming because when they tried at night, all the houses around diverted too much water from the rain effects.” As he spoke to no one, a pea fell from his lips and rolled under the coffee table.

# The Apartment

- The invitation of an Evil presence into your home for perceived gain.
- Pursuit of love as it relates to self harm.

Haiden woke in the dark. He had fallen asleep on the couch, bathed in the light of the projector. He blinked his eyes at the opening scene of *The Apartment*, to Jack Lemmon talking about insurance and nodding along to the clack of his adding machine.

Haiden's head felt choked by weeds. His breath tasted like decay. The world slanted into wild angles wherever he looked.

He tore himself from the couch and lumbered, heart heavy and brain thick, to the bedroom door.

"Are you okay?" he asked, mouth gummy with dried spit and the memory of liquor. He put his hand to the door. "I had a dream. We were driving. You were, afraid."

Haiden felt the particleboard of the door pulse. He snapped another half-step awake. That was a presence on the other side of the door, not a person. Not her. He stumbled back, knocking a painting off the wall. It fell to the carpet without a sound.

# The Ending

- Haiden becomes convinced that the static is his girlfriend, come back to forgive him for her death.
- It is revealed that she died in a road rage shooting incident, trying to calm the perpetrator.
- In the end, Haiden realizes that she knew there was nothing he could have done, and only wanted him to be there as she died.

So why would she have come back?

With that thought, as the static enveloped him, he saw what it was that had lured him in. The branching jaws of an eyeless thing, burning its way through worlds. It radiated hunger, no intelligence or intent implicit in its writhing. An anglerfish, dangling a shining sound in front of desperate creatures, hoping one would fall prostrate, would fall prey.

Just as Haiden had.

A fang of starlight pierced him, body and soul, and muscles that were neither living nor dead contracted to pull him into what could be called a monstrous throat. He drowned in the dust of dead worlds, in the remnants of this sightless creature's hunger, and was compressed by the weight of all the time that had ever been.

He stretched infinitely thin, infinitely long, and his painfully finite brain simply stopped working. And the very last thing that the cathode tubes of his brain burned was the ghost image of hand on arm, lips meeting lips, and what could generously be called a transatlantic accent, but never a Cary Grant.

# Works Cited

- Houellebecq, Michel. *H. P. Lovecraft : Against the World, against Life*. Translated by Dorna Khazeni, Cernunnos, 2019.
- Miéville, China. "Weird Fiction." *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherryl Vint, Routledge, 2009, pp. 510-15
- Lovecraft, H.P. *Notes on Writing Weird Fiction*. hplovecraft.com, <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/nwwf.aspx>. Accessed 24 March 2024.
- Lovecraft, H.P. *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. hplovecraft.com, <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/shil.aspx>. Accessed 24 March 2024.