

## *Dreaming Beautifully in the House of Usher*

Review by Michael Orlando Yaccarino

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### *Lady Usher's Diary*

A film by Alexandre H. Mathis



"Beautiful dreamer, wake unto me."

The opening lyric to the well-known parlor song hints at the sentimental ballad's possibly darker subject matter—that is, the serenading of a dead lover. Perhaps fittingly then it was first published 1864, a year after the death of its creator American songwriter Stephen Foster. The antecedents of this popular musical form are the medieval French *chanson ballade*. The film *Lady Usher's Diary* (2022) is a visually rapturous manifestation of "Beautiful Dreamer's" necrophiliac suggestiveness, as well one linked directly to the very origins of that archaic musical form as expressed for the cinema.

*Lady Usher's Diary* is directed and produced by award-winning independent French *cinéaste*, photographer, and novelist Alexandre H. Mathis. The film's opening credits inform the viewer as to how this was an

unfinished work before finally being redone. Indeed, much of the footage was shot over the course of several years between 2014-18. This is borne out by French actress Pamela Stanford who plays the title role:

Initially, Alexandre discussed the potential of making several films together. To be sure, there were no set scenarios in place or anything definite planned. Alexandre has explained to me how his filmmaking process is not far from composing a sort of ongoing freeform novel, gathering images from here and there. Upon seeing the results, I believe he is a bit of a magician, too![1]

Stanford is also the central character of Mathis' *Outre Tombe* or *Haunted Earth* (2018), presumably constructed with material drawn at least in part from some of the same shooting sessions. The two hour and forty-seven-minute running time of *Lady Usher's Diary* feels brisk in comparison *Outre Tombe* with its nearly seven-hour duration. Cinematographically and thematically, both films source a similar rich wellspring or—more appropriately for *Lady Usher's Diary*—tarn.

Among the best-known phantasmagorical imaginings of American writer Edgar Allan Poe is his illustrious 1839 short story "The Fall of the House of Usher". The work first appeared in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* before inclusion a year later in the collection *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. With its Gothic keynotes of madness, death, and supernatural dread have made this fever-dream especially tantalizing for translation into a variety of media.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century, the French began its *fou d'amour* with Poe just before the end his brief lifetime, chiefly through the championship and translations of him by Charles Baudelaire, preeminent poet, art critic, and essay writer. No less an immortal as French composer Claude Debussy attempted to complete an opera based on Poe's story during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Alas, *La chute de la maison Usher* remained unfinished—a curious connection to the long gestation of Mathis' *Lady Usher's Diary*. Debussy is considered a proponent of Impressionism—the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century art movement which encompassed most notably painting, as well as sculpture, photography, literature, music, and later film.

As signaled by the artistic development's name, the output associated with it is characterized by capturing a particular atmosphere while loosening the adherence to linear narrative, an approach quite radical for the time,

Upon arriving at the story's namesake locale, Poe's nameless narrator describes its bizarre ambiance as an "after-dream of the reveller upon opium." Evoking such a provocative setting for the primarily visual artform of film has resulted in several noteworthy forebears to *Lady Usher's Diary*. Most widely known among them undoubtedly is *House of Usher* (1960), produced and directed by American Roger Corman American as the first effort in his successful cycle of Poe films.

Like the intense siblinghood linking Roderick and Madeline Usher, the DNA of Mathis' film is more readily perceptible in such experimental depictions of Poe's story as *La chute de la maison Usher*. This 1928 silent French film was directed and produced by Jean Epstein who was a novelist and literary critic as well. Epstein adapted the story with renegade Spanish-Mexican avant-garde Surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel. The resultant work is an outlandish conjuration of the tale's doomed universe achieved with superimpositions, deliberately blurred shots, extreme closeups, and a variety of special effects. Yet even closer in feeling to Mathis' interpretation is *The Fall of the House of Usher*, directed by James Sibley Watson and Melville Webber, a silent film also released in 1928. This American adaptation's daring incorporation of contemporaneous fashions and Art Deco architecture contrasts ingeniously with any expectation of an antique setting common to many of Poe's tales and their adaptations. Mathis' technique extends this even further through a poetic blending of such elements with those of other eras simultaneously. Thus, a universe wherein time and place are dislocated to construct realms of unexpected meaning and ambiguity. Mathis' integration of elucidatory silent film-style intertitles throughout *Lady Usher's Diary* may be an appreciative nod to the daring director-producers of his homeland who undertook the same challenge.

As with *Outre Tombe*, *Lady Usher's Diary* is shot mainly with a variety of handheld digital cameras. Both works are edited by Alain Deruelle and the director. Mathis' ever-curious eye documents a wealth of sumptuous *plein air* locations, which include Aubeterre, Castelmoron d'Albret, Gavaudun,

St-Pierre de Buzet, Le Mas d'Agenais, Montpezat, Marmande, Le Temple sur Lot, Clairac, à Paris rue du Chevalier de La Barre, Jardin des Plantes, Au Général La Fayette; and Cimetière de Montmartre (Paris). When capturing small village life, country roads, or bucolic landscapes, there are frequent jump cuts, as well as an undisguised shifting between cameras and aspect ratios. Similarly, the film's audio features a mix of location sound, snatches of prerecorded music, and complete dropouts into silence. In this way, image and sound become entwined in a kaleidoscopic, time-shifting collocation, causing in the viewer a visceral experience of taking part in the actual filmmaking process as it is happening.

Early on in Poe's story, the narrator observes: "...beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth." Consistent with Impressionist principles, this thought is underscored by Mathis' willingness to present the mysteries of the natural world which are then reflected in analogous manmade structures—such as tree hollows mirrored in narrow building passageways. This idea is illustrated further through examples of fine art. Completed during the year of his death, the 1910 landmark painting *Le Rêve* by French Post-Impressionist Henri Rousseau depicts a nude woman reclining within a jungle surrounded by wild animals—most notably two lions. A book reproduction of this masterpiece is set against multiple returns throughout the film to impromptu outdoor moments between the central character and felines of the domesticated type, as well as action between the felines themselves. Such a dialogue between the organic and the artificial is advanced most dramatically when Mathis' juxtaposes Edenic locales with cinematic moments of high stylization. Incorporated into *Lady Usher's Diary* is a drawing room scene from *The Heiress* (1949), the celebrated American romantic drama directed and produced by William Wyler; and a similarly set indoor scene from *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) directed and produced by Robert Aldrich. This comparative volley only emphasizes how while mainstream narrative cinema triumphs in the realm of the fabricated, it often fails to adequately capture the essence of that which is truly alive.

It is significant to recall how Poe's Roderick Usher is an artist with mystical inclinations who finds solace in painting and musicmaking—whose heightened sensitivities have rendered his existence an endless torture of mind, body, and soul. Mathis' work can be viewed as a meditation on the artist's ability to transcend an unwanted reality through their craft. Indeed, in *Lady Usher's Diary*, Roderick and Madeline's creative endeavors are as brother and sister filmmakers documenting their hermetic and mysterious world. In fact, the role of Roderick is played by the director himself during that character's brief appearances.

Pamela Stanford is Lady Usher. The versatile actress has gained a following by unforgettable performances in several films by innovative Spanish filmmaker Jess Franco, especially *Les Possédées du Diable* or *Lorna...l'exorciste* (1974) and *Das Frauenhaus* or *Blue Rita* (1977). In the mid-1970s, Stanford and Mathis first worked together, resulting most notably in a series of remarkable photographic portraits of the performer. Decades later, Stanford has arisen as inspirational force to Mathis once again. Indeed, she has become the focal presence of his filmic experimentations. Given Roderick and Madeline Ushers' twinhood, Poe's physical description of the former not only applies to the latter, but uncannily to Stanford herself with an "...eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve."

As Lady Usher, Stanford manifests throughout the film in a multiplicity of guises—from medieval to contemporary. Stanford has commented on the challenges of embodying the ethereal Lady Usher in a project of unusual length guided by Mathis' spontaneous way with his art:

It is somewhat difficult to express my feelings about my role as Lady Usher, given that a substantial part of my performance was improvised. Since Alexandre shot so much at random, sometimes it was not completely clear as to which specific project we were shooting, and thus which character I was playing! In this way, I have come to think of my largely silent characters in his work as perhaps as a movie "extra"—becoming part of the overall atmosphere.[2]

Unlike *Outre Tombe*, *Lady Usher's Diary* is lightly wrapped in the most gossamer of narrative structures. This is most often endeavored through occasional explanatory intertitles and scenes set presumably in earlier times, if not the stuff of fantasy. The latter consist of a contemplative Lady Usher in antique gown roaming about a churchlike structure, and Henry IV of France (Michael Girod) praying within the same or similar space garbed in gleaming full body armor regalia. Analogous passages appear in *Outre Tombe* involving that film's central character of what may be the spirit of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century French woman wrongly accused of and executed for witchcraft (Stanford) and a member of the Knights Templar, also played by Girod. Poe's Roderick Usher has a peculiar affinity for earlier ages as evidenced by his obsession with a guidebook for an ancient and long-forgotten church.

When encountering the nightmarish abode and surrounding milieu of the tale's title, Poe's narrator likens the effect it engenders within him as "after-dream of the reveller upon opium." No such overtly dreadful images are seen in the film. Pamela Stanford concurs by noting: "I think Poe's melancholy atmosphere concerned with death is darker and more disturbing than anything in *Lady Usher's Diary*."<sup>[3]</sup> Inner-themes explored instead resonate throughout both the source material and the film—supreme among them being the multidimensional nature of existence, the ability of memory to blur time, and the active presence of and influence by the dead as everyday experience. The most apropos to these concepts proclaims: "The dead are alive in dreams." Lady's Usher's poppy-red ensemble is paralleled in fields of the symbol-loaded flower which has long been symbolic of undying love, remembrance, and dreams—and not to forget its role in the production of the powerful narcotic opium.

Poe's tale contains the extraordinary poem "The Haunted Palace" composed by Roderick Usher. Within its rhapsodic verses is reference to "a troop of Echoes". There is a moment in *Lady Usher's Diary* when the titular character writes her beloved brother's name upon the fogged surface of a mirror. A precise visual metaphor for the transient nature of all art and human experience as such an evanescent troop cannot be bettered.

## Notes

*Lady Usher's Diary* is available in a limited-edition, region-free 2-disc DVD set from Phoenix Underground Distribution. Among other items, supplementary materials include a making-of featurette, as well as *Compression Outre Tombe de Alexandre Mathis* (2018)—a condensed 17-minute, alternate version of *Outre Tombe* (2018) as prepared by French author/filmmaker Gérard Courant. Visit Mathis' site to order the film and learn more about his work: <https://https-alexandre-mathis.over-blog.com/>

For decades, the critical writings and interviews of Michael Orlando Yaccarino have championed world fringe cinema. Two pseudonymously penned collections of erotica received international acclaim, while experiential reports from a year-long psychedelic exploration appeared in several journals. Among other works, Yaccarino authored *Heart Vision: Tarot's Inner Path*; and with Scot D. Ryerson, edited *Spectral Haunts and Phantom Lovers* and co-wrote the worldwide bestselling biography *Infinite Variety: The Life and Legend of the Marchesa Casati*. Visit [marchesacasati.com](https://marchesacasati.com) to learn more.

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[1] Author's interview with Pamela Stanford (January 2023).

[2] Author's interview with Pamela Stanford (January 2023).

[3] Author's interview with Pamela Stanford (January 2023).



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