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“They’re Making Sure I Get Their Stories Right”: Horror, Intertextuality, and Metafiction in Mike Flanagan’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*

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Adaptations are fascinating phenomena. They simultaneously function as revisions, reductions, expansions, actualizations, and dissections of an anterior text whose aesthetic brilliance, psychological depth and philosophical affordance(s) catch the eye and ears of a reader who decides to bring out the not-entirely-expressed character of said text, whether it be a story, a poem, a novel, a painting, a play, a piece of music, or a videogame, to name but a few. And that is usually the case when the media category into which the ‘original’ artifact is transposed is cinema or television. The semiotic toolkit of filmic language is a close ally to the fundamentally subjective enterprise of the adapter, for adaptations are nothing short of creative acts of interpretation. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon’s conceptualization of adaptations as both aesthetic processes and products which are not to be shadowed by the obsolete spectre of derivation, this essay proposes to explore director Mike Flanagan’s multi-layered method of interpretation at the heart of his most recent work, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023), now available on Netflix. I argue that Flanagan’s rendition of E.A. Poe’s classic tale of horror shows a sophisticated understanding of intertextuality as a compositional device, while efficaciously toying with the trope of metafiction. I am mostly interested in a crucial scene in which Roderick Usher, the show’s protagonist and narrator, voices his concern with getting the “stories right” of his sons, who each incarnate a specific tale or symbol from Poe’s oeuvre. Functioning as a comment on adaptations at large, Roderick’s worry, I contend, echoes Flanagan’s purpose to do Poe’s fiction justice, to get his stories ‘right’, in a subtly ironic way.

Keywords: adaptation, Flanagan, intertextuality, metafiction, Poe

Introduction

From an aesthetic perspective, adapting essentially means to transfer a text from its original medial context of production, take it apart during said transfer, and put it back together according to the conventions of the target media category. This threefold process dovetails with a range of operations, such as revisions, reductions, expansions, and dissections carried out on the source text by a skilful interpreter who, driven by artistic, philosophical, or market-related reason, decides to embark on a mission to bring out the not-entirely-expressed character of the original work. Although not exclusively, the media most commonly associated with remanufacturing stories, poems, novels, paintings, plays, pieces of music, or videogames are cinema and television, including the relatively recent digital streaming platforms brought about by the increasingly evolving media landscape.

A case in point is American director Mike Flanagan's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023), which shows a sophisticated understanding of the adaptation mechanisms on the director's part, while also toying with self-reflexivity. The following reading of E. A. Poe's classic tale of horror as both a product that cleverly captures the meaning of adaptations as cooperative and relational processes, and an inconspicuous wink to the audience about the nature of adaptations is methodologically inspired by David T. Johnson's and Linda Hutcheon's musings on the fidelity debate, and Gass' notion of metafiction. I am particularly interested in specific episodes and scenes, including one where Roderick Usher, the show's protagonist and main narrator, voices his concern with getting his dead children's "stories right," each of which incarnates a specific element from Poe's oeuvre. Not only can Roderick's preoccupation with narrative accuracy be read against the backdrop of the concept of adaptive fidelity; it also functions as a reflection on adaptation itself – not unlike overtly self-reflexive movies such as Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation* (2002) –, which in turn echoes more broadly the director's purpose to do Poe's fiction justice.

Adaptation: Fidelity or Adulteration?

In the essay "Adaptation and Fidelity" (2017), David T. Johnson tackles what he argues has kept over the years many adaptation scholars up at night, which is faithfulness as the primary critical ground against which the relationship between source text and its adaptation is commonly tested. The brilliance of the article lies not only in the soundness of his survey of adaptation studies in regard to fidelity, but also in the way he investigates why an apparently meaningless concept has "inspire[d] such vitriol over the years" or even "abhorrence" (87). Perhaps, those adaptation scholars have chosen to distance themselves from faithfulness-oriented interpretations for both political and aesthetic reasons. In the former case, as Linda Hutcheon makes clear, the support for the rehabilitation of adaptations has to do with a "de-hierarchizing impulse, a desire to challenge the explicitly and implicitly negative cultural evaluation of things like postmodernism, parody, and now, adaptation, which are seen as secondary and inferior" (xii). It is a shared trend among the continental philosophers of the 1960s and 1970s to question binary oppositions, hierarchies, and cultural metanarratives. Kristeva's theory of intertextuality, Derridean deconstructionism and Foucault's placing of discourses under the microscope to reveal the benefits of a genealogical methodology are well-known examples of the impulse that Hutcheon talks about. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1971), Foucault describes the notion of genealogy, whose influence on any discussion of adaptations (and intertextuality at large) cannot be stressed enough. To the philosopher,

[g]enealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and re-copied many times. [...] [I]t rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for "origins." (139-40)

The entanglements referenced by Foucault are crucial to the development of Hutcheon's well-known argument that "to be second is not to be secondary or inferior; likewise, to be first is not to be originary or authoritative" (xii).

Flanagan's work proves a reliable case study for the legitimization of adaptations as artistic creations that, while exhibiting a more or less explicit descendancy, more importantly enlarge and enrich the source text. Flanagan has an obvious penchant for adaptations: *Gerald's Game* (2017) and *Doctor Sleep* (2019) are both movies inspired by the two novels of the same name by Stephen King; *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018) and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020) are respectively adapted from Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). *Midnight Mass* (2021), an original horror miniseries that blends Christian bigotry and vampiric lore, would be the exception to Flanagan's predisposition towards adaptations, but its genesis still reflects the director's intermedial competence. Prior to signing the deal for a seven-episode show with Netflix, Flanagan had originally conceived *Midnight Mass* as a novel, which later became a movie screenplay before concluding its intermedial arc as a television script (Flanagan, "Deeply Personal Horror").

Subjecting Poe's story to a wealth of transformative devices, *The Fall of the House of Usher* effectively demonstrates the value of renegotiating the primacy of the faithfulness criterion. This approach allows for a variety of creative and interpretive solutions that would be inevitably hindered by an excessively rigorous adherence to the source material. Among the genres particularly suited to such remodelling endeavors, as the case of Flanagan's productions clearly shows, horror fiction is undeniably versatile. Consider the case of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). According to Dennis R. Perry, the numerous adaptations of *Frankenstein* "have all engaged, however unknowingly, in the postmodern enterprise of recomposing memory to encompass new or previously excluded stories" (141). It is not entirely clear that *The Fall of the House of Usher* falls within the scope of postmodernism, but it certainly shares some of its principal characteristics, including an evident tendency for irony, intertextuality, self-reflexivity and textual recombination of pre-existing material. I mentioned *Frankenstein* not only because of its historical relevance in literature, but also because the patchwork metaphor inherent in the novel (and subsequent adaptations) pairs well with Flanagan's adaptive assembly project – by drawing on multiple Poe tales (besides the titular work), Flanagan weaves a story in which all its threads are cohesively held together.

The Fall of the House of Usher: Structure and Plot

Though the title openly reveals its debt to the story of the same name, Flanagan's miniseries is an intertextual mosaic based on a variety of Poe's characters, poems, motifs and symbols. Each title of the eight episodes explicitly acknowledges its literary antecedents: "A Midnight Dreary" (a reference to "The Raven"'s first line), "The Masque of the Red Death," "Murder in the Rue Morgue," "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "Goldbug," "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Raven." Set in November 2023, *The Fall of*

the House of Usher follows the lives of Roderick and Madeline Usher, who are the billionaire owners of Fortunato Pharmaceuticals, an empire founded on the development and manufacture of highly addictive painkillers “that have inflicted untold misery on the American public” (Latif). The Ushers, however, did not build their fortune thanks to their hard work and impeccable moral compass; it is all Verna's merit, a Mephistophelian woman who offers the Ushers the opportunity to become “king and queen of Fortunato,”¹ on the condition that the price will be paid by their progenies with their own lives: “You get the whole world, and when you're done, at the end of it all [...] your bloodline dies with you” (“The Raven,” 46:47-46:49).

The arrangement of the story's discourse does not only reflect Flanagan's attempt to merely correlate form and content, but also emphasizes the texts' “interrelationships with other rejoinders in the same dialogue” (Bakhtin 274) within Poe's literary universe. The episodes are interdependently connected, so as to assemble a seemingly organic narrative network whose nodes refer to each other throughout the show, in a way that resembles both horror anthologies from the past (each episode is based on a comparatively autonomous specific story) and the traditional, single-narrative series (the stories are nonetheless intratextually connected to each other),² achieved through the recurrence of characters and subplots. The show begins with Roderick and Madeline attending the funeral of Frederick, Tamerlane and Victorine, the eldest three of Mr. Usher's six children (the others being Prospero, Camille and the deceased Napoleon). It soon becomes clear that something is wrong, when we see a sequence of flashback-like shots, each powerfully hinting at the violent death that the siblings must have died. After the funeral, still visibly shaken by the previous hallucination of the ghosts of his children inside the church, Roderick collapses to the ground, whispering “It's time,” while the camera shifts toward a raven staring ominously at Roderick (“A Midnight Dreary,” 52:32). Enter detective August Dupin, called by Mr. Usher with the request to meet with him in private: “I called to give you the only thing you've ever wanted. My confession” (“A Midnight Dreary,” 06:50). This is the series' framing device: Roderick confessing his ‘crimes’ to detective Dupin, whose position as narratee becomes one with that of the viewer. Embedded within the main chronological casing is a long flashback beginning with Roderick and Madeline's childhood (1953), followed first by the death of their mother (1962), and then by their rise to wealth (1979-onwards) – all of which is in turn framed in and intertwine with the bulk of *The Fall*'s plot; that is, the death of the Usher siblings, each of them manifestly connected to a Poe story.

¹ The name “Verna” is an obvious anagram of “raven”.

² Two shows I have in mind are Rod Serling's original *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) and William Gaines and Steven Dodd's *Tales from the Crypt* (1989-1996), which is coincidentally adapted from the comic series of the same name.

Capturing the Spirit of the Text (and Adaptations)

The story's contemporary spatio-temporal setting can be read as yet another element that speaks to Flanagan's uninterest in the fidelity paradigm, an approach that several viewers have adopted as their interpretive framework of choice. For instance, there is a discussion on Reddit about whether Flanagan's *Usher* should be considered a successful adaptation, tellingly titled "*The Fall of the House of Usher* (Netflix, 2023) Is a Bad Poe Adaptation but a Great Show" (JavierLoustanaou). The view is echoed by Aja Romano in a column they write on Vox, in which the critic complains about one of the many evident differences between the short story and the series, such as the incestuous relationship between Roderick and Madeline in Poe's tale, and the pharmaceutical conspiracy orchestrated by the two characters in Flanagan's adaptation: "For starters, if most people know any one thing about *The Fall of the House of Usher*, it's that the titular downfall is about incest. The Netflix adaptation, however, proposes: What if it were about the opioid crisis instead?" (Romano). *Elle* (Menon), *Variety* (Ingram), and *The New York Post* (Sarner), instead, are much more appreciative of Flanagan's show, although all reviewers seem equally preoccupied with the faithfulness aspect of the director's transposition. While these remarks prove that the days of fidelity as the principal critical lens of adaptations are all but numbered, I want to suggest that they are somehow missing the point of adaptations as creative remodulations of pre-existing artifacts. Flanagan is motivated not so much by a desire to follow in his predecessors' footsteps – with their conservative (albeit effective) takes on Poe's work³ – as he is by his interest in Poe's study of the mind as a sort of conceptual archetype susceptible to adaptive reconfigurations.⁴ As pointed out earlier, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Poe's tropes, characters and imagery are fully developed to extend beyond their original narrative arc. "The Masque of the Red Death" (second episode), for example, inspiringly capitalizes on the admonishing, parable-like tone of its literary antecedent. In the short story, Prince Prospero holds a masquerade in "one of his castellated abbeys" and invites "a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court" to protect and distract himself and his guests from the deadly plague known as the "Red Death," a pestilence that "had long devastated the country" (Poe 485). But no matter how secluded from the plague he felt he would be, the Red Death herself comes at last to claim Prospero's life as well as that of the other attendants who "one by one dropped [...] in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel" (490). In Flanagan's retelling, Prospero arranges a private bacchanalian masquerade at an abandoned Fortunato facility to prove his worth following Roderick's sardonic dismissal of his VIP club pitch. At

³ Prominent figures in the history of cinema such as Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff and Vincent Price contributed to the increasing popularity of Poe on the big screen since the 1930s, with Price starring in no less than eleven adaptations inspired by the writer (Neimeyer 217).

⁴ Indeed, Poe's fictionalization of the dark side of the human psyche may be viewed as symptomatic of what Harold Bloom defined "our uncanny unanimity in our repressions" (*Modern Critical Views* 5).

the party, Verna shows up dressed up as the Red Death and 'kills' everybody after Prospero activates the facility's sprinklers at the stroke of midnight. Instead of water, the partygoers are showered with a highly corrosive acid, subsequently dying an extremely agonizing death. Not only the cautionary tone of the original is preserved (the themes of pompousness and uncompromised luxury leading to an inevitable demise are common to both versions of the "Red Death"), but it ties in nicely with the ethical stance of the show against the opioid crisis and the pharmaceutical companies behind it. Whereas Prospero and his guests vainly attempt to find refuge in the abbey, confident that they can "bid defiance to contagion" with beauty and pleasure alone shielding them from the raging pestilence (Poe 485), Roderick's demiurgic vision of building a "world without pain" is equally destined to collapse under its own hypocritical weight. A vision that he makes explicit as he lashes out against Verna in the final episode of the show:

Nobody can stomach a little discomfort. It hurts. It hurts and they cry and cry, and I took it away! I reached in and I snuffed out those flames in their backs, in their joints, in their heads, in their hands. I waved my wand, wasn't enough. Was never enough. They just kept wanting more. More and more.

Roderick's narcissistic strategy of blaming the victim is unconvincing ("Oh honey, don't kid a kidder," says Verna), and resonates with the same rhetoric behind which OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma hid amidst the growing scandal that eventually led to its dissolution in 2021. Being former producers of one of the most addictive opioids in the market (and the obvious inspiration for Roderick's empire), Purdue knowingly lied about the drug's potential for abuse, falsely promoting a 12-hour cycle of pain relief (Ryan, Girion and Glover).

Holding up a Metafictional Mirror to the Gears of Adaptation

While ascribing the bloodline curse of the Usher family in Poe's story to Roderick's Faustian pact with Verna is one of several elements that are clearly indicative of Flanagan's approach, a particular moment in the series truly demonstrates Flanagan's understanding of the mechanisms underpinning adaptation. In the seventh episode, "The Pit and the Pendulum," Roderick tells detective Dupin that the ghosts of his children "[have] been at me all night. Mak[ing] sure I get their stories right." It is a passing comment during a lengthy confession, but I would argue that it indicates the emergence of Flanagan's awareness of the dichotomy between strict fidelity and liberating revisionism, an ironical, metafictional flavor that calls attention to the adaptation process itself. Generally agreed-upon as being coined by Postmodern novelist and literary theorist William H. Gass, the term metafiction designates any instance whereby the text, intentionally or not, reflects upon itself as an aesthetic artifice. In the essay *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (1972), Gass compares the notion to the metalinguistic nature of those discourses used to discuss certain disciplines, such as mathematics or ethics:

There are metatheorems in mathematics and logic, ethics has its linguistic oversoul, everywhere lingos to converse about lingos are being contrived, and the case is no different in the novel. I don't mean merely those drearily predictable pieces about writers who are writing about what they are writing, but those, like some of the work of Borges, Barth, and Flann O'Brien, for example, in which the forms of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms can be imposed. Indeed, many of the so-called antinovels are really metafiction. (24-25)

The description fits the circumstances of the above scene. We see Roderick, the principal narratorial agent of the series, reflect on his narration, instead of a metaleptic trick performed by the extra-textual author to direct the viewer's attention to the story as such: there is no breaking of the fourth wall, nor is the spectator ever directly addressed. Roderick plays the role of what Graley Herren defines as "embedded author." Described by Herren as Don DeLillo's characteristic habit of placing in his fiction an artistic character "implicated as the very narrative we are reading or watching" (Herren viii), embedded authors are internal figures "who create themselves alternate universes, ones that make sense and possess symmetry and elegance, which provide answers to otherwise intractable questions" (12). By having Roderick "delive[r] instructions by proxy" (14) to the empirical audience about what to make of the thoughts, words, and emotions displayed on the screen, Flanagan lets us have a look at his interpretation of the adaptation game – a game through which he carefully casts a dynamic intertextual net of nexti, references and allusions to Poe's universe into a heteromedial cosmos governed by its own rules.

While *The Fall of the House of Usher's* metafictional flavor might be evocative of other, openly self-reflexive works such as the aforementioned movie *Adaptation*,⁵ Roderick's remark in fact parallels a different subtle textual mechanism. Under otherwise normal circumstances, it seems to express nothing beyond a combination of guilt and fear: guilt over the possibility of failing to do justice to his children's lives (and deaths); fear of being metaphorically haunted by them. Yet, what happens on the screen is far more literal, for the Usher siblings truly return as ghosts to confront their father. My contention is that Roderick not only acts as Flanagan's mouthpiece, but he also plays the role of the quintessentially Poesque unreliable narrator. Indeed, Roderick is soon diagnosed with "cerebral autosomal dominant arteriopathy with subcortical infarcts and leukoencephalopathy,"⁶ also known as CADASIL. This untreatable degenerative condition that causes symptoms similar to dementia would logically account for all the hallucinations he suffers throughout the series. This is not to say that the facts told by Roderick are ontologically untrue; it is unquestionable that everyone is dead, but with hindsight, our witnessing the deaths of the various characters is always filtered through (or obfuscated by) Roderick's dominant perspective – was Tamerlane's erratic behavior the result of an actual ghostly presence, or was she also just hallucinating? Was Frederick

⁵ Things are further complicated by the casting of Nicolas Cage as Charlie Kaufman (and his [fictional] twin brother), thus adding an extra twist to the whole metafictional edifice.

⁶ "The Mask of the Red Death," episode 2.

becoming fatally incapacitated after mistaking nightshade for cocaine due to the mind-bending actions of Verna, or was he merely distracted? Are the ghosts that Roderick sees but fails to persuade Dupin of real? These are all legitimate questions. What matters is that Flanagan borrows a classic structural device of Poe's fiction and applies it to the context of a contemporary, flawed, drug-ridden America.

Delusional or distracted narrators abound in Poe's stories – “The Black Cat,” *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, “Ligeia,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” to name but a few –, and “The Fall of the House of Usher” is no exception to the rule, with Roderick in Flanagan's version echoing the source story's unreliable diegesis. The story effectively dwells on that grey region so dear to Gothic authors, which is the middle ground between rationality and the supernatural.⁷ But there is a detail, often overlooked, that would seem to betray Poe's unnamed narrator's presumed objective vision. As noted by John C. Gruesser, towards the end of the story the narrator describes the weather conditions of the storm which preceded Madeline's ‘resuscitation’: “[A]nd the exceeding density of the clouds did not prevent our perceiving this – yet we had no glimpse of the moon or stars – nor was there any flashing forth of the lightning” (Poe 331). However, at the very end the narrator describes the moon as it “now shone vividly through that once barely discernible fissure [...]” (Poe 335). How would that be possible if until a few seconds earlier, the stormy clouds were so “exceeding[ly] dens[e]” that no light could be visible? Gruesser's conclusion – and I agree – is that “the narrator [...] must be delusional [...]. The implication of such an interpretation is that nothing the narrator tells us in the final paragraph [...] can be trusted” (82-83). The original story's unreliability translates into Flanagan's Roderick suffering frequent memory lapses and hallucinations caused by his mentally impairing illness, which casts more than one shadow over the truthfulness and accuracy of his confession. At the very end of the last episode, the perspective shifts from Roderick to Dupin, who now becomes the final (meta)narrator, uttering the final lines of Poe's “Usher”: “There was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters – and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘House of Usher’.” The trope of the unreliable narrator goes hand in hand with the show's suggestive self-reflexivity, and serves to foreground Flanagan's metafictionally aesthetic proneness, because only through a semi-delusional narrator who has seen apparitions all night does the line about “making [the stories of his children] right” become even more effective.

Although Roderick fulfils the series' most significant instance of self-reflexivity, several other elements contribute to this metafictional undertone, namely the characters of Camille and Arthur Gordon Pym. In the third episode (“Murder in the Rue Morgue”), Camille is having a conversation with Leo, where the former voices her frustration at the

⁷ Was Madeline really brought back from the dead, or was she purely in a state of prolonged loss of consciousness, making her appearance at the mansion shocking but still rationally explainable? Was the house preternaturally connected to the twins, or was its fall just a fittingly poetic (if tragic) coincidence?

Ushers' lack of talent and originality, which reads to me as Flanagan's tongue-in-cheek response to the general perception that adaptations are nothing but derivative works that owe the entirety of their artistic and economic success to the 'original. In a rare genuine soul-searching flare, Camille admits to both her stepbrother and herself that Ushers are not truly capable of achieving anything relevant or original. As we previously saw with Prospero, who only cared about branding glamorous clubs and bottles of expensive whiskey with his name, no one among the siblings actually "made stuff." In Camille's words, Leo does not create videogames (as he naively believes), but only "pay[s] people to make videogames"; Frederick (she calls him "Froderick") "is like this Roderick Usher cover band, and he's playing the hits, but it's sort of off-key"; Tamerlane "is basically just Goop with, like, a big golden bug sticker on it," while Victorine's "heart mesh is not even her heart mesh, it's the surgeon's heart mesh, that's why she's fucking the surgeon"; and lastly Camille, talking about herself, concedes that she "belongs in a room of smoke and mirrors, and [she's] like a ceiling fan" spinning randomly without "go[ing] anywhere." She laconically concludes that "Ushers don't make stuff. None of us."⁸ Camille's reaction reminds me of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, a poetic theory according to which "every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem" (94). This indirectly references the artist's latent sense of hopelessness that everything aesthetically impactful has already been written, even more so in today's content-creating-driven society. Nevertheless, poets (and artists in general) employ preexisting material and "transform, redirect, reinterpret those already written figures in new ways" (Allen 135), hence making the option of artistic relevance still viable.

Loosely inspired by the protagonist of Poe's novel of the same name, Pym is an unscrupulously dark, cynical lawyer, occasionally nicknamed "the Pym reaper,"⁹ whose past we know very little about, especially in regard to his voyage around the world when he was younger. In the sixth episode, "Goldbug," Roderick tells Dupin that, when Pym shared the memories of his experience, he "always stop[ped] telling it as he g[ot] to the North Pole," adding that "[it] used to be a fun game when the kids grew up trying to finish Arthur's story." This passage is an allusion to the abrupt ending of Poe's novel – the last thing that Pym sees before the actual narrative concludes is a gigantic "shrouded human figure" (1179) close to the South Pole –, but it is also partly evocative of Flanagan's storytelling process itself, as he continues, revisits and twists Poe's tales, exactly like Roderick's children used to do with Arthur's story.

The concept of destruction and its prominence in the series can also be thought of as reflective of the very mechanisms of adaptation. Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" famously ends with the titular mansion crumbling down, a climactic scene that Flanagan preserves and revitalizes in the show's finale. In Poe's story, the significance of

⁸ "Murder in the Rue Morgue," episode 3.

⁹ It is thanks to his ability that the Ushers always get away with the crimes for which Dupin continuously investigates them.

the fall goes beyond the physical deterioration and ultimate destruction of the house: it symbolically represents the demise of the heirless twins. Flanagan recreates the same destructive binary and applies it not only to Roderick and Madeline, but also to their first house and their firm. We see the house coming down in the middle of a storm, disintegrating over the corpses of Madeline (who, by the way, had briefly come back from the dead) and Roderick at the end of the eighth episode, "Raven". The destruction motif figures especially in the deaths of Roderick's legitimate children, Tamerlane and Frederick. The first dies in her bedroom after multiple pieces of glass from the ceiling mirror fatally wound her (she had crushed it in a hallucinatory fit with a fire hook). Frederick, instead, falls victim to a death gruesomely inspired by Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum," with the major difference that he, unlike the story's protagonist who eventually survives, is cut in half by a swinging blade hanging from the ceiling of a Fortunato facility that he was trying to have demolished. I interpret these multiple destructive phenomena as a metaphor for Flanagan's response to what adaptation purists may regard as a defying act of authorial violation (or textual destruction, indeed). Going against this stance, Flanagan fully embraces the possibilities of a creatively rewarding deviation from the norm, making it part and parcel of the story's material, as in the death scenes that I have just mentioned. To quote Hutcheon, Flanagan seems to rebel against the idea that "the source text is granted an axiomatic primacy and authority" (16). Flanagan's reaction to the literary antecedent's supposed authoritative aura is accentuated by the fact that it is precisely Roderick's only two legitimate children (the ones from the 'original' bloodline) that are involved in an openly wreckful death.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated Mike Flanagan's acute sensitivity to the internal dynamics of adaptation. In horror fiction, a genre that responds well to the known capacity of cinema and television to maximize the dormant (not absent) sensuous import of literature, Flanagan found a close ally to reorganize prior texts in a truly creative way. Through *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Flanagan shows a clear understanding of the complex twofold nature of "adaptation as both process and product" (Hutcheon 31) – a process in which close and respectful adherence to the source text is relevant only to a certain extent. This is not to wage a rhetorically sterile war against the fidelity criterion "as [negative] counterexample to the critic's preferred methodology" (Johnson 92), but merely to open up the reading of adaptation to new, generative possibilities. "Perhaps," suggests Hutcheon "one way to think about unsuccessful adaptations is not in terms of infidelity to a prior text, but in terms of a lack of the creativity and skill to make the text one's own and thus autonomous" (20). It is not easy to dispose altogether of the looming spectre of fidelity, which is why in Flanagan's adaptation a certain anxiety semantics can be still located (albeit ironically), as in Roderick's concern about "making sure [to] get [his children's] stories right." However, Flanagan also seems to be willing to come to terms with his Freudian repression of faithfulness to the original, capitalizing on the very debate

itself, and thus making *The Fall of the House of Usher* a special kind of adaptation which reflects upon its own nature as adaptation. The fact that “Ushers don’t make stuff,” that Roderick’s kids used to finish (hence, extend) Pym’s mysterious story, or that the specific demise of a group of characters helps to mirror and comment on the politics of the textual dismantling at the heart of adaptations: all of these occurrences shape Flanagan’s metafictional way of pointing the camera towards a deeper layer than the surface on which the story is brought to life, without disturbing the viewer’s suspension of disbelief.

Flanagan is perfectly aware that death does not necessarily entail a tragic drop of the curtain. As Verna’s devilish end of the bargain is ominously fulfilled, Roderick’s bloodline dissolves. However, in a final twist, Flanagan has the only surviving heir to the Ushers’ heritage (formerly drug-addict Juno Usher, Roderick’s much younger wife), sell all of the company’s assets, converting Fortunato into a recovery network aptly named “Phoenix Foundation” to fight addiction. Excessive manipulation of the source material may indeed be beneficially consequential and aesthetically productive. After all, as Roderick tellingly acknowledges in the third episode, “Ushers adapt quickly.”

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