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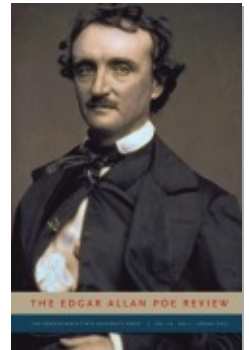
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Crowd-Sourcing Romantic Alienation: Following *The Following*

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## REVIEWS

### Crowd-Sourcing Romantic Alienation: Following *The Following*

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#### I Am a Professor of American Literature, but I Don't Play One on TV

When professors of American literature who also happen to be charismatic serial killers hold forth in a modern American television series like Kevin Williamson's *The Following*, which began airing this January on Fox, this is what the exchange sounds like:

Flashback: Sarah Fuller (former student and soon-to-be victim of Prof. Joe Carroll) recalls a seminar from her past. On-screen: a conventionally handsome professor with shirtsleeves rolled up, dark vest, tie with loosened collar, chalk in hand, turns from the blackboard (on which can be read in a nice, teacherly script, "All that we see or seem/Is but a dream within a dream/Poe").

Joe Carroll (with a slightly emphatic English accent, as if he were explaining something): So Poe's chief principle: Insanity as art. This is the Romantic period. Death is about theme, mood, emotional aesthetic. Poe equates death with . . . (turning to the class as whole) what?

Student 1 (male, perhaps African American or mixed race): He equates death with love?

Joe Carroll: No. Not with love. Poe equates love with . . .

Student 2 (younger, callow version of Sarah Fuller): . . . beauty. Poe believed that art was about beauty and that nothing was more beautiful than the death of a beautiful woman: Helen, Lenore, Annabel Lee.

Joe Carroll: And to bereave beauty is to . . . ?

Sarah Fuller: . . . to elevate one's soul.

The professor nods in agreement, or more to the point, recognition, pleased.

What kind of tutelage is this? We never really learn what the good professor (played with twinkly menace by James Purefoy) thinks Poe equated death with; the point gets entirely lost in a muddle of other hasty equations. The good student, Sarah Fuller, who is destined to be one in a litany of beautiful corpses, seems to have a nodding acquaintance with Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition," where Poe wrote that "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world," but she gets it slightly (but significantly) wrong, as Laura Miller has pointed out recently in *Salon*.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of whether television viewers would catch the distinction between something considered beautiful and "the most poetical topic" is hard to know, but we might acknowledge that it is a fairly shifty distortion of the original and in a crucial way the opposite of what Poe was in his own way slyly suggesting. For Sarah Fuller, Poe is saying that the death of a beautiful woman is an authentically beautiful form of art, whereas Poe seems to be suggesting something nearly the opposite, that this kind of death is the most conventional topic for a poem because of its powerful associations with grief. And then there is the problem of her chosen pantheon of Poe's supposedly beautiful dead ladies. Lenore and Annabel Lee fit the profile to be sure, but Poe's Helens are notable for not being part of the universe of the dead. Would Ligeia or Berenice have been too obscure? If the prof was willing to dismiss Student 1's suggestion, why not correct Sarah's partial misperception?<sup>2</sup> But never mind, this is television; the killer prof is supposed to be more of a hypnotic spellbinder than a quibbling pedant, and we are in the realm of, as Poe said of Dupin and detective fiction, "more air of method than method."

And there is more to this exchange: Prof. Carroll, too, seems to share his student's casual and paraphrasing acquaintance with Poe's criticism (there is great fondness for verbatim quotation from Poe at the crime scenes of *The Following*, but in the classroom exact wording can be dispensed with). His follow-up question about beauty, bereavement, and the elevation of the soul appears to echo

the internal catechism that marks Poe's own display of aesthetic logic in "The Philosophy of Composition"; the lines following those quoted above read, "And equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover." Prof. Carroll seems to be indulging in the same substitutive error as his student. Where Poe points to conventional appropriateness, Carroll transmutes this into worshipful adoration. Where Poe offers a self-reflexive and possibly ironic dialogue about the rational processes behind poetic composition, *The Following* offers a deeply unironic appeal to passion for a cult of death.

As a real professor of American literature with some expertise in Poe, I recognize with dismay yet another example of television representing English teachers (or "professors of literature," as this program's newscasters grandly intone) as corrupt villains, and take glancing solace in the idea that at least Joe Carroll is supposed to be a charismatic villain, as opposed to the array of losers American TV usually conjures up. Indeed, it can hardly be a surprise that a number of Poe experts have already weighed in (in articles and interviews) about the inaccurate and distorted uses to which Poe is being put in *The Following*, and one must concede that the show provides a ready cover for these representations: the professor is a psycho killer, a sociopath, closer to a Poe character than a Poe authority. But it strikes me that these distortions are not uninteresting and, far from random, reflect a rather strategic, if unsettling redeployment of Poe as a popular cultural figure—part of a process that I suggest has been going on since at least the late 1960s.

The trajectory I have in mind begins roughly with Poe's appearances on the cover The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and in the lyrics of their acid-soaked classic from *Magical Mystery Tour*, "I Am the Walrus," but one must seek its forerunners in *Classic Illustrated Comics* and the films of Vincent Price and Roger Corman. The 1970s music of Alan Parsons (*Tales of Mystery and Imagination*) and Alice Cooper (*Welcome to My Nightmare*), Michael Jackson's landmark "Thriller" video (1983) with its use of Vincent Price, and Matt Groening's *Simpsons Treehouse of Horror* version of "The Raven" (1990) would all be signal moments in this history.<sup>3</sup> But the critical artifact in Poe's penetration into popular youth culture, the full expression of the transition and transmutation from gothic to goth, appeared in 1982 in the form of Tim Burton and Rich Heinrich's animated short *Vincent*. Recited by Price himself in Seussian rhyme, the film describes a Poe-obsessed seven-year-old boy, Vincent Malloy, who, while outwardly "considerate and nice," harbors ghoulish fantasies and "wants to be just like Vincent Price." The animated Vincent (who bares a striking resemblance to Tim Burton himself) is shown acting out (or fantasizing about acting out) a series of macabre scenarios from dipping an aunt in

wax to transforming his dog into a zombie to digging up his dead wife. When Vincent's mother insists that he desist in his morbid fantasies and enjoy some normal suburban pursuits like outdoor play and sunshine, Vincent retreats into a morbid funk in his room. With Vincent "limp and lifeless down on the floor," the film concludes with the following invocation:

His voice was soft and very slow  
As he quoted "The Raven" from Edgar Allan Poe:  
"and my soul from out that shadow  
that lies floating on the floor  
shall be lifted?  
Nevermore . . ."

Poe, a writer who is typically an author of late childhood and early adolescence (thanks, in part, to American middle school curriculum), is positioned by Burton as a writer for precocious second graders. Burton's sensibility—which is most plainly evident in his early films (e.g., *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands*)—transforms Poe from a figure of Romantic isolation and dark imaginative power into one whose narratives compose the blueprint for an alienated lifestyle that is moody and willfully oppositional to the suburban world of the American child. The gothic, which in Poe is always a site for the interrogation of reason, becomes an assertion of identity, a will to enjoy and dwell in the gothic. In Burton's vision, Poe activates and presides over the shift from gothic to goth. "The Raven" may take as its premise that its narrator is driven mad (or to the verge of madness) from grief at the death of the lost Lenore, but for Burton's Vincent Malloy no such loss is necessary; one need only take extreme pleasure in the virus of Poe's texts in order to be infected: they become the rationale for a permanent mood of listless, morose defiance.

Since the advent of Burton, to be an enthusiast of Poe and his works has, I suggest, become a potential symptom of a goth or quasi-goth identity. This shift has moved Poe as a cultural figure toward the cultic, toward collectives and group identities, and the signs of it are everywhere one looks. In the increasingly close association of Poe with Halloween, we find his works coming to stand for collective practices (a celebration of childhood/all souls' night/the undead) rather than the Romantic literary individualism with which he has been traditionally associated: the mock reburial of Poe in October 2009 (on the sesquicentennial of the author's death), with its poetic impersonators, dummy corpse of Poe, and parade of goth and zombie cheerleaders. Like the media stakeouts that surrounded the mysterious Poe toaster, who, on the anniversary of Poe's birth, would leave roses and cognac at the

Baltimore gravesite, a solitary and rather quaint communion with a rather tragic nineteenth-century literary figure has been turned into a kind of literary Groundhog Day, a group ritual tailored to an age of social media.

## The Age of Social Terror

*The Following* seeks to exploit this social use of Poe; Romantic alienation is being aggressively crowd-sourced. Professor Joe Carroll does not have to wield a precise command of Poe's critical positions because he is not seeking to edify his students. Rather, he is looking for fresh recruits, more would-be Vincent Malloys, probing their interest in Poe for signs of homicidal tendencies. As Detective Joan Garcia (Melissa Ponzio), head of the FBI's alternative religion unit, observes, "Carroll's using Poe's works as a religion." And rather than teaching his followers how to read and interpret Poe, Carroll is really, as Ryan Hardy (Kevin Bacon) recognizes, teaching them how to become serial killers. However difficult it may be in real terms to imagine that works of nineteenth-century literature could form the basis of a Manson-like cult, we have the Manson cult itself and its use of the Beatles' songs as actual historical precedent for such behavior and, as such, a ready cultural model. It is perhaps only a second-order approximation to posit Poe as a key text in this type of enterprise.

The way his texts and image become graffiti art at every crime scene in *The Following* suggests that the figure of Poe has taken on the status of the Beatles. On *The Following*, Poe's words actually function like song lyrics for the killers; they are stylishly scrawled on walls with album-cover-style images of Poe, much the way the Manson family used lyrics from the Beatles' *White Album* in the murders they committed in 1969 at Cielo Drive. In the lecture scene I described at the beginning of this essay, Carroll's quotation from Poe's "A Dream Within a Dream" is not so much an instructional device as it is a piece of graffiti hiding in plain sight. It is not to be explicated but to be deciphered by those select cultists who are into it. In some ways, the issues raised by *The Following* were anticipated by Hon. William L. Downing's "Zero Hour: Tisby Hark v. Cedar Country School District," a 2009 mock trial case from Washington State dealing with the prosecution of an English teacher who has been summarily terminated when one of his students, a Poe-influenced creative writer, brings a loaded gun to a school assembly. In the aftermath of so many mass murders (Columbine, Virginia Tech, Aurora), the investigation turns to what the killers were reading, listening to, or playing on their video-game consoles. In *The Following*, Poe functions like ultraviolent video games. He becomes a flashpoint through which American culture debates the relationship between representational and actual violence.

In the third episode (the creators of the show refer to each episode as a “chapter”) of *The Following*, we see a Richmond, Virginia, street performer recite “The Raven,” concealing his identity behind a creepy, waxy, seemingly rubberized Poe mask. At the conclusion of his performance, he then proceeds to walk over to a hot dog stand, pour fuel over one of its patrons, ignite him, and take off on foot while stunned onlookers do nothing to apprehend the perpetrator or snuff the flames. The victim turns out to be a Richmond literary critic who savaged Carroll’s novel *The Gothic Sea*, which was Carroll’s attempt to complete one of Poe’s last unfinished manuscripts, “The Lighthouse” (visual and verbal references to lighthouses are sprinkled throughout the show). The killer’s recitation of Poe takes on the quality of a prayer in advance of an act of domestic terrorism. Indeed, if one sets aside some of the literary–critical foldero, *The Following* derives a good deal of its power from the way it transmutes Poe’s brand of terror into twenty-first-century forms of terror.

As I watched this sequence with a group of Michigan State undergraduates who were enthusiastic about the show, one of them was incredulous at the passivity of the crowd in the face of this deed. He thought that someone surely would have reacted. But no one did, and in this way *The Following* stacks the deck against the viewer, forcing you to watch helplessly as acts of terror play out and repeat themselves on media screens, forcing on you a mournful and never-ending passivity. *The Following* feels like it has as much to do with 9/11, Iraq, and Afghanistan as it does with Poe, or, rather, its strangeness emerges from the fusing of the figure of Poe to this age of terror.

Kevin Bacon, as a forensic Poe expert and ex-FBI agent Ryan Hardy, brought in to once more catch the killer he had captured years before, spends a lot of screen time staring into the middle distance and swilling vodka from a water bottle. If Hardy represents a Dupin figure, the solitary detective who works alone, profoundly uneasy with CSI-style teams that are the preferred mode of fictional detection on television since the late 1990s, then *The Following* thematizes his isolation, conferring on it a kind of analytical power but highlighting its impotence. Hardy does not want to cooperate, but he is confronting a killer/adversary who has a legion of agents and allies cooperating with him. In a key confrontation with Carroll, the killer taunts Hardy by pointing out how lonely he is and how few friends he has. This is what *The Following* stages: the man of the crowd versus Dupin. We see a confrontation between a sociopath who is socially plugged in with a legion of acolytes and assistants, running his terror operation from prison (like Bin Laden in his various hideouts), and a vestigial individualist who goes it alone and cannot fit into the FBI’s own social network, relying on his own literary critical acumen as a form of criminology.

And who are Joe Carroll's followers? Well, the central premise of the show is to keep the viewer jumpy and guessing. In fact, the group I watched the show with did so in part so that they would not have to be frightened alone. *The Following* takes place in a world of moles and double agents. Anyone might be one of Carroll's minions. In the first episode, a prison guard assists in Carroll's escape; a pair of youthful gay neighbors turns out to be straight (or maybe not . . . stay tuned) members of the cult; Carroll's ex-wife's babysitter kidnaps their son, revealing her secret allegiance. A youngish married couple is also involved. Seeming victims whose lives are in imminent danger seek police protection only to turn on their guardians with lethal force. The ordinariness and whiteness of these characters seems to be the chief commonalities of the members of this cult.

The preferred weapons in *The Following* are knives, so that the killing can be intimate and visceral. As I watched the show with the students, we had a good deal of fun speculating on who might turn out to be the next crypto-follower. The reactions of the students swerved from light irony to shrieks of terror, sometimes irony and terror simultaneously. "Poe my god!" one student quipped in the middle of a shocking sequence, diffusing the tension with laughter. "The girl with the pixie cut seems so obvious, right?" "What about that FBI lady? She seems like a prime suspect." "What if Kevin Bacon himself turn out to be one of the followers?" *The Following* encourages this kind of cross talk and speculation. One student told me that the only time he felt relaxed in watching the show was when Joe Carroll was on-screen because you could be certain of his villainy. When anyone else was on screen you never knew.

Kevin Williamson, the show's creator, built his reputation on the *Scream* horror franchise and *Dawson's Creek*, and it appears that *The Following* is something of an amalgam of the two: macabre generic parody mixed with young love. When two of the young cultists get together, we learn that Carroll's social networking skills extend to matchmaking:

Jacob (aka Will Wilson): Joe said you'd be my type.

Emma: What's your type?

Jacob (grinning): Special.

What is special about Emma turns out to be that beneath her tomboyish appearance lurks a matricidal maniac. Jacob/Will Wilson, for his part, seems to be motivated by some kind of homosexual panic that is just emerging in the story line, hence the doubling of his name with one of Poe's famous doubles and all the Freudian knife-play imagery. The use of violence as an expression of a sexual identity crisis is pretty standard slasher-film fare, and according to

the *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb), Williamson has expressed how formative Scott Carpenter's *Halloween* was for his own ambitions. But the use of Poe gives the aura of sexual dysfunction in *The Following* a wry quality, as if Marie Bonaparte's psychoanalysis of Poe were being used as a self-help manual. The IMDb entry on Williamson mentions that he "based the villainous character in *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* (1999) on a teacher who screamed at him in front of the class and told him something he wrote was lousy and that he shouldn't be writing." Perhaps this accounts for all the revenge that is exacted on critics and school administrators in *The Following*. While many Poe scholars have been quick to point out the show's distortions with respect to Poe, the theme of revenge, both personal and cultural, is deployed throughout in a way that has much of the spectral quality and grim humor one finds in Poe.

Thinking about the gothic, Joyce Carol Oates once asked, "Who has not been influenced by Poe?"<sup>4</sup> *The Following* answers this question much the way Oates does: no one. But perhaps the most interesting aspect of *The Following* is not the fact of Poe's influence but the ways in which that influence is differentiated and distributed among the characters. James Purefoy's Joe Carroll, despite his critical lapses, has the ambiguous suavity of Poe's psychopaths. Kevin Bacon's Ryan Hardy has the alcoholism born of a private grief and an implanted pacemaker that will surely reveal, at some crucial stage of the investigation, his own tell-tale heart. Joe Carroll's band of crypto-killers masquerading as victims and bystanders act out double identities that one finds with a generous frequency in Poe's writing. With all of this floating around in the gothic sea that is *The Following*, we should recognize that Poe's language is warped and denatured in this process, but that denaturing is perhaps the point when literature becomes the vehicle and instrument of TV terror.

## Notes

1. Laura Miller, "Desecrating Poe," *Salon*, January 24, 2013, accessed February 15, 2013, <http://www.salon.com/>.

2. Because so much of the killing arises from cultic, proxy, or unclear motives, *The Following* seems to proliferate questions in the viewer. Why does the male African American student get the answer "wrong"? Why does the physically powerful African American cop get tricked and killed by the seemingly defenseless, timid, physically unprepossessing knife-wielding white woman in episode 3? Why does homosexual panic manifest itself as a theme among Carroll's followers? Are these meant to be spectral epiphenomena related to Poe's literary output or biography?

3. For more on this history, see Stephen Rachman, "Subterranean Homesick Poe: Lou Reed's *The Raven*," *Edgar Allan Poe Review* 4, no. 1 (2003): 28–41.

4. Joyce Carol Oates, *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* (New York: Plume Book, 1994), 305.