Tim Burton’s themes and trademarks

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Tim Burton is known for being an eccentric film director with strong yet strange ideas. His films have been nominated for several Academy Awards, usually for makeup and set design, and won a few of them. Burton is known for having a love of art, and always sketches out his ideas for his films before he starts working on them. Burton’s style of directing sets him apart from other directors because he doesn’t compromise his ideas for the way that most considered conventional. However, Burton doesn’t want to become known as a director who only does a certain type of films. Tim Burton has made about 12 films, not including his early short-film works with Disney such as Vincent (1982), including his first major film, Pee-wee’s Big Adventure (1985), his most well-known, Edward Scissorhands (1990), and his upcoming film, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (2005), in post-production. Because Burton puts as much into the art of film and he does the essence of good directing, his films contain many themes, interesting characters, and beautiful set designs. Burton’s films include strong themes, childhood fantasies, trademarks, and ideas from various sources that all seem to reflect his own life.

Tim Burton was born in Burbank, California, in 1958. His father was a baseball player and worked for the city and his mother owned a gift store devoted to cats. Therefore, his parents stayed busy most of his life leaving him to grow up on his own terms. As a child, he lived in a bedroom that was completely dark because his parents blackened out his windows to supposedly save on heat. As he entered his teenage years he chose to follow his own path rather than the one set by the “popular” people. According to Hirschberg, author of “Drawn to a Narrative”, Burton believes that those
who grew up as the unpopular loners will turn out to be the most successful adults because they have spent their time searching for who they are, and those who were considered popular in high school will have already reached their peak and downfall as an adult (54). Burton’s passion for art came as a child and continued to grow as he got older. As Hirschberg also noted, his art was first recognized in ninth grade when he won an art contest for Burbank’s garbage trucks’ poster about littering (53). After receiving general education, he went to the Disney institute where he began studying animation, but realized he didn’t want to draw the way they wanted him to. His style of art can be seen throughout all of his films because he takes what he sketches the characters and backdrops to look like and applies them to the actual people and scenes.

There are many themes found throughout Burton’s films. A specific type of them found in many films is mythic theme. Mythic themes are, as explained by Bernard F. Dick, as “a form of racial history---a narrative distillation of the wishes and fears both of ourselves and the human race” (182). Burton’s films contain many mythic themes, but the one they seem to all have in common is exile. Exile is defined as separation of one from society in both a geographical and behavioral sense. This theme is seen in many of Burton’s films, but is most prevalent in Edward Scissorhands.

Edward Scissorhands is about an unfinished man named Edward, who was created by an inventor who left him with scissors for hands. Edward lived up on a hill away from the rest of the town in a house that everyone thought was haunted. Having no contact with the outside world, Edward was left to himself to develop and turned out quite different from everyone else. When he finally came down into the town with the local Avon lady, the people treated him as an outcast and menace to their town. No
matter how much Edward tried to show them that he cared, the people still wanted him gone. It got to a point where Edward had to return back to his home to live in solitude so that everyone would think he was dead. According to Kehr, “The crisis of young adulthood shaped Edward Scissorhands, in which the character played by Johnny Depp, was divided between loyalty to home and family and the excitement and danger of stepping out into life” (14). While this theme is primarily involved in Edward Scissorhands it is also seen in other Burton films. Ed Wood is a biography about Edward Wood, “America’s worst director of all time”, who is separated from Hollywood’s mainstream of film makers and mocked at for his taste in films. Wood is different from most people in Hollywood because he was not after the riches of fame but rather wanted just to be accepted for making movies the way he wanted. Another one of his films that shows the theme of exile is Beetle Juice. In this movie, exile is not necessarily focused into one character but rather all of them in a different way. The one character most that exemplifies exile more than the others is Lydia, who was forced to move to a town where she doesn’t fit in, and she considers herself unusual and an outcast.

Another theme that is found throughout Burton’s films is the theme of death. Each of the five films I watched contained some form of death, and it usually became the focus of the movie. In Beetle Juice, the Maitlands die from a car accident in the beginning and spend the whole movie in the alternate reality between heaven and hell while being unable to leave their house. Death is the main theme seen in the movie Sleepy Hollow. The Headless Horseman himself represents death because he is a dead man seeking revenge on the one who stole his head, and in the process ends up killing
many people that the owner of his head tells him to. There are about 12 beheadings from the Horseman, and there is also a focus on the death of Ichabod Crane’s mother. In Edward Scissorhands, there is a different theme of death. The first death, Edward’s creator, is not actually seen but sets the story-line. The next actual death is that of the bully who is trying to kill Edward, but in defending himself, Edward pushes him out a window of his house. Edward himself represents death but in an opposite way. As soon as he comes down from his house into the neighborhoods, the people dislike him and want him dead. Despite their attempts, Edward escapes and goes back to his house never to leave again. At the end of the movie the young girl being told the story asks how her grandmother knows that Edward is not dead and her grandmother replies by saying that if he weren’t up there right now it wouldn’t be snowing. Big Fish also includes a theme of death because throughout the whole movie Edward Bloom is on his death bed while talking to his son, and at the end he dies and is buried. Critic Dave Kehr states that, “Death has become something more real in Big Fish (based on the Daniel Wallace novel)---a permanent limit rather than a romantic apotheosis” (1).

These themes are probably prevalent in Burton’s movies because Tim Burton himself has gone through many of these same situations. As a child, Burton experienced exile from both his family and friends. His parents were always busy and left Burton to grow up on his own terms; he did not have a functional family life being passed back and forth between his parents and grandmother. Josh Tyrangiel, author of “Big Fish in His Own Pond”, states that, “Many of his earlier films are responses to growing up in a family that couldn’t express itself” (2). It seems that because Burton grew up on his own, experienced a creative lifestyle, and puts much effort into his films, much of his
life is reflected in his films whether he intended it or not. As one critic states, “From the
beginning, Tim Burton’s films have possessed the intimacy and fragility of an
emotional autobiography” (Kehr 1). Even though many links can be made between
Burton’s life and the themes of his films, it is important not to consider his films stories
from his own life. Talking about Edward Scissorhands, Burton states in his
autobiography, “But the film is not autobiographical, because it was important for me to
be as objective as possible” (91).

One idea noticeable in Burton’s films is the development of a child into an adult
in the way they act and think. Because he lived in a darkened bedroom, was set apart
from his parents, wears black all the time, and avoids Hollywood events, people tend to
view Burton as strange and unusual with a dark side. Although as Hirschberg states,
“Despite all the darkness, Burton has the manner of a precocious teenager who has
spent a great deal of time happily alone” (52). Because Burton emphasizes the essence
of childhood it has been said that he is out of touch with society and unfriendly, but as
Josh Tyrnagiel points out, “Burton may live in his own space, but it is not juvenile, and
it is not sealed. While he refuses to attend industry events like the Oscars---…---he
loves having movie people around him” (3).

What we can conclude from Burton’s idea of childhood is probably a reflection
of his characters such as Edward Wood (Ed Wood), Ichabod Crane (Sleepy Hollow),
and Edward Bloom (Big Fish). The character of Ed Wood, based on biographical
information, is a man naïve to the criticism of his films and is always optimistic about
his ideas. Ichabod Crane is also naïve because he goes to the town of Sleepy Hollow
thinking his uptown, New York style detective work will work on a murderer who is
already dead. According to Bernardo, author of “The Bloody Battle of the Sexes in Tim Burton’s Sleepy Hollow”, “Burton himself has commented that Ichabod is like a thirteen year old girl” (40). In Big Fish, Edward Bloom tells of his many adventures growing up that seem quite unbelievable for those who spent their life growing up as mediocre. The idea of Bloom being full of child-like aspirations that is seen in most children switches and is seen in his life. As stated by Tyrangiel, “Big Fish is rooted in a conflicted adult world and for the first time in a Tim Burton film it is the parent—not the child—who is whimsical and misunderstood” (2). Because of this role change, it seems that Burton is trying to emphasize his ideas on the childhood imagination being lost as we get older, and how we spend too much time worrying about the realities of life.

Of the films I watched, Burton’s inspirations seems to come from either an outside source or almost completely from his own ideas. In both Edward Scissorhands and Beetle Juice, Burton is not only the director but also the writer and producer. Therefore, Burton put a lot of his own ideas into these movies making them as personal as he could to make it a good movie. For the films that he did not put as much input into, Burton found other ways to get inspiration. As Smith and Matthews state, “The majority of Burton’s films have been adaptations or progressions of pre-existing material” (2). Big Fish was based on a novel written by Daniel Wallace, Ed Wood is based on the biography of Edward Wood written by Rudolph Grey, Sleepy Hollow is taken from the story by Washington Irving, and other of his films are based on books, comics, and even trading cards.
Burton has become known for the trademarks he is associated with in his films. His films have somewhat of a similarity to them due to the film techniques that serve as trademarks, and most of these techniques seem to be greatly influenced by his artistic side. Burton has also been known for his casting regulars. Having a different approach to directing, Burton is set apart from others in his unique film techniques. His most well known film technique that can be seen throughout most of his films is in the opening scene. In reference to Beetle Juice a critic states, “The film's opening, for example, has become a Burton staple--a sweeping traveling shot across a skillfully constructed model that serves to literally waft the viewer right into the film” (Hanke, “Tim Burton: Part Two” 1). Burton also has film techniques that set him apart from the typical genre the film fits into. For example, Sleepy Hollow is classified as a horror movie yet does not contain the usual horrifying scenes. According to Calhoun, “It’s what allows one to watch a series of graphic decapitations without seriously flinching…Yet on analysis, what Burton shows us is a horrific in a manner rarely touched by run-of-the-mill slasher movies” (1-2).

Because he has such a passion for art, his films tend to greatly reflect his own creative ideas. Most children develop a love for art but drop it as they start to get older, but Burton held on to his passion and let it unfold. He started off his career as an animator and artist with Disney, thus many of his films contain strong ideas of an artistic version of our life. As Hirschberg states, “His artwork, like his movies, is a combination of the beautiful and the strange” (50). Many of his films contain artistic elements, and many of his earlier films contain ideas that later all come together in the film he wrote, The Nightmare before Christmas (1993).
Another common Burton trademark is the people he casts, known as “Burton regulars”. Many actors from Burton’s movies will appear in more than just one movie, and he also uses many of the same production crew over again. According to Smith and Matthews, Burton finds it less complicated to just stick with the same people that understand his way of doing things so that he isn’t wasting time talking and working out each idea he has. They also state that once those people get to know him they can automatically do whatever it is he’s wanting, the way he envisions it with their own discernment, and it wonderfully fits and increases the enthusiasm (2). The most well-known Burton regular is Johnny Depp. Depp started with Burton as the leading role in *Edwards Scissorhands*. Burton saw in Depp the character of Edward the first time he met him; maybe it was because he saw much of himself in Depp. Since then he has played a main character in *Ed Wood*, *Sleepy Hollow*, and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (post-preduction). Another well-known regular is the music composer, Danny Elfman, who has been used in a number of Burton’s films. As Hanke states, “The connection to Elfman goes deeper than might be imagined on the basis of filmmaker and film scorer. In interview, Elfman always speaks of their working relationship in terms of a collaboration…” (“Tim Burton: Part One” 3). Therefore, it appears that Burton develops good relationships with the people he works with in order to produce a better movie that not only flows well but draws you in and makes you feel like a part of each scene.
Works Cited


Thesis: Burton’s films include mythic themes of exile, themes of death, and ideas on childhood.

I. To better understand his films it is important to know about his background.
   A. Birth information, parents’ characteristics, childhood, etc.
   B. Interests developed and early career.

II. Tim Burton’s films have many mythic themes found in them, a major one being exile, separation from society.
   A. Many of Burton’s films deal with the theme of exile, some more than others.
      1. Edward Scissorhands is a prime example.
      2. It is also seen in Ed Wood, Sleepy Hollow, and others.
   B. This theme seems to reflect Burton’s life and ideas.

III. Many of these themes seem to reflect Burton’s own life.

IV. Burton puts an emphasis on childhood and its importance in shaping your life as an adult.

V. Burton is known from his trademarks in his films.
   A. Film technique trademarks
   B. Artistic style as influence
   C. Burton Regulars

VI. Burton’s inspiration for his films comes from different places.
   A. His own ideas (writer and producer)
B. Ideas from outside sources (books, etc.)