

The Burtonesque Gothic

Salem Shinn

“Most people say about graveyards: "Oh, it's just a bunch of dead people. It's creepy." But for me, there's an energy to it that is not creepy, or dark. It has a positive sense to it.” This quote straight from the director, Tim Burton exemplifies the very basis of the gothic genre, from which his films draw their morbid inspiration. In examining the films *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *The Corpse Bride* (2006), and *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2008), Burton’s tendencies towards appropriating the Victorian gothic are readily apparent.

While defining the gothic genre and pinpointing its origins is difficult, gothic fiction arguably had its golden age during the Victorian era, when life expectancies were considerably lower: 40.2 for men and 43.6 for women in 1851 compared to 75.4 and 80.4 today (Bailey 12). The Industrial Revolution was a time in which living and working conditions were poor and disease spread rapidly through overcrowded cities (Townshend 100). For many, the outlook was bleak and as a result, death was welcomed by mainstream culture as another aspect of life to celebrate. Grief was shown outwardly by the dark apparel donned by the mourning loved ones of the departed; dark, morbid humor was used as a coping mechanism against the pain of loss; and many people turned to superstitions and spiritualism in the hopes of maintaining contact with those in the afterlife (Townshend 120).

One necessary component in creating a gothic atmosphere is “a sense of the *unheimlich* or uncanny, which Freud described as the awareness that something familiar is also strange. The sensation is produced by the realization that some element in an otherwise normal setting,

situation, or even a person is not quite right.” (Bailey 40). In gothic fiction, whether from the Victorian era or the modern works of Tim Burton, this is often set up by incorporating elements of the supernatural, such as hauntings from the deceased or inhuman monsters like vampires and zombies. The haunted house is also a common motif, as the domestic setting is usually one associated with comfort and safety, and the thought of danger lurking inside can make the comfortable feel ominous and uncomfortable.

Gothic narratives also hinge on “the transgression or blurring of boundaries between certain binary oppositions such as good versus evil, light versus dark, reality versus illusion, past versus present, living versus dead, to name but a few, plays an important role – often to address a society’s contemporary anxieties and concerns” (Langenbach 12). In Burton films, these concerns more often than not involve a social outcast protagonist’s struggle for belonging in a cookie-cutter society. In modern gothic films, such as those by Burton, the dual nature of humanity is often called into question through the use of the sympathetic monster “as an outsider-artist, separated from the world, but observing it from his attic space” (Louttit 288). Burton juxtaposes his relatable outsider characters against the manufactured conformist aesthetics of the suburban neighborhoods, which he truly believed to be more frightening (Middlemost 212).

Though it initially comes off as merely a cheesy black comedy, Burton’s *Edward Scissorhands* exemplifies the phenomenon of dark humor in the gothic genre. In addition to the strange premise of a human being with scissors in place of hands, “Burton’s decision to keep the special effects ‘cheesy’ and somewhat obvious not only mitigates the fear inherent in approaching the subject of death and the afterlife but also acknowledges the Gothic tradition in which the genre does not take itself seriously” (Bailey 105). Edward (Johnny Depp), being a

synthetic human being created in a laboratory by a mad scientist, simply does not understand what kinds of responses are appropriate in serious situations, leading to humor in scenes that would otherwise be considered morbid. For example, the scene involving Edward breaking into Jim's (Anthony Michael Hall) parents' house. When he is asked by the police to put his hands up and weapons away, there is no way for him to do so given the nature of his scissorhands, so the police react by threatening to fire rounds at him as he walks towards them, looking at them like a deer in the headlights.

Also, as a result of being artificial, Edward serves as an example of the “uncanny” as well as adding a supernatural element to the plot, both indications of the gothic style that influenced it. Edward is “uncanny”, because he experiences emotion in a human way and has a human appearance, but is not technically human as he was manufactured rather than born, and he is incapable of aging or dying, as seen in the film's unfortunate ending.

The setting of the film also gives off an air of gothic influence, in the form of the dualities of light and darkness between Edward's castle on the hill and the suburban neighborhood surrounding it. “With their tawdry colors – also in line with the Gothic's penchant for visual excess – the sunlit suburban houses thus not only helped create a fairy-tale quality, but they also formed a stark visual contrast to the dark look of Edward's Gothic castle, which was furthermore mostly filmed in monochromatic blue tones” (Langenbach 195). These dualities are also present between the “uncommonly gentle” Edward and the rude all-American high school jock, Jim, who are both competing for Kim's (Winona Ryder) love. Where Jim is egoistic and easy to anger, Edward is a timid and gentle character who has no desire to harm those around him, in spite of the weapons serving as his hands.

Burton's claymation films, despite being more targeted towards children, also present the grim elements of the gothic genre, though in a considerably more lighthearted and family-friendly way. The story of *The Corpse Bride* (2006) begins in the dreary realm of the living where young, wealthy debutantes, Victor Van Dort and Victoria Everglot are arranged to be wed. In this realm, "the association with Gothic conventions are many: the echoing, empty shell of an ancestral home that at once imprisons and devours, driving the choices and lives of the family it encases" (Bailey 113). With the arranged marriage between the pair, there is little freedom for either in this realm, so Victor tries to calm his nerves by wandering the cemetery, reciting his wedding vows in preparation for what will become his fate. To his surprise, he is pulled into the world of the deceased by the risen corpse bride, Emily who has returned his anxious vow, and finds a surprising world of color and cheer waiting for him below.

"The Land of the Dead seems to celebrate the new freedom death offers - freedom from the harsh consequences of those realities: it is ruled by the carnival spirit through the logic of grotesque imagery that connects this film with the theme of death as rebirth, the combination of birth and death, and the images of joyous death and their liberating and rejuvenating sense of laughter, all of which, play a role in the aesthetics of the grotesque condition" (Weishaar 65).

The Corpse Bride features a lighter take on the dark humor of the gothic genre, with its zany undead characters and the talking maggot that accompanies Emily in her endeavors. The tagline of the movie itself, "The love of his life. The love of her afterlife. Can a heart still break once it's stopped beating?" (Burton 2006) is itself an example of the morbid wordplay that is used within the film as well. An example of this kind of dark humor in this film is an instance in which Victor is attempting to return to the surface world to introduce Emily to his parents and seeks

help from the knowledgeable leader of the Land of the Dead, Elder Gutknecht, who replies; “Now, why go up there when people are dying to come down here?” (Burton 2006)

Burton’s recurring motif of cookie-cutter societies as the true villain is apparent in “the contrast between the sober, uncomfortable gathering of the Van Dorts and Everglots, who strain to fill the silence in their monochromatic, spare mansion, and the noisy colorful informality of the underworld (which) emphasizes the freedom of the afterlife and calls into question the judgment of which one is truly darker” (Bailey 115).

Sometimes, such as in Burton’s *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, his works are directly taken from existing narratives. This movie musical is an adaptation of Patrick Quentin and Stephen Sondheim’s Broadway musical by the same title, which in turn was based on an 1846 Victorian gothic penny dreadful titled *The String of Pearls* by James Malcolm Rider and Thomas Peckett Prest, which was allegedly taken from a real serial murder case. In Burton’s film adaptation, his signature muted color palette shows through, transforming the known setting of Victorian London into a more somber and dreary atmosphere to better suit the gothic aesthetic. Although the color palette consists of primarily cool greys, a special emphasis is placed on the color red, seen in the blood drained from the victims of the dissociating barber’s straight razors.

The dim lighting, foggy skies, and bleakness of Burton’s imagined London help to play into Freud’s ‘uncanny’ by re-presenting a recognizable setting in a way that is made to make the audience feel uncomfortable. The uneasiness, persistent throughout the film, is only accentuated by the multiple instances in which the title character, Sweeney Todd (Johnny Depp) pulls out the lathering brushes and straight razors of his barber trade and hovers dangerously close over the vulnerable neck of his customers. Todd’s eyes are aglow with passion as he ogles back and forth between his blades and the extended necks of his perceived next victim, only for suspense to

build even more when he completes the shave without slitting their throats. This is even more effective when Judge Turpin (Alan Rickman), whom Todd had sworn revenge against for kidnapping his beloved wife and daughter, is the one sitting in the barber's chair, as the audience knows that he has every intention of seeing him suffer. This murderous rage carried out within the familiar and vulnerable space of the barber's shop, marks the presence of the uncanny in *Sweeney Todd's* narrative. Once the victims have been bled, they were dropped through a chute to yet another uncanny venue, the meat pie shop owned by the equally unsettling Mrs. Lovett (Helena Bonham Carter), to be dismembered and cooked into meat pies, which she serves to unsuspecting customers. Mrs. Lovett's pie shop is a source of much of the dark humor in the film's plot, and is a commentary on social class, poking fun at how the tables turn as once their flesh is ground into pie filling is "those below serving those up above".

Overall, despite how radically different the Burton films are from each other from a cheesy suburban black comedy, to a claymation masterpiece with children as a target audience, and a penny dreadful turned movie musical respectively, *Edward Scissorhands*, *The Corpse Bride*, and *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* are all truly gothic at the core. Each film shares elements of the gothic genre manifested through the Freudian 'uncanny', the carnivalesque celebration (and general acceptance) of topics of death, the ominous atmosphere, and the persistent state of suspense, uniting Burton's varied work under the gothic style.

Bibliography

- Alkema, Kyle, Alissa Burger, Florent Christol, Elsa Colombani, Christopher M. Cuthill, Maria Diceanu, Orsolya Karácsony, Diane Middlemost, et al. *A Critical Companion to Tim Burton*. Lexington Books, 2017.
- Bailey, Katherine R. "Appropriations from the 19th century and the topic of death in modern Gothic narratives: Edward Gorey, Walt Disney, and Tim Burton." Ph.D. diss., The Florida State University, 2012.
- Clarke, Julie, "All Too Human: Edward Scissorhands." *Screen Education*, Issue 50, p.93-98, 2008.
- Langenbach, Julianne. "Gothic shadowplays: the evolution of Gothic film and its visual aesthetic from the Gothic novel to the cinema of Jacques Tourneur, Roger Corman, and Tim Burton." Ph.D. diss., University of Zurich, 2013.
- Louttit, Chris. "Tim Burton's Pop-Victorian Gothic Aesthetic." *Gothic Studies* 20, no. 1-2 (November 2018): 276-94. doi:10.7227/GS.0049.
- Townshend, Dale. *Terror and Wonder : the Gothic Imagination* London: British Library, 2014.
- Weishaar, Schuy R. *Masters of the Grotesque : the Cinema of Tim Burton, Terry Gilliam, The Coen Brothers, and David Lynch* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012.

Films

- Burton, Tim, Mike Johnson, Allison Abbate, John August, Caroline Thompson, Pamela Pettler, Johnny Depp, et al. 2006. *Tim Burton's Corpse Bride*. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video.
- Burton, Tim. 1990. *Edward Scissorhands*. United States: Twentieth Century Fox.

Burton, Tim, John Logan, Laurie MacDonald, Walter F. Parkes, Richard D. Zanuck,
Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter, et al. 2008. *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of
Fleet Street*.