

Tim-Plate Burton

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Abstract

With his undone hair and affinity for the bizarre, Tim Burton is a peculiar character in Hollywood. Previous scholars have focused on his “outcast” status when dissecting his films. In *The Works of Tim Burton: Margins to Mainstream*, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock notes that Burton insists on “saddling [protagonists] with grotesque appearances that estrange them from ‘normal’ people.” Such appearances encourage reading into Burton’s horror movie-filled childhood and attempting to understand his fascination with such looks. His color and costume choices have created a style so distinctive that similar movies, such as Henry Selick’s *Coraline* (2009), are often misattributed to him. Despite his visual artistry being celebrated, critics such as Roger Ebert find fault with his flat characters and predictable endings. I argue that by creating a world and characters that are just three-quarters filled in, Tim Burton uses archetypes to invite relation with the characters. These characters are boiled down to their key components, leaving plenty of room for symbolic character association. Characters that are fully fleshed out are often bloated to the point of leaving no room for interaction with the audience. Taking a closer look at *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *Corpse Bride* (2005) suggests that the trend of pale faces and vibrant colors relates to the trend of flat characters. By breaking down aspects of makeup, costuming, color, and characterization, I explain the ways each contributes to distilling each character to a point of symbolism. This distillation is a new take on creating characters in an era of films with established universes that are swollen with backstory and worldbuilding.

Keywords: Tim Burton, Characters, Alice in Wonderland, Edward Scissorhands, Roger Ebert

1. Introduction

The most intimidating object known to man: a blank canvas. It offers up no inspiration, no direction. Its edges are limits in which to cram a vision or unknown borders of a map with no landmarks. This is what stalls painters from painting and writers from writing. Yet a blank paint-by-number possesses none of these qualities. The difference is staggering. There is no pressure on the artist to create a vision from scratch, but they are still offered the opportunity to paint. Tim Burton recognizes the much more inviting qualities of a partially finished work versus a blank one. He recreates this invitation by constructing a world and characters that are only three-quarters filled in. More specifically, he does not waste time fleshing out each aspect of his work with humdrum normalcy. Quirks are allowed to stand on their own without being weighed down by “relatability”. In doing so, he creates people who are symbols for their morals rather than possessors of them.

2. Critical Reception

Roger Ebert, the famed film critic, picked up on this flattened quality of Burton’s films. In his review of *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), he mentions that Burton’s characters tend to have “all of their actions ... inspired by shallow

melodramatic motivations.”¹ These motivations are indeed straightforward, making the characters appear a bit flat or “remote.”² This tends to suggest that these characters are not meaningful or fleshed out enough to convey emotion. Ebert harps again on this trend in Burton’s films when reviewing *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) about 20 years later. Deciding that the Wonderland’s “inhabitants exist for little apparent reason other than to be peculiar and obnoxious,”³ he suggests that yet again, Burton has created characters that are simple and single-minded. Even major players, such as the Red Queen (Helena Bonham Carter), are obnoxious beyond belief. Her ability to make inconsequential words resemble nails on a chalkboard is astounding, to say the least. Screaming “DWINK” instead of politely asking for a beverage is enough to even make the chalkboard flinch. While this makes Carter’s performance memorable, it does not provide the Red Queen with any sort of depth. This singularity of characteristics makes it easy to see why Ebert refers to Burton’s constructions as “personality vacuums.”⁴

The characters are not the only structure of Burton’s films that Ebert finds deflated. The plot of *Alice in Wonderland* garners some rather exasperated quips at the end of his review, including that “the story will have a beginning and a middle but nothing so tedious as an ending.”⁵ This statement refers to the film ending with a climactic battle with the Jabberwocky. Viewing it as a cop-out, he feels Hollywood ruined a colorful world with a “real story” by using the cookie-cutter resolution. Terrified that the box office might not favor a character-based resolution, they’ve inserted a sequence once reserved only for action movies (where it made sense). This is not the only Burton film in which this occurs. Again, it is Ebert who notices it, pointing it out in *Edward Scissorhands*. He declares that the “conclusion is so lame it’s disheartening,”⁶ as Edward ends up fighting a neighborhood bully instead of resolving the situation with “dialogue and plot developments.”⁷ This action sequence feels even more forced than in *Alice*, since this takes place in a quiet suburb rather than a fantastical world. Ebert describes Burton going on autopilot and pasting in an ending instead of using his considerable imagination to create a real resolution. At first glance, this would indeed seem like a lost opportunity; however, Burton may just be creating a different sort of film than Ebert is looking for.

3. Defense of Methods

Burton’s endings and characters may be flatter than any flapjack, but for reasons previously unexplored. Edward Scissorhands is “teenage angst transformed into an extended parable about a shy-punk being.”⁸ An extended parable may well indeed be what Burton is trying to achieve. Full, intricate characters leave little space for symbolism. Edward has a very singular goal: to be accepted into society. Had Burton created a long, winding backstory for Edward it would be difficult to distill his purpose. It is much easier to skip over the experimental nature of his creation and instead focus on his relatively few, but strong, characteristics. These being his shyness, his inability to do certain tasks, and his socially inept persona. This is true not only when considering a character’s motivations, but their mannerisms as well. By creating people that have a singular reason to live, Burton creates people that are full of only one emotion. For simplicity’s sake, we’ll use the Red Queen as an example. She is all rage, jealousy, and general brattyness. None of these qualities are ones attributed to the heroes of old, but the archetypal villains. In those times these villains were witches and demons, today they are bullies and political rascals. The Red Queen joins the ranks of these unsavory people in Burton’s tale. “Skeletons, stitched-together bodies, and bodies with unusual parts, such as scissors,”⁹ serve as physical manifestations of these simplified personalities. Most films with outlandish manifestations use them to add texture to their appearance. Instead, these characters are steamrolled by having any texture hidden behind color or animation.

4. Explanation of Methods

Dramatic colors, dark costuming, and white makeup are all Burton staples. Each of these is engineered to erase the specific features and quirks of the characters so they do not distract from their symbolic nature. By using outlandish color schemes, he pulls us out of the narrative and into the audience before spotlighting the visuals. Most films tend to use colors that might be a bit over or under saturated, depending on the needs of the scene. However very few do this to the degree that Burton does. The bright colors in *Alice in Wonderland* are so vibrant they nearly burn themselves into the mind’s eye. *Edward Scissorhands* possesses colors half as saturated, but is just as shocking by drawing a stark contrast between the dark costume of Edward versus the pale pastels of the suburbanites. *Corpse Bride* contrasts color between the world of the living and the dead, but not in the way you’d expect. All these color choices draw attention away from the characters themselves and instead focus on the context the characters are in. The intense but homogenous saturation in *Alice* makes the Red Queen and the rest of the characters fade into the scenery. Edward and

Emily are different in that their color palates clash with the worlds they inhabit for most of their respective films. This may seem to make them stand out, but it instead emphasizes that they are pieces of context; they are not sufficient themselves to require attention. This adds to the idea that they are not fully formed and are only a sum of few parts. Were they fully fleshed out characters, they would have need of contrasting colors to emphasize their busy, complicated personas.

Continuing with Burton's stylistic tendencies, flattened characters are shown not only through their costumes but their makeup. The choice to disguise well-known actors (Johnny Depp, Helena Bonham Carter) is certainly an interesting one. These actors have very expressive faces, lending themselves well to their profession. The desire to cover them up, then, is not for lack of acting ability. It is to continue the use of characters as templates. By removing their skin color and general recognizability, it makes it much easier to look past the actor and into the concept they stand for.



Figure 1. Makeup obscures the famous face of Helena Bonham Carter in *Alice in Wonderland* (2010)

Image Credit: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/children_sbookreviews/11416718/Alice-in-Wonderland-and-the-childrens-classics-that-should-be-left-to-grown-ups.html

Key features to notice here are the extensive use of white and the choice to minimize her features. Each piece is designed to remove specific parts of human expression. The white serves to remove any changes to the coloring of her face, removing the ability to blush or to sweat. Her red lipstick is a color normally used to draw attention to the lips, but instead obscures them by choosing a heart shape in the center. The corners of her mouth are obscured with the rest of her face, so her frowns and smiles are obscured as well. Last is the choice of eye makeup. The large wash of color wants to hint at highlighting her eyes, but the light blue is so pale in comparison to the rest of the color pallet that it is barely noticeable. The new height of her eyebrows also restricts their motion, again obscuring expressions of surprise, suspicion, and anger. By making it more difficult to portray the subtleties of emotion, each expression is distilled into one primary component. This again suggests the symbolic nature rather than the human nature of Burton's characters.



Figure 2. Makeup also obscures the face of Johnny Depp in *Edward Scissorhands* (1990)

Image Credit: http://hero.wikia.com/wiki/Edward_Scissorhands

The makeup choices for Edward are not as graphic as those for the Red Queen, but still provide the same effect. Similarities between the two are the smaller lips, the muted color for the eyes, and the single wash of color for the rest of the face. Both figures also include a dark wardrobe with a lot of different textures to contrast with the emptiness of the faces. It is telling that the makeup and outfit choices are similar for both the good and the evil characters. Burton then is not trying to say that symbolic characters are good or bad, just that what they symbolize is good or bad.

This makeup choice is found not only in Burton's live-action films, but in his animated ones as well. In *Corpse Bride* (2005), the characters do not have the white makeup, but the medium of animation does not require it. Since everything must be fabricated, animation loses a lot of the texture that life has. Therefore, there are no extra facial tics and features that need covered by makeup.



Figure 3. Emily in *Corpse Bride* (2005) emulates a similar wardrobe despite being animated
Image Credit: [http://loveinterest.wikia.com/wiki/Emily_\(Corpse_Bride\)](http://loveinterest.wikia.com/wiki/Emily_(Corpse_Bride))

For Emily the white wash for the face still stands, however the rest has changed. Her wardrobe and hair are nearly the same color, removing the contrast seen in previous figures. Her lips are also fully colored in, as well as her eyes. The eyes in particular are lined and painted with a high contrast color to highlight them further. Despite the face being more clearly shown, the flatness of this character remains. This is largely due to the fact that animation removes most of the realism from a character and flattens them simply by rendering them into existence.

The characters and storyline in *Corpse Bride* are richer than in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Edward Scissorhands*. Since animation is already template-like, Burton doesn't have to rely on the same flatness as before, allowing him to play more with the characters and resolution without losing the template quality of his other films. In both mediums, a character's features are minimized by washing out expressive faces.

5. Simplification of Plot

The cookie-cutter ending Roger Ebert detests is required by symbolic characters. In a film with explicit protagonists and antagonists, a victorious confrontation is the only resolution available. No one would imagine a detective not catching his man or a knight not slaying his dragon. The ending crafted by Burton while apparently on autopilot is what is craved in any story with such polarized conflict. By drafting a situation in which the forces of good and evil can battle, he constructs a place in which the symbolic protagonist can feel powerful. This symbolism is easy to place in *Alice in Wonderland*, because the Jabberwocky is so obviously evil. Existing only to destroy, it cannot be viewed as a force for good. There is no underlying sweetness to distract from the bitter personality. Alice, on the other hand, is portrayed repeatedly as a force of good. Her care for her father is an overplayed characteristic throughout literature and film, but is still extremely effective in humanizing her. The use of the protagonist and antagonist as good and evil is very clear cut in *Alice* because of shorthand like this. Had Burton made these characters more morally gray, then a confrontation would not be so necessary. It is their purified roles in the world that require the action-movie ending. In *Edward Scissorhands*, however, it may seem more forced due to the different form that evil takes. The evil is not personified in a fantastical monster, but rather in a humdrum suburbanite. Edward being the symbol for good is also mildly off kilter, mostly because the good is wrapped up in the appearance of evil. It's difficult to argue that his dark costuming and scissorhands are not at least a bit off-putting. Despite the counter-active costuming, the natures of each character still defy any gray moralization. Each is still perfectly good or evil. So yes, the confrontation itself is easy to portray as forced, but the symbolism is not. It is much easier to pit Edward's symbol (outcasts) against the pesky suburbanite's (conformism). With this symbolic angle in mind, a confrontation is not only excusable, but required.

Predictable endings and flat characters are considered flaws not just by critics like Roger Ebert, but studios as well. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* regarding his film *Frankenweenie*, Burton reminisces on his days at Disney. “They didn’t really know what to do with me.”¹⁰ His style of filmmaking and animation didn’t mesh with Disney’s model. Ironically, Disney is the studio that ended up distributing some of his films years later. This transition of the studio’s opinion showcases just how much Burton has done to make his style accepted. He seems a bit aware of this “template” concept trickling through his films. Earlier in the same interview, he is asked about his “unusual” childhood and how it influences his films. He responds by saying “I don’t think my childhood was unusual”¹¹ and goes on to talk about how every kid has felt like an outcast or a freak at some point in their life. In doing so, he acknowledges that his characters are not meant to stand alone. His characters are propped up by the tradition of archetypes and the symbols for which they stand. In this case, the symbol of the misunderstood outcast.

6. Previous Models

Tim Burton may seem a bit avant-garde in his approach nowadays, but he is by far not the first to use it. The Greeks did the same by giving their gods singular purposes. Each had very simple traits that detailed what they stood for. Hera, the goddess of the home, was also the queen of the gods. The Greeks were not concerned with what motivated her actions, but with what she stood for. Burton does not tell stories of gods, but still portrays his characters in a similar manner. Edward Scissorhands knows this about himself. “I’m not finished” is his only explanation for his off-putting appearance and odd actions. Edward is not the only example of Burton “saddling [protagonists] with grotesque appearances that estrange them from ‘normal’ people.”¹² Emily, the Corpse Bride in the film of the same name, is “a figure of sympathy, not horror.”¹³ This quality, paired with the skeletal personality traits, lends itself to comparison with a specific Greek god: Hephaestus. Hephaestus was the son of Hera but was bodily ejected from his home due to his unsightly appearance. He occupied the same outsider position offered to many of Burton’s characters while possessing the same amount of personality traits. Yet throngs of Greeks worshipped him for his blacksmith skill. They did not lament the lack of deeper character or the petty motivations of physical appearance. They cared only that he was their “protagonist”, and that he stood for something. Burton’s characters strive for this possession of a singular quality rather than the multifaceted goals of their full-fleshed counterparts.

7. Conclusion

Outcast or not, Tim Burton’s films are colorfully washed out to encourage us to paint symbols into the frame. His characters and storylines were considered one dimensional by some, but this is only so metaphors can fill in the other dimensions. To properly appreciate this symbolic quality, Burton’s characters must be entered into the same arena of Greek myths rather than that of the fuller characters in today’s stories. His stories instead offer a simplistic view of morality that does not get entangled in the gray areas inherent in our world. That blank canvas that was so daunting is no more; Burton has sketched out the lines for us.

8. References

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