

## Curator's Essay

### Inhabiting Tim Burton's Universe

By Jenny He, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Film

Elaborately developed, indelible characters inhabit Tim Burton's films that focus and revolve around their relationships with each other. Many of these characters belong to a triumvirate of archetypes that reside in Burton's films and uniquely define his personal vision.

"I love extreme characters who totally believe themselves."<sup>1</sup>

Edward Scissorhands, Jack Skellington, Ed Wood, and Ichabod Crane—variations on a theme—represent a central figure in Burton's filmic universe: the "misunderstood outcast." Well-intentioned but with a worldview in dramatic contrast to those around him, the at-times autobiographical character favors blind passion over logistical rationale. The misunderstood outcast, if grotesque, is endearingly so in his naïveté—sympathetic monsters or inarticulate men. Bucking assimilation, they appear delusional to those without special understanding, often incurring the protestations of the "village mob," the underlying antagonist ever-present in Burton's films. The misunderstood outcast is an idealist among naysayers, but Burton's duality of idealism and pessimism, in essence the dichotomy between childhood and adulthood, deters this character from success.

"Tim showed me several drawings of his Edward. I'd read the script, of course, but Tim's drawings said everything. I instantly fell for the character—he made his way into my body." – Johnny Depp<sup>2</sup>

Edward is Burton's most literal Frankenstein's monster. Clad in a stitched-together leather body suit and unable to touch others with his razor-sharp fingers, he is the physical manifestation of isolation, one of Burton's predominant themes. Mostly mute, Edward's channel of communication lies in his ability to shape things—hair, hedges, ice—into wondrous sculptures. This self-referential component of Edward—expression through creativity—is his only connection to the world outside of himself. An original creation, both in the film and as a character, Edward is the first true misunderstood outcast of Burton's feature films.

Left alone in a mansion atop a hill after his creator's sudden death, Edward is brought into (pastel-colored, cookie-cutter suburban) society by the kind Avon Lady who takes him home to her husband, son, and daughter Kim, and dresses him in "normal" clothes. At first superficially accepted by the neighbors, they inevitably turn on Edward when he rebukes their exploitation.<sup>3</sup> Despite narrative attempts to the contrary, Burton never diminishes Edward's outsider persona. In the scene preceding the film's climax, Edward carves an angel out of a block of ice and Kim dances underneath the falling snow. This tender moment is immediately interrupted by Kim's boyfriend Jim who startles Edward into accidentally cutting her. Branded a "freak" and "not even human," Edward runs away and rampages through the neighborhood, ripping his "human" clothes off and destroying his topiaries—metaphorically severing his only link to society, rendering him the perpetual outcast.

*The Nightmare Before Christmas* evolved from Burton's childhood memories of Halloween and Christmas (when his bland environs were enlivened by a veneer of fantasy), Dr.

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<sup>1</sup> David Edelstein, "Mixing Beetlejuice," *Rolling Stone*, June 2, 1988, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Hirschberg, "Drawn to Narrative," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 9, 2003, p. 52.

<sup>3</sup> Joyce, a randy neighbor attracted to Edward, attempts to seduce him; and Jim, Kim's boyfriend, coaxes Edward to commit petty larceny.

Seuss's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, and television specials like the Rankin/Bass production *Rudolph, The Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964). Circa 1982, Burton began writing a holiday-themed poem, a twist on the old Clement Clarke Moore standby, and drawing the character of Jack Skellington, the "Pumpkin King" of "Halloween Town," who annually masterminds the frights of the holiday for the "real world."

Revolving around this character, a manic-depressive antihero, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* straddles the line between a grim children's fable and a gentle horror story. Jack, dissatisfied with the monotony of success and obsessed with his new discovery of Christmas, embarks upon the challenge of being Santa Claus. He enlists his cadre of ghouls and goblins to make toys for the tots, a disastrous endeavor with equal results—decapitated dolls, roadkill hats, jack-o-lantern jack-in-the-boxes, boa constrictor pets. When Christmas Eve comes, Jack sets off in his coffin sled pulled by skeletal reindeer and led by a ghost dog with an orange-pumpkin-bulbed nose. When his well-intentioned deeds are discovered, the military is called in to take down this "imposter." As cannons are firing at him, Jack, oblivious to his folly, declares, "They're celebrating. They're thanking us for doing such a good job." The misunderstood outcast cannot understand why his grand undertakings would be anything but a glorious success. Jack is overeager and determined in his single-mindedness, but he never means harm. Burton explains, "Just because he's fucking up Christmas, he's not doing it on purpose. Everybody's perceiving him as something horrible and negative, and he's not."<sup>4</sup> However, in his misguided enthusiasm, Jack ends up alienating everyone.<sup>5</sup> His world doesn't understand his revelations concerning Christmas (the denizens of Halloween Town are content in their existing conditions) and the "real world" doesn't recognize his good intentions.

The disparate projects *Ed Wood* (1994) and *Sleepy Hollow* (1999)—a biographical picture on the infamous B-movie director and a reimaging of Washington Irving's well-known short story, respectively—share a commonality in Burton's inclinations toward the main characters. Although appearing in contrast to Edward Scissorhands and Jack Skellington, who existed in universes of Burton's creation, Ed Wood and Ichabod Crane are similarly men who don't fit into their environments, whether Hollywood in the 1950s or upstate New York at the turn of the eighteenth century.

Anointed the "Worst Director of All Time" by Michael Medved's *The Golden Turkey Awards* (1980), Edward D. Wood, Jr., was an inept filmmaker who relied more on gumption than talent. A director of schlocky horror films who either did not understand or did not feel the need to pay attention to rules of filmmaking, Wood's films often lacked coherent scripts, continuity, proper pacing, production values, and actors who were not frightened by the camera.

Tim Burton's *Ed Wood* is an earnest man with an absolute belief in the integrity of his vision and craft. Armed with pure optimism in the face of abject humiliation and rejection, he is not as naïve or out of touch with reality as he may appear at first glance. Wood is the embodiment of hope, Burton's nod to not compromising. Drawing a parallel to Burton's own filmmaking fortitude, Wood dares to pursue his own distinctive vision. (By definition, Wood himself can be considered an auteur, although not a very good one.)

Burton portrays the beleaguered director with equal amounts of alienation and sympathy. When Wood's girlfriend puzzles over her missing angora sweaters in the background, Wood is seen in close-up in the extreme foreground, communicating the cross-dresser's distance from even the closest people in his life. Wood is rarely on the same page as others around him, even within his own production crew—a veritable merry band of misfits who willingly participates in Wood's outlandish escapades, such as running from the police for filming on public streets without permits, the unauthorized "borrowing" of props from studio warehouses, and getting baptized to secure funding for a movie. After the first take of a shot,

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<sup>4</sup> "Trick or Treat?," *The Boston Phoenix*, 22 October 1993, sec. 3, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> *The Nightmare Before Christmas 3D*, Official UK Podcast, 2006.

his cinematographer asks, "Don't you want another take for protection?" Wood replies with unabashed sincerity, "What's there to protect? It was perfect."

Wood has a genuine aspiration to be a director of Orson Welles's caliber. Instead of ridiculing Wood for this far-fetched ambition, Burton injects an aura of optimism in a film that documents Wood's unending and unquestionable failures. In a sympathetic scene that embraces the downtrodden director, Wood encounters Welles in a bar and the legendary director advises the novice to never conform to the Hollywood establishment or give up on his distinctive dream, no matter how daunting the obstacles. "Ed, visions are worth fighting for. Why spend your life making someone else's dreams?"

The script for *Sleepy Hollow* transforms Irving's folktale into a supernatural whodunit. The original meek schoolteacher Crane is now a priggish constable from New York City who frustrates and distances himself from his peers and superiors with his bizarre gadgets and methods that rely on forensics, a newfangled science foreign to the denizens of 1799. This rendition of Crane compelled Burton to sign on as director. "Reading the script, what I liked about Ichabod...is that he was written very much as somebody who's just living...inside of his own head—and not relating to what's happening in the rest of the world."<sup>6</sup>

Burton has been able to develop, explore, and refine this significant archetype in his filmic universe via many different characters in various films, and in particular through his collaboration with Depp over the last two decades. Although Depp has been a chameleon in all of his Burton films and has approached each distinct character with different nuances (Ed Wood was reminiscent of a ventriloquist's dummy, Ichabod Crane was played as a cross between Angela Lansbury and thirteen-year-old girl<sup>7</sup>), the same fragility of character is expressed (Scissorhands hides behind his castle, Skellington under a costume of Santa Claus, Wood hides under a veneer of optimism, and Crane behind science).

The women in Burton's films possess a broader mélange of characteristics than the misunderstood outcast. At times vulnerable and fragile, at other times aggressive and independent, all are a form of the "progressive woman," the misunderstood outcast's vision of the ideal female figure. She is usually part of the established society that the misunderstood outcast infringes upon, but her progressive and alternate views, in contrast to the status quo, render her an outcast of sorts as well. Usually the object of affection for the chief bully and antagonist (and the romantic interest for the hero outcast), she is often resourceful and narratively determined to come to the rescue of the misunderstood outcast.

Classic romantic interest examples are Kim in *Edward Scissorhands* and Sally in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Costumed at various times in the film in undergarments (at her first encounter with Edward), a cheerleader's uniform, and a virginal white dress (at the film's climax), Kim is symbolic as an adolescent boy's vision of ideal female fantasy. Sally, like Edward Scissorhands, is a version of Frankenstein's monster. Although a ghoul herself, she is the only monster in Halloween Town who understands Jack's desire to break free of his stagnancy.

The female leads in both of Burton's Batman films are confidantes of the conflicted comic book hero. In a departure from the comic mythology, Vicki Vale discovers Batman's identity as Bruce Wayne. She is allowed access to his domain, the Batcave. At the end of the film, Vicki returns home with Alfred, an indication that she has crossed the threshold into Wayne's dual identity and has blurred the separation between the two. In *Batman Returns*, Burton dismisses the classic villain/hero dynamics between Batman and Catwoman in favor of kinship. Both are flawed and damaged people struggling with conflicted psyches and the issue of identity. Selina Kyle/Catwoman is a counterpart to Bruce Wayne/Batman both in and out of

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<sup>6</sup> Tim Burton, *Burton on Burton*, ed. Mark Salisbury (United Kingdom: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 167.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Nashawaty, "The Truth about Charlie," *Entertainment Weekly*, July 8, 2005, p. 27.

costume. During a confrontation, Catwoman straddles Batman while he, lying on his back, notices mistletoe above them. He tells her that mistletoe can be deadly if you eat it, and Catwoman tells him that a kiss can be even deadlier if you mean it. In a later scene, dressed as Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle at a costume ball, the two lovers dance under mistletoe. Selina absentmindedly remarks, "Mistletoe can be deadly if you eat it," to which Bruce instinctively replies, "A kiss can be even deadlier if you mean it." Again, Burton's Batman reveals his identity to the progressive woman with whom he feels an understanding.

Although not typical romantic leads, the characters of Lydia in *Beetlejuice*, Taffy in *Mars Attacks!* and Ari in *Planet of the Apes* are also representative of this female archetype. In *Beetlejuice*, while others around her are oblivious to the presence of the underworld coexisting among them, Lydia is the only human character who senses the presence of the Maitlands.<sup>8</sup> Lydia's ability to see the Maitlands identifies her with the world that the "normal" society cannot comprehend. Lacking fear of the ghosts, she professes a desire to be part of "their" world. Lydia, the only human in the film who does not want to exploit the Maitlands, later is literally on the threshold of crossing to the other side by agreeing to marry Beetlejuice to save the couple from becoming lost souls.

We first see Taffy looking bored and out of place in the White House as her mother, the First Lady, is redecorating the Roosevelt Room. Later on in the film, we see Taffy wandering aimlessly through the White House and blocked from entering a room when a Secret Service Agent quips, "I'm sorry, you can't come this way. There's a tour in progress." The gag communicates the assertion that Taffy is a stranger in her own home. At the end of the movie, in front of a ruined Capitol Building made to resemble the Roman Forum, and with a mariachi band playing in the background, Taffy, the only member of the First Family to survive and the ad hoc leader of the free world, bestows the Congressional Medal of Honor upon the gawky hero who figured out the way to destroy the Martians. They share awkward looks and she asks, "Do you have a girlfriend?"

Ari, a simian who speaks out for "human rights," is portrayed as a potential love interest for the human Leo in Burton's *Planet of the Apes*, in contrast to the 1968 *Planet of the Apes*.<sup>9</sup> In Burton's film, a love triangle is set up between Ari, Leo, and Daena, a human native to the foreign planet on which Leo crashes. Ari is first seen stopping the simian children from throwing stones at an imprisoned cart of human captives that includes Leo. The apes taunt her by calling her a "human lover," and a close-up shot of Ari looking at the cart is followed by a reverse shot of Davidson looking back, establishing a connection between the two. Throughout the film, interactions between Ari and Leo are followed by reaction shots of Daena, setting up Ari as a romantic rival. Ari leaves her family and society and joins Leo on his quest to escape the planet. Her affinity with the humans results in her being branded, a fate reserved for captive humans, and she is cast out from her brethren.

Burton's female archetype is embodied by humans, monsters, cats, and apes, but they are cut from the same complex cloth. Not used as mere plot devices to propel the narrative, the progressive woman allows an avenue to probe deeper the motivations of the misunderstood outcast.

The third of Burton's recurrent archetypes, the "flawed father," is well intentioned (similar to the misunderstood outcast), but ultimately disappoints. Portrayed with reverence, both

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<sup>8</sup> After perishing in an auto accident, Adam and Barbara Maitland discover themselves to be ghosts forced to haunt their New England home for 125 years. Lydia Deetz is the daughter of the New York City couple who moves into the Maitlands' home.

<sup>9</sup> In *Planet of the Apes* (1968), the Zira ape character, who is likewise sympathetic to humans, is a platonic ally to the human George, who crash lands on a planet where apes form the ruling class and humans are the savages. George's romantic interest is Nova, a native human.

narratively and stylistically, this father figure often manifests intangibly, on film, in flashback, dreams, and hallucinations—filmic techniques that communicate the detached and unattainable nature of the character. In addition, the death of the flawed father is often an important part of the narrative. The fleetingness of the corporeal father is in contrast to his significance as he defines the existence and motivations of the misunderstood outcast.

Bela Lugosi and Ed Wood share a codependent, surrogate father-and-son relationship in Burton's film. Lugosi comes to rely on Wood for support with his financial struggles and battle with drug addiction. In return, Wood hinges his hopes on Lugosi, truly believing that the actor, whose impact appears to reside only in Wood's mind, will lend a credibility to his films and lead to inevitable, immeasurable success.

*Ed Wood* sets the chance meeting of Lugosi and Wood in a funeral parlor, where the former is trying out coffins. This set-up casts Bela as a persona, linking him to his most famous role as Dracula in Tod Browning's 1931 film. Although Wood and Lugosi work together intimately throughout the film and become close companions, Burton doesn't diminish the separation between the mentor and surrogate son. After Lugosi passes away, Wood is seen sitting alone in a darkened screening room sharing the frame with only a path of projected light. He watches Bela's last filmed footage on earth, a melancholy scene of an old man slowly plucking a rose in front of an empty white house. Wood's only access to Lugosi is and has been only through celluloid.

The theme of the flawed father is elaborated in *Big Fish*, a film centered around the strained relationship between a father and a son. In contrast to Daniel Wallace's novel, on which the script is based, Burton's film shifts the focus and sympathy onto the elder, Edward Bloom. In the film, the son, Will, who insists upon unadulterated truth over his father's embellished recollections is more dour and austere than in the novel. The man misunderstood by his son is the more likeable character. On Edward's deathbed, Will relives his father's life through a series of flashbacks motivated by Will's memories of his dad's tall tales. These subjective recollections create a man who is larger than life. Edward becomes a hero of epic proportions, who is finally redeemed in his son's eyes when the son realizes that manipulated and invented reality is a preferable existence than actual reality.

In *Edward Scissorhands* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the flawed father is peripheral, however pertinent, to the main story, and seems to exist only in the minds of the main characters. Edward Scissorhands's creator, referred to only as the Inventor, is first introduced in a flashback, holding a heart-shaped cookie up to the chest of an anthropomorphic machine. Later, via Edward's dreams, the Inventor is seen lovingly reading to Edward, a recollection of the clearly endearing "father." At the film's climax during Christmas time, as the "village mob" of suburban housewives gather after Edward's rampage, Edward returns home and embraces Kim, motivating a flashback to Christmas with his inventor. In the silent scene, the Inventor presents Edward with a present of rubber human hands. At the moment of Edward's almost-fulfillment, the Inventor falls to the ground and dies. As he collapses, Edward cuts the hands into pieces. Edward touches his departed father, in as tender a manner as he can, and leaves a cut on the father's cheek. The parallel between his proximity to (ultimately unfulfilled) happiness with Kim, whom he also accidentally cut—leading to his final ostracism—is made clear by the juxtaposition of the present scene and the flashback.

Burton's inclination toward this archetype necessitated the addition of a new character, Dr. Wilbur Wonka, to Roald Dahl's familiar story. Dr. Wonka, Willy's father, is a dentist who preaches on the evils of candy ("Lollipops, what we call cavities on a stick"). His disapproval of Willy's affection for candy leads to their estrangement. Seen in flashback, Dr. Wonka is shot in low angles, signaling the dramatic significance and importance of this character.

Like the Inventor, Dr. Wonka is the reason why the main character is who he is. Burton posits that Edward Scissorhands and Willy Wonka would not exist if not for their flawed progenitors. (Ichabod Crane also has the ultimate "flawed" father, who kills his mother with an

iron maiden. This childhood trauma is the cause of Crane's reserved and withdrawn personality and his intolerance for unscientific concepts, including the magic and witchcraft for which his mother was punished.)

Although both flawed fathers are relevant to understand the character, in *Edward Scissorhands* the flawed father is an expository character, whereas in *Charlie* he is now a character motivator. At the end of the film Edward returns to isolation. His deceased, flawed father cannot redeem him and connect him to the rest of the world. Willy Wonka, however, reunites with his father with the help of Charlie. Finding a proud father, Willy is able to integrate himself into the Bucket family, and break free of his disconnect. Examining Burton's films as a whole, one can discern the evolution of the archetype, which is not stagnant and unchangeable. Each individual project requires Burton to adapt and reinvent his specific vision.

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