

# The Gothic Imagination of Tim Burton

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Education Resources



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## TIM BURTON AND THE GOTHIC IMAGINATION: AN EDUCATION RESOURCE EXPLORING THE FILMS OF TIM BURTON AND THEIR LITERARY, FILM AND CULTURAL INHERITANCE

*The arts of the grotesque are so various as to resist definition. Here we have the plenitude of the imagination itself. – Joyce Carol Oates<sup>1</sup>*

This resource is designed as an introduction to the duality of Tim Burton's imaginative vision and his creative fascination with the darkness that is part of human existence and the human psyche. It will also suggest ways that Burton's films can be used more broadly to explore the centuries-old tradition of Gothic literature as well as more recent but well-established film styles, genres and conventions.

Burton has always been fascinated by the dark and light aspects of life, consistently arguing that one cannot exist without the other: 'life is an incredible jumble of being funny and sad and dramatic and melodramatic and goofy and everything'.<sup>2</sup> During his childhood in suburban Burbank, Burton found the tendency for the people around him to live life on the surface unsettling and alienating. Their resistance to the darker side of life and their denial of the reality of death inhibited their creativity as well as their capacity to accept and nurture different ways of looking at and exploring life. Such a denial of life's duality involves a failure of imagination that has the paradoxical effect of rendering life 'lifeless'.

*That thematic thing of the living world being much more 'dead' than the dead world, playing with juxtapositions and those feelings – I remember having that from very early on. It goes back to childhood: I just remember that feeling that what people call 'normal' is not normal and what people call 'abnormal' isn't abnormal. – Tim Burton<sup>3</sup>*

Burton could be described as having a 'Gothic sensibility' and this way of looking at the world underpins the stories that he tells in his films and the way that he tells them. While Burton's artistry and imagination are remarkably individual, his films consciously place themselves within a particular tradition of story-telling, and demonstrate his indebtedness to the inspiration and freedom that his early engagement with popular culture gave him. Burton reworks and echoes themes, images and techniques from the texts that fed his imagination during the arid years of his suburban childhood and adolescence. His tastes were eclectic: Japanese monster movies, B-grade horror and science fiction films and Dr Seuss's picture books. His work attests to his ongoing fascination with texts and stories that counter the façade of practical and mundane realism with which so much of life is invested.

In exposing the deficiencies of the normalising logic of everyday life, Burton's films privilege the strange and the fantastical, both in terms of theme and of the world created. This fascination with the underside of normality and with figures cast out for their difference is a key concern in Burton's films, a fascination that places him in the Gothic tradition of artists who privilege feeling over reason.

*It was the function of Gothic to open horizons beyond social patterns, rational decisions, and institutionally approved emotions; in a word, to enlarge the sense of reality and its impact on the human being. It became then a great liberator of feeling. It acknowledged the non-rational – in the world of things and events, occasionally in the realm of the transcendental, ultimately and most persistently in the depths of the human being. – Robert B. Heilman<sup>4</sup>*

## WHAT IS THE GOTHIC TRADITION?

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, scientific ways of thinking about the world began to predominate, leading to a questioning of previous less rational ways of thinking about the world. The Enlightenment challenged traditional Christian teachings in such a way that spiritual faith was no longer able to 'explain' the world and became increasingly separated from public life. The thinkers of the Enlightenment sought to shed the light of reason onto the darkness of magical and superstitious beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, human beings are not entirely reasonable and a purely rational life is untenable and unachievable and, in response to Enlightenment rationality, the Romantic movement in art and literature emphasised the importance of emotion and imagination. The Gothic tradition in architecture and literature grew out of this reinvigorated interest in the aspects of experience that refuse to succumb to the rule of reason.

*Where the classical was well-ordered, the Gothic was chaotic; where the classical was simple and pure, Gothic was ornate and convoluted; where the classics offered a world of clear rules and limits, Gothic represented excess and exaggeration, the product of the wild and the uncivilized, a world that constantly tended to overflow cultural boundaries. – David Punter and Glennis Byrnf*

In particular, Gothic literature sought to reconnect with the 'dark' side of life and human nature. It offered readers extremes of emotion, a chance to experience the thrill of terror and a glimpse of the chaos that constantly threatens the order we seek to impose on our lives. Accordingly, just as scientists and intellectuals were celebrating the fact that magic and superstition were things of the past, people were rushing out to buy spine-chilling novels about haunted castles, phantoms and curses. Some people were so keen to imagine themselves part of a Gothic romance, they had their own Gothic ruin erected on their land.

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is generally regarded as the first true Gothic romance and introduced many of the conventions associated with this genre. It was set in a castle, was infused with an atmosphere of mystery and suspense, and included an ancient prophecy, supernatural omens and strange visions.<sup>7</sup> Following on from Walpole, Ann Radcliffe laid down the conventions for a Gothic story-telling style dependent on 'terror' and apprehension – the fear of what might happen. Best known for *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Radcliffe's stories featured pale trembling heroines, brooding men and thrilling plots.

*While Emily kept her eyes fixed on the spot, she saw the door move, and then slowly opened, and perceived something enter the room, but the extreme duskiness prevented her distinguishing what it was. Almost fainting with terror, she had yet sufficient command over herself to check the shriek that was escaping from her lips, and letting the curtain drop from her hand, continued to observe in silence the motions of the mysterious form she saw.<sup>8</sup>*

In this style of Gothic narrative, the terrifying events turn out to have a logical explanation, a device that was parodied by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* (1818). Austen's story opens

with heroine, Catherine Moreland, reading *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and she proceeds to devour more and more terrifying Gothic novels until the world around her becomes filled with imagined fears.

*Catherine trembled from head to foot. In the pause which succeeded, a sound like receding footsteps and the closing of a distant door struck on her affrighted ear. Human nature could support no more. A cold sweat stood on her forehead, the manuscript fell from her hand, and groping her way to the bed, she jumped hastily in, and sought some suspension of agony by creeping far underneath the clothes. To close her eyes in sleep that night she felt must be entirely out of the question.<sup>9</sup>*

The other broad category of Gothic fiction does not rely on apprehension and suggestion but, instead, gives shape to the dark possibilities that lie at the heart of the Gothic imagination. These narratives rely on horror and the horrible to draw readers into the world being represented. Matthew Lewis's novel *The Monk* (1796) exemplifies this mode of Gothic storytelling and is full of grisly sights that confront the reader in the same way as they might in a horror film.

*The door was thrown open and again the Bleeding Nun stood before me. Once more my limbs were chained in second infancy. One more I heard those fatal words repeated,  
'Raymond! Raymond! Thou art mine!  
Raymond! Raymond! I am thine &c. – '  
The scene which had shocked me so sensibly on the former night was again presented. The spectre again pressed her lips to mine, again touched me with her rotting fingers, and as on her first appearance, quitted the chamber as soon as the clock told 'Two'.<sup>10</sup>*

### Activities for introducing the Gothic tradition

- Images with a Gothic theme or look can be a great way to begin a discussion about the idea of the Gothic.
- Before approaching the Gothic literary tradition, look at some images of the Gothic follies that were in fashion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
- Why would an English gentleman want to build a Gothic ruin on his estate? (In fact, a quick google reveals that it is still possible to have a Gothic folly installed.)
- What about the idea of an amusement park ride involving a simulated burial? Try googling the following terms: 'Last Ride'; 'coffin ride'; 'coffin ride Hong Kong'.
- What ideas do we associate with the term goth as it is used in everyday life?
- Look at a selection of fiction that is identifiably Gothic. Passages could be taken from a range of modern and classic Gothic texts: *Dracula*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *Pet Sematary* or *Interview with a Vampire*.
- What features do these examples share?
- Make a list of books and films that could be described as Gothic.
  - Focus on passages and clips that best illustrate the idea of the Gothic.
- List some of the key features of the Gothic that emerge from this exercise.

## THE GOTHIC TRADITION AND FILM

The initial thrilling attraction of Gothic architecture and literature was connected to the challenge it held out to the classicism and rationality of the Enlightenment perspective, but this way of representing the world has a continuing fascination. In the nineteenth century, Gothic fiction gave expression to excesses, perversities and passions that resisted the repressive practices of this period:

*Victorian popular fiction aimed to horrify readers by scraping the opaque surface of every day reality and foregrounding the deceptiveness of appearances. – Laurence Talairach-Vielmas<sup>11</sup>*

American writer Edgar Allan Poe made a distinctive contribution to nineteenth century Gothic fiction,<sup>12</sup> while George W.M. Reynolds' Gothic novels were hugely popular in Britain. At the end of the nineteenth century, a flurry of books like *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Robert Louis Stevenson, 1886), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oscar Wilde, 1891) and *Dracula* (Bram Stoker, 1897) explored what lies both beneath and at the edge of rational human experience and existence.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the emerging feature film industry sought out stories that would capture the imaginations of early film audiences and relished the heightened emotional impact of the dark themes explored in Gothic literature. The act of going into a darkened cinema and entering the imaginary world created in a film has been likened to dreaming, so it is not surprising that filmmakers were eager to explore the strange and the unknown. Most of the visual language, thematic preoccupations and modes of characterisation still associated with the horror genre were set in train during the development period of the film industry.

In particular, German filmmakers, inspired by the Expressionist movement in art,<sup>13</sup> developed a repertoire of techniques to explore and represent the dark themes integral to Gothic horror. Expressionist filmmakers seek to represent moods and emotions in the way they stage a particular scene (in what is called the *mise-en-scène*). Stylised sets and the use of light and dark (*chiaroscuro*) to create shadows were key features of this mode of filmmaking and underpinned a number of Gothic-inspired horror films such as *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* 1920, Robert Wiene) *Nosferatu* (1922 F.W. Murnau) and *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (1920, Paul Wegener).

Hollywood-produced horror films drew readily on the literary heritage of Gothic fiction, as well as being inspired by the dark shadow worlds created in the German Expressionist films of the 1920s. They used a number of the visual conventions associated with these films but also reconnected with the ornate and the grotesque settings integral to the Gothic literary sensibility – partly due to increased financial resources. Whereas German Expressionist horror films tended to favour more abstract settings, Hollywood filmmakers often used fairly detailed sets imbued with claustrophobic terror. *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) used striking Expressionist-inspired *chiaroscuro* effects and experimented with camera shots and dissolves. However, Browning substituted a more theatrical and attractive Dracula (played by Bela Lugosi) in the place of the starkly hideous *Nosferatu*. Although few twenty-first century

filmgoers have seen Browning's *Dracula*, Bela Lugosi's portrayal of this archetypal vampire figure has become the touchstone for subsequent English-language representations. Even the children's program *Sesame Street* has helped sustain this portrayal with the character Count von Count.

The Robert Louis Stevenson classic *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was a particular favourite, in keeping with the modern fascination with ideas of duality, the unconscious and repressed desires. In particular, the transformation of Dr Jekyll to Mr Hyde gave filmmakers the opportunity to explore and extend the imaginative possibilities offered by film with the use of special effects to represent the dark side of the self.

Another nineteenth century narrative that held out a particular fascination for filmmakers was the Mary Shelley classic *Frankenstein* (1818). This text merges the science fiction focus on people overreaching themselves and the Gothic fascination with boundaries, particularly the border between the living and the non-living. Created out of pieces of dead bodies, Frankenstein's monster feeds into the disgust associated with the human corpse but also invests this state of half-life with pathos. In James Whale's classic 1931 version of *Frankenstein*, Frankenstein's monster is accidentally given a 'criminal brain', but despite the suggestion that his aggression is integral, the monster has a curious innocence that complicates the distinction between human and inhuman. As with Bela Lugosi's portrayal of Dracula, Boris Karloff's performance in *Frankenstein* as the grunting monster has become so inextricably connected with the character, it is difficult to imagine the creature in any other form (although Kenneth Branagh attempted to overwrite Karloff's iconic portrayal in his 1994 adaptation).

In *Frankenstein's* conclusion, the monster is chased by the townsfolk wielding flaming torches before being burnt in a disused windmill. The frenzied, screaming mob is represented as a monster every bit as destructive as the creature trapped in the windmill, a creature who wails in pain and fear as the flames consume him.

*The monster is an adult child, a violent, bewildered toddler born suddenly into a hostile and incomprehensible world. – Cecil Helman<sup>14</sup>*

The windmill scene in James Whale's *Frankenstein* has a recurring fascination for Tim Burton who uses it to reflect on the drive to expel what is unfamiliar and strange. Burton's own response to the creature that is expelled or destroyed has always been one of sympathetic – even empathetic – connection:

*I felt most monsters were basically misperceived, they usually had much more heartfelt souls than the human characters around them – Tim Burton<sup>15</sup>*

In the 1950s, studios like Hammer in the United Kingdom and American International Pictures in the United States found a film production niche in the production of low budget, brightly coloured, horror extravaganzas that relied heavily on a kitsch aesthetic. Hammer's success with Gothic horror began with *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1958), a film that drew out the most gruesome details of the Frankenstein story and illustrated it liberally with very

bright red blood. The theatricality and excess of the Hammer horror film tradition allies it with the extreme style of performance that was the trademark of the Grand Guignol theatre in Paris.<sup>16</sup> Tim Burton's bloodiest films *Sleepy Hollow* and *Sweeney Todd* are very much a part of this tradition.

Although Hammer made its own contribution to the horror film genre and marked a clear break from the black and white Expressionist-style films of the 1930s, it also drew on Gothic classics like *Frankenstein*, *Dracula* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Around the same time, Roger Corman of the low budget studio American International Pictures made a series of horror films based on the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, the eight titles included: *House of Usher* (1960), *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1965). *House of Usher*, the first in the series, stood out from previous films made by the studio due to the lavish sets and the general opulence of the production. These films were popular on first release but have probably become embedded in our shared cultural memory due to their frequent TV screenings.

As a child and teenager, Tim Burton was an avid TV viewer who also revelled in the triple bills that were a feature of Saturday afternoons in Burbank during this period. Feeling stifled by the conformism and banality of the Burbank milieu, Burton escaped into the imaginative worlds offered by these low budget horror and monster films.

*Vincent Price, Edgar Allan Poe, those monster movies, those spoke to me. You see somebody going through that anguish and that torture – things you identify with – and it acts as a kind of therapy, a release. – Tim Burton<sup>17</sup>*

As well as responding to these films for their capacity to take him into another world that was so different from the one he was trying to survive while growing up, Burton was also inspired by the visual artistry of these works. The ornate Gothic excess of these films in combination with the hand-made, artificiality of their mise-en-scène have fed into Burton's own work and its determined rejection of narrative realism.

## Introducing Gothic styles of filmmaking

- Access stills from a range of German Expressionist horror films.
- What features stand out?
- In what ways could these images be considered Gothic?
- Look at some key scenes from James Whale's *Frankenstein* and Tod Browning's *Dracula*.
- Which images, motifs and characters are familiar?
- Why?
- How do these films fit into the Gothic tradition?
- Sample some of the 1950s and 1960s horror films that were such an integral part of Tim Burton's artistic development. Even if you cannot get hold of the films, you can seek out trailers and images that highlight the films' visual excess and creative energy.
- Compare the early Expressionist style of Gothic horror film with these florid extravaganzas.
- How can these quite different films be considered Gothic?
- What attributes do they share?
- Look at a range of horror texts and focus on the key features of this way of representing experience.
  - Which of these could be considered Gothic?
  - Why?
- Visit this informative website devoted to the Grand Guignol in order to think about what attracts people to the forbidden and offensive (<http://www.grandguignol.com/>).

## TIM BURTON AND THE GOTHIC TRADITION

This section focuses on three of Burton's films that form a specific reworking of some of the key texts of Gothic literature and film: *Vincent* (1982), *Frankenweenie* (1982) and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990):

*The real precedent for Scissorhands isn't Batman at all, but the surreal, gothic shorts Frankenweenie and Vincent. Both films featured 'fish out of water' themes in which elements of gothic horror were introduced into a contemporary suburban milieu, and both were deadpan comedies which suggest, as Scissorhands does, that the evils of suburban living were far more terrifying than anything a mere mad scientist could cook up. – Ben Andac<sup>18</sup>*

### *Vincent* (1982)

*Vincent* is a 6 minute-long stop-motion animation made by Tim Burton during his time at Disney.<sup>19</sup> In this short film, Burton works through many of the themes that have continued to be a preoccupation in his work as well as exploring his personal imaginative heritage. In describing his inspiration for his short film *Vincent*, Burton has highlighted the impact of the popular culture texts that gave him an imaginative and emotional outlet during his youth. In particular, he was drawn to the performances of Hollywood veteran Vincent Price whose lugubrious face, sinister voice and general air of genteel menace made him very convincing in the role of man with a dark and dangerous secret. Price, who starred in all but one of the films in Roger Corman's Poe cycle, created a persona that became bigger than the films he performed in.

*Vincent Price was somebody I could identify with. When you're younger things look bigger, you find your own mythology, you find what psychologically connects to you. – Tim Burton<sup>20</sup>*

While *Vincent* pays homage to Vincent Price, Edgar Allan Poe and the colourful horror films of the 1950s and 1960s, Burton draws his imagery from the Expressionist horror repertoire. He uses a stark black and white palette, simulating the stylised lighting techniques and the evocative use of shadow associated with the films of Murnau and Wiene.

In the animation, the character of Vincent lives a conventional family life in a bland, featureless house. Outwardly Vincent conforms, but he lives a much more dramatic and exciting life inside his head. His imagination runs riot under the influence of the gruesome stories of Edgar Allan Poe and the magnetic persona of Vincent Price. As he gets drawn further and further into his dark fantasy world, his mother tries to pull him back into the everyday world that he is so keen to renounce:

*So he took out some paper and scrawled with a pen:  
 'I am possessed by this house, and can never leave it again'.  
 His mother said: "You're not possessed, and you're not almost dead.  
 These games that you play are all in your head.  
 You're not Vincent Price, you're Vincent Malloy.  
 You're not tormented or insane, you're just a young boy.  
 You're seven years old and you are my son.  
 I want you to get outside and have some real fun."<sup>21</sup>*

As this passage makes clear, one of *Vincent's* key themes is the struggle between the world of the imagination and the world of reason – the central theme in Gothic literature. This theme was also played out in real life when Disney studios pressured Burton to give *Vincent* a more upbeat ending. Instead of finishing with Vincent imagining that his soul is forever trapped in darkness (as in *The Raven*), some 'people at Disney' wanted a cheerier ending where Vincent heads outside to play baseball or football with his father. Not only would this ending have been a travesty of the concept underpinning the animation, the very fact that it was suggested highlights the conflict between the 'happy ending' aesthetic and the imaginative world that Burton has always found so fascinating.

Burton has commented that the 'happy ending' felt darker to him than the one that he conceived which:

*felt more beautiful and more like what was in his mind, which is what the thing was about. It was about somebody's spirit, and to make it literal was, I felt, making it darker, ultimately. – Tim Burton<sup>22</sup>*

In describing the kinds of emotions and thoughts about life that shaped and inspired the creation of *Vincent*, Burton places this animation firmly within the Gothic tradition of confronting the fear of death within the world of the imagination.

*Embracing death and the catharsis of 'Oh my God, I'm going to die' and The Fall of the House of Usher and The Raven and Edgar Allan Poe and Vincent Price helped me to live. – Tim Burton<sup>23</sup>*

Note: *Vincent* is available as an extra on *The Nightmare Before Christmas* DVD. Vyvyan Stranieri has provided extensive notes, questions and activities designed to introduce students to the visual language of *Vincent* (*The Fantastical Imaginings of Tim Burton*, <http://www.acmi.net.au/ed-kit-tim-burton.htm>).

## Discussion questions and activities

- What features of *Vincent* might be described as Gothic?
- In what ways does *Vincent* demonstrate the influence of the German Expressionist style of filmmaking?
- For a transcript of *Vincent's* verse, go to: <http://www.timburtoncollective.com/vincent.html>
- Tim Burton was not a great reader in his youth and has commented that he did not actually read the stories of Edgar Allan Poe but, instead, imbibed them through the films.
  - Are dark images and horrifying themes particularly memorable?
  - What are some of the dark myths – drawn from both fact and fiction that have become part of our shared cultural knowledge or history?
- Think about this quote from Tim Burton:

*Embracing death and the catharsis of 'Oh my God I'm going to die and The Fall of the House of Usher and The Raven and Edgar Allan Poe and Vincent Price all helped me to live'.<sup>24</sup>*

- What does he mean by this?
- List as many of the visual and narrative allusions in *Vincent* as possible (a good group exercise).
  - How many of Burton's references are familiar but hard to place?
  - Does it matter that *The House of Wax* has no direct connection to Poe's work?
- The metre of *Vincent* is based on the work of Dr Seuss – one of Burton's childhood favourites.
  - What is the effect of the rhythms of the verse?
- The mother in *Vincent* is also drawn from Dr Seuss. While it would be quite a stretch to describe *The Cat in the Hat* as Gothic, isn't there something rather sinister and unsettling about this absent mother who instils such fear in her children?

## Frankenweenie (1982)

*Frankenweenie* is a 25 minute black and white live action film featuring a young boy, Victor Frankenstein, who brings his dog, Sparky, back to life. Victor's happy suburban existence is turned upside down when Sparky is run over by a car and killed. Inspired by a science lesson about the effect of electrical impulses on the body, Victor disinters his dog, stitches him back together and reanimates him. *Frankenweenie* translates *Frankenstein* to the American suburbs, using the dark themes of the *Frankenstein* story to lay bare the unthinking conformity of this apparently idyllic suburban community.<sup>25</sup>

Burton is fascinated by the idea of Frankenstein's monster – a creature given life but doomed always to be an outsider. In particular, though, it is James Whale's *Frankenstein* which inspires Burton and contributes to his ongoing fascination with pieced-together characters who are always in danger of coming apart. After his reconstruction, Sparky looks like a canine version of the monster as portrayed by Boris Karloff.

Burton uses the *Frankenstein* story to explore the disgust and horror generated by a creature that inhabits a borderline space somewhere between life and death. For instance, he focuses on the revulsion Victor's parents reveal when faced with a reconstituted, pieced-together version of their once-beloved pet. Like Karloff's monster, Sparky is an outcast and is pursued by a raging crowd that seeks to destroy him.

In *Frankenweenie*, the windmill scene that is the climax of Whale's film becomes an exploration of the darkness and hatred that lies at the heart of narrow-minded suburbia. Whale's monster leaves a trail of destruction behind him, but has a curiously defenceless, doomed quality that comes to the fore in the conclusion where he is destroyed in the burning windmill. Burton's fascination with the idea of creatures as a 'heartfelt souls' feeds into the depiction of the faithful Sparky, whose superiority to the mindless mob, is confirmed by his heroism in saving Victor from the burning windmill. In this way, *Frankenweenie* is a much more optimistic and redemptive version of *Frankenstein* than the film that inspired him and Burton's later reworking of the story in *Edward Scissorhands*.

Commenting on *Frankenweenie* and the inspiration and ideas behind it, Tim Burton has said that, rather than being an homage to James Whale's *Frankenstein*, his short film engages with the feelings and memories connected to this film. The popular culture texts that Burton consumed during his childhood fed his imagination and provided an emotional outlet and they have become integral to his sense of himself as a human being and an artist. The questions he asks when he revisits a work that has made an impression on him are, 'Why do I like that, what's the emotional context in this new format?'<sup>26</sup> The feelings that a memory, image, work or idea produces are the key to Burton's artistic practice.

Note:

*Frankenweenie* is available as a special feature on *The Nightmare Before Christmas* DVD and Vyvyan Stranieri has provided material that focuses on *Frankenweenie*'s visual language in *The Fantastical Imaginings of Tim Burton*, <http://www.acmi.net.au/ed-kit-tim-burton.htm>.

### Discussion questions

- What is Gothic about *Frankenweenie*? Think about:
  - narrative features
  - themes
  - the visual features of the film
  - the soundtrack
  - the characters
- In *Frankenweenie*, Tim Burton uses suburbia to explore the different meanings attached to death and the unknown.
  - Which characters prove to be the ones without any vision or 'soul'?
  - Why do the neighbours behave the way they do?
  - How does Burton use dark and light, sunshine and nighttime to explore the feelings and behaviour of the people who live in the local neighbourhood?
- *Frankenweenie*'s pretty suburban setting seems to have come directly out of a family sitcom. In contrast, the cemetery and the mini-golf course are presented in the mode of a horror film.
  - What is the effect of this contrast?
  - If Burton is interested in revealing the dark impulses that lurk beneath the bland surface of Victor's community, why does he make this suburban world so superficially pretty?
- *Frankweenie* was originally planned as a short to accompany the re-release of the Disney animation *Pinocchio* but its PG rating meant that this couldn't happen. When Burton asked what he could cut from the film in order to get a G rating, he was told the issue was the 'tone'.
  - What is meant by 'tone' in this context?
  - What aspects of *Frankenweenie* might seem unsuitable for small children?

## Edward Scissorhands (1990)

Gothic narratives involve a desire to grapple with the terrifying unknown and, for Tim Burton, this dark abyss lies beneath the neat lawns and painted bungalows of 'normal' suburban life. *Edward Scissorhands* and *Frankenweenie* paint a particular version of suburban existence as a kind of hell on earth and these films could therefore be described as suburban Gothic.

*I always felt that growing up in those kinds of neighbourhoods the only time you'd ever see the neighbours all together was if there was an accident or something out front. Then the pull-out-the-lawchair mob mentality would kick in. I was always fascinated by that, and how the parallel between suburban life and a horror movie was really closer than you might think. – Tim Burton<sup>27</sup>*

In *Edward Scissorhands*, in contrast to the conventional horror narrative, the dark, forbidding, secret world of the crumbling castle along with its mysterious and otherworldly inhabitant are the source of life and renewal, while the everyday world is empty and bleak.

*Edward Scissorhands* tells the story of Edward, a boy found living alone in a dark mansion on the top of a mountain. Edward is the creation of an elderly inventor who dies before he can replace Edward's scissorhands with conventional hands. The motherly Peg takes Edward under her wing and invites him into her home to live as part of her family. One of the film's jokes is that Peg's job as an Avon lady makes her an outsider like Edward. Although her home and life outwardly resemble the rest of the town's, she is the one who seeks Edward out and accepts his difference. The world into which Edward is placed is a model of pastel-coloured conformity and, initially, he is welcomed by the rest of the community as an entertaining oddity but is brutally rejected when things go wrong.

Edward's experience reflects Tim Burton's own struggle to survive the bland, conformist world of his youth. Burton felt isolated and misunderstood, and Edward emerged as a character:

*who wants to touch but can't, who was both creative and destructive... It was the feeling that your image and how people perceive you are at odds with what is inside you. – Tim Burton<sup>28</sup>*

One of the identifying features of the continually shifting definition of the Gothic is the fascination with thresholds and boundaries, the places where two worlds and two kinds of experience meet. One of the key ways this idea is explored in Gothic narratives is through placing 'ordinary people in "extraordinary positions"'.<sup>29</sup> In the case of *Edward Scissorhands*, this process is reversed as the extraordinary Edward is confronted by the ordinariness of the new world he finds himself in. Underneath their conventional exteriors, most of the people that Edward meets are narrow and unfeeling. The people of the town project their own idea of what Edward should be like onto him as if he is a blank surface. They are delighted by his capacity to add texture and excitement to the bland, pastel-coloured environment in which they live, but repelled by the darkness and pain that make him who he is. These people prove far more destructive than Edward and are without the accompanying creativity and humanity that Peg's daughter Kim finds so attractive. By coming down into the world of the

suburbs, Edward brings the contrast and depth that life needs, but he is soon expelled for challenging the 'mask of normalcy' behind which the suburban characters hide.<sup>30</sup>

Audiences have always reacted positively to Edward because he has the 'heartfelt' quality Burton is so drawn to, a quality that invites shared understanding and empathy. Edward is a tragic figure who personifies 'aloneness'; he has no family and the surrogate father who created him has died. However, his connection to and memories of the past give him a depth of feeling that makes him different from people who have:

*grow[n] up in a place where there's no sense of history, no sense of culture, no sense of passion for anything. – Tim Burton<sup>31</sup>*

As an unfinished human, the character of Edward highlights the fragmented nature of any individual trying to make their way through a complex world. Edward's pieced-together, unfinished state emphasises a humanity and vulnerability that set him apart from the mob who turn on him and chase him back to where he came from. These people are the monster whose power to destroy must be feared, while Edward – both creature and true soul – becomes the Gothic hero who must escape in order to survive.

Some critics have complained about the logic of the *Edward Scissorhands* story and, in fact, celebrated special effects artist Stan Winston initially struggled to come to terms with what Burton was trying to achieve.

*He (Stan Winston) was used to working with directors who used science and research to help create characters, and here he was helping to transform Johnny Depp into a vintage German expressionistic boy made from a cooking robot that had scissors for hands.<sup>32</sup>*

However, Winston was able to relax when he accepted that the story was not science fiction but a fairy tale. Rather than being about fantasy and escape many traditional fairy tales deal with dark themes in such a way that they are intimately allied with Gothic fiction. The 'extremely violent and extremely symbolic and disturbing' aspect of fairy tales is the key to Burton's interest in the form and in its role in allowing people to work through the shared fears that are basic to human existence.<sup>33</sup> This is something that preoccupied the renowned psychologist Bruno Bettelheim who suggested that one of the reasons children are so drawn to fairy tale narratives is the opportunity they provide for confronting in a symbolic form the terrifying questions and realities that are part of being human.<sup>34</sup>

It is therefore not at all surprising that *Edward Scissorhands* is a film that has particularly captured the imaginations of children and teenagers, who respond to its portrayal of life's duality. *Edward Scissorhands* is a particularly dark form of fairy tale, as unlike *Frankenweenie*, it does not offer a happy ending. Far from living happily ever after, Edward is returned to the fortress from which Peg sought to rescue him. Although Edward has been compared to the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast*, he will never be transformed into a handsome prince but is doomed to an eternal half-life, while Kim will grow old and die.<sup>35</sup>

## Discussion questions

- Tim Burton has a perennial fascination with the idea of what makes someone human, and this is the central theme of *Edward Scissorhands*.
  - In what ways is Edward more human than the people he encounters?
  - Which characters in *Edward Scissorhands* are the most destructive and monstrous?
- Not only is Edward the unique product of his scientist creator's vision and imagination, he also benefits from the love and care lavished on him by this surrogate father.
  - How do we know they have a special relationship?
  - Why are Edward's memories so important?
  - In what ways does Edward carry with him the creativity and vision that led to his existence?
- A fascination with the duality of existence is an essential element of the Gothic imagination.
  - How is this expressed in *Edward Scissorhands*?
  - Think about this idea in terms of the opening where Peg makes the journey between the world of the town and Edward's castle. What does each of these places represent?
  - How is the theme of duality explored in the relationship between Edward and Kim?
- In both *Edward Scissorhands* and *Frankenweenie*, Burton reprises the mob scene from James Whales' *Frankenstein*.
  - Why is this scene such a powerful part of Burton's cultural memory?
  - In what ways might a mob be considered monstrous?
- Discuss this quote with reference to *Edward Scissorhands*:

*Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return.... These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression. They ask us why we created them. – J.J. Cohen<sup>36</sup>*

## THE GOTHIC HERO IN THE FILMS OF TIM BURTON

While *Edward Scissorhands*, in particular, demonstrates Tim Burton's ongoing affection for the creature with a soul, Burton is also fascinated by human characters who struggle to construct a coherent identity for themselves. Characters like Batman, Sweeney Todd and Willy Wonka are figures whose present-day selves carry with them a darkness connected to past suffering.

### *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992): the fractured self

*...since the 1980s, Batman comics and films have invented a neo- or retro-gothic amongst the art deco of New York's skyscrapers, making these the equivalent of the crumbling castles and monastic ruins of old. – Clive Bloom<sup>37</sup>*

When Burton was given the task of translating the comic book hero Batman to the screen, he was fascinated by the idea of a man who chooses to take on the guise of a bat. In the classic 1960s television adaptation of *Batman*, Batman and his sidekick Robin are, like the villains they tackle, both camp and comic. Burton, however, was attracted to the potential darkness in the character of Batman, considering him one of the few comic-book heroes of any interest.

*I love Batman, the split personality, the hidden person. It's a character I could relate to. Having those two sides, a light side and a dark one, and not being able to resolve them – that's a feeling that's not uncommon. – Tim Burton<sup>38</sup>*

As Burton conceived him, Batman was part Gothic hero struggling to hold his fragmented self together and part tortured, solitary freak who liked to dress up in a batsuit. In keeping with the Gothic archetype of the dual personality (now inextricably associated with *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*), Bruce Wayne's lacklustre and ineffectual identity is placed in stark contrast with the memorable public persona of his alterego Batman. This psychological framework precluded the inclusion of Robin as Batman's sidekick.

Batman's dark side allies him to the villains it is his self-appointed duty to destroy. With this in mind, Burton has described the confrontation between The Joker and Batman as 'the duel of the freaks'.

*The split is pure Burton: one unhappy character dresses up to express something but still feels hopelessly out of place in the real world; another, an extremist creates his or her own demented reality. Burton clearly identifies with the former but the latter – Pee Wee, Betelgeuse, The Joker – charges him up, inspires him too. – David Edelstein<sup>39</sup>*

Gothic heroes bear their past history with them like a dark shadow, and in the case of Batman and The Joker, their histories are inextricably intertwined. The Joker killed Batman's parents, a tragedy that set him on the path of masked avenger. In turn, The Joker's rictus grin is a consequence of a bullet ricocheting off Batman's metal gauntlet.

Burton's interpretation of the Batman story is a dramatic example of his Expressionist-inspired practice of representing moods, themes and psychological states in the *mise-en-scène* (the staging of the scene). In the script of *Batman*, Gotham City is described as 'if hell had sprung up through the pavements and kept on going', a world that can't be escaped, only survived. When this world is revisited in *Batman Returns*, it has become even more darkly corrupt. The dark themes of *Batman* are magnified into a twisted Gothic mixture of mutants and evil plots. Whereas *Batman* had the crazed Joker (liberated by his madness), *Batman Returns* has the mutated half man/half penguin who is rejected and expelled by his appalled parents and reborn in the sewers below Gotham City. While The Penguin's existence attests to the stinking river of human waste that flows beneath the city, the sinister, vampire-like Max Shreck (named after the actor who played *Nosferatu*) dominates the dark world above the sewers, literally sucking the energy out of the city.

In the film's extraordinary opening, it is made clear that the people of Gotham City are wedged between the toxic underworld inhabited by The Penguin and the neo-fascist überworld dominated by Shreck. The ordinary people who inhabit Gotham City meekly accept the stories these figures feed them, and give their loyalty to a new leader without a moment's hesitation. Selina Kyle begins the film as one of the meek townsfolk doing the bidding of her powerful leader but remakes herself as Catwoman after Shreck tries to eliminate her for having uncovered his evil plan. In creating the character of Catwoman, Burton continues to explore the Frankenstein theme that he finds so compelling. After her fall, Selina stitches herself together in a new form: half woman, half cat. The fragmentation of her personality and her constant efforts to put herself back together give her a pathos that is the other side of the vicious fury that keeps spurting to the surface. While she wields a wonderful mesmerising sexual power, she also turns in on herself, hating who she used to be, while having constantly to reassemble her new identity. In *Batman*, the hero and the villain each sees something of himself in the other; in *Batman Returns* this mirroring is between Batman and Catwoman, each of whom hides a fragile and damaged self behind a mask and inside a costume. When Bruce Wayne and Selina Kyle try to explore their attraction for each other, their wounded natures make it impossible. As Bruce tells Selina, his previous relationship failed because of his problem with duality.

*There are two truths, you know and she had trouble reconciling them, because I had trouble reconciling them. – Bruce Wayne (Batman Returns)*

## Discussion questions

- Focusing on the idea of ‘the double’, choose a pair of characters from either of Burton’s Batman films and explain how they connect and contrast with each other.
  - How does this doubling contribute to the story the film is telling?
  - How might these characters be considered Gothic?
- In the Batman films, the classic struggle between good and evil and life and death is complicated by a hero who has to fight the destructive impulses that exist within himself as well as in the outside world.
  - What other superhero figures experience a similar form of internal conflict?
- At the end of each of the Batman films, the villains are defeated, but do we feel that order has been restored?
  - Discuss.

*Tim Burton is a director who externalises the internal struggles of his characters with his extreme imagery and use of costumes, makeup and masks.<sup>40</sup>*

- Discuss this idea with reference to *Batman*.
- What other Tim Burton films might this comment apply to?

## Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street (2007): the darkness within

*Sweeney Todd* is an unremittingly dark film that explores the idea that evil is inextricably connected with the human condition. While Lady van Tassel in *Sleepy Hollow* expresses her murderous impulses by unleashing the scourge of the Headless Horseman, the characters inhabiting the Gothic landscape of *Sweeney Todd* release their own personal demons. When the story begins, it is clear that the past overshadows the present in such a way that the characters live in permanent darkness. In a grim analogy with the victims consumed in Mrs Lovett's pies, Sweeney Todd is consumed by revenge. He starts out as a respectable and respected barber with a loving wife and a beautiful baby and ends as a murderous demon guilty of acts so abhorrent that he and the man he once was share no common ground.

Like Batman, Todd has experienced a trauma that has left him a divided being. He has lost his position in society and his status as husband and father. His razors are the only connection he has to his old life; and when he is reunited with them, he handles them with reverence. Whereas Batman uses his crimefighting alterego to channel his desire for revenge, Todd's obsession with revenge disconnects him from the man he used to be. Batman is also deeply dependent on maintaining a clear split between good and evil and right and wrong. (One of the reasons he finds Catwoman so unsettling is that she disrupts this distinction.) In contrast, Todd's desire for revenge is so overwhelming, it mutates – rather like The Penguin's – into an indiscriminate bloodlust: 'Not one man, no, nor ten men, Nor a hundred can assuage me.' He decides vengeance will be his salvation, a decision that unleashes a kind of murderous joy.

The gentle family man, Benjamin Barker, glimpsed at the beginning bears no relation to the detached and efficient murderer Sweeney Todd. (Note how his fractured personality is represented in his reflection in the broken mirror.) However, when Todd discovers he has killed the wife whose suffering he has been avenging, he is confronted by the magnitude of his monstrous transformation. His final song is left hanging, as he finds it impossible to describe the man he once was, or bear the knowledge of what he has become.

*There was a barber and his wife  
And she was beautiful  
A foolish barber and his wife  
She was his reason and his life  
And she was beautiful  
And she was virtuous  
And he was...*

When the young boy Toby picks up Todd's razor, Todd quietly offers up his throat with a gesture of resignation and relief. Toby's act is an act of mercy that brings to mind the line from Todd's song (entitled *Epiphany*): 'For the rest of us, death will be a relief. We all deserve to die.'

In creating *Sweeney Todd*'s darkly Gothic depiction of evil, Burton generates the same impression of oppressive claustrophobia as he did in the Batman films. The mise-en-scène of

*Sweeney Todd* reinforces the idea that London is 'a great black pit' drawing in the mass of humanity, except for the 'privileged few' who sit 'at the top of the hole ... making mock of the vermin in the lower zoo, turning beauty into filth and greed'. Ordinary people are easily manipulated into: buying hair tonic made out of urine, eating Mrs Lovett's pies and offering up their throats to *Sweeney Todd*. The grim Victorian streets echo the moral bankruptcy of the people who live in them, while – as in *Batman Returns* – the city's cellars, drains and sewers are a reminder of a further layer of human foulness running below the surface. Rather than any kind of supernatural horror, the horror of *Sweeney Todd* is the horror of being human.

In typically Gothic fashion, *Sweeney Todd* plays with the borders between civilisation and barbarism, living flesh and dead meat, love and revenge, the present and the past. In its exploration of cannibalism, *Sweeney Todd* dramatises the idea of the taboo, a social prohibition that is inextricably linked with the boundaries that not only impose social order, but also contribute to the construction of individual identity within a particular society. In western society cannibalism is subject to a much stronger set of prohibitions than murder; it is a taboo connected in part to the sacredness of human life, but far more to the disgust evoked by the corpse. If cannibalism is one of the most shocking of all transgressions, then tricking people into committing this offence could be considered the ultimate treachery.

The Gothic tradition feeds into the idea of the living nightmare and in *Sweeney Todd*, the events have the curious, inescapable inevitability associated with nightmares. Todd is an efficient and cold-hearted killer, but he still arouses an element of sympathy linked to the tortured misery that engulfs him. He is the heartfelt monster that is a feature of Burton's work:

*It represents humanity at its most fallen, or furthest removed from the norms of society. More than simply a reflection on the dark side of humanity, the archetype represents the tragic end-result of oppression by unresolved grief or of rejection-turned-grudge. – Tim Kroenert<sup>41</sup>*

A feature of Gothic narratives is the 'the massive inaccessibility of those things that should normally be most accessible'.<sup>42</sup> In the case of Sweeney Todd, this state of separation and dislocation is communicated not only through the loss of his family and his social status, but also through the loss of the positive human emotions that make life bearable. Todd's desire for revenge has suffocated these feelings and cut him off from the man he once was.

## Discussion questions and activities

- In Sweeney Todd, Tim Burton uses some of the Expressionist filmmaking techniques that have become associated with Gothic horror: in particular, the contrast between light and dark (chiaroscuro).
  - This effect is particularly memorable in Sweeney Todd's attic room. What are the key features of this setting?
  - Choose another scene where chiaroscuro is used to convey mood and feelings. Describe how this is achieved.
  - How does the treatment of blood extend this effect?
  - Keeping in mind that Expressionist filmmaking employs mise-en-scène to represent internal states, how do Mrs Lovett's colourful dreamscapes work within Sweeney Todd?
  - Describe the use of colour to depict Sweeney Todd's memories of the past?
  - What is being evoked by the contrast between the present and the past?
- The song in which Sweeney Todd sings the line 'we all deserve to die' is called Epiphany.
  - Find out what is meant by this term.
  - What kind of epiphany does Sweeney Todd have?
- Sweeney Todd's dramatisation of life and human nature at its most brutal reaches a bloody climax. Todd and Mrs Lovett have sunk into complete degradation.
  - How does Burton increase the dramatic intensity at the end of the film when there has already been so much horror, violence and bloodshed in the film?
  - Tim Burton is fascinated by the tradition of the Grand Guignol theatre and its dramatic and theatrical presentation of violence. This live presentation of horror always trod a fine line between the shocking and the comic ([http://www.grandguignol.com/tri\\_3.htm](http://www.grandguignol.com/tri_3.htm)). Note how Burton plays with the border between the two modes, particularly with the death of Mrs Lovett.
  - Burton challenges our perspective, by infusing the final blood-drenched moments of Sweeney Todd with a haunting beauty. How does he achieve this? What is he trying to say?
- How does Burton work with the musical dimension of the production?
  - What is the emotional impact of the songs and the music in Sweeney Todd – do they draw us further into the horror and misery or do they keep us detached?

- Tim Burton tells the story of seeing a London stage production of Sweeney Todd and sitting behind two proper English ladies who asked each other whether the liberal use of blood 'was really necessary'? Do you think the bloodiness of Burton's version of Sweeney Todd is necessary?
- Of the story of Sweeney Todd, Robert L. Mack writes: 'Each generation has been compelled to make use of what might best be described as the 'mythic' elements inherent in the macabre story.'<sup>43</sup>
  - How might Tim Burton be considered to have interpreted the story of Sweeney Todd for the twenty-first century?
- Describe the relationship between Mrs Lovett and Sweeney Todd?
- What is the role of Johanna and Anthony Hope in the story?
  - How does Todd respond to each of these characters?
  - Does the love these two share provide the story with some kind of optimism?

### ***Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005): bitter memories and sweet treats**

Drawing on Roald Dahl's dark imagination and absurdist view of human nature, Tim Burton infuses his adaptation of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* with an underlying brutality. Willy Wonka, the film's fantasy hero is, like Bruce Wayne/Batman, a character with a fractured personality. Each of them struggles to come to terms with childhood trauma. In the case of Batman, this trauma relates to the death of his parents, while Willy Wonka is haunted by the cruelty inflicted by his dentist father (played by horror film veteran Christopher Lee). Batman dramatises the divisions within himself by assuming an alterego completely at odds with his everyday persona. In contrast, Willy Wonka has worked to expel the memories of the past by immersing himself in a candy-coated world completely at odds with the grim regime imposed by his father. However, this dreamworld is constantly metamorphosing into a nightmare, as bitter memories resurface and Willy Wonka engages in an ongoing struggle to balance his dark and light sides.

*Thematically it's not dissimilar to what I found in Batman, or Edward Scissorhands, or Ed Wood. It has to do with a character who is semi-anti-social, has difficulty communicating or relating, slightly out of touch, living in his own head, rooted in early family problems - all those things I could relate to in the Wonka character. - Tim Burton<sup>44</sup>*

While Batman is constantly confronted by a dark and distorted version of himself, Willy Wonka is mirrored by Charlie who is the child Wonka would have liked to have been, a son who has always been sure that he is loved. Tim Burton was appalled when, in the planning stage, it was suggested that Wonka should be interpreted as a 'father-figure'. Quite to the contrary, Burton interprets Willy Wonka as a damaged child.

Roald Dahl's work appeals to children because of the darkness of his stories; he feeds children's imaginations with a kind of unsettling awareness of how scary the world is. However, Dahl's perception of a world populated by warped and twisted people making life hard for his downtrodden protagonists is not accompanied by any curiosity about how his distinctive characters become the kind of people they do. In contrast, Burton is fascinated by the emotional damage wrought by events in the past. His Gothic vision is driven by a continuing recognition of the psychological wounds that people carry around. Burton has been criticised for adding Wonka's back story to Dahl's original vision, particularly the hideous brace forced upon him by his merciless dentist father. Yet, for Burton this personal history was important, because he wanted Wonka's dark side to be connected to the horror of growing up in an unsympathetic world.

Willy Wonka's chocolate factory forms a wall of protection around his wounded, childhood self, something that is stressed in its forbidding, towering structure. The opening credits of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* create a connection to the vision of industry presented in Fritz Lang's Expressionist film *Metropolis*. The representation of the chocolate factory as a mechanised monolith disconnected from humanity also picks up on the figure of the soulless business man Max Shreck in *Batman Returns*. While Wonka does not have the same kind of cold-blooded agenda as Shreck, his paranoia about losing the factory that is his shield

against the pain of his past leads him to take away the livelihood of the town that once thrived on his chocolate-making business. The town that huddles below the mighty factory walls seems to exist in its shadow, drained of colour and life.

In Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, the dark reality of the exploitation of the workers is hidden away in a subterranean industrial city, while outside the rich are perched high in the sky, bathed in the glow of the sun. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the enchanted garden with its chocolate waterfall and sugary grass is inside the fortress-like factory, and you need a golden ticket to get in. Once inside, the winners slowly discover that the artificially-lit bright and magical world that Wonka has created for himself is a deceptive and rather cruel place, the product of a thwarted childhood and warped imagination. His paranoid response to the idea that workers were selling his secret recipes is bound up in his sense of isolation as well as his determination to be in total control. He reopens the factory, with a captive workforce of Oompa Loompas enslaved by their love of chocolate.

*I think of Willy as sort of the Citizen Kane or Howard Hughes of candy – somebody who was brilliant but then was traumatised and then retreats into his own world. – Tim Burton<sup>45</sup>*

## Discussion questions and activities

- The factory that looms over the town where Charlie lives looks like a grim and sinister version of a Gothic cathedral with the smoke stacks replacing the spires.
  - Watch the beginning of the film and list some of the effects used to represent the factory visually.
  - How is the town represented?
  - Describe the nature of the power this factory has over the people who live in the town and how this is communicated visually.
  - How do people in the rest of the world react to Wonka's chocolate?
- Note some of the similarities between the factory and Edward Scissorhands' castle.
  - What might this tell us about the way that Burton perceives each of these worlds and each of these characters?
- Note down some of the key features of the Bucket house.
  - Look at some stills from *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari* and note some of the similarities.
  - In Wiene's film, the distorted sets indicate Dr Caligari's warped psychological state, mirror the fear and confusion of the main characters and suggest that there is no certainty in the world being represented. What is being communicated in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*?
- When we first encounter the inside of the chocolate factory, it seems like a child's dream come true. Yet, in both *Edward Scissorhands* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Tim Burton explores the idea of surface perfection, suggesting that bright colours and man-made symmetry should be treated with suspicion.
  - How does Wonka's candy-filled paradise begin to reveal its nightmarish side?
  - Even before anything goes wrong, aren't we already suspicious of the appearance of perfection? Why might that be?
- Willy Wonka's father abhors sweets because of their capacity to cause tooth decay and his obsession with perfect teeth leads him to torture his son with a painful and disfiguring brace. When the pair meet again at the end of the film, Wonka's father recognises his son's perfect teeth.
  - What does the surface perfection of these teeth hide?
- Tim Burton has suggested that Willy Wonka's look was partly inspired by the groomed, bespectacled look of *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour.
  - Why might Burton have chosen this look for his character?
  - What does Willy' Wonka's unmarked surface tell us about him as a character?
  - Is a comparison between Wonka and Michael Jackson a useful one?
- In Gothic narratives, the dark, damaged or threatening anti-hero tends to make more of an impression than the protagonist. How does this work in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*?
  - Compare the endings of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and Tim Burton's film.
  - Burton's ending has been described as sentimental. Is this true?

## TIM BURTON'S GOTHIC PLAYFULNESS AND *CORPSE BRIDE* (2005)

The Gothic imagination is recognised for its fascination with the dark, unknown or unexplored side of human experience, but it is driven by a range of impulses, anxieties and fascinations. Gothic styles of perceiving and representing the world are underpinned by the inevitability of death, but while some Gothic texts represent death in terms of destruction and annihilation – the opposite of life – others seek to reconnect life and death as two halves of existence. *Corpse Bride* is very much focused on life and death as inextricably intertwined aspects of the human experience.

It could be argued that most people who identify with the 'Goth' subculture are attracted to its creative possibilities. Similarly, Tim Burton's films disrupt the familiar surface reality of everyday life in order to explore other imaginative possibilities. For instance, in *Beetlejuice*, the Maitlands, a conventional couple, die and come face to face with an afterlife that is chaotic, unpredictable and funny. In *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, Jack Skellington and his Halloween Town friends are full of a crazy, disorderly energy that is completely out of place at Christmas time but is both funny and appealing. *Edward Scissorhands* comes down from his Gothic mansion and injects a heady combination of fantasy and creativity into the monotony of the suburban world he encounters before being expelled.

*Corpse Bride* is Burton's most complete exploration of the relationship between life and death and involves a particularly playful and positive representation of the idea of the afterlife. The story is taken from a folktale about a young man who accidentally puts his ring on the finger of a bride who has been murdered on her wedding day. In his adaptation of the story, Burton remains faithful to the basic narrative in which the young man is taken down into the underworld where he must set things right before being reunited with the living woman waiting to marry him. One of the outstanding features of Burton's interpretation of the story is the gentle humour and compassion of his depiction of the Corpse Bride who is so pathetically delighted when the young man, Edward, inadvertently proposes to her.

The Corpse Bride is very much in the tradition of the Burton outsider. In particular, she brings to mind the character of Edward Scissorhands. Like him she is incomplete, and lives in an in-between world. These characters are also alike in their essential innocence and their desire for acceptance, a desire that only serves to emphasise their difference from everyone else. Just as Edward's scissorhands are a constant reminder of his constructed 'monstrous' nature, the Corpse Bride's rotting body highlights the disintegration and degeneration of death. Desperate to be the captivating girl she once was, the Corpse Bride treats decomposition as a social embarrassment best managed with decorum. The maggot that pops out of the Corpse Bride's empty eye socket makes a mockery of the pretence that she still inhabits a world where appearances matter. However, rather than being shocking and horrible, the Corpse Bride's determination to put herself back together when she comes apart, is both brave and optimistic, linking up with her pitiful pleasure in Edward's accidental proposal.

In the scene where Edward first encounters the Corpse Bride, Burton pulls out a multitude of the conventions associated with Gothic horror: a dark wood with trees towering overhead,

screaming crows, the sound of a storm and dramatic music, a hand emerging from a grave, a woman in billowing, translucent white and a cemetery. However, once Edward is in the world of the dead, the conventional imagery associated with death gives way to a crazy colourful place filled with music and entertainment. This world is placed in direct contrast with the monochromatic, oppressive and constricted world of the living. In his depiction of the world of the dead in *Corpse Bride*, Burton revisits and refines many of the ideas he explored in *Beetlejuice*.

*...I always responded to characters and monsters, and cultures like Mexico and its Day of the Dead, because I always felt there was more life there...I came from a sort of puritanical suburban existence where death was looked upon as dark and negative. But it happens to everybody, and I always responded to cultures that made death feel more a part of life. – Tim Burton<sup>46</sup>*

The strikingly eccentric figures who inhabit the welcoming and party-loving world of the dead have a delightful capacity to improvise, as they cheerfully 'make do' with their remaining body parts in order to enjoy themselves. As the skeletal Bonejangles makes clear in the song he sings about the Corpse Bride's murder, it is only in life that you meet with such cold-hearted cruelty. Moreover, no matter how much you might try to fight against it, there is only one thing in life everyone can be sure of: we are all going to die.

*You might try and hide  
And you might try and pray  
But we all end up  
The remains of the day.*

## Discussion questions and activities

- Choose a scene from *Corpse Bride*'s world of the living and compare it with one from the world of the dead.
- Are the characters in the living world genuinely 'alive'?
  - What is Burton telling us by representing life in this way? What qualities do the living people lack?
  - Compare the world presided over by the Everglots and the Van Dorns with the middle class suburban world in *Edward Scissorhands*.
  - How can such contrasting visual representations (i.e. the different approaches to *mise-en-scène*) make the same point?
- Find out more about the Mexican Day of the Dead
  - What are some of the similarities between the celebrations that take place on this day and Burton's presentation of the land of the dead?
  - An important aspect of the Day of the Dead is humour. How does Tim Burton pick up on this idea in his films?
- Tim Burton is not alone in presenting the themes of death and mortality in a comic manner. What other texts can you think of where the conventions of Gothic horror are mixed with humour?
- Focus on the scene in the underworld bar where the *Corpse Bride*'s companions celebrate her wedding.
  - Choose a character and explore its visual representation.
  - How does this character contribute to the playfulness of the scene as a whole?
  - What are some of the lines that contribute to the general sense of impish fun? Think in particular about the use of puns.
  - What is the effect of Mr Bonejangles presenting the *Corpse Bride*'s story with so much theatricality and panache?

### ***Sleepy Hollow* (1999): classic Gothic horror**

With *Sleepy Hollow*, Tim Burton melds the more stylised Gothic mode influenced by German Expressionism with the mid-twentieth century style of horror that brought imagined and implied horrors to the surface. Although filmed in colour, the film has ‘an almost monochromatic effect’,<sup>47</sup> a muted, filtered effect that is an ideal backdrop for the brilliantly red blood that flows through the film. Like the films made in the 1950s and 60s by Hammer Studios and American International Pictures, *Sleepy Hollow* deals in Gothic horror (involving horrifying confrontation rather than dread and apprehension) at its most excessive.

*Sleepy Hollow* is very loosely based on Washington Irving’s ghost story *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820), but Burton takes this fairly restrained tale and saturates it with blood and death. The film’s hero, Ichabod Crane, is continually confronted with the bloody evidence of a malevolent force dealing out revenge from beyond the grave.

The plot of *Sleepy Hollow* playfully and self-consciously alludes to the elaborate, convoluted, sensational and boldly irrational narratives that might perhaps be described as ‘high Gothic’ and that first appeared in the eighteenth century as a response to the growing dominance of science and rational thought. In using *Sleepy Hollow* to dramatise the clash between the irrational worldview of the imagination and the rational one led by an overwhelming faith in science, Burton reimagines Irving’s doomed schoolmaster Ichabod Crane as a city-based detective with a fervent devotion to both science and the power of deductive reasoning.

Crane is first introduced trying to overhaul the criminal justice system in his native New York. He asks the Burgomaster (the principal magistrate played by Christopher Lee)

*Why am I the only one who sees that to solve crimes, to detect the guilty, we must use our brains to recognise vital clues using up to date scientific techniques?*

The burgomaster puts Crane’s methods to the test by sending him upstate to investigate a series of murders as a result of decapitation. Crane’s belief in deductive reasoning and rational explanations is very much put to the test, as he is assaulted by a relentless barrage of violent and bloody supernatural events. Within this context, Crane’s nervous attempt to remain true to the scientific principles he espouses begins to seem an irrational turning-away from the evidence before his eyes.

*what I liked about Ichabod... is that he was written very much as somebody who’s just living too much up here – inside his own head – and not relating to what’s happening in the rest of the world. And that, juxtaposed against a character with no head, was a really good dynamic. – Tim Burton<sup>48</sup>*

In the film’s over-the-top and bloody conclusion, Crane applies his deductive reasoning to the supernatural evidence that he is finally forced to accept in defiance of science, and throws the horseman his head. Crane deduces that once the horseman’s body is complete, he can return to his grave and the people of Sleepy Hollow need no longer fear for their lives.

The film concludes with Crane returning to New York with Katrina. The disorienting, mist-filled, haunted world of Sleepy Hollow has been left behind for the orderly streets of the city. Katrina wakes the sleeping Crane with a kiss, who appears to reawaken as his old self, secure in his forward-looking view of the world and with a rekindled enthusiasm for the dawn of a new century. Emerging confidently from his carriage, accompanied by his bride and his ward, he announces as he strides forth,

*You'll soon get your bearings young Masbath. The Bronx is up and the Battery is down and home is this way.*

He speaks as a rational man observing a world organised by people according to rational principles. The evidence to the contrary has been banished from his consciousness as if it were all a bad dream.

Set in 1799, on the eve of a new century, *Sleepy Hollow* was released in 1999 as the world was getting ready for a new millennium. Whereas Ichabod Crane was full of anticipation at the scientific wonders the dawning nineteenth century would hold, the audience of *Sleepy Hollow* was anticipating a new millennium where planes would drop from the sky, bank records be completely wiped and the world of commerce and industry be brought to a standstill. As it eventuated, the millennium bug was a modern example of a superstitious fear of the unknown, in which digital technology became the man-made monster that had taken on a destructive life of its own. It was no accident that this shared fear emerged in a cultural moment heavy with the symbolic weight of change.

*The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place.... The monstrous body is pure culture.<sup>49</sup>*

Tim Burton is only too aware that monsters are born out of the 'in-between': the result of anxieties about life and death, the past and the future, the natural and the unnatural, the human and the inhuman.

## Discussion questions and activities

- A feature of Gothic horror is the claustrophobic fear that there is no escape. How is this conveyed in the opening sequence of Sleepy Hollow?
  - How does the use of colour contribute to this feeling?
  - What about the camera shots used?
  - How are we, the viewers, positioned?
  - What sound effects contribute to the drama?
- What is the effect of the blood that is shed so liberally in Sleepy Hollow?
- Sleepy Hollow treads a fine line between humour and horror.
  - Choose a scene and analyse how this works.
- Of the Hammer horror style of acting he employs in Sleepy Hollow, Johnny Depp has said,

*it's a fine line that we're walking here. It's sort of got that style that's almost bad acting. Certainly I'm trying to stay with the idea that it could be bad, and if it is a little bad it's good, you know.<sup>50</sup>*

- What does he mean by this and how does it work in Sleepy Hollow?
- Find some examples of the films Johnny Depp is referring to and compare the performances in these films with those in Sleepy Hollow.
- Tim Burton talks of the 'joy' of this kind of film.
  - How would you describe the 'joy' of Sleepy Hollow?
- Tim Burton also talks about the 'emotional simplicity' of the Hammer tradition. This simplicity contrasts with the conflicted and complex emotional range of a film like James Whale's Frankenstein.
  - How does the term emotional simplicity apply to Sleepy Hollow?
- According to Tim Kroenert the Headless Horseman is one of Burton's archetypal outsiders. Is this true?
  - Who are the other outsiders in the film?

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