



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Playing with Time - Defining the Pop-Historical Gothic in Tim Burton's Dumbo, Edward Scissorhands and Beetlejuice

Meulen, Demelza van der

Citation

Meulen, D. van der. (2025). *Playing with Time - Defining the Pop-Historical Gothic in Tim Burton's Dumbo, Edward Scissorhands and Beetlejuice*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [License to inclusion and publication of a Bachelor or Master Thesis, 2023](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4258972>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Playing with Time – Defining the Pop-Historical Gothic in Tim Burton's

Dumbo, Edward Scissorhands and Beetlejuice



source: Burton, Tim, director. *Edward Scissorhands*.

20th Century Fox, 1991.

Master thesis

Demelza van der Meulen



Two-year educational master English

Supervisor: Dr. van Dam

2nd reader: Dr. van Leeuwen

22-06-2025



Universiteit
Leiden

Abstract

This thesis is a case study of three of Tim Burton's movies – *Dumbo* (2019), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) and *Beetlejuice* (1988). Much research has been done on Burton's engagement with the Victorian era and the historical accuracy of his account of it, but the other time periods in which his movies take place are underrepresented. This thesis analyses the historicity of the three movies mentioned, which all take place in different time periods. This thesis is a literature study and mostly engages with aesthetics-based research, utilizing accounts of Burton's work, general works about the Gothic and literature on representing history. Burton's work is his own unique style, dubbed 'Burtonesque', which is Gothic in nature and often influenced by his own childhood and the media he consumed as a child. While he and his team do research on the relevant time period, he will choose aesthetics over historical accuracy in order to best achieve his vision and therefore his style can be described as pop-historical Gothic.

Index

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1: Burton's Aesthetic and Historicity.....	7
Chapter 2: Anachronistic Machinery in the Circus: <i>Dumbo</i>	14
2.1. Establishing <i>Dumbo</i> within the Gothic.....	15
2.2. Placing <i>Dumbo</i> within the Burton Aesthetic.....	18
2.3. Historicity in <i>Dumbo</i>	23
Chapter 3: Punk Outfits and Waterbeds in 1950s America: <i>Edward Scissorhands</i>	28
3.1. Establishing <i>Edward Scissorhands</i> within the Gothic.....	29
3.2. <i>Edward Scissorhands</i> within the Burton Aesthetic and Brand.....	32
3.3. Characters in <i>Edward Scissorhands</i>	34
3.4. Historical Inaccuracies in <i>Edward Scissorhands</i>	37
Chapter 4: A Timeless Story Set in the 1980s: <i>Beetlejuice</i>	39
4.1. Burton's Aesthetic in <i>Beetlejuice</i>	39
4.2. Establishing <i>Beetlejuice</i> within the Gothic.....	44
4.3. The Pop-Historical Gothic in <i>Beetlejuice</i>	47
Conclusion.....	51
Works Cited.....	54

Introduction

In the introduction to the revised edition of *Burton on Burton*, Mark Salisbury describes Tim Burton as having “transformed from being a visionary director with the Midas touch to becoming an identifiable brand; the term ‘Burtonesque’ being ascribed to any filmmaker whose work is dark, edgy or quirky, or a combination thereof (xviii).” Tim Burton employs an aesthetic that is immediately recognisable, based on work that has inspired him in his own youth.

Many works have been published by renowned scholars commenting on Burton’s work and aesthetics. Many focus on the Gothicism of his work. Boyacioğlu clarifies: “researching Burton’s filmography makes it clear that almost all academic work written about the director focuses, to varying degrees, on his particular style, at times labelled as grotesque, dark, twisted or ghastly” (55). However, there seems to be very little research on the historicity of Burton’s work. Of that research, much focuses on his engagement with the Victorian era, while other time periods that are featured in his films are neglected. This thesis analyses those neglected time periods in Burton’s films, and will therefore fill a gap in the research on Burton’s work. That is necessary because, moving forward, it will give a more informed understanding of Burton’s work. Labels put onto his work so far have never fully covered the scope of his aesthetic, always neglecting a small part of even just highlighting one element of his aesthetic. The defining of a label that is applicable to all of Burton’s work that fully describes his aesthetic is therefore necessary and in future will enable scholars to analyse Burton’s work while being fully informed about his aesthetic choices, and they will understand why certain choices are being made. Creating that label is what this thesis will do.

As said before, almost all of the research done on the historicity of Burton's work is done by analysing his works set in the Victorian era. This thesis aims to get a broader impression of the historicity of Burton's work, a term expanded on further on, and will therefore engage in a case study of three of Burton's movies not set in the Victorian era. They are set in three different time periods. The first movie is *Dumbo* (2019), which takes place in 1919. This is a live-action reimagining of Disney's *Dumbo* (1941) for which Burton was director and executive producer. The movie features a family working at a traveling circus who encounter an elephant which has such large ears it can fly. The movie is, as said earlier, based upon an earlier, animated version, which in turn is based on a novel. This limits Burton's vision but not his aesthetic choices. The second movie is *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), which is set in the 1950s / 1960s. The exact time frame is undefined, and Burton plays around with the fantasy aspect of that. The story features a young man whose hands are made of scissors, who lives alone up on a hill. He is found by a woman who lives in the neighbourhood and is taken pity on, and is subsequently moved to the woman's house in picturesque suburbia. This is the movie most closely associated with Burton's aesthetics and is, in a way, autobiographical. He is director, producer and story-writer for *Edward Scissorhands*. The last movie is *Beetlejuice* (1988), which is set in the late 1980s. It features a family with a teenage daughter who move into a new house which is haunted by the previous owners. In order to eject the former inhabitants of the house, the family conjure up Betelgeuse, a 'bio-exorcist' who will help the family get rid of them. Burton directs this movie. I selected these three movies because they are set in very different time periods. In order to fully analyse the aesthetics and the historicism Burton employs in his work, movies from different time periods he represents in his film must be present. The movies in the Victorian era have already been thoroughly analysed, and these three movies cover most of the remaining time periods, and can therefore describe Burton's aesthetic well.

This thesis is compromised of a case study of the three movies previously mentioned. It analyses the aesthetic put forth by Burton and analyses their historicism. The thesis consists of four chapters. The first chapter sets out the theoretical framework to be able to compare and analyse the three movies. Each subsequent chapter will discuss one movie, in order of the time they are set in. With these chapters the thesis aims to argue that Tim Burton's aesthetic is historical pop-Gothic and can consistently be found in all of his films, whether they are set in the Victorian era or otherwise.

Chapter 1: Burton's Aesthetic and Historicity

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework needed to analyse Burton's engagement with historicity. Historicity, in this thesis, mostly engages with historical accuracy, and will be explained in more detail further on in the chapter. As explained in the introduction, this thesis is a case study of three of Burton's movies, all set in different time periods. Burton's aesthetic has been analysed thoroughly by many different scholars, and has been labelled in many different ways. Weishaar, for example, labels Burton as a master of the grotesque (52-80). Hockenhull and Pheasant - Kelly explain that "Burton's fertile imagination has ... been viewed as a proponent of a counter style rooted in the Victorian Gothic, with expressionist tendencies that fully support his dreamlike perversity and oneiric aesthetic register" (44). So, Burton's aesthetic is considered by them to be a counter style that found its origins in the Victorian Gothic. Spooner, however, defines Burton as having been a "key figure in the development of post-millennial Gothic aesthetics. [Spooner's writing] suggests that Burton produces a new kind of Gothic, one that is based as much in aesthetics as it is in narrative (*Post-Millennial Gothic* 49), so placing Burton's aesthetics as a more modern stream of Gothic, also referred to as happy Gothic, a stream of Gothic further explored later in this chapter. Lastly, a scholar who discusses Burton's work to be highlighted is Louttit. He comments:

Burton's take on the Victorian Gothic is undeniably secondary and 'less-than original' in nature. More specifically, his sense of the Victorian is viewed primarily through the lenses of two popular traditions: 1930s and 1940s Hollywood horror and the Gothic mode of 1950s and 1960s Hammer productions. Yet it is undeniably his own, reshaped and altered to fit his own peculiar preoccupations. (289)

This reshaping of an aesthetic into Burton's own is described by Louttit as pop-Victorian Gothic. These labels put unto Burton's aesthetic all highlight certain elements within his aesthetic, but seem to miss one interesting part, which is historicity. While Louttit comments on a part of it, considering Burton's Victorian works, it is not broad enough to describe Burton's whole aesthetic.

Burton's unique style has been informed by his youth, an aspect which is widely recognised by scholars. In *Burton on Burton*, Tim Burton discusses his youth growing up in Burbank, California. He grew up in suburbia, as the self-described 'weird outcast' during his school years. He spent his free time escaping reality in the cinema, where he viewed many monster movies, such as *Godzilla* (1954) and the works by Vincent Price. (2-7) These movies shaped Burton's fascination for the outcast, which is a recurring motif in his films. Furthermore, as Louttit commented on also, the movies Burton watched as a child have informed his vision, which is visible when doing a close reading of his work. This is interesting to note, as it is a significant part of the pop-historical Gothic aesthetic Burton employs.

Burton's style has been labelled as Gothic, a genre which contains the supernatural as a key feature (Hughes 4). The Gothic itself was established with the release of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), but truly thrived during the Victorian era, which was a time of experimentation and fascination with the macabre. Therefore, the association of the Gothic with the Victorian will always be present in any work within the Gothic genre. However, Burton's Gothic does not just take inspiration from Victorian times. This thesis argues that Burton's brand of Gothic is inspired by the cinematic depictions of the supernatural and monsters in the movies he viewed in his youth, and is therefore influenced by many time periods, sometimes even time periods through another time period's point of view. His movies play with historical accuracy, not only when they are depicted in the Victorian age, but all

movies, even contemporary ones. Therefore, using the following case study to prove it, this thesis will argue that Burton does not have a pop-Victorian Gothic aesthetic – instead, he has a pop-historical Gothic aesthetic; a certain vision that remains consistent in all of his work.

The Gothic and the Victorian are often considered so intertwined that for the uninformed they mean the same thing. However, the origin of the Gothic and the Victorian interpretation of it are in many ways different. Gothic initially referred to the Germanic people and ‘Gothic’ works meant works set in medieval times. Gothic later ‘would come to serve as the name for the modern literature of horror and terror, wonder and supernatural enchantment (Spooner, *Gothic in the Nineteenth Century* 4). This shift from being based on a time period to focusing on key components of a work means that a work set in any era can be categorised as Gothic. It has caused some confusion now, as Spooner explains:

Indeed, the problem with this accelerated age in which Gothic seems to bleed across media and infect any number of other genres, is that it can become difficult to distinguish what is not Gothic. At times it seems as if anything we wish may be subsumed within its generous embrace; the category can be stretched to include more or less anything with a smidgeon of the macabre, the haunted or the grotesque. (Spooner, “Gothic in Contemporary Popular Culture” 3)

However, Burton is firmly set in the Gothic, as it contains more than just a ‘smidgeon’ of the macabre, the haunted or the grotesque, although it is not used in the same manner as most Gothic works do. A label that fits Burton’s brand of Gothic best so far is happy Gothic, a term coined by Catherine Spooner in *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic*. This genre is a modern stream of Gothic that finds its subversiveness in joy. Or,

To speak more broadly, in the twenty-first century, Gothic texts, products, imagery and artefacts can no longer be regarded as almost universally gloomy and miserable, or

even scary and horrid. There are a growing number of Gothic texts that are distinctly celebratory in tone, which hybridize Gothic with comedy or romance ... Contemporary Gothic can increasingly be described as comic, romantic, celebratory, gleeful, whimsical or even joyous. (3)

Merging of the Gothic with other genres is something Burton does often. The only movies in his oeuvre that are considered horror, are *Beetlejuice* and its sequel. However, his movies do often feature traditionally scary and Gothic components, such as the supernatural or images of death. He is not just one filmmaker working within this genre of happy Gothic – Spooner has named him “instrumental in the ascendance of the mode” (*Post-Millennial Gothic* 24). The pioneering of a new genre makes it easier for him to try things not often done in Gothic cinema or in cinema in general, as he is setting the standard.

Burton is a filmmaker mostly known for his aesthetic, which is described as ‘Burtonesque’ (Di Lallo 39). However, it would be an unjust assumption that Burton only cares for visual elements in a superficial manner. He comments in *Burton on Burton* that many people believe his movies are visual only, yet they do not realise that every element, everything he does has to have meaning. The more absurd an element, the more understanding for it he has to create (124). Burton always makes deliberate choices in order to execute his vision. His aesthetic is very recognisable, and in general that means certain motifs recur in nearly every movie. That is the motif of the split world (Weishaar 80) stripes and spirals (Spooner *Post-Millennial Gothic* 78) or references to death (Burton 65), and various others. Some motifs only stick to a certain set of movies, as Louttit identifies multiple that only occur in Burton’s Victorian movies, such as formal Victorian dress, monochrome photography and the sash window (p.280). Key images, whether present in all movies or only present in a specific subset, make Burton’s vision easily recognisable. Furthermore, Burton often employs stark differences in colour pallet in order to show, not tell, what the world in a

movie feels and works like. Dark worlds are sober, and oppressive, such as *The Land of the Living* in *Corpse Bride* (2005), and vibrant worlds are full of life, the place where a viewer should want to be, such as the Land of the Dead in the aforementioned film. To show the differences between these worlds, which coexist in one movie, he employs chiaroscuro, a tool regularly seen in Gothic works (Hughes 45). It is an optical tool, where dark and light create a visually stark contrast. As Aldana Reyes mentions in *Gothic Cinema*, “Burton’s oeuvre is very varied and heterogenic, but it is visually consistent in its Gothic investment, with skulls, stitches, black and white stripes and bats acting as the main motifs and sequences often shot using chiaroscuro, when not black-and-white cinematography.” (225) Therefore, the notion of a consistent, ‘Burtonesque’, aesthetic is true, even though the subjects, characters and time periods depicted in his movies vary greatly.

What really is being considered when talking about pop-Victorian or pop-historical aesthetics, is historical accuracy. A term which is in and of itself dissonant. When consuming a work, consumers actively leave elements out when considering historical accuracy, the most profound one being speech. When watching Hollywood movies depicting other nationalities, it is not unusual to hear them speak English instead of their native language. When works go far back in time, to times of Early Modern English, or even Middle- or Old English, “the character in [a historical] work speaks in a way that is anachronistic, but necessarily so for the piece to work (De Groot *Consuming History* 182)”. Meaning, the character’s speech is not what would be deemed historically accurate – but because a viewer would not be able to fully understand their speech, the language of the work is modernised. De Groot calls authenticity an “empty category (*Consuming History* 182)” and this is what this thesis also considers to be true. In his book *Remaking History*, de Groot asks “can we even represent history accurately? (31)”, which is a reasonable question to consider. History is written by victors, by the educated middle and upper class, and is always coloured by the writer’s perspective. As de

Groot says: “the past is rarely straightforward, generally compromised, and ethically dubious” (*Consuming History* 190). Therefore it can be said that no work can ever be truly historically accurate. For the sake of Burton’s work this thesis will engage with the dictionary definition of historical accuracy, otherwise named as historicity: “the fact, quality, or character of being situated in history; *esp.* historical accuracy or authenticity” (“historicity”). To elaborate, any and all elements in a work that should not appear considering the time period the work is set in, will take away from historicity. Burton is, as elaborated on earlier, often influenced by the works he viewed in his childhood. These works have formed impressions of the past that he holds onto. As Spooner explains: “The evocation of period in Burton’s films ... never aspires to the verisimilitude of ‘classic’ period drama, but is instead filtered through cinematic history” (*Post-Millennial Gothic* 58). Indeed, Burton never has a straightforward vision of the past. That does not mean, however, that Burton or his team do not do any research. However, Burton picks the visual over historicity, which means that historical accuracy will almost certainly get lost in favour of how a film looks. This play with historicity is not actually new in Gothic. As Wright and Townshend explain, Gothic has always taken a critical stance to history, and Walpole [the author of the first Gothic novel] even went so far as to describe it as just as much fiction as romance is (6). So, historical accuracy can never be truly achieved because it is uncertain how truthful accounts of history even are, and achieving historical accuracy is not something Burton aspires to.

Concluding, Tim Burton has a recognisable style, termed by others as ‘Burtonesque’. He is a pioneer of what Spooner calls happy Gothic, a variation of Gothic not meant to terrify but instead finds its subversiveness in its joy (*Post-Millennial Gothic* 3). He has many recurring motifs, and is known for basing his work on the films he viewed while young and his experiences growing up in suburban Burbank. Aesthetics are very important to him, and due to that Burton is not very interested in historical accuracy, whether his movie takes place

in the Victorian era or any other. This thesis argues that Burton's aesthetic stays consistent and can be categorised as pop-historical Gothic.

Chapter 2: Anachronistic Machinery in the Circus: *Dumbo*

In the previous chapter, the theoretical framework has been laid out, and the need for re-defining Tim Burton's aesthetic has been highlighted. To do so, a case study of three movies is conducted, the first one being on *Dumbo*. *Dumbo* is a strong example of Burton pulling visual elements from more modern times in order to fit his aesthetic vision. While research was done, Burton picked aesthetics over historicity, as will be elaborated on further on in the chapter. Tim Burton's *Dumbo* is a live-action remake of the Disney classic released in 1941. This reimagining sees many changes, some of which will be explored in depth later on in the chapter. Burton's version features a father, recently returned from war, coming back to his children and his work in the circus. This circus witnesses the birth of a unique elephant, who has ears large enough to fly. The children are able to tame him and the circus exploits the elephant for monetary gain, leading to chaos in many ways. The movie is set in 1919, making it possible for the father to have just returned from the First World War. As the Victorian era ended before the First World War, this movie takes place in the interwar period. A period that, while close in time, is quite different due to the First World War and the damage that did to the people and the country.

Burton himself was born in 1958, therefore *Dumbo* is a prime example of Burton looking back at a time period through his own unique vision, derived from his own encounters with pop-culture during the relevant time period. This movie, while a remake and therefore stuck within the parameter of the Disney original in relation to storytelling, is still firmly planted within the Burton aesthetic. This chapter will examine the movie in relation to it, and examine the historicity of the movie to prove the label of pop-historical Gothic. Much of the research for the chapter was done using the book *The Art and Making of Disney; Dumbo* by Leah Gallo. For this art and behind-the-scenes book she interviewed many crew members,

whose answers run through the various chapters. They are mentioned by name and function throughout this chapter, but the author is always listed as Gallo.

2.1 Establishing *Dumbo* within the Gothic

When the Disney studios were considering remaking *Dumbo*, Burton was approached by Ehren Kruger, the screenwriter. Burton and Disney have a complicated past, as Burton started his career in filmmaking as an animator at Disney. He very much felt out of place there, as his style of animation did not fit the style of animation used at Disney. He left fairly quickly after being taken off his first animation project there, *The Fox and the Hound* (1981), for incongruities within animation styles. While looking back at his time at Disney not too fondly, he worked on and off with them for years, for movies such as *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) and *Frankenweenie* (2012). He came back to them after Disney requested him specifically as director for this project. Kruger tells Gallo: “Disney’s first and only choice was Tim Burton. ‘Based on his body of work, it was clear he has great empathy for society’s outsiders’” (37). Kruger was right. To *Vanity Fair*, Burton explains that ‘the point in making *Dumbo* was to just try and create a simple fable about weirdos finding their place in the world. When he first started working at Disney that is how he felt, a strange weird outcast. The symbol of the story is the weird character who does not fit in due to a disability or something what others consider strange, and then uses it to a beautiful advantage. The simple story of finding your place in the world is what drew Burton to *Dumbo*’. Indeed, Burton was able to relate his own story to *Dumbo*’s experiences, which is why he felt drawn to taking on the remake. Burton’s work can often be considered biographical to an extent, and this is a straightforward example of that. Furthermore, that story of the outsider in society is a notable feature of the *Gothic*. However, traditionally in the Gothic genre, the outsider is one to be scared of, and is ousted from society, while in this

movie the viewer sympathizes with the outsider and is made to feel like them, which is a feature of happy Gothic (Spooner *Post-Millennial Gothic* 26). Out of the three movies discussed in detail in this thesis, *Dumbo* may be most heavily associated with the genre of happy Gothic. As Louttit says, Tim Burton's movies "do not very often adopt features of the Gothic with the purpose of evoking fear or terror" (287). While the main character in *Edward Scissorhands* may invoke no fear in the viewer, he does in some of the other characters in the movie, as will be discussed in the respective chapter. However, the characters in *Dumbo* never really do, apart from the hunter Skellig and the original caretaker of Mrs Jumbo, Sorghum. They are minor characters. In this way, the movie is a prime example of contemporary Gothic, which "can increasingly be described as comic, romantic, celebratory, gleeful, whimsical or even joyous" (Spooner *Post-Millennial Gothic* 3). That means that elements often associated with Gothic that typically incite fear, such as the ghost, the mad scientist, the supernatural and other such elements are stripped of their fearful character to instead incite joy, or indeed, do not appear at all (Hughes 77, 101, 146). So, while the characteristic of the outsider being the main character in a text is a Gothic sentiment, the outsider here is not something, or someone, to fear.

Dumbo is 'Burtonesque' through and through, considering, for example, the dichotomy displayed between the two worlds. The split-world motif is something Burton employs often. In *Dumbo*, the circus and the theme park are designed quite differently in order to show, not tell, the audience the contrast between the characters and their intention. The 'Burtonesque' touch will be further explored in 2.2. *Dumbo* might not be as clearly placed within the Gothic genre as within Burton's aesthetic. As explained, it can be categorized as happy Gothic, which is why traditionally scary elements found in Gothic are absent. However, that is not very unusual for Burton movies. As Spooner explains, "Burton films rarely play Gothic 'straight' – they seldom adhere to stereotypical expectations of a

Gothic narrative. They tend to hybridize Gothic with other genres” (Spooner *Post-Millennial Gothic* 50). In this case that would be drama and comedy, having not made this remake into a musical as the original is. Furthermore, the Gothic is used in animation and a children’s movie, something which was not initially done.

There is one set within the movie that can be more clearly identified as Gothic, which is Nightmare Island (figure 2.1). Located in Dreamland, this is the location where Mrs. Jumbo



Figure 2.1 Nightmare Island. Source: Burton, Tim, director. *Dumbo*, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2019.

is taken to after she was sold. Visible in figure 2.1 is that Nightmare Island is dark, surrounded by fire, and decorated with skulls. It is a

more classically Gothic visual than the rest of the movie contains. Nightmare island is created to scare the visitors of the park, but for viewers it conjures pity instead, because Mrs. Jumbo resides there after she has been branded highly dangerous, while the viewer knows that that not true. She is renamed ‘Kali the destroyer’; Kali is an Indian goddess featured more frequently within the Gothic, because in the West she is often linked with death (Hughes 98). This is a newly added part to the movie, and it seems almost as if Burton cannot resist those dark, Gothic features he normally employs in his movies. It also makes clear that Burton makes conscious choices. Kali is a significant name because it is linked to death, a theme Burton more often engages with. Kali is not only a marker of Gothic, but also marker of Burton’s engagement with the theme of death.

So, while *Dumbo* may not have as distinctive Gothic features as most of Burton’s other work, Gothic elements are present in the film. These Gothic elements are conscious

additions to the source material by Burton, and shows clearly that Burton moved *Dumbo* into the Gothic genre. The story of the outsider was already present, but the change to Dumbo being rejected by humans instead of animals makes it fit more into Burton's style, because it is a link to his childhood, a factor which comes back more often in this thesis. Additionally there are some smaller elements added such as Nightmare Island and renaming Mrs Jumbo to Kali the destroyer that create a more superficial link to the Gothic, which makes that *Dumbo* can be placed within the Gothic genre.

2.2 Placing *Dumbo* within the Burton Aesthetic

While in some manner limited because of the remaking of the original source material, Burton gave his own twist to *Dumbo* in many ways. That is not something surprising; when considering Burton's oeuvre, it is notable that many of his works (*Sleepy Hollow* (1999), *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), to name a few) are adaptations of already existing material, whether that be an urban legend, a novel or a movie, so he is very familiar with making already existing work his own. The plot of the original *Dumbo* was extended by Kruger, who says: "Just as the world finds out Dumbo can fly, the movie ends. It always felt to me like there might be a bit more story to tell. *Then what happens* (Gallo 37)? This extra space, containing more plot and more characters than the original, gave Burton room to add his 'Burtonesque' touch, because it meant that the story had room to be different. Changing elements of the original plotline is more acceptable to viewers when the story has been expanded already.

Burton is known for his frequent collaborations. Certain actors or people behind the scenes have worked on his movies many times. *Dumbo* features several actors who have worked with Burton before, such as Michael Keaton (five movies, including *Beetlejuice*

(1988) and *Batman* (1989)), Danny DeVito (five movies, including *Big Fish* (2003) and *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* (2024)) and Eva Green (three movies, including *Dark Shadows* (2012) and *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2016)). Behind the scenes many frequent collaborators are present as well, such as costume designer Colleen Atwood (thirteen movies, including *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990)) and film composer Danny Elfman (composed the music for all but three of Burton's movies) and more. This familiarity with Burton's work created a space in which Burton could easily execute his vision, as people around him knew exactly how he worked and what Burton would want to achieve (Gallo 49). What he was trying to create was "a very original world. So that takes time, and the influences come from everywhere for that. But mostly from Tim" (52). Meaning that Burton's vision may be influenced by his collaborators who come in with their own vision, he will always have the final say. Working for and with Walt Disney Studios to produce a movie can often result in conflicting visions for a project as ideas might differ, as Disney has a recognisable brand that has to be upheld. That is why knowing Burton worked with a very familiar crew is important. It enables Burton to execute his vision as best as possible because the crew and cast know him and understand his vision. It ensures that the final product is a true Burton production.

Burton often portrays two separate worlds in his movies that are total opposites to each



Figure 2.2 the Medici Bros. Circus. Source: Burton, Tim, director. *Dumbo*. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2019.

other. He often achieves this by playing with light or colour, which is a form of chiaroscuro

(Hughes 45). This is especially prevalent in *Edward Scissorhands*, and will therefore be more extensively discussed in that movie's chapter. However, *Dumbo* does engage with the characteristic of the split world; just not by lighting, but by design choice. The movie takes place in two 'worlds'. First, there is the Medici Bros. Circus (figure 2.2), a slightly dilapidated circus that has some money troubles, but with a family feel nonetheless. It is designed horizontally (Gallo 68). As director of Photography Davis explains: "even though the film is set in 1919, The Medici Bros. Circus was very much of an earlier, almost Victorian period, whereas Dreamland was modernist and art deco futurist" (75). Dreamland is the theme park designed by Vandevere, the antagonist in this film. Dreamland (figure 2.3) is designed in a

colder
pallet than
the circus
and is
designed
vertically,
with tall
buildings



Figure 2.3 Dreamland. Source: Burton, Tim, director. *Dumbo*. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2019.

that create a distanced feel. It is also described as post-industrialist. Figures 2.2 and 2.3 show the dichotomy between the two worlds, which is created to establish the main conflict, namely the dispute between the Medici Bros. Circus and Vandevere's Dreamland on how to treat Dumbo (75). Figure 2.2 shows that described low building style, with the only elevated point in the area being the high top tent. The viewer's attention is very much drawn to the circus tent, and it alludes to the circus show being the most important part of their life. In contrast, figure 2.3 shows that Dreamland consists of many similarly-sized buildings as their high top. Vandevere's priority is not the circus show, it is just another part of his entertainment park for

him. It is a foreshadowing of what Dumbo's fate will be in the park. The feature of the split word as in the Medici Bros. Circus and Dreamland is one Burton often employs, and it is always an unspoken indication of what a viewer should think of the different places.

Dreamland is dazzling with its technological advances but the Medici Bros. Circus tells the viewer what they should really care about - Dumbo. Creating the split world motif not by chiaroscuro but by different building styles is a good example of Burton playing with the idea of historicity in order to execute his vision and his story. For the sake of visual storytelling, he gave up the notion of historical accuracy. That is not a haphazard choice; Burton and his set designers clearly researched different time periods in order to execute this split world motif. Research was done and then explicitly applied to mould history in order to fit the vision.

Another characteristic of Burton's aesthetic often seen is his featuring of stripes and spirals (Spooner *Post-Millennial Gothic* 58). Taking a closer look at the entrance into Dreamland (figure 2.3), the gate is made of multiple swirls, with swirls on the actual doors and on the gate enveloping them. This is purely decorative, as they seem to serve no protective function a differently designed gate would not be able to do. This is designed from Burton's preferred aesthetic. Furthermore, the circus tents feature stripes. While circus tents traditionally do so, Burton chose to place one in Dreamland too. Theme parks do not traditionally have circus tents in them, so the choice to place one within instead of a regular building built for shows displays Burton's love of stripes. These stripes also feature in Vandevere's pinstriped suit. The striped suit specifically is a staple within Burton's oeuvre, with many well-known characters such as Jack Skellington and Betelgeuse wearing them. A character in a striped suit is another trait *Dumbo* features that Burton is well-known for. The addition of these features, when they do not explicitly serve a purpose - Dumbo could have performed in an arena, Vandevere could have worn a solid black suit – also shows a subconscious bias that Burton has for certain features, which is why they are considered

‘Burtonesque’. It is important to recognise the addition of these features, because they are characteristics of Burton’s aesthetic, and therefore it strengthens the link to the Gothic.

Burton’s influence in a story can be readily found, as they are often about a misunderstood main character, who exists on the fringes of society because they are different in some manner. However, his unique brand can mostly be perceived in the visual. A visual which is ever based upon his childhood in Burbank and by what he himself viewed as a consumer. When reading Leah Gallo’s book, it is indisputable that Burton is involved in every detail that goes on visually in his movies. For example, the skies that are present in *Dumbo*. The movie was shot inside, on sets, because there were no places which had enough period appropriate architecture still present. They built the sets inside a studio, which meant that Burton and the producers did not have to worry about nor were bound by the weather, but that the post-production crew did have to edit in the sky later on. These skies became a focal point for Burton (Gallo 208). He wanted the skies to look a very specific way. Power, the concept artist, explained to Gallo: “[The skies] needed to be real but not *too* real. A significant inspiration, which Tim often mentioned, were old Hollywood movies like *Gone with the Wind* [1939] or *The Night of the Hunter* (1955)” (209). The skies in these movies had been painted on and that dreamlike, fantasy quality is what Burton was looking for as well. They had to be fantastical enough to fit in the space. While these skies take up a significant amount of space in the shots, they are still a small detail. Therefore, Burton’s touch can be found in every aspect of his movies and that is what creates the unique ‘Burtonesque’ aesthetic. This understanding that Burton deliberately chooses the smallest details in a movie, especially through influences from other media he has consumed, is significant. It shows that Burton’s aesthetic is inspired by cinema, filtered through a unique Burton lens. Pulling elements from different genres, but most importantly, different time periods and applying it in his own work creates a historically layered vision.

2.3 Historicity in *Dumbo*

The original *Dumbo* was not a historical work, as it took place during the time it was made. Making a movie set in 1941 in 2019 would already qualify it as a historical work, but additionally, the script writer moved back the time in which the story takes place, namely from the 1940s to 1919. Consequently Burton pushed aside the source material in many ways while shaping the look of the set, because it would not be as period appropriate anymore. However, he was not very concerned with historical accuracy, as the storytelling through aesthetics is more important than his vision being feasible. Now, I argue that is a very valid way of working as a filmmaker, and as de Groot says: “simply put, research into historical has been bedevilled by an overriding concern about the *historicalness* of such work” (*Remaking History* 3). That means that while this chapter is an analysis of the historicalness of *Dumbo*, it is not a critique.

Burton and his crew essentially received freedom to design their set because it was set in a different time than the existing source material, which is quite unique while making a live-action version of an already existing movie. As set decorator Bush explains to Gallo: “Tim was not interested in giving a history lesson with his films” (75). To elaborate, Burton made choices on what he believed would convey the story the best, whether that would be considered historically accurate or not. That does not mean, however, that no research was done at all. As mentioned earlier, the Medici Bros. Circus and Dreamland have two different styles, pulled from different time periods to depict their differences without outwardly saying so. When designing the theme park, Bush and his fellow set designers “wanted to explore just how much of the earlier Victorian pleasure parks [Burton] was interested in depicting. As we developed our park and got his input, we kept moving the period of the visual reference further forward until we were really looking heavily at world’s fairs from the 1930s for some of the park attractions” (75). This means that Dreamland’s design does not look like how a

theme park in 1919 could look, because it pulls in elements that did not exist during that time. That makes sense, because Burton puts the visual over the logical, and “historical fictions allow for an encounter with a kind of past that is predicated upon enjoyment, because, if they are not pleasant to an extent, they will not sell or achieve popularity” (De Groot *Remaking History* 183). Meaning, the design of the park is rooted in history, but the park is ultimately designed for enjoyment of the movie and execution of the vision in Burton’s head on how a theme park should look. This researching of the relevant time period to subsequently add features from different eras to elevate the look of a movie is important to understand about Burton, because it shows a deliberateness, not callousness, in Burton’s choices. Burton largely operates on impressions made in his childhood, and therefore characteristics of old monster movies shine through, often subconsciously, but he also makes deliberate choices regarding historicity in his work. After extensive research, he chooses his aesthetic vision over all.

The aforementioned disregard for historicity shows in the more modern elements of the park, as they are anachronistic. This includes the double, rotating ferris wheel. While originally patented in 1939, the first one was built and sold by the Allan Herschell Company in 1960 (“McCrary, Martin Buy Herschell Sky Wheel”). That means they were not present during either 1919 or even the researched parks by the set designer. Another ride that does not seem plausible to have in this theme park is the rollercoaster with multiple loops. While originally invented in the late 19th century, they were perceived dangerous due to the high g-forces they released as riders looped - the physics could not be calculated properly, leading to incidents such as broken necks. As a result, they died out quickly, with only a few ever constructed. The modern coaster type featured in the park were not built until the mid-1970s (Kay). This implies that Burton was more influenced by his own impression of how such a park should look, based upon the earliest impressions he has, than by how the park actually would have looked at that time.

Simpler technology was also used that was not present in 1919. This includes the typewriter, the telephone and the microphone. The typewriter used in the movie, based on what is visible, seems to be a Remington electric typewriter. Patented earlier but not produced until 1925 (Leip), the electric typewriter was not available at the time this movie took place. Furthermore, the telephone present on the assistants' desks, based on their shape, look to be either 'Bauhaus' phones or phones from the Hungarian Telephone Factory. These were not produced until 1925 and 1937 respectively (Ngak). Finally, there is the microphone used by Medici at the end of the movie. While microphones had been invented decades earlier, they were not actually used within ballrooms or theatres (and, presumably, circuses) to amplify voices until the 1930s (Greenberg). These forms of technology all show that Burton was more concerned with his own idea of how this world should look and function than with whether these things realistically existed during that time. Not because there was no information, because producer Frey explains: "[because] circuses were the primary form of entertainment in the early twentieth century, a wealth of information existed. This proved true for amusement parks as well, which grew in popularity in the late 1800s" (Gallo 43). The information was present, but Burton valued aesthetics over historical accuracy. The importance of adding advanced technology to Dreamland is shown in the analysis of the split world motif earlier in the chapter. Dreamland had to look better, more impressive than the circus. By making the theme park actually historically accurate, the 'world' of Vandevere would be less impressive and the difference would be diminished, the intended effect not as stark. That means that while the insertion of the telephone, the typewriter and even the double sky wheel and rollercoaster are both deliberate and rooted in Burton's childhood at the same time. The theme park had to be modernised to achieve Burton's goal in making Dreamland as different from the circus as possible; the elements chosen in order to achieve that vision were features Burton was familiar with from his own childhood.

Research was also done by Atwood, the costume designer and hair and makeup designer Paul Gooch. They stayed fairly true to the material about the period, while staying true to the Burton vision and the actors themselves as well. Characters were only given one set of regular clothes, which were basic in design, while having elaborate performance costumes (49). Considering Atwood's explanations on the costuming, the clothing looks quite period-appropriate, although materials and construction could be very different. This would be an interesting area for further research from a fashion history perspective.

As mentioned before, the original storyline was expanded upon in many ways. While the original *Dumbo*'s plot was fairly simple and straightforward, Burton and screenwriters expanded the storyline to highlight modern concerns. As Pheasant-Kelly explains: "while Burton's adaptation follows the original and reflects the filmmaker's predilections for outsider status, it concurrently addresses contemporary concerns of animal welfare by first highlighting the human/animal divide, and then working to diegetically close this gap through specific aspects of characterisation, cinematography and mise-en-scène" (120). Consciously addressing anxieties not present in the original storyline is another aspect of Burton's pop-historical Gothic. It is Gothic in the manner that "Gothic narratives are not meant to be read as authentic or to be taken seriously, and yet they often express and embody very real and serious anxieties" (De Bruin - Molé 139). Moreover, these anxieties about animal welfare were not as strong, if present, in the film's time period. Placing current ideas about the treatment of circus animals in this movie show nonconformity to what is to be expected.

Tim Burton's live-action remake of *Dumbo* may be placed more within the happy Gothic category than the Gothic, although its story of the outsider is a typical feature of the Gothic and of Burton's. The movie explicitly engages in the split world motif, by placing the aesthetics of the Medici Bros. Circus back in time in order to make it look dilapidated, and pulling Dreamland into the future to make it seem more impressive to the circus crew and the

viewer. The adding of anachronistic elements into Dreamland was a very deliberate choice made by Burton. It shows that historical accuracy was never the aim, even though research was done into the relevant time period. Burton consistently chooses aesthetic over historicity, which makes *Dumbo* a good first example of the pop-historical Gothic in Burton's work.

Chapter 3: Punk Outfits and Waterbeds in 1950s America:

Edward Scissorhands

In the previous chapter, *Dumbo* was analysed in relation to pop-historical Gothic. In this chapter I will focus on *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), where the viewer encounters titular character Edward, who is created as a science experiment. In place of hands, he has a multitude of scissors, which impede his ability to engage in daily life. He lives alone in a dark castle at the top of a hill, where he is found by a friendly local Avon salesperson, who takes him into her house. While initially loved by the neighbourhood as something interesting in their day-to-day life, he is eventually feared by them and is forced to return to the abandoned castle.

The movie is set in an uncertain time period, but can be dated by aesthetics to somewhere in the 1950s or 1960s. This can be seen in the clothing worn by the characters, the cars they drive, but is also driven out of the popular association society has when talking about 1950s' USA. It is often associated with an idyllic lifestyle in the suburbs. The movie itself was made decades later, in 1990, and is therefore a prime example of Burton looking back at a time period from a more modern view. He himself was born in 1958, and was therefore very young during this time. While he does have memories of it, they are very informed by his own childhood. He incorporates contemporary aspects into the dated town, a choice more often made in the Gothic nowadays. As Megen de Bruin - Molé states: "We see a move towards the Gothic in popular culture that deliberately distorts the past, and appropriates its objects at the expense of their contexts" (141). Burton does this, because he obviously plays with historical reference, deliberately distorting the past in order to fit his vision. In this chapter multiple facets of *Edward Scissorhands* will be highlighted to examine the pop-historical Gothic aesthetic present in the movie. This is relevant in relation to *Dumbo*

and *Beetlejuice*, not only because it is set in a different time period, but also because *Edward Scissorhands* is the most autobiographical movie out of these and it engages with history in a different manner than they do.

3.1 Establishing *Edward Scissorhands* within the Gothic

Edward Scissorhands is one of Burton's earliest movies, and one that, according to Fraga in her compilation of Burton's interviews, "is the movie that, in many ways, establishes the Burton aesthetic" (x). The main character, Edward, lives in an abandoned castle at the top of a hill. As Aldana Reyes argues in *Gothic Cinema*, "landscapes and buildings, especially when temporally remote, are arguably the most essential markers of the Gothic" (17). By establishing the main character within this typical Gothic location, the character itself gains a distinct Gothic feel. The house is depicted in a dark colour palette and looks almost like a stain on the adjacent neighbourhood. This helps enhance the atmosphere Burton is trying to depict, because "Gothic landscapes of any type are further enhanced by a generous helping of darkness. Darkness has negative connotations in a number of cultures and is suggestive of death, cold, occlusion, mystery and uncertainty" (Aldana Reyes 19). That negative connotation brought forth by the depicted darkness is clear in the movie, because no person has dared approach the castle before Peg, the salesperson who eventually takes Edward home, and no one has dared since.

The stark difference between the dark, abandoned, dilapidated house at the top of the hill and the perfect-looking pastel houses in the main part of the city is a clever use of chiaroscuro. Chiaroscuro is the use of light and dark, with tonal contrasts between shade and light taking on a symbolic resonance. The ignorance and despair often associated with darkness is highlighted by the light surrounding it (Hughes 45). So, the association of the dark

with death and mystery is strengthened by the contrast with the brightness of the pastel neighbourhood. Figure 3.1 shows that Burton was intent on showing the contrast between the castle and the neighbourhood to viewers. As Peg looks into her mirror, she sees a castle so dark its features can barely be distinguished, while everything visible behind the mirror is glaringly bright. This still from the movie shows the differences

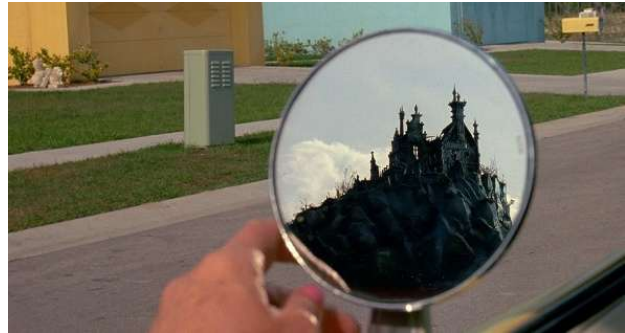


Figure 3.1 Peg looks back at Edward's castle from her car.
Source: Burton, Tim, director. *Edward Scissorhands*. 20th Century Fox, 1990.

between the two areas immediately. The castle looks dark, but once Peg steps into the garden belonging to the castle, which is invisible when looking at the castle from the bottom of the hill, it is bursting with colour and joy. Edward has transformed the hedges into shapes, a talent he has because of the scissors he has for hands. It shows a subversiveness, because the viewer would expect the castle's inhabitant, if indeed there were someone living there, to be just as dark and gloomy as the exterior walls of the house. While Edward does appear that way, it is clear from the way he has tended to his garden and from the way he has dressed up his bedroom, which is covered in magazine clippings depicting happy people, that he yearns for joy, for brightness, for normalcy. The character of Edward is often linked to Burton himself, who always felt he was an outsider in society.

Gothic narratives often employ the trope of the outsider, generally given form as a monster or monstrous being. Edward fulfils this role in *Edward Scissorhands*. It is insinuated that he is a robot, given life by an inventor. He is slowly turned from robot into human, but before the inventor can make Edward whole, the inventor suffers a heart attack and dies in front of Edward. This happens just as Edward is presented with his hands, but when the inventor dies, Edward tries to catch him and slices up his own hands. It is a moment of foreshadowing of what is to come in the story, because as much as Edward wants to belong in

the regular world, the way he is made cannot fit into regular society. As Kim's boyfriend says: "You can't touch anything without destroying it!", after Edward is distracted from creating ice sculptures for the family Christmas party and accidentally wounds Kim. Edward may be gentle, but that does not change that his hands are dangerous and hurt multiple people throughout the story. Eventually, he retreats back to the castle to 'free' society from his presence.

This trope of the outsider is a trope much employed by Burton. Almost all of Burton's movies feature "an alienated subject, and in each film, part of the drama relies on this individual's strained relationship to a version of the world that cannot understand him" (Weishaar 71). Burton himself has made clear that he often felt to be an outsider in his youth. While older Gothic works often view the outsider as a threat to the status quo, Burton sees himself within these outsiders, he identifies with them. He says about his youth: "I remember growing up and feeling that there is not a lot of room for acceptance. You are taught at a very early age to conform to certain things. It's a situation, at least in America, that's very prevalent and which starts from day one at school" (87). He himself is the 'monster' in Gothic works, because he felt misunderstood and as if he were not allowed to express himself. This "great sympathy with the figure of the monster aligns him with recent trends in the Gothic and in Gothic criticism" and places him therefore very firmly in the modern Gothic tradition (Louttit 287).

Of course, *Edward Scissorhands* can also, in some ways, be seen as a version of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). While Edward is not created by stitching together corpses, he is created by an inventor out of different pieces, who gives life to something that should not be alive. This 'monster', just like Frankenstein's monster, has trouble adapting to the regular world and is viewed as 'other' by people in regular society. By embodying one of the most well-known stories of Gothic fiction, the movie establishes itself more firmly within the

Gothic genre. This engagement with *Frankenstein* is not incidental; Burton reveals in *Burton on Burton* that he loved watching the original *Frankenstein* adaptation (2) and before making *Edward Scissorhands*, he made the short movie *Frankenweenie* (1984), about a boy who tries to bring his deceased dog back to life by electroshocks, which, in 2012, was fully fleshed out to a black-and-white stop-motion animation movie likewise titled *Frankenweenie*. This was a much more straightforward adaptation of *Frankenstein*. Taking all these aspects into consideration, it is clear that *Edward Scissorhands* is firmly rooted in the Gothic genre, but it is also important to understand how it fits within the Burton aesthetic.

3.2 *Edward Scissorhands* within the Burton Aesthetic and Brand

As mentioned before, Burton has a unique aesthetic, referred to as ‘Burtonesque’. This aesthetic comes with a set of recognisable characteristics, some of which are visible in *Edward Scissorhands*. Burton loves creating unique characters, with unique proportions. This is noticeable in his animated work such as *Corpse Bride* (2005), where characters have either very thin or very large bodies, and occasionally have disproportionate heads. Because *Edward Scissorhands* utilises live actors to convey the story instead of animation, having non-normative proportions is not possible. However, the main character is still unique, considering he has scissors instead of hands. Main characters in a Burton work are quite often lanky, have black hair, and are pale. This is all true for Edward, portrayed by Johnny Depp, an actor Burton has often worked with. Depp appears in a total of eight Burton movies, with *Edward Scissorhands* as the first. As explained in the chapter on *Dumbo*, Burton is known for working with a small group of people who are very familiar with his vision, making executing said vision to the smallest details more achievable.

These disproportionate, distorted dimensions are not only applied to human beings, but also to architecture.

While the suburban neighbourhood depicted in *Edward Scissorhands*



has to look as figure 3.2 The inside of the castle. Source: Burton, Tim, director. *Edward Scissorhands*. 20th Century Fox, 1990.

ordinary as possible, Edward's castle does not. While still having to look realistic, it can be overexaggerated in parts, or have strange dimensions and unique features. Visible in the scene shown in figure 3.2 is the exaggeration in how bare the castle is made to look, and how dark and grubby the interior is. Visible on the statue and on the chandelier and candlestick is dust and cobwebs, as if they have not been touched in years, although Edward lives there. There seems to be no decoration apart from these pieces, showing a wide open space. It is truly made to look abandoned, and the bare interior and dark colours reflect Edward's loneliness, and it enhances the contrast between his space and the Boggs' family home. The castle borrows from other famous cinematic castles but is also unique. It shows lack of symmetry, contains no right angles, and the rare straight lines within are jagged and broken, while windowpanes are spaced irregularly. Spooner calls the castle both "stark and over-elaborate", with architecture evoking the Gothic while also being timeless (*Post-Millennial Gothic* 62-63). This timelessness is significant, because it shows that Burton does not simply copy aesthetics from other Gothic castles. This 'Burtonesque' touch given to the castle, rendering it timeless, shows the pop-historical within the set clearly, because it is an example of Burton

taking elements of his aesthetic and putting it into an architectural style which takes it out of a standard Gothic style and making a mixed style which is not historically accurate.

3.3 Characters in *Edward Scissorhands*

In *Edward Scissorhands*, the main character is Edward, who, as mentioned before, is an outsider of society who lives in an abandoned-looking castle and has scissors for hands. He is dressed fully in black, in an outfit made up of leather and silver studs and buckles. A suit which is designed by Colleen Atwood, who also worked on *Dumbo*. The suit is described by Moore as a “Gothic black leather suit” (20). Edward is very pale and has black, wiry hair that sticks out in all directions. He is very similar to Burton in appearance and manner, something which has not been overlooked by scholars analysing this movie. He himself says this character is not more autobiographical than any of his others, stating “I’ve always felt close to all the characters in my films. I’ve always felt I *had* to be, because when you’re doing something you’re putting your life into it, and there has to be aspects to all the characters that are either a part of you, or something you can relate to, or something that is symbolic of something inside you” (*Burton on Burton* 44). However, as said before in this thesis, Burton often employs his own childhood to inform his works. Edward as a character is clearly modelled after him. Burton knows his status as outsider, and as Fraga says: “Burton would be out of place anywhere, and his awareness of that suffuses his work, which is set in a peculiar twilight zone between the matter-of-fact and the flabbergasting” (32). This awareness of his outsider status allows Burton to abandon societal expectations and exist within that twilight zone. The feeling of being the outsider has come from his childhood, and Burton’s pop-historical Gothic aesthetic is informed by that. Therefore it is not difficult to place *Edward Scissorhands* within this genre.

The only character like Edward is his creator, only named as The Inventor. He is like Edward in the manner that he is a social recluse, as he lives up on the hill together with Edward, so lonely that he created another being to share his space. The inventor is also the only one to don dark clothing. He is played by Vincent Price, an actor who mostly worked within the horror genre, and is a childhood hero of Burton's. In *Burton on Burton*, Burton says: "it was the films of Vincent Price that spoke to me specifically for some reason ... those movies were a way to certain feelings, and I related them to the place I was growing up in" (4). Burton selecting an actor he admired in his childhood for the role of the father figure is significant, as it strengthens the suggestion that the character of Edward is autobiographical and can be viewed as Burton, and it reinforces the link to Burton's childhood.

Apart from Edward's family, other characters in *Edward Scissorhands* are the people who live in the neighbourhood. They represent ordinary American life, and fall into stereotypes that have been perpetuated about suburban life in the 1950s and 1960s. They have perfect homes and perfect lives. Nothing is especially special about them. This is also represented in their names, which are all short and basic, such as Kim, Jim, Bill and Joyce. Daughter Kim is a cheerleader, father Bill likes working in the garden during his day off and is obsessed with sports. They very much represent the idea of the American Dream. They are all dressed in mostly pastel shades, colours that are typically associated with sweetness; these clothes represent their perfect lives. Burton, however, believes that life in the suburbs is more nightmare than bliss, and it shows in the way these characters behave. They are absolutely obsessed with everything everyone else does, and they must know what is happening at all times. When Peg drives into the neighbourhood with Edward, chaos commences. Neighbours start calling each other asking for information and they all come together on the lawn to gossip about the mysterious passenger in Peg's car. Furthermore, they force Peg to have a barbeque to introduce her guest, because they imply it is impolite to not introduce him to

them; it is simply not done in suburbia. Burton calls it a place with no culture, no history, and containing a sense of vagueness, of blankness (90). In essence, everything is very surface level. This depiction of suburbia as a constricting place to live again strengthens the link to Burton's childhood, as the depiction is coloured by his own memory of life there.

However, when considering the attitude towards suburbia, Edward is different from Burton. Edward seems truly happy when driving through the neighbourhood, fascinated by everything around him. Burton says on that: "[suburbia] was seen from Edward's point of view, a slightly more romanticized view of the world. I like darker colours better" (93). However, Edward is forced into normalcy, a feeling to which Burton can relate. When arriving at Peg's home, he is given clothes belonging to her husband, and is transformed from a goth in a dark leather studded suit into slacks and a button-up white shirt with suspenders. Peg covers his face with makeup to make his scars less visible. She takes away all the unique features about Edward she can. In a way, she does not seem to realise it. She lets him struggle with dressing himself and handling cutlery, as if she never considered how that might be a struggle for him without proper hands to use. Indeed, Edward draws a similarity to Burton in this situation – struggling to adapt to regular life when he is simply not equipped to do so. Burton says: "I just felt I couldn't communicate. It was the feeling that your image and how people perceive you are at odds with what is inside you" (87). Burton displaying his struggle to fit into regular society through the character of Edward shows that Burton truly engages with his childhood within this movie. When looking back at memories, facts will be blurred, as parts are forgotten, coloured by emotions or distorted by nostalgia. This engagement with childhood is therefore a strong case as to why historical accuracy cannot be achieved in *Edward Scissorhands*.

3.4 Historical Inaccuracies in *Edward Scissorhands*

Edward Scissorhands is never specifically dated, leading to much speculation. In my research, I was not able to find a definitive answer. However, when trying to determine the time period by visuals, the 1950s and 1960s come to mind. The clothing worn by the women especially are reminiscent of the 1960s mod clothing. Weishaar describes a repressed small town in 1950s America, depicted in pastel colours. He also comments on the repression linked to Burton's upbringing in Burbank, California (282-283). This is significant, because it gives an indication of time, which is necessary in order to analyse the pop-historical Gothic. The link between repression in the Victorian era and Burton's childhood recalls the link to his childhood made throughout the chapter. The neighbourhood depicted in the movie is housing developed in the 1980s, which can be seen in the architecture (Paynter). However, Burton had the houses painted pastel shades to recall to earlier times, dated no later than the 1960s. The soundtrack, developed by longtime collaborator Danny Elfman, is added onto by music from Tom Jones, all originating from the mid-1960s. These elements all combined make a compelling argument for stating that the movie takes place somewhere in the mid - 1960s.

However, there are certain aspects in the movie that cannot possibly exist within that timeframe. Kim's boyfriend refers, in one of the dinner scenes, to the stereo set that his father has, something that would date the movie somewhere in the 1980s. The existence of such modern technology for the time is in contrast with the visuals in the movie. Another element in the movie that would date it later in time is the waterbed Edward sleeps on and destroys. Waterbeds were first introduced in the 1970s, but only gained traction a decade later. When considering historical accuracy, this would not make sense. While characters are dressed in clothing styles considered to be mostly historically accurate, Joyce has long, acrylic nails. These only came into fashion in the 1970s. Moreover, Edward is dressed in a style most accurately referred to as punk, which is a subculture that arose in the 1980s under designers

such as Vivienne Westwood. Most of these elements were popular during the production of the movie, as the movie was released right at the start of the 1990s. Burton blends a contemporary style of clothing and décor with a style of architecture and clothing remembered through the lens of his childhood. This blend of components is the essence of Burton's pop-historical Gothic aesthetic.

The castle that Edward stays in is identifiably older than the housing in the suburb, but not much can be found on its exact dating, nor can we know how long Edward is alive by the time that Peg finds him. Because he has not aged by the end of the movie on account of him being a robot, he could be decades old. The clothing the inventor wears seems to date to the 1920s (Schneider), which will not have been a conscious choice based upon time period but upon nostalgia, as it takes after the Price movies he watched as a child, which feature similar aesthetics, as they were from the early 1900s.

Concluding, *Edward Scissorhands* cannot be specifically dated to one particular time period, and Tim Burton knows this. He deliberately plays with elements from different time periods in order to build an aesthetic that he feels conveys his vision best, and is not concerned with whether that would be considered historically accurate at all. *Edward Scissorhands* is very autobiographical, and this engagement with his own childhood is a theme often seen in Burton's works. This to the viewer very visible relation with his childhood shows outwardly his engagement with the historical, which is less obvious than with *Dumbo* and with *Beetlejuice*, as will be shown in the next chapter. The pop-historical Gothic label can certainly be applied to *Edward Scissorhands* but because it is in a slightly different manner than in the other movies, it gives the label more credibility, as it shows a fluidity enabling the label to work in different contexts and therefore different movies.

Chapter 4: A Timeless Story Set in the 1980s: *Beetlejuice*

The previous chapters have analysed Burton's *Dumbo* and *Edward Scissorhands* within the genre of pop-historical Gothic. They were set in two very different time periods, and so is the last movie this thesis will discuss. *Beetlejuice* is set in the late 1980s, and was made and released during that time as well. Therefore, careful observers will not find pieces of machinery and décor anachronistic to the time of the film's narrative, as they had not been invented yet, as they would in *Dumbo* or *Edward Scissorhands*. Instead of looking back at an earlier time as those movies do, *Beetlejuice* is a contemporary film. However, there are other useful ways in which *Beetlejuice* can be studied in order to analyse Burton's aesthetic in relation to the pop-historical Gothic. *Beetlejuice* is only Burton's second full-length feature film, following *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure* (1985). It follows the Maitlands, a newly-wed couple who pass away after a car accident. Their souls are stuck in their old house as ghosts, but the house is sold to a new family, the Deetzes. The Maitlands desperately want to get rid of them, and in order to do so, they conjure a 'bio-exorcist' named Betelgeuse, who causes chaos in many ways. Eventually he is cast out and the families can peacefully co-exist in the house. The eccentric Betelgeuse actually returned to the screen recently, with the release of the sequel *Beetlejuice Beetlejuice* (2024). This chapter analyses *Beetlejuice*'s relation to current understandings of Burton's aesthetic, how it fits into the Gothic tradition and why that is relevant when placing it in the pop-historical Gothic aesthetic.

4.1 Burton's Aesthetic in *Beetlejuice*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, scholars often describe *Edward Scissorhands* as the quintessential 'Burtonesque' movie, the birthplace of his aesthetic. In many ways I would agree, but when analysing Burton's work, it almost seems as if there are two streams of

aesthetic prevalent. *Edward Scissorhands* is a more serious movie in terms of storytelling and exists within a relatively realistic world, while still being whimsical and fantasy filled.

Edward Scissorhands is biographical to an extent and deals with more serious topics of being an outsider in society. Burton has directed more films that follow this same trend, such as *Ed Wood* (1994) and *Big Fish* (2003), or films that lean more into the horror genre, such as *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2012). Then there are the high fantasy or imaginary movies that might exist in a 'real' world but have no desire to cater to realistic expectations and can therefore engage in exaggerated proportions or unrealistic plotlines. These movies are often animated and include *Corpse Bride* (2005), *Frankenweenie* (2012) and *Alice in Wonderland* (2010). *Beetlejuice* should very much be included in this category. While taking place in 'real life', it plays with fantastical elements and can especially go to extremes when the characters are taken out of their regular world into the afterlife's waiting room or the sandworm's desert. *Beetlejuice* includes some of Burton's overarching characteristics and the fantastical characteristics and has established the 'Burtonesque' aesthetic just as much as *Edward Scissorhands* has done. This is affirmed by Salisbury, who in *Burton on Burton* writes: "It was, in retrospect, quintessential Burton material: ghoulish, bizarre, highly imaginative with the potential for outrageous set design and innovative special effects" (54). Clearly, Burton, going forward, set the tone as to what to expect from a Burton movie.

Burton is known for certain recurring elements in his stories. Both *Dumbo* and *Edward Scissorhands* feature a main character that is an outsider to society and is ostracized for it. This harkens back to Burton's childhood, where he felt the same way in suburban Burbank. *Beetlejuice* is a little different, but both Lydia Deetz and Betelgeuse fill that role relatively similarly. Lydia feels herself to be an outsider in her family. Her father and stepmother are very modern, social people, while Lydia dresses within the emo style and is a shy girl. She

feels different from them, and she is – she is the only one who can see ghosts. However, she is not as much outsider as, for example, Edward is. Then there is the character of Betelgeuse. He has been ejected from society, but due to his own fault. There is nothing inherently ‘outsider’ about him as the deformities that Dumbo and Edward have. Instead, he misbehaved as a caseworker in the underworld and was dismissed from the job. Now, people warn against conjuring him and he thus takes the outsider status. Therefore, this characteristic of Burton is applicable to the film but is not as outspoken of a feature as it is in the other two movies. However, naming the movie after the outsider character did foreshadow for viewers what they could expect from Burton in coming movies.

Some visual elements that often occur in Burton movies and appear in *Beetlejuice*, are the imagery of model towns, graveyards and other references to death, and black and white stripes. These elements mostly draw back to Burton’s childhood, as is often the explanation in Burton’s work. He tells Salisbury in *Burton on Burton*:

There was a graveyard right next to where we lived, about a block away, and I used to play there. I don’t know exactly why it keeps showing up, except for the fact that, again, it’s part of your soul. As for model towns, I used to draw big tableaux of flying saucers attacking an army. They were very elaborate, almost like miniatures in a way. ... Again, I don’t know why, but all those movies I used to like as a kid had them. It’s like stop-motion animation, there’s a certain energy and vibe which is quite strong. ... As far as the black and white stripes are concerned, that one I have never been able to figure out. I guess there must be some sort of prison element involved in there somehow. I *am* drawn to that image, I always have been, it’s in a lot of drawings as well, but I don’t know why. (65)

As Burton explains, the element of the graveyard and the model town draw back to his childhood. This is significant, because the pop-historical Gothic aesthetic Burton employs is

rooted in his childhood consumption of media, as it influenced his assumptions about many historical periods. In *Beetlejuice*, the graveyard and the model town feature extensively. The movie opens with a shot of the town, zooming in on the house. It is then revealed that the house is part of the town's model made by Adam Maitland. Within the model there is a graveyard, which is where Betelgeuse is conjured from. Many scenes take place within this graveyard specifically. Figure 4.1 shows Betelgeuse standing next to his grave, drawing attention to it. The light-up sign and engraving in the stone invites the person looking at it to



4.1 Betelgeuse stands next to his grave in the model town. Source: Burton, Tim, director. *Beetlejuice*, Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 1988.

say his name
three times,
bringing him
to life. What
it also shows
is
Betelgeuse's
outfit. He
wears a black

and white striped suit, the stripes being a motif that Burton often uses. If the motif of stripes does come from a fascination with the prison theme, it is very fitting within the context of the character, because his face shows similarities to a corpse - visible in figure 4.1 is his white face and the darkened eyes, which suggests empty eye sockets as skeletons have - while his striped suit calls to mind either a prisoner or a carnival barker. This alludes to two aspects of his character – his banishment after his inexcusable behaviour in the afterlife and the carnival allusion shows his role as trickster, someone who causes humorous mischief (Fowkes 166-167). As Fowkes explains, the character of Betelgeuse is a prisoner and a trickster, a clown. This is a reference which Burton more often makes in his movies (Weishaar 57). The black

and white stripes for Betelgeuse's suit are clearly not just an aesthetic choice, but bring up relevant associations for the viewer.

Betelgeuse is a trickster character, a figure often featured in carnivalesque works. That is not the only element Burton uses from carnival. Di Lallo explains: "his imagery of twisting tongues, eyeballs coming out of their sockets, masks, jesters, and poisonous clowns, often accompanied by deadpan wordplay humor ... evokes the notion of the "carnavalesque" (184). That means that Betelgeuse being a trickster character is coherent with Burton's brand. Burton has often played around with this aesthetic and is drawn to the whimsical and the fantastical. When looking at Burton's art as displayed in Di Lallo's book *The World of Tim Burton*, this becomes obvious. The style Di Lallo describes, of the twisting tongues and eyeballs coming out of their sockets, is displayed in *Beetlejuice* heavily. Both the Maitlands and Betelgeuse himself often twist their faces into horrific forms in order to scare and terrify the viewer but it is created with such unrealistic special effects that it reads as comical instead. In *Burton on Burton*, Burton describes his childhood and what he watched during it. Movies such as *The Brain that Wouldn't Die* (1962) and *Godzilla* (1954) show a similar approach to special effects that Burton employs in *Beetlejuice*. This consistency in aesthetic that can be linked back to childhood makes that *Beetlejuice* is a great example of the 'Burtonesque', and it set the standard for his movies going forward.

As explained extensively in the chapter on *Edward Scissorhands*, Burton is often very inspired by his childhood. Vincent Price movies were discussed in that chapter, as Price plays a role in that movie. Louttit discusses how the Hammer movies, which as a significant element have the "often judgemental attitude to the idea of 'Victorian values' and stuffy Victorian sexual morality", were clear influences on Burton when making *Corpse Bride* and *Alice in Wonderland* (283). Burton indeed mentions in *Burton on Burton* that he often went to see Hammer movies in cinema (2). Burton's pop-historical Gothic aesthetic is founded upon

his childhood, and influences from the media he consumed as a child and the area he grew up in are visible in everything he does. Therefore, Burton employing many of his, what we now consider, usual tropes in *Beetlejuice* is significant. The main character wears a black and white striped suit, calling to mind a prisoner while also placing him within the role of trickster. The movie uses a lot of graveyard imagery and uses a model town, something which Burton does in many of his movies, elements going back to his childhood. Burton employed whimsical, fantastical elements in *Beetlejuice* and set the standard on what to expect from his non-realism movies. This consistency in aesthetic, employing what would later be recurring motifs that draw back to his childhood, make *Beetlejuice* a quintessential ‘Burtonesque’ movie. That is important in *Beetlejuice*’s relation to the Gothic.

4.2 Establishing *Beetlejuice* within the Gothic

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, *Beetlejuice* is only Burton’s second feature length film. The first, *Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure*, was a strict universe to work in, as the character and its world was already established, so Burton could not create a ‘Burtonesque’ universe such as he did in *Beetlejuice* and as is expected from him nowadays. *Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure* set an expectation for Burton’s work and therefore it took quite some time for him to start on another movie, as the scripts he was being sent were all in a similar style. Looking back, *Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure* is an outsider to Burton’s style and his move into a Gothic style with *Beetlejuice* is what created the ‘Burtonesque’ aesthetic. Eventually, Burton was sent the script for *Beetlejuice* by Michael McDowell and Larry Wilson, which really spoke to him. The original script was much darker and graphic, but was shifted by Warren Skaaren into the Gothic comedy horror it eventually turned out to be (Macor 11).

Beetlejuice is a Gothic story through and through. The movie, a “battle royal between good ghosts and bad mortals told from the point-of-view of the recently deceased Adam and Barbara Maitland” (Fraga 44), is a paranormal story, something which is very popular in Gothic tales. From the start of the genre, Gothic has been associated with the paranormal. The book *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole is often described as the first Gothic novel, and it is set in a haunted castle. The Gothic tradition, especially in the Victorian times, was born from anxiety surrounding the recent technological discoveries. While haunted by ghosts and apparitions in their stories, in real life

Victorians were also ‘haunted’ by the uncanny ability of modern science and technology to collapse time and space. The telegraph and telephone, carrying invisible or disembodied signals and voices from afar, blurred distinctions between science and magic, and between modernity and superstition. (Brewster 239)

This means that Victorians saw less difference between science and magic than before, creating new possibilities for the paranormal to exist. These signals could clearly exist and carry messages while being invisible to their naked eye, therefore they could not ensure that spectres could not exist beyond their visible world. While the engagement with the paranormal within the Gothic has shifted over time - at the start of the genre, the ‘hauntings’ could often be explained at the end by people coming in through trapdoors or being hidden away in backrooms, then the genre shifted to voicing genuine anxiety, and then to purely terrify the reader or amuse them with comical hauntings - the engagement with the paranormal has stayed. So while *Beetlejuice* is a horror-comedy, it can certainly be placed within the Gothic.

Moreover, there are more Gothic traits within the story. The Maitlands and the Deetzes are designed to be opposites of each other. The Deetzes represent the future – they have more modern values and are dressed in a very current fashion. This contrasts with the Maitlands,

who represent the past – they are dressed in a more old-fashioned manner and have furnished their house in a similar manner. Not just the inside of the house seems historical; the outside is too. As Fowkes says: “their white house displays distinctly Gothic features” (167), which Michael Wyetzner breaks down further for *Architectural Digest*. Victorian architecture and Gothic architecture are used interchangeably when describing the house. Wyetzner points out that the house is located on a hill, a feature seen in other horror movies as well, and known to be a feature of the Gothic, as is clarified in the chapter on *Edward Scissorhands*. He explains the house has a wrap-around porch, a feature which is prevalent in Victorian architecture. He also points out the prominent tower that the house features, with a widow’s walk around it. He also emphasises the point made earlier in this chapter – “of course it’s Tim Burton, so you know there’s a model version of the house featured somewhere in the film”. The house is later renovated by the new owners, and as mentioned previously, they are modern and therefore they want to give their house a modern feel. Instead of a Gothic architectural style, they choose a style called deconstructivism, a style prevalent in the late 1980s, which is the most modern style they could choose (02:03-05:27).

The prevalence of the paranormal and the showing of Gothic architecture places *Beetlejuice* within the Gothic. Because this movie set the standard for the ‘Burtonesque’ aesthetic, the link between them is significant, because it means that Gothic is inherently linked to Burton. This link is important when placing *Beetlejuice* within the pop-historical Gothic, because the pop-historical part comes for a vast part from its link to the Victorian ghost story, as expounded in the next subchapter.

4.3 The Pop-Historical Gothic in *Beetlejuice*

Beetlejuice is, unlike *Dumbo* and *Edward Scissorhands*, not set in an earlier time period than when it was made. This makes analysing it as was done with the others not possible, because Burton could not have used elements from the genuine future as it was set in current times. That means to find the pop-historical in the movie, references to the past have to be found. *Beetlejuice* contains many, which means it can be placed within the aesthetic as well as *Dumbo* and *Edward Scissorhands* were.

Burton has a fascination with death, which is clear when looking at his filmography (considering movies such as *Corpse Bride* and *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*) and the recurring motif of the graveyard and the skeleton (a motif coincidentally not much used in the movies discussed in this thesis, but very visible in works such as *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993)). Burton was not the only person working on the movie who had that fascination; script writers McDowell and Skaaren did too. McDowell is reportedly “enamored with death” (Siegel) and let it influence much of his work. Macor writes in her biography on Warren Skaaren that “he and McDowell shared a deep interest in death” (111). McDowell wrote a PhD thesis on American attitudes toward death in the 19th century, therefore he pulled in a lot of old references for this movie when writing the script. Both McDowell and Skaaren were very interested in the book by Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, which in simple terms deals with the Terror Management Theory. TMT means people fight an internal battle against the awareness on one’s own mortality and mortality in general, which can be either conscious or unconscious. This shines through subtly in the *Handbook for the Recently Deceased*, which the Maitlands find after their death. In the movie, after the viewer has just encountered Betelgeuse for the first time, Barbara questions why ‘they’ are not telling them anything and looks for answers in the book. While reading, Barbara reads rule 2 out loud to Adam. “‘The living usually won’t see the dead.’” ‘Can’t or

won't?' 'It just says won't.'” The cannot or will not question references the idea that people, albeit subconsciously, choose to ignore death, and therefore also ignore dead people appearing as ghosts. They are visible to some, in this movie Lydia, who somehow are able to engage with apparitions. Lydia seems to be very concerned with death, a stereotype often associated with someone who dresses goth like her. She has questions about death, which in reality are about life (Macor 113). The engagement with the afterlife in film is not unique; there are many movies that deal with the afterlife in any way. The addition of how ghosts experience the other side instead of them being a prop to terrify the living main character(s) has been done in multiple decades. The fresh take by Burton on the concept gives the movie a timeless quality.

Burton is known to engage with the past. Many of his movies are set in the past, whether it be an ambiguous time period such as in *Edward Scissorhands* or a specified time period, such as in *Dumbo*. *Beetlejuice* taking place during the time the movie was made, is a more deliberate choice than initially might be expected. The story itself has a timeless quality. As mentioned before in this thesis, the Gothic and the Victorian are often understood to be the same by the uninformed. This continual shifting of genre, explained in chapter 1, means that Gothic is inherently open to hybridization, something which Burton uses extensively (Boyacıoğlu 56). That innate ability to merge into any genre makes it so that *Beetlejuice* can fit into many categories, and it is named a contemporary horror-comedy. However, I would argue that the story has many influences from many eras and happens to be set in the 1980s because the original script writer wrote it so. While, as said before, many changes were made to the script, most of the original story line stayed intact. That included the car crash, the type of house the Maitlands lived in and why they were on holiday. Therefore the rewriter Skaaren and Burton took that on and did not change it. The script was pretty fluid, as Burton explains, and could be imagined in many different ways. Death could be cruel and horrific, or peaceful

up in the clouds as in *Heaven Can Wait* (1978), and Burton was able to work with his preferred designer to achieve the look he wanted (*Burton on Burton* 58-59). This fluidity allowed Burton to pull elements and references from many different time periods, whether consciously or unconsciously.

The most significant influence on *Beetlejuice* is, as discussed earlier, the Victorian Gothic ghost story. It created “the fictional tradition comprising many of the characteristics that are most often associated with the mode today: darkness and death, gloom and mystery, and the host of supernatural terrors, from sheeted ghosts to spectral shadows, that ‘make the flesh creep’” (Spooner, Townshend and Wright 6). *Beetlejuice*, while also creating comedy, is aimed at frightening the viewer. It invites the viewer to think about death while laughing at the Maitlands literally wearing sheets in order to frighten the Deetzes out of their home. Furthermore, the combination of comedy and horror is not something new to the genre of the ghost story. In “the Bawdy Body in Two Comedy Ghost Films: *Topper* and *Beetlejuice*”, Fowkes discusses the similarities and differences between *Topper* (1937) and *Beetlejuice*. *Topper* is a similar movie to *Beetlejuice*, in that it is also a slapstick comedy. That indicates that not even combining the comedy with the horror created an original genre. Furthermore, there are more visual and auditory borrowings from the past. One of *Beetlejuice*’s most famous scenes is the possession scene, where the Deetzes and their dinner guests are forced to dance to “Banana Boat (Day-O)” by Harry Belafonte, a song originally released in 1956. This emphasizes that *Beetlejuice* is from an earlier time, and it is a clear reference to the past. Additionally, there are more elements of set design that are from a different time than just the Gothic house. The brothel *Beetlejuice* visits is “actually based on a series of 19th-century French stereograph cards of devils doing various things in hell”, according to the partner of McDowell (Siegel). It comes from the collection of death-related objects this script writer

collected, and a book on these stereograph cards was lent to Burton, who subsequently created the brothel.

Burton's childhood has been discussed multiple times, and it is a recurring theme in both this thesis and in Burton's work. The theme of his childhood is also visible in visual choices he made. The special effects are, as discussed earlier in the chapter, so unrealistic they read as comical instead of realistic. This was a choice made by Burton based upon what he viewed in his own childhood, namely Harryhausen movies. He feels they used more human effects than other movies did and he used a similar technique, giving them a handmade quality (Burton *Burton on Burton* 61). That was a conscious choice. He consumed many horror and monster movies in his youth and has created a vision based on them, so inherently Burton while influenced by others, that he often pulls from them without conscious thought. This makes that all parts of Burton's movies, including *Beetlejuice*, will have elements that come from outside of their time, which makes his vision pop-historical Gothic.

Beetlejuice is set in the 1980s and is a contemporary horror-comedy, but when analysed closely it becomes visible that many elements are not contemporary. Burton pulls from the Victorian ghost story, and his depiction of the afterlife is unique because of Burton's style, but is not inherently a unique trait of the ghost story. Even small elements, such as the brothel, are taken from different times. Burton is influenced by media from his own youth, a persistent theme in this thesis. Understanding that all the influences from different time periods make up *Beetlejuice*, and seeing how it can be placed within the Gothic makes clear that *Beetlejuice* is a Burton movie best labelled pop-historical Gothic.

Conclusion

This thesis discussed Tim Burton's aesthetic in the context of three of his movies: *Dumbo*, *Edward Scissorhands* and *Beetlejuice*. All three movies are set in different time periods, namely 1919, an ambiguous time period most likely to be somewhere in the 1950s, and the late 1980s. They have many things in common, but most importantly: they all play with the idea of historical accuracy in the name of aesthetics.

Dumbo takes place in 1919, but is made a century later. It is a remake of the 1941 Disney classic, but broadens the story in many ways and it is made uniquely Burton's. Burton is often associated with the character of the outsider being prevalent in his story, and *Dumbo* is no exception. *Dumbo* is a prime example of Burton's engagement with the happy Gothic, a term coined by Spooner to indicate a form of Gothic that does not try to invoke terror but instead invokes whimsy and joy while using classic Gothic elements, a style which Burton has become the figurehead for (*Post-Millennial Gothic* 3). The movie can be placed firmly within the Burton aesthetic. The movie employs the trope of the split world – while not created with chiaroscuro as he is often wont to do, it is instead created with aesthetics and arrangement of the set (Gallo 68, 75). Burton was not bothered with historical accuracy in this movie; he was given free rein on set design because the movie was moved back by over two decades. It is clear he chose aesthetics over accuracy, because the world is riddled with technology that should not exist during that time. Research was done, but Burton's choices were based upon what he felt looked and worked best for the movie, planting *Dumbo* firmly within his pop-historical Gothic aesthetic.

Edward Scissorhands is set in a more ambiguous time period, but seems to be most accurately described as somewhere in the 1950s. It is perhaps his most autobiographical work,

with the main character of Edward looking so much like him he could be mistaken for Burton himself. The movie is more obviously Gothic, with the element of the abandoned castle, the intensive play with chiaroscuro and, once again, the trope of the outsider. Furthermore, it can be seen as an adaptation of *Frankenstein*, with the character of Edward being constructed from non-living parts instead of being born. However, he is not a monster, but the viewer is invited to identify with the character and to feel pity for him. The movie plays around with time references, with aesthetic choices made that would pull the movie out of the 1950s, such as the clothing Edward wears or the waterbed he sleeps in. The ambiguity in time period and outright ignoring of historical accuracy, makes that *Edward Scissorhands* can also be categorized as pop-historical Gothic.

Lastly, this thesis examined *Beetlejuice*. The movie is a contemporary horror-comedy but it incorporates components from many different eras, often influenced by Burton's childhood. The movie was the first where Burton's aesthetic was really visible, and it contains many elements, such as stripes, graveyards and model towns, that would come to recur in many of Burton's movies. It is firmly set in the Gothic through its interaction with the paranormal and its visual features such as the house the Maitlands live in. *Beetlejuice's* combination of elements from different time periods make that the pop-historical Gothic is visible in this movie.

Historical movies have been analysed on their historical accuracy for a significant period of time, and are punished for not adhering to the strict rules set for period pieces by society. History can never be truly portrayed accurately and therefore authenticity is an empty category (De Groot *Consuming History* 182). It is unmistakable that Burton considers it to be so too. As set decorator for *Dumbo* Bush explains: "Tim was not interested in giving a history lesson with his films" (Gallo 75). He pulls elements from his childhood through the movies he watched and the upbringing he had in Burbank's suburbia to manipulate his portrayal of a

time period to fit his aesthetic. He is known for his visual style, dubbed 'Burtonesque', which is distinctly Gothic and employs certain tropes many times over.

Burton has paved the way for many filmmakers. He is a pioneer of the genre happy Gothic, a genre which has, since Burton started, gained a lot of popularity. However, the label of happy Gothic fails to incorporate Burton's engagement with the historical. Burton may be a very visual director, but that does not mean his work is superficial. Burton was a creative child, who felt he was misunderstood by the world. He sought escape in art and movies, and this engagement with media from a young age formed his vision, what we now call 'Burtonesque'. It is important for the cinematic world to understand what Burton does exactly within his 'Burtonesque vision' because only then can critics and consumers fully understand his movies and appreciate every detail in the work Burton does. This thesis showed that the label pop-historical Gothic is much more descriptive of Burton's work than any other label previously applied – and not just the movies set in Victorian times – and should therefore be applied to his work henceforth.

Works Cited

Aldana Reyes, Xavier. *Gothic Cinema*. Routledge, 2020.

Beetlejuice. Directed by Tim Burton, Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 1988.

Boyacioğlu, Elif. "Corpse Bride: Animation, Animated Corpses and the Gothic." *Tim Burton's Bodies: Gothic, Animated, Creaturely and Corporeal*, edited by Hockenhull, Stella, and Fran Pheasant-Kelly, Edinburgh University Press, 2021, pp. 54-66.

Brewster, Scott. "The Genesis of the Victorian Ghost Story." *The Cambridge History of the Gothic; Volume 2: Gothic in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Dale Townsend, Angela Wright and Catherine Spooner, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 224-245.

Burton, Tim. *Burton on Burton*. Edited by Mark Salisbury, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006.

--- and Colleen Atwood. "Tim Burton Breaks Down Dumbo's Parade Scene With Colleen Atwood; Vanity Fair." *Youtube*, uploaded by Vanity Fair, 26 March 2019, <https://youtu.be/ZrBweQ3qW3Q?si=u4IBORDzTJnNAxRi>.

De Bruin - Molé, Megen. *Gothic Remixed: Monster Mashups and Frankenfictions in 21st-Century Culture*. Bloomsbury, 2020.

De Groot, Jerome. *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*. Routledge, 2009.

---. *Remaking History: the Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions*. Routledge, 2016.

Di Lallo, Emanuela, editor. *The World of Tim Burton*. Silvana Editoriale, 2023.

Dumbo. Directed by Tim Burton, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2019.

Edward Scissorhands. Directed by Tim Burton, 20th Century Fox, 1990.

- Fowkes, Katherine A. "the Bawdy Body in Two Comedy Ghost Films: *Topper* and *Beetlejuice*." *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era*, edited by Murray Leeder, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, pp. 159-176.
- Fraga, Kristian, editor. ---. *Tim Burton: Interviews*. University press of Mississippi, 2010.
- Gallo, Leah. *The Art and Making of Disney; Dumbo*. Disney Enterprises inc., 2019.
- Greenberg, Robert. "Music History Monday: Microphones." *Robert Green Music*, 2018, <https://robertgreenbergmusic.com/music-history-monday-microphones/#:~:text=While%20the%20first%20microphones%20were,until%20the%20very%20early%201930s>. Accessed 19th of February, 2025.
- "Historicity, N." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3294870911>.
- Hockenhull, Stella and Fran Pheasant-Kelly, editors. *Tim Burton's Bodies: Gothic, Animated, Creaturely and Corporeal*. Edinburgh University Press, 2021.
- Hughes, William. *Key Concepts in the Gothic*. Edinburgh University Press, 2018.
- Kay, James. "The History of the Inversion." *Coasterglobe*, 2001, CoasterGlobe: Articles: The History of the Inversion. Accessed 5th of May, 2025, through "Roller Coaster Inversion", *Wikipedia*, reference 1.
- Leip, Brandon. "Journey Through Typewriter Evolution: From Inception to Modern Designs." *Typewriters*, 2022, https://typewriters.com/blogs/journey-through-typewriter-evolution-from-inception-to-modern-designs/?srsltid=AfmBOop6NpKC-_yvEOwRPwiMTU3jfZJ4BebgRPhNUn0eeHp_g2H-Vks. Accessed 19th of February, 2025.

Louttit, Chris. "Tim Burton's Pop-Victorian Gothic Aesthetic." *Gothic Studies*, volume 20.1-2, 2018, pp. 276-294.

Macor, Alison. *Rewrite man: the Life and Career of Screenwriter Warren Skaaren*. University of Texas Press, 2017.

"McCrary, Martin Buy Herschell Sky Wheel." *The Billboard*, 17 October 1960, p. 52, accessed through Google Books.

Moore, Booth. "10 2022, The Year TV Drove Fashion Trends." *Women's Wear Daily*, volume 12, 2022, pp. 20-21.

Ngak, Chenda. "The Evolution of Telephones." *CBS News*, 2011, <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/the-evolution-of-telephones/14/>. accessed 19th of February, 2025.

Paynter, Sarah. "See the Real Florida neighbourhood where *Edward Scissorhands* was Filmed." *New York Post*, 2021.

Pheasant-Kelly, Fran. "Anomalous Bodies in Tim Burton's Bestiary: Reimagining *Dumbo*." *Tim Burton's Bodies: Gothic, Animated, Creaturely and Corporeal*, edited by Hockenhull, Stella, and Fran Pheasant-Kelly, Edinburgh University Press, 2021, pp. 118-134.

Schneider, Sven Raphael. "What Men REALLY Wore in the 1920s." *the Gentleman's Gazette*, <https://www.gentlemansgazette.com/what-men-wore-1920s/>, accessed 5th of April, 2025.

Siegel, Alan. "How *Beetlejuice* was born." *The Ringer*, <https://www.theringer.com/2018/03/30/movies/beetlejuice-30-years-tim-burton-michael-keaton>, accessed 7th of June, 2025.

Spooner, Catherine, Dale Townshend and Angela Wright, editors. *The Cambridge History of the Gothic Volume 2: Gothic in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.

---. "Introduction: Gothic in Contemporary Popular Culture." *Gothic Studies*, volume 9, no. 1, 2007, pp. 1-4.

---. *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing plc, 2017.

Weishaar, Schuy R. *Masters of the Grotesque The Cinema of Tim Burton, Terry Gilliam, the Coen Brothers and David Lynch*. Macfarland & Co Inc, 2011.

Wright, Angela and Dale Townshend, editors. *The Cambridge History of the Gothic: Volume 1, Gothic in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Wyetzner, Michael. "Architect Breaks Down 5 Haunted Houses From Scary Films | Architectural Digest." *Youtube*, uploaded by Vanity Fair, uploaded 19 October 2022, <https://youtu.be/GGrKSsMO4LY?si=cFsA8HcBfpDMU5Od>.