

Question 2: Using at least three examples, consider how storytellers have utilised film and/or music/sound design to explore at least one of the following: sublime, weird & eerie, transformation conflict, the self, silence, leitmotifs, symbolism, archetypes.

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Total Word Count: 2513 words

Introduction: 241 words

Edward Scissorhands: 658 words

Beetlejuice: 644 words

The Nightmare Before Christmas: 697 words

Conclusion: 273 words

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Introduction

In this essay I will be talking about the combined work of Tim Burton and Danny Elfman.

Both creatives have worked together on numerous projects, that being said they both

have similar mindsets in their own respective field. Burton relies on creepy imagery by

creating new and diverse worlds unimaginable to some people, these worlds usually

consist of patterns and unusual characters to say the least. Elfman parallels Burton's

imagery with eerie undertones bringing Burton's world to life almost with grand

orchestral themes making what seems like a creepy place feel magical and almost

fantasy like. We will be focusing on three films Burton and Elfman have collaborated on

together; Edward Scissorhands, Beetlejuice and The Nightmare Before Christmas.

Although these three films I have mentioned have a lot in common Elfman and Burton

went above and beyond to differentiate each piece from another. People could argue

that Burton's design choices are too repetitive, the weird striped and checkered patterns

do pop up more often than they should, or others could argue that Elfman doesn't focus

on any other genre other than orchestral music. However, in this essay we will be

discussing how both creatives separate each piece to create the weird and eerie feel

they have been known for collaborating on for years. These three specific pieces have

different aspects in them which make them weird in their own respect but it doesn't make them the same, far from it actually.

Edward Scissorhands

The first film we will be looking at is Edward Scissorhands, I'll mainly be focusing on the opening scene where we are introduced to the unique world Burton always delivers on.

Burton uses the setting of a castle in the middle of a suburban town to portray the narrative in this film. Already we are talking about contrast. The opening scene works through an aerial Dutch shot presenting this world, Burton wanted to create a contrast from the start so by revealing both sides of the world really opens up the viewers mind to how weird this film could get. The odd choice of putting a gothic like castle in the middle of a residential suburbia is also an odd choice. Definitely not the weirdest choice Burton has made in recent films but it is not a normal choice. The scene ends with a gothic like character standing in a castle, its hair is greasy and he is wearing full leather. The viewer doesn't know whether they can trust this character because of the way it looks, it doesn't look well kept and it moves very stiff and wooden. This is only another way Burton has portrayed his world. His characters are one of the unique parts of his

films, Edward Scissorhands being one of the more unique ones. As I've mentioned above Burton throws a curveball into the mix each time. Not one world is the same, this weirdness is what makes his films so unique. Edward Scissorhands focuses on the contrast, bringing some madness into the mundanity of modern suburbia. Most viewers would expect a normal fantasy film from first glance but Burton goes above and beyond from character design to set design, the colour scheme Edward is given is a complete parallel to the town folk which again separates the two lifestyles living in that world. Edward is the weird in this sense whereas the town folk are the normal, again Edward's castle is the weird in this world and the town's folk's village is the normal. This contrast is presented very early in Edward Scissorhands. Here's a quote by Burton to show the inner workings of his weird mind. "The movie is largely based on the idea of scissors and having scissors for hands, and the concept of having scissors for hands came from scissors and me thinking about scissors." Unknown/Clickhole (2015)

Elfman creates bring this opening scene to life with his very orchestral score. The Edward Scissorhands theme is very distinct against any of Elfman's other work with Burton. The theme relies on a female choir which radiates this eerie feel to it. The mix of instrumentals makes the world seem grand and open which makes sense as it is

revealing the inside of a castle. The choir is the main distinct piece to this score.

Listening to the women sung gives you this sense that the world you are entering isn't normal, this place isn't going to be like anything you have witnessed before. Combined with the wispieness of the visuals, the payoff with the score is massive. One thing to note is the opening scene is part of a build up, which again I like what Elfman does in this score because he constantly adds instruments to build what seems like a crescendo then it slowly dies down after the payoff of meeting Edward. Even the feel of a build up to a crescendo builds this thriller like tension. It makes the viewer think what's going to pop up on screen? What is being revealed to us? It's this eerie build up that keeps the viewer engaged. If Elfman kept just the choir it would have got very repetitive. This is why I was happy that he brought in instrumentals and then took some out. You even have the lone choir at the end which works perfectly because it then sets the tone of the world, which again it does tremendously.

Beetlejuice

The second film we will be looking at is Beetlejuice. Beetlejuice focuses completely on out of this world character design, and in parts weirdly unique set design. Burton describes Beetlejuice as a "burlesque version of The Exorcist" (Nathan, 2016, p. 32) which explains what types of weird we will be covering with this film. Burton has never

been afraid to reference death in his films and this is one that literally revolves around it. The reference to *The Exorcist* in this film is very clear, from the constant talk of death to the sublime feel of horror lurking in the background. I'll focus on the main protagonists character design when they decide to scare the new homeowners. Burton creates these terrifying creatures out of thin air, its not expected by the viewer or anything, the characters simply pop their eyes out and open their mouths out to ungodly lengths. This type of weird is what you come to expect in *Beetlejuice* nothing you see is what you expect, and you can't come to expect anything. Even when you think something normal is about to happen something unusual is happening. Again another example of this is the sandworm. When the protagonists leave the house they fall into a desert and are nearly swallowed whole by a sandworm. I guess this just goes to show how Burton has mastered the art of creativity and has reimagined it in his own weird way. The film is supposed to be wacky with creepy undertones which I think it does very well. The unexpectedness is really what drives the film and doesn't make it boring. The last thing I'll talk about in this film is the set design, it isn't as complicated as other Burton films but it does go into some unique places that people have come to know as Burton's style. For example, the main protagonists walk through an office and the room turns into a checkered spiral, yet again the unexpectedness of this is what really drives the film, making it unique.

Again, Elfman adds this mystical touch to the Beetlejuice score. It's completely different to what you hear in Edward Scissorhands, yet it is very similar. The score is more instrumental driven but a choir is present in the backbeat. It's not the driving force of the score but it's definitely impactful. The pacing is what separates the score from any other score composed by Elfman for a Burton film. The score is very upbeat and keeps a fast tempo. This is to show the craziness of the film. It doesn't feel that eerie throughout because there are too many lighthearted instruments going off. However, you start realizing the choir then it starts to get a little unsettling. The score represents the mischievous world Burton creates for Beetlejuice. The on and off trombone and trumpets seem really playful which is what a lot of the characters are in the afterworld of the film. As I go back to the choir, I feel like it represents the whole theme of death which again draws me back to the choir representing the eerie feel to the score. Thus making the film come across as a lighthearted horror rather than something to be observed by a young audience. One last instrument that stands out is the flute, the flute stands out really well over the others in some places due to how over the place it can get. Again, I feel like this is to composite against the eerie feel and bring back the playful feel to the score. I think the score represents the world well and doesn't give any mixed messages as to what the world is trying to portray, the world of Beetlejuice is very

hard to understand so by having this type of score helps the audience realize what they are about to watch.

The Nightmare Before Christmas

Finally, the last film we will be talking about is The Nightmare Before Christmas. This film wasn't directed by Burton but it was produced and the idea was created by him, just from observation you can see that he had a heavy influence on the aesthetic anyway. A Nightmare Before Christmas is what Burton is well known for and that's where his weird and outright eerie style is most commonly recognized. Burton relies on obscure shapes and patterns to create the world of Halloweentown. Not one place is the same to the rest, each with their own distinct pattern or shape. This is what makes this film stand out from the rest we have mentioned before. The character design is very unusually as well to say the least. Burton focuses on horror like creatures and adapts them into his style of work. In fact the whole idea was so out of the ordinary Walt Disney dropped the pitched idea as "they had little faith in stop motion, and less still in such disturbing material. A rag doll who can unthread a limb? A crippled scientist able to scratch his own head like a bin lid to give his own head a scratch? (Nathan, 2016, p. 81) This is a direct quote from Burton himself. One scene that pops in to mind about the whole world featured in the film is when Jack and Sally duet their last song. They climb a mountain

that looks like it could snap at any moment, it ends with a spiral and has crosshatches on it to represent grass. From the design to the texture, Burton had the idea to create his worlds with full intent that they are going to be unique and something the world hadn't seen before. I've mentioned before about the character design but Burton had these characters designed so they don't look the same, the Halloweentown residents range from zombies, to werewolves, to mummies. You never really know what's going to pop up on the screen next, the world is weird and quirky in its own little way, and I think it knows it.

Elfman composed many songs for the Nightmare Before Christmas, they all follow so many different genres, ranging from musical to ballad. One song I'll be focusing on is This Is Halloween. This is down to it being the most unique with the visuals. Elfman knew this song would be introducing the world and the characters that inhabit it so he came up with a melodic track where each character has their own respective part to sing. The characters come in and out of the song seamlessly until it turns into one big choir. Choirs have been a theme in Elfman's collaborations with Burton but this is something very different than what we have heard before. For example, this is the first time in the essay we have come across a multi aged choir of different genders. This is to represent how diverse the town is and that each character has their own personality.

When each character has a solo part it usually has a bit of relevance such as a sinister line or some sort of distorted vocals. The song slowly reaches a crescendo until it breaks into the film's world. The lyrics are also personal to the characters, they describe what the characters are and what they are feeling during the town's parade. As this is a town parade Elfman uses church like instruments such as bells to bring a village feel to the score. The bells are almost diegetic because you'd hear this going off in a town parade anyway, this unique style of score is what helps get the eerie vibe across. Everything from the instrumentals to the lyrics is just very unsettling. I did mention before that the town's folks solo parts were altered in one way or another to create this eerie feel to them. The distortion in some of the voices are just plain sinister and they don't sound human which I think is an amazing touch to add, had they not done this I feel like it would have been a different film from the start.

Conclusion

In conclusion, each film I've mentioned in this essay has been completely different from the other and it's down to Burton and Elfman's weird and eerie genius. We discussed films such as *Edward Scissorhands* where the world is a complete contrast to the other visually and the score helps it keep that eerie feel to make sure the viewer knows they are watching a fantasy film. We also looked at *Beetlejuice* where the horror like

character design stood out mostly with so many characters transforming into weird and ungodly things. Elfman helped pull back the young appeal to the film though by implementing happier instruments into the score to create this energetic backbeat. Finally, we looked at *The Nightmare Before Christmas* where Burton focused mainly on out of this world set design by creating sets that you could never imagine working in a stop motion animation. Elfman also helped give the characters some personality by giving them solo parts during *This Is Halloween*, the whole song was personal to the town's folk so this brought some life into the film. During this essay I knew Burton and Elfman were diverse with their thinking but I hadn't quite considered how unusual their work was and how much dedication had gone into it, I could have covered a many more films both creatives have worked on together but I feel like these three were the ones that stood out the most for their vast differences with each other. As I've mentioned before the worlds both Burton and Elfman have created are just outstanding with so many unexpected visuals and twists ready to pop out throughout.

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