

## Original Paper

# The Gothic Complex in Tim Burton's Films

Wenchao Deng<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sichuan University of Culture and Arts

\* Wenchao Deng, Sichuan University of Culture and Arts

Received: September 28, 2024 Accepted: October 18, 2024 Online Published: November 12, 2024

doi:10.22158/csm.v7n2p234

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/csm.v7n2p234>

Fund Project: Undergraduate Teaching Reform Quality Engineering Project of Sichuan University of Culture and Arts Project: Characteristic Course Construction of Script Project Course under the Background of Integrated Media (Project Number: 2021ZL02)

### Abstract

*Tim Burton's films are known for their melancholic and melancholic yet love filled nature. The display and interplay of cool and warm tones in his films provide the audience with the director's kindness and warmth during the viewing process. Tim Burton's films use Gothic artistic techniques to create a very eerie world, with Gothic style reflected in characters, audio-visual language, and themes.*

### Keywords

*gothic, Tim Burton, film style*

Tim Burton is a famous "genius" director in Hollywood, whose works have unique styles such as eccentricity, humor, exaggeration, violence, and other non-traditional elements that attract audiences who crave to break through tradition. Most of his films are in the Gothic art style, known as Gothic cinema. The concept of Gothic originated from the architecture industry and ultimately originated in Europe during the 11th to 15th centuries. It was a very popular architectural style at that time. This style of architecture features towering spires, pointed arches, large floor to ceiling windows, and ornate stained glass windows, showcasing its religious and cultural characteristics. Tim Burton's films showcase the Gothic art style through their distinct audiovisual language features, various Gothic style shots, music scores, etc. This article elaborates on Tim Burton's Gothic film style from three aspects.

### 1. Gothic Character

In Gothic literature, elves, ghosts, monsters, vampires, zombies, and various bizarre supernatural phenomena are often portrayed. These characters often have abnormal appearances, abnormal

personalities, cold personalities, and strange behavior. The protagonist in Tim Burton's film portrays such a Gothic character personality. For example, the protagonist Edward in "Scissorhands Edward" is a robot that his "father" has not yet completed. Most of his body has been completed, but his arms can only be replaced with a pair of scissors. He lives alone in a castle, isolated from the world, with a pale face, insect like scars crawling on his face, black and stiff hair, and a black leather jacket covering his entire body. The entire character's appearance is out of place compared to ordinary movie protagonists. Tim Burton, on the other hand, endows the character of Edward Scissorhands with an extremely pure and innocent heart and a kind and warm personality that is different from ordinary people. Just like Tim Burton's 1982 film 'Vincent', the images of Edward Scissorhands and Vincent are almost identical, or it can also be said that Vincent and Tim Burton have similar childhood experiences, and Edward is a later version to express the passionate and kind heart hidden deep in his lonely heart.

In "Scissorhands Edward", Gothic dogs are also reflected in it. Edward used his natural scissor hands to repair the fur of his neighbor's pet dog, which was shaped into a postmodern style image. These gothic dogs can also be found in "Little Scientist" and "Zombie Bride", with their fur designed in various gothic styles, appearing in the movies to showcase their image.

In the movie "The Barber Todd", Tim Burton's portrayal of Todd also has a strong Gothic style. Beethoven's messy black hair mixed with a strand of white hair, red eye circles, sunken eye sockets, pale face, Todd presented the posture of a devil avenger from head to toe. It is worth mentioning that the actor who plays Barber Todd and Scissorhands Edward is the same person - Johnny Depp, who combines gloom, sensitivity, personality, innocence, and sexiness.

The appearance of Edward in "Scissorhands Edward" has made more audiences recognize and appreciate Tim Burton's Gothic style characters. This film embodies the symbols that Gothic cinema should have, such as castles, weirdoes, bizarre events, and more. Edward is a strange person with scissor hands who came to the town and was welcomed by everyone. However, those scissor hands still hurt people, and people began to reject and fear Edward. Eventually, Edward gained everyone's recognition and helped everyone with their hair. However, when an unexpected incident occurred, once the harm appeared in the community, Edward was rejected by people and could only return to his dark and lonely castle again. If the film ends here, it can be said to be a sad and depressing movie. However, Tim Burton did not end the story, but gave this dark world a happy ending, just like everyone, no matter how dark the heart is, there is always a gap that allows sunlight to shine in.

In "Zombie Bride", the zombie bride appears from a withered tree branch in the dark night, with her hair covering her face. There are signs of decay on her face and body, and her veil is torn and tattered. Her wedding dress also has aged blood stains and holes, clearly symbolizing abnormal death. The male protagonist Victor also has a pale face, deep dark circles under his eyes, a thin face, a frail figure, and a feeling of vulnerability, with a gloomy temperament. As for the other characters in the movie, they are

either exaggeratedly obese or exaggeratedly thin and weak, like hemp poles. The whole movie is completely immersed in a black, gloomy, and terrifying atmosphere, as if there is no glimmer of light.

## 2. Gothic audio-visual Language

Gothic architecture is a pillar of environment and tone in Burton's films, establishing that the story is destined to be dramatic. Architecture is used to support the environment in which the story takes place, the environment is used to reflect the characters' psychology, and the characters' psychology is used to elevate the meaning of "cult" films. In Tim Burton's films, audiences can easily see buildings full of Gothic style. In the movie "Scissorhands Edward", Edward lives in a dark, gloomy, dilapidated, dirty, and abandoned Gothic castle, while the defeated castle is opposite to a sunny, clean, tidy, and orderly residential community. It is not difficult to see that the contrast between the two buildings reflects Edward's warmth and humanity, despite his seemingly indifferent appearance; the orderly and even planned monotonous community reflects the conservative, worldly wise, devoid of personality, and rarely affectionate warmth of the residents. For example, the narrow alleys, medieval castles, palaces, and churches built in works such as "Sleepy Hollow", "The Barber Todd", and "Zombie Bride" are a must see symbol in Tim Burton's films. Tim Burton has a power that reminds audiences of his movies whenever they see Gothic architecture. The existence of all Gothic buildings showcases the pervasive aesthetic features of Gothic through the lens and images. These buildings are often important emotional outlets and overall atmospheric displays in movies, showcasing Gothic style to the audience through the lens.

Music is an important medium for listening to language in movies, and Tim Burton's Gothic films use typical Gothic music to enhance the atmosphere. Gothic music has obvious anti traditional characteristics, opposing the existing musical forms of classical music, and its musical themes are mostly against European orthodox morality and Christian traditional religious beliefs; Music often praises darkness and the dark personality traits of indifference, ruthlessness, jealousy, and cruelty in human nature; Faced with death, Gothic music considers it a symbol of beauty; Music melody processing often uses low, dull, and oppressive melodies to create a cold and ruthless music world.

When extreme tension is portrayed in "Sleepy Hollow", the rapid rhythm of the violin portrays the panic of people being chased by the Headless Horseman, while the playing of horns and drums slows down the rhythm, but it shapes the Headless Horseman's powerful sense of control over people, creating a terrifying atmosphere for the film. The music at the beginning of the movie "Zombie Bride" is low and distinct from the upcoming wedding, creating a tense and chilly atmosphere; the camera went underground, and although the scene was even darker, it used upbeat and emotionally charged music, fermenting the emotions of the male and female protagonists. The music complemented the plot perfectly; At the end of the film, the music is full of warmth, making the audience believe in the power

of love again. This is how Tim Burton cleverly uses music to give the audience a happy and surprising feeling.

In “Barber Todd”, Todd coldly and ruthlessly cuts his razor across his throat, spilling blood all over. At this moment, the music is a typical duet, creating a cold and gloomy atmosphere. At the beginning of the movie, “Edward Scissorhands” is accompanied by a desolate castle, and the music is low and oppressive, establishing the heavy tone of the entire film. When Mrs. Ampere, a cosmetics salesman, accidentally discovers a castle, the background music appears mysterious and novel, revealing Edward’s world and the process of his discovery. In the eyes of outsiders, this is a haunted castle, but when its true face is revealed, it is just a dilapidated dwelling, waiting for a lonely and helpless fragile young man.

The clever combination of music and visuals, Gothic architecture, Gothic music, and Gothic editing shots, together form the artistic style characteristics of Gothic. Tim Burton uses music to portray the atmosphere of the film, uses Gothic music to drive the development of the plot, uses Gothic music to shape the characters’ images, and expresses the director’s own inner world.

### 3. Gothic Theme

In literary works, Gothic themes are portrayed, and authors shape demons, vampires, and witches to tell stories full of bloody terrorism or mysticism through their images, in order to stimulate the audience’s imagination from a textual perspective. To showcase the Gothic theme in a movie, what is presented to the audience is a story. Through this Gothic story, the audience discovers the Gothic theme in the movie through a unique story.

In “Scissorhands Edward”, Edward’s world is a dark Gothic world, but when he walks out of the castle, he sees another organized, serious, and even somewhat monotonous community. This community has changed its previous gloom before the film. It presents a seemingly peaceful and happy ordinary community life, with the colors of the community treated with vintage tones, such as blue sky, white clouds, apartments, lawns etc., appearing in the eyes of the audience. However, the use of these elemental symbols further highlights the boredom, silence, rigidity, and uniformity of traditional middle-class society. In such a community, every household has a well maintained lawn, a hardworking husband who goes out to work, a blonde housewife, and two children, a man and a woman.

When Edward, who possessed these scissor hands, appeared, he was out of place with the environment. This sharp contrast in style often appears in Tim’s movies. Edward, who has scissor hands, falls in love with a beautiful girl. The reason why this film is called a fairy tale is because its plot has rich imagination and fantasy. The difference is that fairy tales are always beautiful and there are not so many realities to face. And “Edward Scissorhands” marks reality fiercely in the fantasy and beauty of fairy tales, adding a strong Gothic atmosphere. The castle in the fairy tale has become a dilapidated

castle, and the people living inside are not princes and princesses, nor are they kind and simple. From this perspective, it can be said that Edward Scissorhands, who lived in fairy tales, walked into reality. When fairy tales clashed with reality, it was the moment when Tim Burton's Gothic fairy tales showed the biggest difference from ordinary fairy tales, and of course, the tragedy arrived.

The majority of the film in "The Barber Todd" is still dominated by dark tones, as Todd carries out his revenge plan in the Gothic town under the never-ending dark clouds. Only when talking about Todd's past and recalling scenes of his wife and daughter living together, does the film sweep away the dark tones and present a warm and sunny golden hue. In Tim Burton's other films such as "Alice in Wonderland" and "The Big Fish", although the overall style is not so Gothic, in some scenes, such as Alice walking into the forest, we see Tim's usual Gothic art style again.

Tim Burton's works combine cartoon characters and Gothic style. This makes Tim's Gothic always close to fairy tales. Tim Burton's films are mostly full of fantastic imagination, including some animated works. Among them, "Zombie Bride" is one of the Gothic style animated films, which is classified as a horror movie, but the same audience can still clearly feel the pure warmth from the protagonist Emily. Viewers generally believe that animation colors should be fresh and bright, and character designs must be cute or beautiful. However, the protagonist of "Zombie Bride" is a group of skeletons, and the scene is dark and gray. The protagonist is a group of skull bones, but the story is as beautiful and moving as a fairy tale. The story of a deceased bride who pursued love with simplicity and purity, and ultimately let go of love. The fairy tale that audiences are accustomed to is a love story between a princess and a prince, while in Tim Burton's movies, it can be a love story between zombies and living people. The grid by grid puppet blockbuster "Zombie Bride" contains many elements such as strangeness, creativity, fairy tales, black humor, commercial plot, gorgeous music and song and dance, etc. For example, the scene of Victor and Emily playing the piano in the film, the passionate sound of the piano and delicate expressions, the movement of the camera and the rhythm of the editing, are full of dramatic power, almost exceeding the limits that can be achieved by live performances. Such a film with rich and complex elements may be Tim's unique black fairy tale.

Movies are Tim Burton's means of expressing his personal beliefs, always conveying his evil fairy tale heart to the audience. Fairy tales often give us beautiful stories, where heroes always win and villains have no happy endings. When you watch Tim Burton's fairy tales, you unconsciously fall in love with the villainous characters because the audience understands that good people are also bad people, and bad people are not necessarily good people. Tim Burton uses the bright colors of fairy tales to further beautify good people, elevate bad people, and ultimately establish his own style. This is not a disappointing movie, it is just Tim Burton's unchanging style.

## References

- Chen, Z. H. (2016). Interpreting the Art of Ugliness in Tim Burton's Films. *Film Literature*, (05).
- Guo, Y. (2010). Tim Burton: Interpreter of Author Films and Genre Films. Chongqing University.
- Lin, L. (2020). On the Gothic Style of Tim Burton's Films. *Drama House*, (30).
- Wang, S. (2013). On Expressionism in Tim Burton's Films. *Drama House (First Half)*, (05).
- Yu, M. (2017). On Tim Burton's American Black Film. *Film Literature*, (11).
- Zhang, W. S. (2017). On the Gothic Character Images in Tim Burton's Films. *News Research Guide*, (05).
- Zhi, C., & Liang, M. (2011). On Tim Burton's Gothic Films. *Film Literature*, (03).