

Is He or Isn't He? A Close Textual Analysis of the Auteur Theory and the Works of Tim Burton

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*ABSTRACT: Tim Burton's Beetlejuice (1988), Edward Scissorhands (1990), and Batman Returns (1992) successfully illustrate Burton's tendency to use influences of German Expressionism, mise-en-scene, and chiaroscuro lighting effects, even through the clear shift in genre. By analyzing these characteristics in Burton's most arguably popular masterpieces, I am able to identify what exactly makes Burton an auteur, and how. The three premises of the auteur theory as criterion of value are: technical competence, personal style, and interior meaning. These three premises are equally represented through Burton's work, leading him to be identified as a true auteur, and one of the most creative directors of his generation.*

"Mr. and Mrs. Maitland? Hello? Where are you?" calls Lydia, slowly walking into the attic dressed in black, with a black veil over her face, over to Adam's tiny scale-model of their small New England town. "Dead. Dead, dead, dead-ski," responds a miniature Betelgeuse, sitting in a lounge chair on the porch of Dante's Inferno Room under a couple of red-tinted lights. He has made himself at home in the town replica, linking the Maitlands' house to the underworld through the miniature cemetery. "Of course they're dead, they're ghosts," says Lydia. Betelgeuse answers, "No, I mean they're gone, split, outta here, afterlife kids, deceased." Pulling back her veil, Lydia asks Betelgeuse, "Are you a ghost too?" Betelgeuse says with a sleazy smile on his face, "I'm the ghost with the most, babe." Taking off his tanning goggles, Betelgeuse takes one look at Lydia in her all-black ensemble and says, "You know? You look like somebody I can relate to. Maybe you could, maybe you could help me get out of here, you know? Cause, I gotta tell ya, this death thing-," Betelgeuse stops mid-sentence to squish a beetle with his hand and bite its head off, "-it's just too creepy." Going on to talk about how he needs to get out of the underworld, when Lydia responds with, "I want to get in," Betelgeuse looks at her like she has three heads, asking, "why?" (*Beetlejuice* 1:07:16-1:08:22). This scene of horror comedy movie *Beetlejuice* is just the beginning to Tim Burton's cinematic world of madness and the supernatural.

As a child, Tim Burton was obsessed with horror films. In 2012, the film director did an interview for *Interview Magazine* with Danny Elfman, a composer that Burton has worked with on almost all of his movies. The two close friends began to talk about Burton's childhood fascination with horror movies. Burton said, "I never really got nightmares from movies. I was much more terrified by my own family and real life, you know?" (Elfman). Burton's fear of the real world heightened his ability to come up with the absurd. His films feature outsiders: The guy with scissors for hands. The girl who can see ghosts. The half penguin-half human. Themes of darkness and mystery are continually expressed in Burton's films; they represent a part of him.

Burton was a strange kid who never seemed to fit in with societal norms, and many of his characters reflect that. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Burton said, "Things that I grew up with stay with me. You start a certain way, and then you spend your whole life trying to find a certain simplicity that you had. It's less about staying in childhood than keeping a certain spirit of seeing things in a different way" (Itzkoff). His life has been influential in the creation of his productions, and his different view of life is represented in his works; most of his films are relative to each other in dark themes and creepy style, despite the change in genre. Elfman wrote that Burton's film style is "a delicate balance of sadness, humor, and horror that matches his eye for gothic beauty and mythical surrealism" (Elfman). These themes of horror and strangeness can be found in *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *Batman Returns* (1992). Particularly in the freakish characters of Lydia Deetz, Edward Scissorhands, and the Penguin. Burton has stuck to a consistent personal style and artistic vision for the majority of his work, despite a fluctuation in genre.

Andrew Sarris was the first to bring the word "auteur" into American film critics' vocabulary. According to Richard Brody, in an article on Sarris for *The New Yorker*, auteurs are

filmmakers who “exert the same artistic control on (and bear the same moral responsibility for) their film as a writer does for a book, and can therefore be considered the ‘author’ of a film” (Brody). Tim Burton is an auteur due to the fact that his influences of German Expressionism, use of mise-en-scene and chiaroscuro translate throughout his early films, specifically *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands*, and *Batman Returns*. All three aspects of film correlate with Andrew Sarris’ criterion of value for auteurism: technical competence, personal style, and interior meaning (Sarris 43). In Burton’s three films from 1988 to 1992, however there is a switch of genre from dark comedy to superhero, but he still manages to keep the same distinguishable style and themes.

After watching Tim Burton’s three films *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands* and *Batman Returns*, I recognized so many similarities between them. This led me to my research question: Is Tim Burton considered a true auteur based on these three films from 1988 to 1992? What film techniques and personal inspirations led Burton to keep the same artistic vision throughout his work as a director? Influences of German Expressionism, chiaroscuro lighting and specific use of mise-en-scene led me to my answer, despite the change in genre from horror comedy to superhero. Based solely on his three wildly popular films ranging from 1988 to 1992, Tim Burton is an auteur by means of theme, technique, and personal style.

### **Literature Review**

Ideas from Andrew Sarris and Peter Wollen on the auteur theory, Brian Ray’s take on *Edward Scissorhands*, Helena Bassil-Morozow’s perspective of Burton’s idea of outsiders, and Sabine Hake’s deep analysis of German Expressionism all lead to the same answer: based on his early films, Tim Burton is considered to be a true auteur.

The auteur theory, also known as the “politique des auteurs,” has never had a very specific definition. According to Peter Wollen, “it could be interpreted and applied on rather broad lines” (55). An auteur is an artist who controls and puts their time and energy into making a creative work with others, like an author. The auteur theory, involves figuring out which film directors are auteurs, and why. There are two main categories of auteur critics: those who “insisted on a core of meanings, of thematic motifs” and those who emphasize “style and mise en scene” (Wollen 56). The work of an auteur, a filmmaker whose style is so embedded into their films that they are considered authors, is not “purely formal,” or just traditional or conventional (Wollen 56). To identify an auteur, you must identify what connects their work, making it all fit together. Being able to identify an auteur by their work is what makes them so great at creating art; their own vision is in the art, even if they are not all the same genre.

Wollen utilizes the work of Howard Hawks, a director of many Hollywood films who only made one critically acclaimed film award throughout his entire career, to define an auteur. Hawks has films in almost every genre, with almost all of his films exhibiting “the same thematic preoccupations, the same recurring motifs and incidents, the same visual style and tempo” (Wollen 57). Looking at all of these different aspects of a film helps to define what an auteur is, because auteurs may include them in all of their films. Directors can create films that are seemingly very different at first glance, but really have the same base. Wollen also argues that it could be easier to identify “lesser directors” as auteurs because their films have a noticeable constant, something that connects them (63). On the other hand, “the great directors must be defined in terms of shifting relations, in their singularity as well as their uniformity” (Wollen 63). Great directors utilize much more complex and elaborate tools to create their films, and you must look deeper into why their films are individual and unique, or why they conform

with other films to truly figure out whether or not they are considered an auteur. Wollen points out that the director does not have complete control over his films. There are other people who work just as hard on them, like producers, cameramen, and actors. Wollen writes, "This explains why the auteur theory involves a kind of decipherment, decryptment" (63). The director is only one part of the creation of a film, although he or she is the one who has the most influence on the outcome of the film. Both Peter Wollen and Andrew Sarris have analyzed the auteur theory, all while giving it their own definition.

Similarly, themes of a film can be recognized by a profound analysis of the film itself. Brian Ray dives deep into the films of Tim Burton. He writes about *Edward Scissorhands*, *Sleepy Hollow*, and *Corpse Bride*, comparing and contrasting them to common fairy tales. Ray writes, "American filmmaker Tim Burton has, for nearly two decades, performed potent countermagic to Hollywood's syrupy adaptations of fairy tales and fables" (198). Ray calls Burton a "visionary and 'slightly twisted' auteur" when describing him, which shows that he believes Tim Burton is, in fact, an auteur (Ray 198). Ray goes into detail when analyzing *Edward Scissorhands*, comparing it to the fairy tale "Beauty and the Beast." He writes, "Burton's interpretation of the tale type may seem haphazard, but it possesses a surprising degree of complexity, upsetting many social conventions and gender preconceptions" (Ray 200). Burton does this with many of his films, making his main character an outsider who does not fit in with society.

Along the theme of outsiders, Helena Bassil-Morozow sums up a lot of Tim Burton's films in one phrase, the "artistic Western individualists who fight against the tenets of the bland, unimaginative, provincial or metropolitan middle-class mentality" (Bassil-Morozow ix). The characters that Burton classifies as monsters are those who want to live a separate lifestyle from

the society they are in: a bohemian, a goth, a punk, an artist or an anarchist (Bassil-Morozow ix). Bassil-Morozow's idea of the monster and the crowd has been analyzed repeatedly, but she believes it is deeper than just someone rebelling for personal freedom. Bassil-Morozow analyzes the conflict of the monster and the crowd and how Burton uses that to create his films.

Bassil-Morozow wants to know the answer to this question: how is it possible to live in a society where you feel you do not belong? Going through Burton's films, Bassil-Morozow analyzes the characters that belong in these categories: the child, the monster, the superhero, the genius, the maniac, and the monstrous society. By looking at these characters in Burton's films, she gathers that he makes films about "the mad, creative monsters and the 'normal' people in the crowd" (Bassil-Morozow ix). Burton's films are undeniably clear, but "emotionally deep" (Bassil-Morozow 5). Anyone can understand what they mean, and she writes, "Tim Burton developed a unique personal style whose essence can be described as 'grand effect by simple means'" (Bassil-Morozow 5). She believes that Burton is more of a *mise-en-scene* director than a cinematic one, creating visually appealing scenes that are what make his films his own, which tie into the clear influences of German Expressionism, as described by film scholar Sabine Hake.

Sabine Hake writes about *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and how this German film has inspired many films beyond its release. She writes, "In narrative terms, the story translates the anxieties and resentments of the war and postwar years into specific melodramatic constellations. The appearance of a stranger destroys the appearance of harmony and order" (Hake 322). An outsider, in this case, has disrupted the flow of normalcy in an average town's everyday life. She goes on to talk about the Expressionist imagination, and that "the precarious relationship between knowledge and power and the disturbing similarities between magic/sorcery and cinema must be considered central" to it (Hake 322). German Expressionism

is based on the art and film that resulted from the fears and anxieties during the time of the First World War. Those artists and filmmakers who lived during this time created works that represented how they felt: scared. She writes about how Expressionism as a whole is a “reflection of social reality” (Hake 322). Living through the war caused artists and filmmakers to reflect their experiences into their work.

Hake writes mostly about the films that came from the Expressionist movement, and how the film techniques were all related to the fear of the war. In one section, she writes about the poster that advertised for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and how it had “flat surfaces, simple shapes, and intense colors” (Hake 327). Expressionism inspires filmmakers and artists to use similar film techniques to those used on the poster. There were also aspects of the poster that directly identify with Expressionism, like sharp angles, diagonal lines, and stark contrasts (Hake 327). Later, Hake writes about how characteristics of Expressionism revolve around “the crisis of masculinity and the dangers of female sexuality,” as well as “its fascination with madness” and violence (330). With highly stylized costumes and makeup, Expressionist films involve the crisis of masculinity and over sexualize the female counterparts. Furthermore, Expressionist films have strong affinities with “the fantastic, the grotesque, the occult, and the supernatural” (Hake 331). The use of these themes of fantasy and madness are extremely common in films that are inspired by German Expressionism.

In the films themselves, greater abstraction and greater expressiveness are often featured. Greater abstraction is the use of “dark backdrops and flat spaces, highly symbolic use of objects, [and] graphic approach to sets and costumes,” while greater expressiveness is “through exaggerated gestures and movements” (Hake 333). *Mise-en-scene* and *chiaroscuro* are commonly used film techniques that appear in films inspired by German Expressionism, as well



as a specific type of architecture. Hake writes that, “elements of Expressionist filmmaking such as oblique angles, false perspectives, graphic distortions, and the selective addition of color” are important, as well as extremely common (335). These angles, distortions and strange colors are key in Expressionist film architecture, creating a setting or scene that represents the main character of the film: the outsider. Hake goes on to write more about the outsider who threatens the “rule of reason in modern civilization” (337). Many Expressionist films are focused on a character who upsets the equilibrium in the world around them, someone so different from the rest. Expressionist films are easily recognized by their lighting, acting, setting, and themes; Hake recognizes and describes in detail each and every one of these aspects of film and how they relate to films inspired by German Expressionism.

Wollen, Ray, Bassil-Morozow, and Hake all have different perspectives of the auteur theory and Tim Burton, but the work of the five scholars give enough knowledge and in-depth information for one to relate the two subjects.

### **Methodology**

I decided to use close textual analysis to allow me to pinpoint the specific characteristics of Tim Burton's three films *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), and *Batman Returns* (1992) that identify Burton as an auteur. I chose these three films because they are close together, all released within a four-year period, and are three of Burton's best films. *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands*, and *Batman Returns* all have a persisting Burton-esque style, despite the fact that there is a shift in genre between them. Burton's twist on the two original stories, *Beetlejuice* and *Edward Scissorhands* clearly represent his personal style, but the fact that blockbuster *Batman Returns* also represents his distinct style is what intrigued me in the first place. By looking at three of Burton's films that support Andrew Sarris' theory, I have been able

to identify certain styles, genres, and themes in his films that confirm Burton as an auteur. Influences of German Expressionist film, chiaroscuro lighting, and certain use of mise-en-scene have allowed me to pinpoint the exact criterion that can identify why Burton is considered an auteur, based on his three films from 1988 until 1992. The auteur theory has three premises that are required to be fulfilled by directors in order for them to be considered for auteur status. Technical competence, personal style, and interior meaning all combine to constitute the qualifications of auteurism.

## **Analysis**

### Andrew Sarris' Auteur Theory

The auteur theory is a particular method used by critics to recognize a director's recurring signature style throughout their filmography. Andrew Sarris was "officially credited" with "bringing the words auteur, auteurism, and auterist into the English language" (Sarris 21). He introduced the theory to America in 1962, changing the name from the French "politique des auteurs" to the popular namesake today. Before Sarris, there was no definition of the auteur theory in the English language. Difficult to define, the auteur theory in Sarris' words, "claims neither the gift of prophecy nor the option of extracinematic perception. Directors, even *auteurs*, do not always run true to form, and the critic can never assume that a bad director will always make a bad film" (Sarris 42). Basically, this theory allows critics to recognize a good director, but it does not fully define what a good director is. A bad director will not always create a bad film, and vice versa. An auteur is the "author" of a film, usually a director, who puts forth their artistic vision into a film, which in turn can be recognized as their own amongst their other works. By focusing more on the film itself, Sarris discovered that he is able to identify connections within a director's work, and whether or not the director is considered an auteur.

Sarris describes himself as an auteurist, and he knows how to identify an auteur by analyzing their films. Sarris writes, "auteurism is and always has been more a tendency than a theory, more a mystique than a methodology, more an editorial policy than an aesthetic procedure" (29). This means that in his eyes, the auteur theory is not really a theory as it is a "mystique," meaning something that is unknown to those without the correct knowledge, and the auteur theory is only recognized by auteurists and film critics because they know what to look for. By analyzing the aspects of film and the themes that are profoundly common through a director's work, one is able to identify whether or not that director is an auteur.

According to Sarris, the auteur theory has three premises. The first premise of the theory is "the technical competence of a director as a criterion of value" (Sarris 43). This means that part of a director's value is based on their skillset in filmmaking. If a director does not have technical competence, they may not be considered a good director. The second premise is "the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value" (Sarris 43). A director's value depends on whether or not their style is recognizable to audiences. Sarris writes, "over a group of films, a director must exhibit a certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature" (Sarris 43). He goes on to talk about how American directors have more pressure on their work because most of American cinema is commissioned, meaning that films are created to make money. They put more of their artistic style into the visual content than the literary content of their films. Because of this, a director's value is based significantly on what audiences see on-screen. What they see on the screen expresses a director's distinguishable personality.

A director whose work is recognizably their own will climb the ladder of "good" directors, according to the auteur theory. As their work becomes more distinguishable as their own, their status in the cinematic world will rise higher. The third premise of the auteur theory

has to do with “interior meaning, the ultimate glory of cinema as an art,” meaning that the interior of a film, similar to the mise-en-scene, brings together the personality of a film, and thus the personality of the director behind such film (Sarris 43). The mise-en-scene of a film is anything put in front of the camera; the set, the costumes, and the lighting. These visual conditions are what the director wants the audience to see. The auteur theory depends on these three aspects of a film: the technique, the personal style, and the interior meaning (Sarris 43). An auteur is a director whose work is identifiable through their technique, personal style, and interior meaning of their filmography.

Tim Burton is one of the most distinctive and creative directors of his generation. As an established filmmaker, Burton applies certain themes of strangeness and eccentricity to his work. Burton’s “trademark Gothic touch also features across his favoured genre mix of horror, drama, comedy and fantasy. Even when working with more family-friendly stories, Burton employs a level of sophistication and pathos that gives those films genuine appeal for both children and adults” (Brammer 79). With *Beetlejuice* and *Edward Scissorhands* as dark comedies (horror comedies) and *Batman Returns* as a superhero/action movie, Burton still manages to keep his distinctive style running through all three films, despite the change in genre. Even on the advertising posters for the films, the distinct connection between the three films is clear. The posters for *Edward Scissorhands* and *Beetlejuice* have the same color scheme of purple and black, with muted tones, while *Batman Returns* has more of a comic book feel to it, with the faces of the three main characters all centered and the main focus. Despite these small differences, the posters still represent one another, and especially Burton and his outlandish sense of style.

The auteur theory is based on a director's technique, personal style, and interior meaning. Burton's films incorporate his unique styles, whether that is the influence of German Expressionism, the specificity of the mise-en-scene, or very precise lighting. Sabine Hake writes, "the Expressionist movement must be described as an artistic response to a fundamental crisis in the institutions of power and the organization of culture, a crisis that had culminated in the bloodshed of the First World War" (325). Influences of German Expressionism are extremely common in Burton's films, and these all revolve around death, fear, insanity, and anything that could have stemmed from German art before the First World War. The trauma of the war affected those who lived through it, and created a "more anxious, troubled, pessimistic tone" (Hake 326). Expressionism is clearly what has influenced Burton to use themes of madness and violence, as well as the "crisis of masculinity and the danger of female sexuality" (Hake 330). The crisis of masculinity is clear in Burton's characters of Betelgeuse, Edward Scissorhands, and Penguin. The dangers of female sexuality are clear in the way that Betelgeuse tries to marry Lydia Deetz, a teenager, Joyce's attempted seduction of Edward, and Penguin's clear lack of boundaries with the women he comes in contact with.

Mise-en-scene is the actual design of a film, what is purposefully put in front of the camera in order to successfully tell a story, more specifically setting, costume and makeup, lighting, and the acting itself. Chiaroscuro, which is the strong contrast between light and dark, is mostly used in different types of art, film included. Hake writes, "many film histories credit the Expressionist film for cultivating the art of chiaroscuro lighting, which distinguishes foreground and background and highlights features and objects, and, in doing so, animates and mobilizes negative space" (335). These Burton-esque themes have been recognizable to audiences throughout the 35 years that he has been creating movies, whether the film is an original, an

adaptation, or a sequel, leading him to become identified as a well-known auteur. According to Weinstock, Burton's films are full of the Gothic tradition, "but they do so in the context of films that persistently undercut the horror of the Gothic mode through humor and sentimentality" (26). Burton creates his films of the horror-comedy and superhero genres in a way that is more funny than scary, and makes the viewer feel attached to the characters.

The first premise of the auteur theory is the technical competence of the director, and Burton sticks to the same technical style in his films for the first decade or so of his journey in filmmaking. He includes stop-motion animation, claymation, and similar camera techniques, especially when starting off a film. *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands*, and *Batman Returns* all have extremely similar opening scenes, with the camera panning over a town or a mansion and similar music playing to set the scene for the rest of the film. Burton focuses deeply on mise-en-scene for *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands*, and *Batman Returns*, making them both visually appealing and symbolic through setting and extremely specific makeup and style of costuming. Burton "lovingly explores Americana within his films' settings, whether in suburbia, small towns or cities," and he expresses this throughout the majority of his films (Brammer 79).

Burton also focuses a lot on chiaroscuro lighting effects, and maintains similar lighting throughout all three films, whether that is high-key or low-key. The second premise is the distinguishable personality of the auteur. Burton's style is easily recognizable to audiences with his German influences (greater abstraction and greater expressiveness), themes of death and his quirky style. The third premise is the interior meaning of a director's work, and throughout these three movies, Burton identifies the main character as an outsider, someone who disrupts the flow of normalcy in the world around them. According to Brammer, "Thematically, Burton depicts characters on the edge of society who are somehow different... and approaches them with love

and humour as they find their place in the world” (88). *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands*, and *Batman Returns* all have specific scenes that represent all of the aspects of film that identify Tim Burton as a true auteur.

### ***Beetlejuice***

*Beetlejuice* is a horror-comedy film that is original of its kind. There are no films like it that successfully include animation, musical numbers, the afterlife, and poltergeists. Released in 1988, *Beetlejuice* was ranked #1 and made a total of \$8,030,897 on opening weekend, and won an Academy Award for Makeup (*Box Office Mojo*). Burton's ability to roll so many different aspects of film into one really shows in *Beetlejuice*. Almost every scene throughout the film represents at least one aspect of Burton's signature style.

Based in Connecticut, Adam and Barbara Maitland's hometown is quaint and normal. The Maitlands' lives are comfortably boring, until they die in a car accident on their way home from running errands in town. Burton unsurprisingly inserts a paranormal aspect into the film, and the Maitlands become ghosts that haunt their own home. Confused, they try to figure out what to do to get through this standstill and into the afterlife. Then, Lydia Deetz, a rebellious teenage girl, and her stereotypical New York parents move into the Maitlands' home. The family disrupts the Maitland's lifestyle, adding strange elements of art and decor to their country farmhouse style. The family seems somewhat normal and the Maitlands continue their poltergeist quest of trying to get them out of their home, until they realize Lydia can see them. The Maitland ghosts enlist her in trying to scare her parents away, but cannot do it without the help of Betelgeuse, the real name for the inspiration of the title *Beetlejuice*.

One scene in particular from *Beetlejuice* stands out among the rest. The Deetzes have friends over for dinner, and this just happens to coincide with Barbara and Adam hiring

“freelance bio-exorcist” Betelgeuse (*Beetlejuice* 11:10) to help them get rid of their unwanted house guests. The Deetzes and their guests are enjoying dinner while having awkward small talk, when all of a sudden Delia pauses mid-sentence (*Beetlejuice* 52:35). She starts to mouth the words to “Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)” by Harry Belafonte as the song starts to play. Betelgeuse is behind this entire possession, trying to scare the house guests away. Shocked, Delia has no choice but to mouth the words along to the song as Betelgeuse possesses her to do so. Her guests are confused, especially her husband Charles, until they start to unwillingly dance and sing as well. The only one at the dinner table who is not possessed is Lydia. She watches from the sidelines as her parents and their snobby guests act as puppets and humiliate themselves in front of each other. The dance starts to get more and more absurd, as everyone starts to dance around, confused. The facial expressions tell it all: they have no idea what is going on. As the song is coming to an end, the group sits back down in their seats, and the shrimp from their plates turn into six red, slimy, monstrous hands. Grabbing them all by the face, the shrimp-hands toss them backwards off of their chairs, ending the creepy musical scene (*Beetlejuice* 54:25). Tim Burton adds a weird twist to his movies and though he was not the writer of *Beetlejuice*, this movie is no exception. The best way to describe the character of Betelgeuse is that he is “A mixture of sideshow clown and maniacal zombie” (Brammer 80). This mixture of horror and comedy represents the Burton-esque style that is clear throughout *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands*, and *Batman Returns*. This film, a morbid masterpiece, was created in a way that makes it one-of-a-kind. Horror comedy is already a strange genre, but the film techniques and mise-en-scene that Burton utilizes makes *Beetlejuice* even more original.

The elements in the dinner table possession scene all point towards Burton. With this scene being a ghostly possession with themes of supernatural fear and insanity, Burton’s



influence is clearly Expressionist, with the dissociation of reality in the possession scene. The weird aspects of the supernatural in this scene, with the shrimp hands and the forced dancing, are Burton's way of incorporating Expressionism into the film. The lighting is out of the ordinary; the chiaroscuro of the scene contrasts the shadows in the background with the bright characters sitting around the dining table, to put focus solely on the characters, not on the room behind them. Another aspect of mise-en-scene in *Beetlejuice* is the use of the shrimp hands. Although not really necessary, Burton uses the hands to add to the element of surprise, disgust, and humor. A signature move by Burton, the figment of the supernatural brings audiences back to the film after the unusual musical scene.

Throughout *Beetlejuice* the lighting changes. At the beginning of the film, the lighting is bright, natural and the film is seemingly happy. The Maitlands' home was picture perfect on a hill in Connecticut. The bright colors and high-key lighting portrayed a happy scene, which was what Burton had intended. The film stays this way until the Maitlands tragically pass away, and the film takes a dark turn. Every scene in the afterlife or with Betelgeuse is dark and full of shadows, making the theme of fear and death even more apparent. Burton's decision to use such contrasting lighting makes sense as it goes along with the plotline of the story. The chiaroscuro lighting effect, the contrast between light and dark, is clear and is common in Burton's films, adding to his already recognizable personal style of filmmaking.

While not a film technique that can be seen, music is an aspect of mise-en-scene. The use of music in this film is also interesting; Burton entrusts Danny Elfman, his most trusted composer, with the soundtrack and score for the majority of his films. *Beetlejuice* features two songs by Harry Belafonte, "Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)" and "Jump in the Line," both of which are featured multiple times throughout the movie, non-diegetically. Non-diegetic music is

music that characters cannot hear, that has been edited in for effect after filming. Elfman's choice of song for the dinner table possession is a very fitting song for such an incredibly odd scene, because it is unexpected, much like the rest of the film. Because the characters are able to hear the music, it is diegetic despite the fact that there is no visible source of the sound. This is an abnormal aspect to include in a film; on-screen music that the characters can hear, but is clearly edited in. Although strange, this scene fits into the *mise-en-scene* of *Beetlejuice*, adding to the insanity that is this film because nothing is expected; *Beetlejuice* is a compilation of clever tricks for the audience. Burton's and Elfman's choice to do this is what makes this film so uniquely Burton-esque.

The fact that Burton is able to mix a musical number with a ghostly possession is exactly the reason why *Beetlejuice* is considered to be horror comedy, just like how *Edward Scissorhands* is in the same genre category. The subgenre of horror-comedy is predominantly meant for "getting us to laugh where we might ordinarily scream, or to scream where we might typically laugh, or to alternate between laughing and screaming throughout the duration of the film" (Carroll 145). The musical possession scene in *Beetlejuice* does just this- we laugh when the guests are dancing and scream when the shrimp hands plunge out of the dinner plates. *Edward Scissorhands* does this a little differently, though. Instead of jump scares, there are scenes that are seemingly supposed to scare you or make you sad, but make you laugh instead.

***Edward Scissorhands***

Keeping the same genre of horror comedy, Tim Burton's admiration for the dark and creepy translates over to his films once again through color schemes, contrasting lighting effects, and the influence of German Expressionism in *Edward Scissorhands*. Released in 1990, *Edward*

*Scissorhands* was ranked #3 and made a total of \$6,484,871 on opening weekend (*Box Office Mojo*). It was also nominated for an Academy Award for Makeup.

*Edward Scissorhands* opens with an elderly woman telling her granddaughter a story. As she is telling her the story, the camera sweeps out the window, into the night, and over the small town with a bird's eye view. As the camera seems to be flying over the town, it sweeps upward and a large, dark mansion comes into view. Then, as the viewpoint shifts inside the castle, you can see the whole town from Edward's point of view through his window. The contrast between the town and the mansion becomes clear in the next shot, when the tiny town is shown in daylight, revealing the bright, colorful and carbon-copy life beyond the gates of the dark mansion on the hill (*Edward Scissorhands*, 3:03-5:50).

*Edward Scissorhands* is vibrant, but with dark undertones. The film "was shot mostly in the daytime and is located... in a mostly sunny 1950s American suburb" (Padva 75). The town has same cookie-cutter houses, the same cars and the same people walk around, all doing the same things. The neon houses and colorful setting in the film are purposefully there to accentuate the contrast between Edward, a "beautiful weirdo" (Brammer 82), and the townspeople. His appearance is the complete opposite of everyone around him, as is his mansion. Burton wants to make Edward distinct in order to represent the outsider in this society of normalcy, using specific color schemes and an unusual setting. By identifying the outsider, Burton makes *Edward Scissorhands* easy for audiences to relate to a certain character. By delving deep into Edward's persona and backstory, Burton makes him the ideal protagonist for audiences to feel connected to. Edward is different, and he is labeled as an outsider from the second he steps foot into town. Until he proves himself, he is a spectacle of weirdness, and once he proves to both himself and the townspeople that he is indeed good, then he is adored. Burton's personal style of morbidity

and his taste for the absurd shines through Edward Scissorhands as a character. He is the epitome of an outsider with his scissors for hands, extreme pallor, and inability to converse with those around him.

Mise-en-scene includes acting as a part of “setting the scene” to establish a character’s personality. The mise-en-scene in *Edward Scissorhands* mainly focuses on the personalities of the characters, the color scheme and the theme of Gothic Suburbia. Frequently in his films, Burton tends to make use of Gothic Suburbia, which ties into his tendency to use influences of Expressionism. Sabine Hake analyzes the common theme of the outsider, a main problem in “traditional society” and a threat to civilization (337). The use of suburban gothic in a film is when a seemingly-regular town or city has a gothic feature that contrasts the rest of the area’s normality. Edward and his mansion are these gothic features. Specifically, in *Edward Scissorhands*, the town he lives in is an exaggerated version of a typical American suburban town. The housewives stay home, the husbands go to work, and the children play outside. Everyone drives the same type of car and lives in the same style home, just in different colors. Edward’s gothic mansion and Edward himself are inserted into this boringly average neighborhood, making him a spectacle amongst the neighbors.

With dark settings and Expressionist architecture, *Edward Scissorhands* is a perfect example of a Burton movie inspired by early 1900s German film and art. The influence of German Expressionism is clear with Edward’s mansion. The mansion has almost no color to it, as if it were part of a black and white film. It casts a dark shadow on the town below, making the fortress stand out even more with its strange angles and points. The mansion stands out against the town below it because of the irregularity of the building itself. The only color in the manor is the grounds, which are filled with bright green shrubbery, representing the brightness of

Edward's mind, in contrast with the darkness of his life and appearance. Hake's analysis of Expressionist structures is that filmmaking involves "oblique angles, false perspectives, graphic distortions, and the selective addition of color" (335). Edward's mansion has the complete opposite appearance to the town below it, with pointed Gothic architecture and a type of distorted reality that can only be created through film. The colorful grounds of the manor contrast with the rest of it, adding to the overall ambiguity of the setting.

Burton's use of high-key lighting illuminates almost the entirety of *Edward Scissorhands*. Unless shot in Edward's mansion or in the dark, the scenes in *Edward Scissorhands* are brightly lit. High-key lighting makes sure that there are as few shadows as possibly on faces, and is mainly featured in daytime scenes. By keeping the lighting bright and balanced in the frame of the camera, little to no shadow is present, making the scene that much brighter. This recurrence of high-key lighting can be compared to the beginning of *Beetlejuice*, before the Maitlands die and everything goes awry. Every outdoor scene in *Edward Scissorhands* is brightly lit, almost unnaturally because there are very few shadows during the daytime. When inside, the lighting is more natural, making the scene more realistic. The use of chiaroscuro, the contrast of the bright lighting and the dark shadows, is extremely Burton-esque. The lighting effects tie into Burton's advanced technical competence, and demonstrates that he knows how to use lighting to change a scene. If any of the darker scenes had been filmed with high-key lighting, the outcome would be very different. Burton's specific use of contrasting lighting only accentuates his story, making the meaning behind them more clear.

For example, a scene in *Edward Scissorhands* that uses all high-key lighting is when Edward starts to discover who he is, and what he is in this town to do: make people happy. Edward is outside, trimming a hedge into the shape of a 50s-style woman, dress and all. Between

a pale pink house and a teal-colored house with a woman watering her lawn, Edward is working quickly and quietly, with the only sound coming from his scissors on the hedge. A big, fluffy white dog is relaxing near where Edward is working, and while the woman watering her grass is not watching, Edward starts to give the dog a haircut. With the camera at the view point of the dog, Edward clips and cuts, with fur flying up and into the foreground of the scene. Just out of view of the woman and the camera behind the garage of the pink house, Edward is working on this dog, with tufts of hair flying around. Once again, the only sound to be heard is the faint spray of the water hose, and Edward's intense sound of the scissors. Once he is finished, the dog runs around the side of the house toward its owner, and the woman is ecstatic. Edward watches her reaction with a smile on his face, listening to her compliment him and the dog. Squealing with happiness, the woman says, "Alexis? Oh, this can't possibly be my Alexis! She looks so beautiful! Look at you! She's gorgeous, thank you!" (*Edward Scissorhands* 47:37-48:34). Edward sees how much the woman loves the haircut he gave to her dog, and realizes this is what he should be doing. He just wants to please those around him.

The lighting in this scene is high-key, with almost no shadows apparent to the camera. The pastel colored homes, landscape and costumes contrast deeply with Edward and his two-toned outfit, black spikey hair, and scissors for hands. This lighting choice complements the film, making the happier scenes even more bright and colorful, while the more intense scenes are filmed in the dark, or more natural-toned lighting, mostly indoors. The lighting and color scheme choices of *Edward Scissorhands* give Burton the upper hand in film techniques, leading him to be known as one influenced by Expressionist films, while still keeping his personal style.

### ***Batman Returns***

Although Burton switches over to the superhero/action genre, he continues to include the same personal style and artistic vision in *Batman Returns* as his two previous films. Released in 1992, *Batman Returns* did better than both *Beetlejuice* and *Edward Scissorhands* on opening weekend, with a rank of #1 and a total of \$45,687,711 in revenue (*Box Office Mojo*). It was also nominated for two Academy Awards in Makeup and Visual Effects.

The superhero genre is extremely common, especially with DC and Marvel films. The superhero genre has always been popular, and still is today. This genre is so common because “the monster is an amorphous and ambiguous manifestation of social values, representing fear and revulsion of a cultural Other” (McGunnigle 110). Fans of DC and Marvel comics are intrigued by this, and fans of Burton’s films are as well. *Batman Returns* is very different from *Beetlejuice* and *Edward Scissorhands* production-wise. By taking on a DC Comics project, Burton proves that he can draw in audiences from such a large fan base, all while maintaining his own personal techniques and styles to make it his own. As a big-budget blockbuster, *Batman Returns* varies from its predecessors but still manages to keep the same Burton feel to it. One review of *Batman Returns* from 1994 said, “To recycle is to reuse that which has already been, in a sense, used up. The refurbishing of the old to create the new appears to be a miraculous reversal of the power of decay” (Bernardo 16). Burton has taken an old story, of Batman, and turned it around into something new and exciting- a story of outsiders in society.

*Batman Returns* may not be a Burton original, but it definitely includes some Burton-esque aspects. The lighting effects, the mise-en-scene, and the dark influences of German Expressionism are once again clear in this film. Even from the start, Burton’s macabre outlook is clear with the opening scene of *Batman Returns*. The film starts off with the camera slowly creeping towards a gate that says “Cobblepot,” and continues on towards the mansion beyond

that gate. Sweeping up to look through a window, a man is standing and staring out towards the night with a cigarette in his mouth. The sound of a woman giving birth in the background does not seem to faze him, until she starts to scream. Turning around, the camera starts to move through the mansion's hallway and into a room where a nurse and a butler come running out of. A child's shrill cries can be heard while the man walks towards the room. He enters the room, and screams in horror. The film cuts to the next scene, with the same man staring out the window, but now he is joined by his wife. They both turn around to look at what seems to be a baby's crib, but it is fully enclosed with bars on the small opening in the front. They both just stare at the caged crib with a cat walking around the crib. This abnormal baby is shaking the crib and the camera cuts to the point of view from inside the crib-cage. The view of the baby is that of a prisoner, bars on the window, with the world outside. As the baby starts to reach its hand out of the cage, it grabs the white cat, pulls it inside, and the camera cuts back to the parents' point of view (*Batman Returns* 0:19-1:07).

The couple exchange a somber look, throw back their martinis, and put their new baby in an all-black carriage. Walking down a snowy path to a bridge, the couple pass another happy-looking pair with their baby carriage going for a night walk and pretend as though they are not about to rid themselves of their own child. Looking around to see if anyone can see them, the couple throw the locked up carriage over a bridge into the icy river below and they watch as their unwanted child floats away from them (*Batman Returns* 1:20-2:30). This child ends up being the Penguin, whose life started and ended in the sewers. This scene in particular is interesting, because it sets the scene for the rest of the film. Burton starts off the film with parents who reject their child, leaving him to die alone. Similar to *Beetlejuice* and *Edward Scissorhands*, the start of *Batman Returns* makes viewers want to keep watching to see what comes of the characters that



are focused on in the beginning of the films. The Maitlands die and Edward is introduced as a “monster,” just like Penguin is. This scene is a clear example of what makes Burton an auteur. His tendency to focus on the outsider is what makes him unique. *Batman Returns* is part of a bigger, more widely known franchise, but Burton's take on it is what makes this interesting. Instead of focusing on Batman, he focuses on Penguin and the other “outsider” in *Batman Returns*, Catwoman. Like the other two films, Burton targets those who struggle to fit in with the rest, like Edward Scissorhands and Lydia Deetz.

The lighting used in *Batman Returns* is very similar to that of Edward Scissorhands' mansion. Shadows saturate these scenes, with faces illuminated for dramatic effect. Chiaroscuro is a common lighting effect used by Burton in his films in order to accentuate the darker-themed scenes. The entire opening scene is dark with faces illuminated by firelight. The parents stare out the window as they listen to their child cry, their faces lit up in an orange-glow from the fireplace nearby. The shadows do well to portray the dark and somber start to the movie itself: parents who give up their baby because he is different, by throwing him over a bridge and leaving him to die. As the parents are on their way to the bridge, they walk through the dark, snowy park. This walk to their son's doom is rightfully lit by dim streetlights, and the parents look like silhouettes against the snowy woods. There is a dark, grim feeling to *Batman Returns*, as most of it is shot in darkness in order to get the right feel to the plot of film. The movie is full of muted colors, except for when Burton wants to emphasize a certain color or scene. Burton's influence of German Expressionism is clear here, due to Hake's analysis of selective colors (335). The parents leaving their child to die is a direct tie to the madness of Expressionist art and fits in well with Burton's personally morbid taste. On another note, Burton's version of Gotham City itself is an example of the influence of expressionism. The looming towers and dark, barely-lit streets tie

into the gloomy aspects of German Expressionism. Gargoyles and statues litter the city, creating a sense of dissociation from reality and tying into the comic book genre. At 05:32 of *Batman Returns*, a shot of Gotham City shows the extremely dark, pointed sky scrapers with lights scattered through them, and spotlights coming up from the center. There are people bustling around, all wearing black winter clothes on the snowy night (*Batman Returns* 05:38-06:05). Although different from the rural and suburban settings of *Beetlejuice* and *Edward Scissorhands*, the expressionist themes persist between all three films.

The mise-en-scene of *Batman Returns* consists of many different aspects, but the color scheme pertains specifically to Burton. The film is mostly dark and full of shadows with rarely any brightly lit scenes. Toward the end of the film, audiences get a better look into Penguin's sewers. A spotlight is shined onto Penguin, as he stands over the toxic sewer water and speaks out to his audience.

He addresses the army of penguins as they are all hooked up to bombs, saying, "My dear penguins, we stand on a great threshold. It's okay to be scared; many of you won't be coming back. Thanks to Batman, the time has come to punish all of God's children! First, second, third and fourth-born! Why be biased? Male and female! Hell, the sexes are equal with their erogenous zones blown sky high! Forward march! The liberation of Gotham has begun!"

After yelling this to anyone that could hear, Penguin gestures and the penguins dive into the toxic water, getting ready to blow up the city. With underwater shots and an eye-level view of Penguin smiling wide, this scene shows how Penguin's influence and evilness could destroy a city forever (*Batman Returns* 1:42:48-1:44:06). This scene clearly represents the common expressionist theme of insanity. When there are pops of bright colors, it makes the clear mise-en-

scene all the more noticeable, like when Penguin comes out of the neon-green toxic waste before his tragic death at the end of the film (*Batman Returns* 1:57:00-1:58:20). The bright coloring of the toxic waste in Penguin's sewer is emphasized due to the muted tones of the rest of the film. The contrast of the bright coloring draws attention to what it signifies, the death of the outcome of an unloved child.

Another example of bright coloring contrasting the rest of the muted tones in *Batman Returns* is when Catwoman, or Selina, comes home after a long day of working for a horrible boss. Walking into her bright pink apartment, Selina's mood is the total opposite of what her living space is saying (*Batman Returns* 23:10). The light pink walls and neon sign that says "Hello There," contrast with Selina's black cat and her sarcastic personality. At 24:56, Selina sits down on her yellow fluffy chair to listen to her voicemail machine; the phone is bright pink and she is sitting among colorful stuffed animals. Clearly, Selina wants to be happy, but her job and current lifestyle are causing her to feel sad and lonely. By using the different bright colors to contrast how Selina is actually feeling, Burton intensifies the difference between Selina and the world around her. The interior meaning behind the specific color schemes in *Batman Returns* shines a light on what Burton is focusing on throughout the film: the outsiders.

The entire film consists of outsiders; the main characters including both heroes and villains are different from those around them. Batman, Catwoman and Penguin are all an outsider in their own way, and Burton wants to highlight that. Specifically focusing on Penguin's life throughout the film gives Burton an even bigger platform to use to tell the story of a strange person in a "normal" world. Using colors to portray important parts of a film is something that Burton does often, causing his filmography to be full of contrasting colors while still continuing to keep a gothic feel to his films. The aspects of film in *Batman Returns* correlate with the three

premises of the auteur theory: technical competence through the lighting choices, interior meaning through the color scheme and mise-en-scene, and personal style through the influences of early Expressionist films, like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920).

## **Conclusion**

The three aspects of film that stand out from the rest in *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands* and *Batman Returns* are the mise-en-scene, the chiaroscuro lighting effects, and Burton's clear influence of Expressionism. These three aspects tie in directly with the three values of criterion for the auteur theory: technical competence, personal style, and interior meaning. The Expressionist influences tie directly into all three premises of the theory. This leads to the conclusion that Burton is in fact an auteur, based on these three films from 1988 to 1992. Burton has created a name for himself that audiences can identify when they watch one of his films. His work is distinguishable as his own to audiences, critics, and auteurists. Because all three apparent aspects are direct correlations of the three premises of the auteur theory, Burton's work, no matter how strange, leads him to become known as an auteur.

The brooding, dark violence of *Batman Returns*, the strange sadness of *Edward Scissorhands* and the insanity of *Beetlejuice* all come back to the fact that Tim Burton is heavily influenced by the German Expressionism movement. The mise-en-scene that he portrays in his films and the chiaroscuro lighting effects that he uses fall into place after the dark themes have been established. All three of these movies feature similarities between them, making them recognizable to audiences as Burton's work. His technique, personal style, and interior meaning seems to be similar throughout *Beetlejuice*, *Edward Scissorhands*, and *Batman Returns*, as these films were all created within a span of four years. The fact that they were all made so close together may be the reason why they look so similar and have such a familiar feel to them.

Burton's tendency to use consistent filming techniques, such as lighting and setting, and frequent themes of death, fear, and madness all point towards Burton being known as an auteur. His personal style is apparent in his films, specifically the three films analyzed here, therefore his style is recognizable to audiences. According to Andrew Sarris and Peter Wollen, a director's value is based upon whether or not their work is identifiable to audiences. Burton is an auteur in the way that his films fit the criteria of Andrew Sarris, the first to identify the auteur theory in American filmmaking, and in the way that Burton's work is easily distinguishable.

Despite the change in genre from horror comedy to superhero, Burton still manages to keep the same values and artistic vision throughout his films. Clearly, his sweet spot of auteurism is in his early films. His most recent films have not done as well critically as his films had done in the past, especially in the late 80s and early 90s, so this leaves room for more analysis of his later films, and whether or not he has been able to keep the identity of an auteur, or if that has changed in recent years. Based on my analysis of Burton's films from 1988 to 1992, I consider him a true auteur, despite the change in genre from horror comedy to a superhero/action film.

So in conclusion, why does this matter? This case study of Burton raises larger questions about the film industry today. Is it still possible for someone to be an auteur in today's cinematic world? The technical evolution of CGI and substantial amount of adaptations and blockbuster films are more apparent than ever before, which may take away from the "technical competence" premise of the auteur theory. Despite the technological advancements though, we still see signs of the auteur theory today. It is apparent in an older director like Martin Scorsese and a younger director like Jordan Peele, the creator of *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019). Peele is known for his psychological thrillers, and Scorsese is extremely well-known for his distinct style in his

filmography. But does it even matter that these modern directors are auteurs? The idea behind the theory is that being considered an auteur is rare, and those directors are held in high regard to audiences and critics. If this degree of rarity is becoming more and more common, it starts to lose its appeal. Yes, the auteur theory is still relevant, but the anomaly of it may start to wear off as more directors are awarded with the highly accredited status.

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