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# Gilles Menegaldo (ed.), *Tim Burton : A Cinema of Transformations*

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## REFERENCES

Gilles Menegaldo, *Tim Burton : A Cinema of Transformations* (Montpellier : Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2018), 442 p, ISBN 978-2-36781-259-5

- 1 This major book on Tim Burton belongs to the serious academic series “Profils Américains” published by the Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée (PULM). It is edited by Gilles Menegaldo, and is structured in five chapters that thematically organize a pleasurable and scholarly journey in Burtonland (from the director’s first short-feature films to his latest 2016 *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children*).
- 2 Gilles Menegaldo first gives a twenty page long introduction that not only summarizes Tim Burton’s life and films, but also starts highlighting the main themes and stylistic features in the director’s filmography.
- 3 In the first chapter (“Origins and Cultural Heritage”), Bérénice Bonhomme concentrates on Burton’s dynamics of drawing. The artist is defined more as a painter than as a director, and Bonhomme insists on the prevalence of his drawings, as they often are the first step to a film. Likewise, the director’s taste for stop-motion animation is stated, and the technique is then shown as life giving, Burton being compared to some demiurge director more bent on creating graphic design than psychologically sound characters.
- 4 Florence Chéron studies Burton’s early films, the latter showing hallucinatory and dysfunctional worlds in which images prevail over dialogues. The critic interestingly links the artist’s early experiments to his more famous feature films while also mentioning some essential intertextual references such as Mario Bava’s flight from naturalistic lighting.

- 5 Virginia Vuiglio analyses Burton's series of short poems in the *Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy and Other Stories*. Her article is thought-provoking and brings into light many relevant aspects of Burton's artistic production, such as the blending of the innocence of childhood with different kinds of cruelty, the notions of anguish and fear, as well as the prevailing ideas of isolation and of suffering. The critic is a little less convincing however when she tries to have Burton's production fit into different sorts of literary concepts, the attempt sounding sometimes too theoretical and even too flimsy to receive our full support (trying to elevate a character whose Bakhtinian grotesqueness has first been stressed to the level of a "sublimated gothic hero" seems debatable indeed).
- 6 Raphaëlle Costa De Beaugard gives an in-depth study of *Big Fish* as she develops a thorough analysis of the film's visual impact while closely linking it to the early cinema. For Costa De Beaugard, Burton's aesthetics and his use of diegetic space-time (as well as the editing) create a porous and ambiguous world in which the real and the unreal merge, leaving emotions flow.
- 7 The second chapter (Strange Bodies: Across Genders and Genres") starts with Eithne O'Neill's showing the connection between Burton's films and Ovid's "metamorphoses". For both, playfulness matters more than didacticism, and satire is a good means to convey messages. Burton's specificity is however his stress on human bodies' imperfections which may lead to the questioning of Man's existential status. Yet with Burton's films, the final acceptance of strangeness implies that wholeness can be achieved.
- 8 Taina Tuhkunen's "Female Gothic" notes the prevalence of male gifted misfits and of patriarchal conceptions of femininity in Burton's films. But Tuhkunen then insists on some female characters whose portrayals take them away from the clichés of the damsel in distress and turn them into "a 'New Woman' of sorts".
- 9 Florent Christol goes against the grain of Burton's image as a subversive author. For Christol, the director's films are infused with politics, and the freak-show presented in *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure* is tinged with the puritan morals that reintroduce control rather than subversion. Burton's film is therefore related to "imperialistic colonial narratives" that depict the freakish other as a grotesque counterpoint to the highly conservative politics of the Reagan era.
- 10 Burton's "animal-men" are convincingly studied by Elsa Colombani who resorts to Noel Carroll's *Philosophy of Horror* and to his division between fusion monsters and fission monsters. Burton's animal-men are described as fusion monsters evolving towards fission monsters, these outcasts keeping however more or less the audience's sympathy, contrary to the mechanical society that appears truly monstrous.
- 11 Analysing *Mars Attacks!*, Yann Calvet emphasizes Burton's desire to accumulate intertextual references and subvert the codes of science-fiction so as to bring to the fore biting remarks on American society and to promote instead agrarianism and egalitarianism.
- 12 In the third chapter ("Family and Trauma"), Laurent Jullier speaks of "the finally reassuring world of Tim Burton". Echoing Florent Christol's ideas on *Pee-Wee*, the critic asserts that the director is far from being subversive as he uses happy endings celebrating the triumph of capitalism. Using some surprising statements sometimes (the notion of "metrokids" is for instance created from a debatable definition of metrosexuality), Jullier also associates the ideal of patriarchal order to Burton's defense of capitalism.

- 13 In “Death and the Maiden”, Marie-Camille Bouchindomme starts from the more frequent viewpoint according to which Tim Burton is inspired by gothic fairy-tales. With many literary references and relevant microanalyses of some scenes (from *Beetlejuice* and *Sleepy Hollow* for instance), the critic underscores the duality of female characters who embody the union of Eros and Thanatos, and who can thus be compared to vanitas.
- 14 Xavier Deverat expresses a similar point of view in “Closer to the Bone”. Deverat mainly focuses on *Corpse Bride*, and he brilliantly highlights Burton’s tendency to eroticize death and to picture the Underworld as a freer and more colorful realm than the world of the living.
- 15 Dealing with the director’s conception of time, Vincent Baticle notes that Burton’s characters are frequently haunted by the shadow of their past (hence the extensive use of flashbacks). Yet, in many cases, the past, the present and the future interact so as to create some blurred temporality.
- 16 Eithne O’Neill’s article is the last one to examine the issue of time and death. O’Neill analyses Burton’s mixing of grotesque horror and nostalgia for things past. The critic then shows how the director stages the flights of fancy that can be found in fables, as a way to avoid the distress caused by the awareness of our mortality.
- 17 In the fourth chapter (“Adaptations, Remakes, Reappropriations”), Christian Viviani focuses on *Sweeney Todd*. The film is shown as one of Burton’s masterpieces, and the only one containing a truly tragic figure. This peculiar film is described as a musical influenced by the English tradition of the “revenge tragedy” as well as by the British post-romantic gothic tradition (with authors like Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens) and by the Hammer studios. Viviani also lingers on the origins of Burton’s film and notes how close Burton’s universe is to that of Stephen Sondheim, the “absolute genius of contemporary musical theatre”, who turned the urban legend of Sweeney Todd into a project of *théâtre total* in 1979.
- 18 In “The Americanization of Alice”, Jean-Marie Lecomte gives a rather harsh account of Tim Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland*, which is described as having little to do with Lewis Carroll’s tale. Lecomte notes the film’s lack of irony and its typically Hollywoodian flavor when it comes to portray the coming of age of a young American girl with no mention however of any sexual awakening. Nevertheless, Carroll and Burton share the desire to develop some baroque imagination, but the latter delights in gothic horror while the former’s violence is only verbal.
- 19 Starting from this gothic nature of Burton’s filmography, Gilles Menegaldo observes the director’s rewriting of the Frankenstein myth from *Vincent* to *Edward Scissorhands*. Menegaldo meticulously notes all the numerous intertextual references and he also gives a detailed analysis of Burton’s films so as to stress their hybrid and postmodern nature, which is a way for the director to ponder over the status of the artist.
- 20 A smooth transition between the articles occurs again as Mélanie Boissonneau focuses on *Frankenweenie* (2012) so as to comment on Burton’s “Frankenstein method”. The blending of different techniques (stop-motion, CGI...), the collaboration with the same artists, as well the director’s desire to stress the echoes between recurring traits of his characters and his own persona, lead the critic to finally assert that Burton, the creator, has become the (monstrous) creature of his own work.
- 21 Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris also insists on the essential role played by hybridity in her analysis of *Dark Shadows*. First noting that Dan Curtis’s TV-series was already based on

- “blurred genericity” in the late 1960s, Paquet-Deyris then shows the richness of Burton’s film, in which the melodramatic, the “comedic” (p. 334) and gothic horror meet in a narrative structure that always takes the viewers off-guard.
- 22 The last chapter (“Artists and the Creative/Interpretive Process”) opens with Olivier Cotte’s article on animation. The artist’s love for stop-motion is stated (as was the case in the articles of the first chapter), and some comparisons are made between 2D animation and 3D characters. Cotte then shows that the exaggeration typical of animation films is even reproduced in some of Burton’s live-characters (like Betelgeuse or Pee-Wee), the director showing indeed little taste for realism.
- 23 David Roche examines the different sorts of spectators that can be found in *Ed Wood*. Using the theory of Michel Picard and some very precise filmic analyses, Roche shows that the character of Ed Wood is the ideal spectator of his own films. Ed Wood’s lack of distance tends to link his position to that of the implied spectator, and his positive reception becomes infectious. As Roche also notes Burton’s use of modern irony, he then concludes in seeing the director’s work as a mix of romanticism and postmodernism.
- 24 In her study on Johnny Depp’s performances in Tim Burton’s films, Sophie Benoist speaks of “iconomorphic relationship” between the actor and those of the silent film era. Depp manages to use both overacting and underacting in a way that enables him to associate the notions of restraint and excess. Whether it be thanks to his (often frozen) facial expressions, his voice, or his costumes, Depp always increases the intensity of the emotions he conveys.
- 25 Studying another artist whose work is essential to Tim Burton’s world, Cécile Carayol then analyses composer Danny Elfman’s “music box effect”. First defining that effect by its crystalline sounds and its ominous-sounding choir, Carayol then insists on the notion of dissonance which introduces fear, and perfectly fits the fairy-tale genre and Burton’s imagination. Elfman’s music is so much part of the director’s world that it becomes a “musical doppelganger” which deeply contributes to the ontological thickness of poetic and gruesome characters, and which is then referred to as some “Disney Poe music”.
- 26 Lastly, Jérôme Lauté associates Tim Burton’s *Big Eyes* to Andy Warhol’s “deeply superficial” conception of art. After *Ed Wood*, Burton then makes another non-realistic biopic (on Margaret and Walter Keane) that enables the director to tackle the issue of the filmmaker’s status. For Lauté the film is some skillful transposition of Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. Lauté concludes his study in stressing what might then be a recurring key notion in the whole collection of essays: “Burton’s cinema is torn between craftsmanship and poetry on the one side, and the temptations of industry and ‘mainstream’ cinema on the other side”.
- 27 *Tim Burton: A Cinema of Transformation* is assuredly a scholarly work that constitutes a major event in the world of Burtonian studies. Some articles may inevitably echo each other (especially when it comes the early stage of the artist’s career), but what is mainly striking is the cleverness of the editing: in the five chapters of the book, the articles logically follow each other and the way they enrich one another is remarkable. And when they evoke aspects of Burton’s filmography that may first appear as paradoxical (Burton’s subversive art vs. Burton’s conservatism), they, as a matter of fact, merely bring to the fore the paradoxes which turn a filmmaker into a real artist whose multifaceted, complex, and captivating filmography therefore well deserves that close scrutiny.

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**Quoted persons:** Mikhail Bakhtin, Vincent Baticle, Mario Bava, Walter Benjamin, Sophie Benoist, Mélanie Boissonneau, Bérénice Bonhomme, Marie-Camille Bouchindomme, Yann Calvet, Cécile Carayol, Lewis Carroll, Noel Carroll, Florence Chéron, Florent Christol, Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard, Wilkie Collins, Elsa Colombani, Olivier Cotte, Dan Curtis, Xavier Daverat, Johnny Depp, Charles Dickens, Danny Elfman, Laurent Jullier, Margaret and Walter Keane, Jérôme Lauté, Jean-Marie Lecomte, Gilles Menegaldo, Eithne O'Neill, Ovid, Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris, Michel Picard, David Roche, Stephen Sondheim, Taïna Tuhkunen, Christian Viviani, Virginie Vuiglio, Andy Warhol

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