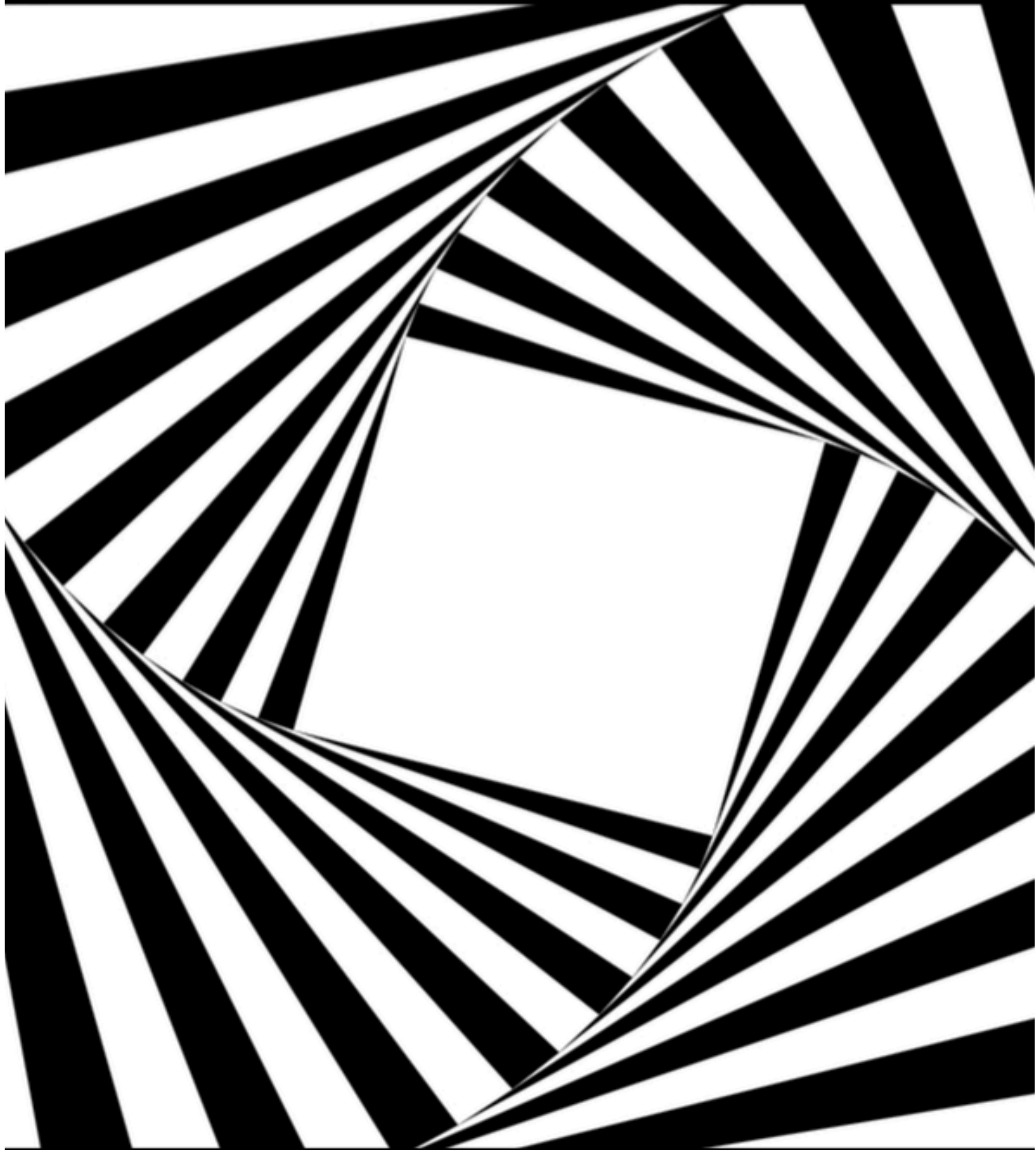


Conformity & Non-Conformity in the Tim Burton Fairytale



A study of Edward Scissorhands, Sleepy Hollow and Alice in Wonderland

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	2
Introduction:	
<i>The Creator of Fairytales</i>	3
Chapter One:	
<i>Conformity to Suburbia and The 'Other' in Edward Scissorhands</i>	7
Chapter Two:	
<i>Conformity to Religion in Sleepy Hollow</i>	17
Chapter Three:	
<i>Conformity to Gender Roles in Alice in Wonderland</i>	26
Conclusion:	
<i>The Conformity of Non-Conformity</i>	34
Bibliography	39
Filmography	43

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INTRODUCTION

The Creator of Fairytales

Of all the Hollywood talents that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, Tim Burton, as David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson recognize, has “created [one of] the most distinctive visual world[s in Hollywood cinema...] filled [with] familiar American landscapes [and] with grotesque absurdist imagery.”¹ Although he rarely uses original images, with the exception of *Big Fish* [Tim Burton, USA, 2003] and *Edward Scissorhands* [Tim Burton, USA, 1990], preferring instead to form his narratives from pre-existing characters and motifs, Burton blends reality with the fantastical. His visual style has become his auteur trademark, with the term ‘Burtonesque’ being ascribed to filmmakers with work as dark and quirky as his own. Often considered to be the creator of fairytales, Burton is known to communicate to his audiences on a symbolic level, representing universal issues, such as estrangement, psychological fragmentation, fear and loss, and offering guidance to those watching.

On numerous occasions, Burton has suggested that, in America at least, there is little to no “room for acceptance [and that] you are taught from a very early age to conform to certain things [...] which starts from day one at school.”² This contradicts the notion of a free world that America promotes, suggesting that individualism and non-conformity does not entirely exist or indicate complete freedom for citizens. Perhaps as a reaction to this forced conformity, Burton’s characters are often either children or mentally young who suffer from issues of alienation and find it difficult to cope with life and their surroundings. It is their inability, or in the case of characters such as *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*’s Willy Wonka [Tim Burton, USA/UK

¹ Bordwell, D. Thompson, K. [2003] Pg. 691/692

² Salisbury, M. [2006] Pg. 87

2005], their refusal, to grow up which puts them into conflict with society. For Burton, everything begins and ends with childhood, including the “fears that haunt and shape it.”³

Like fairytales, which Bruno Bettelheim suggests estrange children from the real world and allow them to journey into their subconscious, Burton’s characters explore their identity and are eventually either able to accept or to reject conformity. The majority of books written about Burton do not provide in depth analysis, but celebrate the auteur. They do not question his work, but rather take it and his non-conformity at face value. It can be argued, however, that the notion of non-conformity is an extremely conformist, American ideology. In making films that attempt to reject conformity, as *Edward Scissorhands* and *Alice in Wonderland* demonstrate, Burton, like other directors before him, is creating a version of something mainstream.

This dissertation will look at the films of Tim Burton through a theoretical lens. It will offer an in-depth examination of the representations of conformity and non-conformity in three of Burton’s most notable fairytale films and explore the ways in which Burton embodies and/or departs from traditional conformism. The project is split into three chapters, each one analyzing conformity to a specific theme in a Burton fairytale film. I will seek to explain the ways in which the issues set out below are approached by Burton in the context of broader American myths and ideologies that relate to the topics considered. The notion of non-conformity as an American ideology will also be explored further throughout the chapters.

Taking its inspiration from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Burton’s 1990 production, *Edward Scissorhands*, can be read as a take on the disparity between the

³ Ferenczi, A. [2010] Pg. 7

individual and society. Chapter one will explore this difference between the protagonist and the society into which he is thrown and looks into conformity in suburbia and the idea of 'the other' in the film. Based on an idea conceived during Burton's childhood as a reaction against the categorization that was forced upon him during school, the film follows the protagonist, Edward, an incomplete invention, as he is discovered by an Avon lady, Peg Boggs, who welcomes him into her suburban home. The film demonstrates that being different is perceived negatively by the townspeople, who use every opportunity to try to mask Edward's abnormality to some degree in order to make him fit into their idea of what is normal. In analyzing conformity to the suburbs in which the film is set, this chapter will pay particular attention to Robert Beuka's *SuburbiaNation*.

In a similar manner, chapter two will investigate conformity to religion in 1999's *Sleepy Hollow*. Although based on Washington Irving's 1820 short, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, Burton turns the traditional story into a whodunit narrative. The character of Ichabod Crane, rather than a superstitious schoolmaster, is a logical, non-believing police constable sent to Sleepy Hollow to investigate the existence of the headless horseman, who has been turned from an unconfirmed villain into a weapon against local landowners. The film explores the binary opposition between religion and science, throwing its main protagonist, Ichabod Crane, and his rationality into a religious society where, although organized Christianity is rejected, the supernatural is accepted, and Ichabod's scientific methods are viewed with extreme skepticism. Ichabod, who is considered to have 'too much head', is forced to metaphorically lose it in order to discover who is behind the paranormal murders enforced by the headless horseman. As well as discussing religion, this chapter will

also touch upon the American frontier mythology, where oppositions are first set up and then a process of ‘magical’ reconciliation is offered.

Where previously, as Colin Manlove recognizes, in the works of such authors as Lewis Carroll and C. S. Lewis, “the protagonist of children’s fantasy was either an adult, or a child shown entering an adult world, now fantasy more often tries to enter the world of the child.”⁴ The final film to be discussed, Burton’s 2010 version of *Alice in Wonderland*, is such a film. The final chapter will explore conformity to gender roles, giving a particularly feminist critique of Burton’s adaptation. In his book *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of The Imagination*, Steve Swann Jones highlights the conventions of the fairytale. In particular, he pays attention to the ways in which they “promote marriage and the patriarchal family structure as dominant cultural institutions.”⁵ This convention is questioned by Burton’s adaptation. In the film, he solidifies Alice Kingsleigh’s empowerment, and therefore establishes the importance of female power at a young age, emphasized by Alice’s eventual triumph over the male Jabberwocky. Moreover, the female protagonists of traditional fairytales have stereotypical representations, often either princesses, as demonstrated in *Edward Scissorhands*, or witches, such as in *Sleepy Hollow*, and are often relegated to passive roles, relying on the male protagonist to find solutions for their problems. By obeying these fairytale conventions, Burton, as this chapter demonstrates, proves to be conformist at times.

⁴ Manlove, C. [2003] Pg. 26

⁵ Jones, S. S. [2002] Pg. 20

Conformity & Non-Conformity in the Tim Burton Fairytale

A study of Edward Scissorhands, Sleepy Hollow and Alice in Wonderland

'Conformity and Non-Conformity in the Tim Burton Fairytale' looks at the films of Tim Burton through a theoretical lens, offering an in-depth examination of the representations of conformity and non-conformity in three of Burton's most notable fairytale films: *Edward Scissorhands*, *Sleepy Hollow* and *Alice in Wonderland*.

The project is split into three chapters, each one analyzing conformity to a specific theme [Suburbia and the 'Other', Religion and Gender Roles] and the ways in which Burton embodies and/or departs from traditional conformism. It seeks to explain the ways in which the issues set out in the introduction are approached by Burton in the context of broader American myths and ideologies that relate to the topics considered. The notion of non-conformity as an American ideology is also explored throughout.

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