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**Morphing Bodies: Strategies of Embodiment in
Contemporary US Cultural Practices**

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

Sophie Mantrant

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REFERENCES

Gilles Menegaldo (ed.), *Tim Burton : A Cinema of Transformations*
Montpellier : Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, « Horizons Anglophones »,
2018, 442 pages, ISBN 978-2-36781-259-5, 38 euros.

- 1 What makes a Burton film Burtonian? This collection of articles explores the postmodern universe created by a filmmaker who mixes genres, aesthetics and cultural references in each of his productions. Frankenstein's creature soon emerges as a central figure, as the literal patching up and stitching of bodies or costumes that mirrors what Mélanie Boissonneau aptly calls Burton's "Frankenstein method" (318), which consists in appropriating, assembling, and thus re-inventing existing material. Burton not only borrows from many sources, but also re-uses his own earlier creations in endless variations. Tim Burton's cinema is, indeed, a cinema of transformations.
- 2 The twenty-four articles gathered in this collection cover all of Burton's production to date, from his little-known early short films to *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2016). Some films may be less thoroughly discussed than others, but none goes unmentioned. The volume contains close studies of specific films as well as articles with a wider scope, thus giving the reader both panoramic and close-up views of Burtonland. Inevitably, it contains a number of repetitions, but they contribute to highlighting the most salient features of the filmmaker's work.
- 3 In his introduction, editor Gilles Menegaldo provides a welcome summary of the main films, which helps the reader sail smoothly through what follows, as does his highlighting of the most prominent aspects of Burton's cinema. The twenty-four articles have been organized into five sections, a particularly difficult exercise given the repetitive dimension of Burton's work. There is some unavoidable overlapping and

the articles in the third section are not as tightly connected as in the rest of the collection.

- 4 “Origin and Cultural Heritage” discusses some of the roots of Burton’s work, in both individual and collective soils. Many of his films originate in his own drawings, which are the main foci of two essays. Bérénice Bonhomme discusses the structuring role of drawing in Burton’s productions and argues that a Burton film is “a canvas that moves” (48). Virginie Vuiglio examines the illustrations in *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy* and their relationships with the texts, which relate the stories of rejected children or teenagers. She situates Burton’s work in the tradition of the American grotesque. Florence Chéron’s look into the early short films clearly shows that the main Burtonian ingredients were already present at the beginning of his career, when the filmmaker started elaborating his conception of cinema “as an art of story telling which emphasizes the image more than the dialogue and narrative framework” (52). Burton’s concept of visual storytelling provides a link with the article that closes the section, and in which Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard convincingly demonstrates how Burton’s integration of early cinema aesthetics modifies our viewing habits. *Big Fish*, she writes, is evidence of “a conception of cinema as an art of visual effects in constant motion” (112).
- 5 The representation of the body is the focus of section 2, “Strange Bodies: Across Genders and Genres”. This is probably one of the most striking aspects of Burtonland, which teems with malleable, distorted, stitched-up, or hybrid bodies. Bakhtin’s concepts of the grotesque and the carnivalesque are again used as an analytical tool in several places. Burton’s films are in many respects reminiscent of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Eithne O’Neill argues in “Tim Burton, Ovid, and the Body Piecemeal”. Taïna Tuhkunen focuses on Burtonian women, but shows that gender specificity may not be as important as the way female characters reflect the director’s typical concerns. She comes to the conclusion that Burton’s main interest is in “scarred, rather than scared or scary females figures” (148). The visual trope of suture is also discussed in Elsa Colombani’s examination of Burton’s “animal-men” and their threefold identity as monsters, others, and outsiders. Burton’s “freak-show aesthetics” is the starting point of Florent Christol’s analysis, which aims to demonstrate how over-simplistic a Bakhtinian reading of the carnivalesque in *Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure* would be: the film’s politics is not as subversive as it seems. In the following section, Laurent Jullier likewise challenges the common view of Burton’s work as “subversive” in an article devoted to the topic of family. Not that his work should be seen as conservative: Jullier argues that both views are tenable depending on which elements you select and how you present them. The films themselves do not give “life lessons” and they “demonstrate a mistrust of cautionary tales typical of the postmodern artist” (216). The ideological dimension is also dealt with in the article on *Mars Attack* that closes the second section, Yann Calvet foregrounding the iconoclasm of a film that “ridicules the very principles of American history” (201).
- 6 The third section, “A Matter of Life and Death (Family and Trauma),” includes two articles that are mainly dedicated to the association of Burtonian women with death. Marie-Camille Bouchindomme explores the recurring “death-and-the-maiden” theme, which marks Burton as a descendant of the Dark Romantics. This aspect is further explored in Xavier Daverat’s close study of *Corpse Bride*. His illuminating comments on the eroticism of death complement the section devoted to the representations of the

body. Death is highly seductive in *Corpse Bride*, where the underworld is presented as a joyful party. The skeletons' song takes one back to Emily's past and her murder by her husband-to-be. Burtonian characters are often haunted by the ghosts of the past, as Vincent Baticle reminds us in the introduction to his study of the handling of time in Burton's films. Time is a trap and just as the characters try to escape, Burton's cinema "seems to seek a certain form of atemporality" (253). Intensive intertextuality plays a major role in creating an impression of timelessness. The passage of time is also a main focus in Eithne O'Neill's essay on *Miss Peregrine*, a film in which spatio-temporal boundaries are transgressed. The author deplores, however, that Burton seems to be trapped in his own loop, as he keeps repeating himself.

- 7 Section 4, "Adaptations, Remakes, Reappropriations", provides an in-depth examination of the ways Burton co-opts and transforms existing material. Christian Viviani identifies Stephen Sondheim's musical play as the main source of Burton's *Sweeney Todd* and dwells on the affinities between the composer-lyricist and the film director, who belong to the same "spiritual family" (275). The way Burton appropriates material he admires is clear evidence of his connection to the British post-romantic gothic tradition. Jean-Marie Lecomte shows how Burton Americanizes Carroll's themes and characters in his *Alice in Wonderland*. A post-modern baroque artist, Burton also transforms "Carroll's subdued violence into overt cinematic violence" (294). Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris explores the mixture of genres, aesthetic and formal motifs in Burton's loose adaptation of the TV series *Dark Shadows*. Her rich close study convincingly shows that the film is both genre homage and satire. As mentioned above, Mélanie Boissonneau studies the "Frankenstein method" in *Frankenweenie*, and includes the biographical dimension to show how Burton the creator blends with his cinematic creatures. The article by Gilles Menegaldo is wider in scope, as the author examines the way Burton revisits the Frankenstein story in several movies, and shows how his rewritings modify the reading of the myth.
- 8 The last section, "Artists and the Creative/Interpretive Process", starts with a highly stimulating discussion of the way animation has always influenced Tim Burton's live action movies (Olivier Cotte). The exaggeration characteristic of animation is also a distinguishing feature of his live action characters, who are often very close to animated creatures. Sophie Benoist's examination of Johnny Depp's acting style is a welcome complement to this examination of Burton's visually unique characters. Depp's acting is an "art of metamorphosis" (384), which harmoniously combines under and overacting. Just like Depp's personal style, Danny Elfman's music contributes to the uniqueness of Burtonland. Cécile Carayol examines how the composer uses and revises the music box effect to perfectly fit Burton's world. Two biopics staging artists are studied in this last section. In his dissection of the workings of romantic irony in *Ed Wood*, David Roche carefully examines viewing positions, including that of the implied spectator. The combination of distance and proximity, he argues, constructs an ambiguous spectatorial position. The volume closes on a discussion of Burton's "most theoretical work," *Big Eyes* (407). Jérôme Lauté sees the film as a "fictional transposition" (414) of Walter Benjamin's essay on art in the age of mechanical reproduction, as it raises the question of the massification of art. The theme of repetition also seems to reflect Burton's fear of repeating himself and of remaining imprisoned in his own cinematic universe.

- 9 This volume leaves hardly any stone unturned in exploring Burtonland. It provides a very comprehensive view of the author's world and the foundations on which it is built. Its main strength lies in the bringing together of close studies and more panoramic views, all of which pay close attention to Burton's aesthetic choices. While the volume as a whole offers the general reader an accessible discussion of the defining features of Burton's production, several articles require more specialized knowledge for full appreciation. Scholars will find stimulating material in this very rich collection of essays, which abounds in fresh insights and sometimes challenges received views. The centerfold of photographs (provided by *Positif*) adds eye candy that makes the immersion in Burton's universe even more pleasurable.
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AUTHORS

SOPHIE MANTRANT

Université de Strasbourg