

# Citing Sources MLA Style

Student's Name

Film Theory & Criticism (name of class)

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Date

*An adventure as big as life itself*  
Tim Burton the Auteur

Moviegoers know what to expect when they sit down with a Tim Burton film: unlikely heroes, bested bullies, and a strange journey to a space where genres intersect. This director's films live in a place best described as a magical departure from reality—an *alternate* reality where quirky characters triumph over their traditional counterparts in the center of a symbolically, if not colorfully, saturated *mise en scène*.

While the storylines of Burton's films are often formulaic, surprise arises when Burton interacts with the material to bring his vision to the screen. His interpretations often lead to odd juxtapositions of genres resulting in fresh takes on old subjects. For instance, in *Sleepy Hollow*, 1999, Burton incorporates elements of horror, mystery, fairytale, and even the western. "The film does in many ways read as a revisionist western," wrote critic Stanley Orr in an article for *Literature Film Quarterly*. "Entering the main thoroughfare of the town, Ichabod [Crane] appears to have entered the set of a

western in which the telltale white church [...] gleams in the immediate background" (47). With this set-up, we assume our protagonist is packing a pistol. But Crane carries, instead, a mysteriously large medical bag filled with a collection of independently devised tools. The mingling genres thwart our expectations. Likewise, when horror, science fiction, and comedy intersect in Burton's 1996 film *Mars Attacks!*, viewers are left with such contradictions as the scene where antagonistic martians repeat the phrase, "Don't run, we are your friends," while vaporizing humans by the dozen. The martians think it's hilarious and so do the viewers; it's just so wildly out of place. In 1990, Burton incorporates elements of romance, horror, science fiction, and fairytale to create the canvas for *Edward Scissorhands*. And again, viewers delight at the interaction of genres which nearly become living things in Burton's hands. In *Edward Scissorhands*, science fiction explains the fairytale; horror informs the romance. Viewers watch to see how the director will resolve the conflicts between them, which storyline will win out. But *where* Burton's characters will end up becomes less of a question than *how* they will move through the maze of the combined genres' superimposed plot lines.

Burton creates magic on screen beginning with a multi-genre, multi-dimensional world where anything is possible; then he augments that magic by dropping in the most unlikely champions. The best representation of this is Edward himself in *Edward Scissorhands*. Edward is the quintessential Burton hero:

an outsider who, although eccentric, is harmless, gentle even, and only wants to fit in. Though this fairytale doesn't secure the typical happily-ever-after, Edward triumphs over Jim, the town bully and the film's primary antagonist (another recurring theme in Burton's work.) In *Sleepy Hollow*, the squeamish detective Ichabod Crane is the one who finally triumphs over the mystery of the headless horseman—not Reverend Steenwyck; not the local politicians; not Brom Van Brunt, the town's buff but shallow jock. And in *Mars Attacks!*, the surprise heroic duo is an elderly woman and her grandson who haphazardly discover that country music makes the martians' heads explode inside their helmets. Critic J. Hoberman puts it this way: "Mars Attacks! allows Earth's **marginal losers** to best the juvenile pranksters from Outer Space" (8). Burton's films continually create magical places where "marginal losers" can prevail—where characters aren't defined by the limitations of off-screen reality.

To serve the believability of these unexpectedly triumphant underdogs, and of other on-screen oddities, Burton brings in a host of intricately detailed, curiously configured contraptions. Crane's mysterious medical bag houses a collapsible shelf of potions and peculiar forensics tools including a pair of spectacles with an antiquely zooming monocle. These tools are not only bizarre to the audience; Crane's fellow characters also respond to his contraptions with question. "What manner of instruments are these?" asks Dr. Lancaster, scrutinizing a two-foot jackknife-style tool topped

with tiny mirrors and magnifying glasses. "Some of my own design," answers Crane, snatching the device from the doctor's hand. Critic David Arnold believes the strange tools indicate the infancy of science in the Colonial setting of the film. "As a scientist [Crane] is perhaps rigorous, perhaps insightful, but also apparently ineffective; the power of science as narrative is still a bit shaky in this day and age, as we infer from the crazy looking instruments he deploys" (Arnold 36). I disagree. When looking at Burton's body of work as a whole, one sees that the **"crazy looking instruments"** have more to do with the director than with the individual character of Constable Crane and his Colonial setting.

Odd contraptions are also scattered throughout *Mars Attacks!* including a belt-style assembly line which dresses the martians and prepares them for battle and a spear that, upon finding its mark in the president's midsection, assembles itself into a flag. In *Edward Scissorhands*, the *main character himself* is a contraption built by an eccentric inventor whose castle home abounds with assembly lines, curious devices, and makeshift gadgets. These contraptions—typically grounded in the visible principles of physics—continue to surface in Burton's latest films as well. Three instances from the 2003 drama/fairytale/romance/fantasy film *Big Fish* illustrate this point. The first device appearance is a giant canopy-style arch over young Ed Bloom's bed, with four pulleys to each side and a huge air pump at the foot—a contraption to aid the boy's muscles during their

period of super-human growth. The second contraption appears only briefly, during a montage to the character's charmed school years. This breakfast-preparing machine is powered by gravity and rolling billiard balls and comes complete with a mini hatchet to crack eggs. We see, in the 3-second scene, that the invention won Bloom a blue ribbon in the high school science fair. The third contraption, only slightly more prominent in the storyline than the first two, has a name: the handi-matic. This counter-top contraption is a life-size, stainless steel hand with five different tools posing as fingertips: a corkscrew, a note pin, a phillips head, a flat head, and a retractable back-scratcher. After serving in the war, Bloom hawked the handi-matic in his profession as a door-to-door salesman. Regardless of topic, gadgetry finds its way to the screen via director Tim Burton. Perhaps its implied scientific considerations help to quiet viewers' questions about the magical world of which the charming contraptions are part.

While these devices propel viewers deeper into the alternate realities created by Tim Burton, it is—without doubt—the visual experience of his films that is the most stunning and memorable aspect of his work. Composing Burton's striking mise en scène, we see simple and highly-saturated color schemes along with bold, exaggerated graphic patterns. Visually, these images are hard to miss, easy to digest. A lovely example of this occurs in *Big Fish* when Ed Bloom is courting the future Mrs. Bloom and appears outside her window in a sea of daffodils, her

favorite flower. Perfect and bright yellows and greens pervade every corner of the shot, except where Bloom stands in a quiet dark suit in the midst of the makeshift meadow. Also in *Big Fish*, Burton compels us to see the sea of brilliant green grass in Spectre, a town whose entrance is decorated with a clothesline, of sorts, where shoes are flung. The message is clear: there is no need for shoes in a town with grass so green. And, indeed, perfect, lush, green grass is bleeding off the edges of the entire lower half of the screen—no bushes, certainly no dandelions, no flowers of any kind. Just grass. Just green.

Describing the visual aspects of *Mars Attacks!*, critic J. Hoberman writes that Burton is not "afraid [...] to dress a set with violently polka-dot spherical chairs, to locate his trailerpark in the shadow of a massive Donut World, or to set an AA meeting in a Pepto Bismol-pink prefab church" (9). Writing on the Ichabod Crane story, critic Kim Newman notes that "despite its sometimes mechanical and often broken-down storyline, *Sleepy Hollow* is never less than ravishing to look at" (4). Newman might be remembering the scene in *Sleepy Hollow* where Crane dreams of his mother spinning among falling puffs of cotton in a grove of trees whose lilac-colored buds fade like watercolor into a storm blue sky. This particular scene not only resembles an impressionist painting, it resembles the scene in *Edward Scissorhands* where Kim, Edward's romantic interest, spins in the snow-like clippings of his 20-foot angel ice sculpture.

Beautifully rendered, perfectly balancing fantasy and reality—it is this spectacular *mise en scène* that gently, finally, and fully nudges viewers into the magical alternate reality of director Tim Burton.

So what can viewers expect this summer when Burton's interpretation of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* is released? My guess? We'll fall in love with a Willy Wonka we never really knew before; we'll delight at a collection of eccentric and detailed candy-making contraptions (we're dropping Burton into a factory after all); we'll witness a host of whimsical, beautiful images; and we'll travel to an alternate reality where anything is possible. Certainly numbers of talented people continue to contribute to the magic of Tim Burton's films. But his signature is plain to see; it's gentle, whimsical, spectacular—an adventure as big as life itself.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Underlining is not necessary in your MLA-style paper. In fact, don't do it. It is not correct. Underlining is used here only to indicate the places in the paper where sources have been cited.

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