Tim Burton's 'Vincent'--A Matter of Pastiche

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Article:

Tim Burton, the director of such popular films as *Beetlejuice, Batman*, and *Edward Scissorhands*, has consistently extended a kind of comic book aesthetic into his work, combining childlike fantasy and visual stylization. Like other animators-turned-directors--notably George Pal and Terry Gilliam--his work is visually diverse and rich. Like them, Burton's ability to construct a complete, coherent fantasy world at times overwhelms larger considerations of story and meaning. His *oeuvre* is rich in references to other films (e.g., *Frankenweenie*), ironic in praise of marginal pop culture icons (*Ed Wood*) and campy in its celebration of cultural ephemera (as in the suburban mise en scene of *Edward Scissorhands*). His work mirrors much post-World War II's mass culture, particularly the cultural landscape of his home in Southern California. This mirroring process. This ransacking of pop culture places Burton among artists that are now conveniently if ambiguously described as "postmodern."

Mirroring other texts, according to Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Parody*, gives artists a method of justifying their own work. She argues that in an age when there is a profound distrust in systems of thought requiring *external* validation, that "Art forms have increasingly appeared to distrust external criticism to the extent that they have sought to incorporate critical commentary within their own structures in a kind of self-legitimizing short circuit of the normal critical dialogue. . . .The modern world seems fascinated by the ability of our human systems to refer to themselves in an unending mirroring process." A close examination of *Vincent*, the first film Burton made with Rick Heinrichs, gives specific support to Hutcheon's claim.

Hutcheon discusses pastiche as one method that contemporary artists use to mirror other texts. "Pastiche" incorporates two meanings that are specifically applicable to *Vincent*. First, it is "a work that closely and deliberately imitates the *style* of previous work," and secondarily it is "an incongruous medley of different styles." More importantly, it denotes a relationship in which the viewer is aware of a background text that the work at hand imitates, the mimicry of another's style.

Specifically, *Vincent* is a pastiche of styles lifted from the writings of Dr. Seuss and Edgar Allen Poe, and a range of movies from B-horror films, German expressionist works and the films of Vincent Price. One could even argue that the techniques used represent a pastiche of 2D and 3D animation methods, particularly UPA's limited animation style. And though Hutcheon does not

discuss the relation of parody to the development of the artist, it seems likely that pastiche is one strategy that maturing artist frequently use to legitimize their own work: it is often easier to mimic a style than to establish one's own. Burton was 24 when he made *Vincent*, so mirroring other texts may have freed him from serious consideration of his own style while focusing his directorial efforts on other matters.

AN EARLY BENCHMARK
After leaving the California Institute of the Arts in 1979, Burton went to work as an apprentice animator at Disney. Here, he came face to face with the reality of working in the animation industry. He recalled being "strapped to a table all day, and you *have* to draw. I just flipped out." Working with animator Glen Keane on *The Fox and Hound* (1979), he realized his visual sense was different from the Disney norm; he "couldn't even fake the Disney style." His then developed character sketches for *The Black Cauldron* (1980), none of which were used.

Feeling out of place and ready to leave, Burton was given the opportunity to direct Vincent, a six minute short based on a children's story he had written. The film is a humorous look at a suburban boy named *Vincent* who reads Edgar Allen Poe and identifies with horror film star Vincent Price. The studio gave Burton the go ahead after Price read the story and agreed to do the voiceover.

Price said later that the film "was the most gratifying thing that ever happened. It was immortality--better than a star on Hollywood Boulevard" Though critics found similarities between *Vincent* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Burton says the film "just happens to be shot in black and white, and there's a Vincent Price/Gothic kind of thing that makes it feel that way. . . .I think it probably has more to do with being inspired by Dr. Seuss. . . The rhythm of his stuff spoke to me very clearly. Dr. Seuss's books were perfect: right number of words, the right rhythm, great subversive stories." Burton paid homage to Dr. Seuss by writing his story in rhyming couplets. These couplets juxtapose a set of binary oppositions between the melodramatic imaginings of Vincent and the reality of his boyhood existence.

Vincent visualizes his nightmarish fantasies: his aunt dipped in wax, his beautiful wife buried alive, and his dog Abacrombie transformed into a horrible zombie. But at every turn he is reminded by his mother that, "You're not Vincent Price, you're Vincent Malloy. You're not tormented, you're just a young boy." The film ends with a tongue-in-cheek citation of Poe's "The Raven": "And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor, Shall be lifted . . .Nevermore!" Thus, in a humorous way, the boy Vincent shares with the protagonist of the poem--the student trying to forget his lost Lenore--what Poe himself described as the "human thirst for self torture . . the luxury of sorrow," as he melodramatically indulges his dark fantasies. *Vincent* is for Burton the same sort of indulgence, a chance to represent himself on the screen as the tortured boy/outsider/artist. He characterizes Vincent as an artist by associating him with both the easel and the quill pen. Isolated and misunderstood in the grand tradition of the romantic artist, Vincent engages the darker side of life via the screen personae of Vincent Price, a figure associated with Poe through his roles in Roger Corman's Poe films of the 1960s.

The film is also an early stylistic benchmark for Burton, whose collaboration with Heinrichs established a pattern of combining 2D and 3D animation within a single film. Heinrichs, who has

since collaborated with Burton as associate producer (*Frankenweenine*) and production designer (*Edward Scissorhands, Nightmare Before Christmas*), argues that *Vincent* was a breakthrough project "that taught Tim and me that you can combine the really graphic look of a two-dimensional picture with something that works in three dimensions." The melding of these two modes of animation is found throughout the film, and endures as a stylistic signature in Burton's later work. Heinrichs says that this notion of combining dimensional and flat animation was suggested by the three-dimensional models that Disney used to provide its animators as reference material.

The film's combination of 2D and 3D methods is foregrounded by its use of black and white. Without the use of color to establish spatial separation and define areas of screen space, the combination of 2D and 3D spatial representations is distilled and clarified. Black and white also reinforces the binary juxtapositions throughout the film: Burton effectively opposes light or high key scenes for Vincent's normal childhood with dark or low key scenes for his imagined torments.

PSYCHIC TOUCHSTONE
The film is a tongue-in-cheek melodrama, a cartoonish pastiche of B-horror movie motifs and Vincent's angst, his exaggerated movements and chiseled facial expressions played against the mellifluous voice of Vincent Price, dripping with mock tragedy. Using Price for the voiceover cements Burton's pastiche of the literary and the cinematic. Poe/Price is Vincent/Burton's psychic touchstone. Burton, who thrived on monster movies as a child but asserts he "never read," frequently invokes Poe/Price as a key figure of his own childhood

> [T]he films of Vincent Price. . .spoke to me specifically for some reason. Growing up in suburbia, in an atmosphere that was perceived as nice and normal (but which I had other feelings about), those movies were a way to certain feelings, and I related them to the place I was growing up in. I think that's why I related so much to Edgar Allen Poe. I remember when I was younger, I had these two windows in my room, nice windows that looked out on to the lawn, and for some reason my parents walled them up and gave me this little slit window that I had to climb up on a desk to see out of. To this day I've never asked them why; I should ask them. So I likened it to that Poe story where the person was walled in and buried alive ["The Cask of Amontillado"]. Those were my forms of connection to the world around me. It's a mysterious place Burbank.
>
> Vincent Price was somebody I could identify with. When you're younger things look bigger, you find your own mythology, you find what psychologically connects to you. And those movies, just the poetry of them, and this larger-than-life character who goes through a lot of torment--mostly imagined--just spoke to me in the way Gary Cooper or John Wayne might have to somebody else.

Throughout the film, Burton mainly uses match cutting to visualize Vincent's identification with Vincent Price, which provides a series of trick transitions between Vincent-as-himself and Vincent-as-Vincent Price. Each of these cuts appear temporally continuous, but as Vincent transforms between himself and Price, the filmic space fluctuates between spatial continuity and discontinuity. In Burton's words, "the film just goes in and out of Vincent's own reality. . .It

clicks in and out of reality so to speak." This style of cutting is familiar from UPA cartoons, which often matched character position while backgrounds dissolved from one location to the next. Moreover, *Vincent's* flat, simplified backgrounds show the influence of the stylized spaces of such UPA films as *Gerald McBoing Boing*. Designer Bill Hurtz once described that cartoon as a film "without walls. There are no lines defining the difference between a ceiling and a wall. . . . The props were placed relative to the action; we thought of them as standing characters." Though *Vincent* is less sparse, a similar ambiguity is introduced when checkerboard linoleum appears as a stark wall instead of a floor, or skylights are simply placed in an upper area of the frame. Done in stop motion animation, *Vincent* nevertheless looks surprisingly similar to a UPA cartoon in the simplicity of its stylized design.

SCENE BY SCENE
The film opens as the camera follows a cat into an empty room where Vincent plays on his recorder a mournful version of "The Hoochie Kootchy Dance"--known to millions of children in its bastardized version by its opening line "Oh they don't wear pants in the southern part of France." Vincent Price, in voiceover, announces that this young boy is "considerate and nice, But he wants to be just like Vincent Price," cueing the first transformation of the innocent boy to a mustachioed, hollow eyed, sophisticate complete with smoking jacket and cigarette holder. The boy, now posing as Price, exits the room with nose held high, cigarette dangling with disdain.

The film match cuts as "Price" crosses the threshold of the door, maintaining spatial continuity-- but in the incoming shot, Vincent has returned to his normal self. In voiceover, the couplet

> He doesn't mind living with his sister, dog and cats,
> Though he'd rather share a home with spiders and bats.

quickly cues another transformation back to Price. In this instance the film match cuts from a shot of Vincent, touching a light switch, to a dark, dungeon-like space where "Vincent-as-Price-as-Mad-Scientist" stands in a gothic pool of light clutching a pull chain for an overhead light. Overlaying the 3D character and set, a group of cel animated bats flutter from the foreground, masking the cut. A minor key organ theme highlights the light/dark juxtaposition, while an unadorned checkerboard pattern on the back wall calls to mind UPA's stylish use of simplified 2D background drawings. The camera tracks with Vincent as he exits right, and a black foreground mask with abstract shaped holes comes into view, eventually blacking out the scene. This foreground masking is one of the more blatant combinations of 2D and 3D animation within the film.

The next shot begins with the mask opening as set of hinged jaws which reveal the "mad scientist," against the same unadorned checkerboard background and surrounded by horrific objects, turning the crank on a jack-in-the-box. As the music box plays "Pop Goes the Weasel," shrunken heads spring from the mouth of a snake. (This snake form is one Burton clearly enjoys, as he brings it back in *Beetlejuice* and *Nightmare Before Christmas*.) Vincent wanders "dark hallways alone and tormented," he leans against a woman's torso. (All of the adults in the film are presented as faceless, figures whose faces extend beyond the frame.) A cut on position brings the film back from his "dark hallways" to high key reality, returning Vincent to a regular kid, leaning against his aunt, who pats him on the head. Price continues in voice over:

> Vincent is nice when his aunt comes to see him,
> But imagines dipping her in wax for his wax museum.
>
> He likes to experiment on his dog Abacrombie,
> In the hopes of creating a horrible zombie.
>
> So he and his horrible zombie dog,
> Could go searching for victims in the London fog.

The spatial transformations continue as before, but here the cartoonish gloom descends when the "dark" Vincent, clad in Edwardian lab coat and gloves, imagines hoisting his aunt into a vat of boiling wax and performing Frankenstein-like experiments on his dog. The filmic space becomes more expressionistic as the diminutive Vincent searches for "victims in the London fog" in a technically sophisticated long shot that combines stark silhouettes of distorted stairways, shafts of light piercing through skylights, and billowing fog.

The film's binary opposition of Vincent's normal childhood and Vincent's darker obsessions proceeds:

> While other kids read books like Go Jane Go,
> Vincent's favorite author is Edgar Allen Poe.

Vincent, under the spell of Poe, imagines that his beautiful wife has been buried alive, a reference to Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher."

Burton continues his spoof of B horror films by staging the boy's "tragedy" in a series of grandiose, melodramatic gestures underscored by frightful organ music. Simple sets, cut by expressionistic shafts of lights, give free reign to Vincent's melodramatic actions, as he plays the romantic artist, stricken with grief. Vincent digs frantically to uncover his wife's "grave," unaware that he's destroying his mother's flower bed. Burton again toys with the film's spatial and temporal continuity using a simple light cue to transform Vincent's nighttime "graveyard" to daytime "flower bed," while the boy maintains the continuous action of digging. His mother enters, admonishing the boy, who pokes his head sheepishly from the hole in close-up. Banished to his room, the film reverts to 2D animation to depict a silhouette of a small Vincent ascending a massive, misshapen staircase.

Alone in his "tower of doom," Vincent's romanticized hallucinations become more kinetic and distorted. His mother bursts into his room and tries to get him to give up his morbid fantasies and "get outside and have some real fun." As Vincent's "horrid insanity" peaks melodramatically, lightning flashes and his visions literally begin to swirl around him in an animated version of a Hollywood montage. As the checkerboard walls sway and bend, Burton animates a series of relief sculptures of skeleton hands, his "dead wife" and his dog Abacrombie in limbo light and supers them over a swooning Vincent, a montage of spatial representation systems which interact on a number of levels.

First, the sculptures of the wife and Abacrombie are iconographic forms but rendered in rounded relief, a design in which the outline of the object melds with a sense of dimensionality. Second, by superimposing and moving these forms towards the camera in an alternating pattern--frame left then frame right--Burton suggests specters in a manner that has been well codified in B-horror movies. This particular method of staging relief sculptures represents a significant visual technique for Burton, who used virtually used the same approach in *Beetlejuice, Edward Scissorhands* and *Nightmare Before Christmas*.

The larger montage, which calls to mind many of the elaborate sequences constructed by Slavko Vorkapich in the 1930s, also combines a close-up of lightning flashes on the 3D Vincent in the foreground against a warping 2D checkerboard background, and a shot of Vincent spinning in the center of the screen. The interplay of these systems for articulating screen space is the result of a strong design sense applied to the difficulties of combining 2D and 3D animation. Given Disney's overwhelming commitment to the cel animation, melding these techniques is perhaps indicative of Burton's own struggle to pursue his own vision. Burton said that,

> Disney seemed to be pleased with [*Vincent*], but at the same time kind of ashamed. I just think they didn't know what to do with it. . . It's like "Gee, what shall we worry about today, this five-minute animated short film or our $30 million dollar movie?" . . it didn't rate really high on their priority scale. Plus, I didn't even know whether I was an employee then.

Pastiche is a melding of styles that encourages the reader to mark similarity between the text at hand and the original work[s]. Burton's use of pastiche is perhaps simply the easy result of an immature, struggling artist, who finds imitation easier than finding his own voice. But building *Vincent's* larger framework after a Dr. Seuss book seems key for Burton: on first viewing, one has the overwhelming sense of the familiar Seuss style, the same rhythms and rhymes. This strategy seems a conscious attempt to use that familiar to and structure to establish a childlike, storybook world. Once this world is established, his use of pastiche allows *Vincent* to click in and out of a darker mold that mixes Poe, Vincent Price films and expressionism, to adopt the darker style of those works for tongue-in-cheek humor. For Burton, using pastiche here may have been a strategy of convenience, particularly in the short animated form where extensive characterization and mood development are limited. However, along with other signature traits like interest in fairy tales, graveyards and gadgetry, a passion for themes of duality and the intolerance of suburbia, the use of pastiche ultimately became a hallmark of the Burton oeuvre, for it recurs as an increasingly sophisticated tool for mirroring other texts in virtually every subsequent film, from *Pee Wee's Big Adventure* to *Ed Wood*.

Michael Frierson teaches film production and theory at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. With his wife Martha Garrett, he has produced short clay animations for the Children's Television Workshop and Nickelodeon. His book Clay Animation: American Highlights 1908 to the Present *won the 1995 McLaren-Lambart Book Award for Animation Scholarship. Currently, he is completing a documentary on the life and work of New Orleans photographer Clarence John Laughlin.*

Frierson, Michael. "Tim Burton's 'Vincent'—A Matter of Pastiche." Animation World Magazine. 1.9 1996. Web. June 27, 2012. http://www.awn.com/mag/issue1.9/articles/frierson1.9.html. Graham, Allison. "Journey to the Center of the Fifties: The Cult of Banality" in The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason. Ed. J. P. Telotte. Tim Burton is one of modern filmmaking's best-known directors — largely because his films all look like Tim Burton films. It's hard to find a recent director whose distinct visual aesthetic has become so universally, immediately recognizable. Following Vincent, Burton's independent artistic forays met with less success. Disney produced his next short film, Frankenweenie, about a boy who tries to bring his small dog back from the dead, in 1984 — but then immediately fired him. "When he made the film in 1984, I don't think Disney knew what to do with him," said producer Don Hahn, who'd worked with Burton back in his Disney days, in a 2012 interview with Yahoo UK. Tim Burton is now at the MoMA in a special exhibition including his films AND drawing. Who's ready for some sweet illustrations by more than just a film maker. The exhibit goes until April. Tim Burton - Exhibition at MoMA Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009. Saw the Tim Burton Exhibition at the MOMA in New York City a couple of years ago. We got this in poster form while there. Lurid beauty of monsters: Tim Burton comes to Moma. Risultati immagini per tim burton original drawing. See more.