Roosevelt Academy

The Dark Side of a Genius:

The Influence of German Expressionism on Tim Burton

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A&H 243 Film in Context

British English – MLA Style

Spring Semester 2012

27 April 2012

Introduction

Dark, eerie locations, distorted, fragmented images, a horrifying monster jumping at the camera seemingly out of nowhere – many contemporary audiences enjoy being scared witless. Both classical and postmodern horror films may take their inspiration from many sources, but would not be the same without a specific trend that was popular in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century. The artistic movement of German expressionism and the resulting films are decisive milestones in the development of cinema, extending their influence even beyond the horror genre that is closely associated with them. This work aims at giving a brief overview of the German expressionist movement in cinema, further asserting in greater detail its influence on the internationally renowned director Tim Burton. Two of his works, *Vincent* and *Edward Scissorhands*, shall be analysed to discover possible influences of the movement, further taking into account his own perspective on them.

German Expressionism

The end of World War I created many social conflicts in Germany. The German economy as well as the German people suffered greatly, in particular from the humiliation of the Treaty of Versailles (Wexman 38). Artists took their frustration with society and the world at large and transformed it into art, giving rise to one of the most decisive movements in film history. German expressionism, then, was "prompted by a variety of social conditions: the establishment of a liberal government headquartered at Weimar, the abolition of state censorship, the new popularity of Marxism and a general rejection of the past that had precipitated the horrors of the First World War" (Telotte 15). Artists of the new cinematic direction were strongly attracted to uncertainties and non-transparent issues that resulted in a typically expressionist (self-)reflection (Eisner 9). Eisner sees German expressionism as an extension of or reflection on German romanticism with its focus on mystical and magical themes (ibid).

German expressionist works can be seen as a rejection of conventions, creating art that deliberately does not reflect reality (Telotte 15). They thrive on "violent contrast (...) and the inborn German liking for chiaroscuro and shadow, [which] obviously found an ideal artistic outlet in the cinema. Visions nourished by moods of vague and troubled yearning could have found no more apt mode of expression, at once concrete and unreal" (Eisner 17). German expressionist art is overall eccentric (ibid. 19).

Nowadays possibly most famous for its films, the movement extends to other areas as well, such as literature and visual art. Recurring motifs in any form of art are "madness, duplicity and alienation", and in particular in film, the mood of German expressionism is captured in "sinister shadows and unbalanced images" (Telotte 16). The fascination with the macabre, obscure and the disturbing psychological depths of the characters found its outlet in the various freedoms as well as the restrictions that silent cinema offered to filmmakers. Distortion, subjectivity and the deliberate removal from reality were the main vehicles of expression at the time to gain access to "an essential, inner reality" (Furness, qtd. in Telotte 16). On a narrative and thematic level, this was emphasised in unconventional narrative structures and themes such as dreams, devilish pacts, monsters (predominantly vampires), madness, the irrational and the unrealistic. Another preoccupation is experimentation on living beings and "[t]he ability to create precise or convincing reproductions of the human form" (Telotte 16). On a technical level, subjectivity and unreality were expressed through

> stylised sets, exaggerated acting, distortions of space, heavy use of shadows, irregular compositions that emphasise oblique lines, as well as specifically filmic techniques like low-key lighting, dutch [*sic*] angles and composition in depth, to create a vision that pointedly challenges the authority of classical representation. Those techniques served to trouble the audience's customary perceptions and prodded them to recognise how much their sense of the world was carefully constructed by various cultural conventions. (Telotte 16)

What film, in contrast to theatre, could do was to place a strong focus on the subjective, on the individual's psyche through the use of subjective camera which gave filmmakers "the possibility of its taking on a character's point of view and even state of mind" (Wexman 45). The German expressionist obsession with subjectivity and psychology was therefore expressed through the recurring themes as well as the rather experimental use of cinematic conventions and techniques.

To conclude, German expressionism places a strong focus on subjectivity, unrealistic images and effects, as well as on unconventional storylines and settings. The predominant atmosphere that lingers in art of this silent film era is a dark, gloomy one, with a strong focus on eerie settings and dark sets dominated by the use of shadow and low-key lighting. Among the most important German expressionist films are *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari* (The Cabinet of Dr Caligari), *Der Golem* (The Golem), and *Der Student von Prag* (The Student of Prague) (Telotte 16). The preoccupation with the human psyche in terms of madness as well as a fascination with the forbidden and horrifying parts of human nature cast a characteristic shadow over films of this era.

Vincent

The short stop-motion film *Vincent*, released in 1982, deals with the seven-year old boy Vincent Malloy and the way his creativity and imagination detach him from reality. His role model is the actor Vincent Price and he is particularly fond of literature by Edgar Allan Poe. He imagines himself to be a mad, sadistic scientist as well as a tortured artist. In his delusion, he believes that his dreams become reality, despite his mother's insistence of their just being his imagination. In the end, Vincent cannot bear the torture of his fantasy world and the loss of his imaginary wife any longer and imagines himself to die. *Vincent* was both designed and directed by Burton himself, who also wrote the voice-over narration in the form of a poem.

When analysing it in the realm of German expressionism, several aspects come into focus, which can be divided into stylistic and thematic features. Firstly, the short film is shot in black and white, attributing an older quality to it that may be reminiscent of horror films of the German expressionist era. Animated in stop-motion, the characters are presented and designed in a deliberately unrealistic manner. For instance, Vincent has an unnaturally long face and his cat a strangely skinny body (Appendix A1). The film's essential theme, the juxtaposition of the real life and the imagined one, is emphasised by presenting the boy's fantasy life darker than his real one, reflecting on and emphasising the themes (such as torture and experimentation) that occupy him in this world. Accordingly, his gothic dream world is characterised by low-key lighting which in some instances achieves a chiaroscuro effect, as well as a distinctive use of long shadows and unrealistic, distorted scenery (Appendix A2). The dark gothic feeling is further emphasised by the sound of an organ whenever he is in his fantasy world. The setting is designed in a fashion that allows Burton to emphasise the change that Vincent undergoes. At the peak of his insanity, the rooms and shapes start to change and twist, driving him mad and into his imagined death (Appendix A3). All such stylistic elements point towards some sort of influence of German expressionist cinema. In fact, the editor of the interview book *Burton on Burton* claims a direct connection, in particular to *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari*. Looking back on the production, Burton himself does not completely deny this, but foregrounds other and to him more important influences, namely Dr Seuss and Vincent Price:

> I certainly saw pictures of it [*Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari*], in any
>
> monster book there were pictures of it. But I didn't see it until fairly recently. I
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> think it probably has more to do with being inspired by Dr Seuss. It 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 grew up loving Dr Seuss. The rhythm of
>
> his stuff spoke to me very clearly. (…) We sent Vincent Price the storyboards

and asked him to do the narration, and he was incredible. It was probably one of the most shaping experiences of my life. [...H]e was so wonderful, and so interesting as a person in what he liked in terms of art and stuff. He was very supportive. I always had the feeling he understood exactly what the film was about, even more than I did; he understood it wasn't just a simple homage, like 'Gee Mr Price, I'm your biggest fan.' He understood the psychology of it, and that amazed me and made me feel very good, made me feel that someone saw me for what I was, and accepted me on that level. (Salisbury 19, 24)

Thematically, the film corresponds to certain elements of German expressionism as well. It captures themes of loneliness and madness, fantasy, torture, experimentation with nature (in this case, on his living dog) and a distorted, subjective perception of reality. The frantic switch between reality and imagination is especially enhanced when Vincent is not able to distinguish between them any longer, carrying out his imagined actions (i.e. digging up the grave/flower bed) in real life as well. Especially this last part is strongly emphasised when his mother interferes after grounding him, now telling him to play outside:

> Vincent tried to talk, but he just couldn't speak
>
> The years of isolation had made him quite weak
>
> So he took out some paper and scrawled with a pen:
>
> "I am possessed by this house, and can never leave it again"
>
> His mother said: "You're not possessed, and you're not almost dead
>
> These games that you play are all in your head
>
> You're not Vincent Price, you're Vincent Malloy
>
> You're not tormented or insane, you're just a young boy
>
> You're seven years old and you are my son
>
> I want you to get outside and have some real fun." (Burton, "Vincent")

An important factor here is that Vincent imagines the duration of his grounding to be several years, whereas in the real world it was probably only a matter of hours or days. In spite of his mother's attempt to make him behave normally again, he gets more obsessed with his world after she leaves. The shape of the room starts to change and the creatures from his dreams – his zombie dog Abercrombie and his dead wife – torment him until he tries to escape. However, it is too late for him and he dies, at least in his dream world. The effects of this in the real world remain unexplained.

Another element that can be detected is the self-reflection that is characteristic of German expressionist cinema (Telotte 16). In *Vincent*, Burton includes this reflexive element humorously in the obvious use of intermediality. The boy Vincent admires Vincent Price and aims to be like him. His design in his dream world also resembles him, as he changes his appearance as soon as the name is first mentioned. Vincent Price is also the voice-over narrator of the poem, which mimics the rhythmic style of Dr Seuss. The character is also obsessed with gothic literature by Edgar Allan Poe, whose works, especially "The Raven", influence and shape the way his world develops. At the end, Edgar Allan Poe is alluded to directly:

> His voice was soft and very slow
>
> As he quoted The Raven from Edgar Allan Poe:
>
> *"and my soul from out that shadow*
>
> *that lies floating on the floor*
>
> *shall be lifted?*
>
> *Nevermore..."* (Burton, "Vincent", emphasis in the original)

To Burton, *Vincent* provided an opportunity to escape from the mundane work at Disney which he had trouble relating to: "Disney and I were a bad mix. For a year I was probably more depressed than I have ever been in my life" (Salisbury 9). It may even be

possible that *Vincent* contains unintentional autobiographical elements relating to Burton's own experiences and feelings during the creation (ibid. 18).

Edward Scissorhands

Burton directed *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) in an entirely different situation than *Vincent*. It was produced after the successful release of *Batman*, placing Tim Burton in quite a different context and popular perception than he was in during his work at Disney, when *Vincent* was produced. Instead of continuing his work in the *Batman* universe, he decided to direct "*a film he had long cherished, and one based on an image – a man with scissors in place of hands – that he had been toying with since childhood*" (Salisbury 84, emphasis in the original). *Edward Scissorhands* tells the story of an artificially created man who is left unfinished by his creator, leaving him with scissors instead of hands. After a long time of solitude, Edward is found by Peg Boggs who integrates him into her family. He falls in love with her daughter Kim. Edward gains popularity in the suburban neighbourhood because of his unconventional appearance. He is soon widely used and abused because of his skills (including hedge-trimming and haircutting) and his gentle nature. When a neighbour spreads lies about him after he rejected her sexual advances and he is persuaded to participate in a robbery, the town turns against him, finally forcing him and Kim to retreat to the castle where he was found. When Kim's ex-boyfriend attacks them, Edward kills him. She finally leaves him after a heartfelt goodbye, telling the townspeople that he had died in the fight to ensure that he is left alone and safe in the future. The frame narration shows Kim as an old woman who relays the story to her grandchild.

The film has a radically different mood to it than *Vincent*. It is shot in colour and appears much less expressionistic. However, traces of German expressionism can still be identified, albeit weaker and less obvious. The castle in which Edward was created is strongly reminiscent of the movement. It is isolated from the rest of the town. Some of its features are

highly unrealistic, such as its enormous door handle and interior, which shows the remains of experiments (and experiments gone wrong) on various creatures. Within the castle there is a dominant use of shadows. The setting is shot in low-key lighting, more so at the end than at the beginning and provides an exceptionally strong contrast with the topiaries outside the castle (Appendix B1). These, too, have quite unconventional and unexpected shapes such as a hand or various animals with complex physiques. Edward's appearance coincides with the strange gothic atmosphere of the castle. He is first shown with backlight, emphasising his eerie silhouette until the rest of his features become clear. He looks pale and sickly and is in quite a deranged and neglected condition. He has scissors instead of hands and behaves quite awkwardly, apparently not used to any kind of social interaction. His protective leather clothes and the scars on his face emphasise the fact that he can be a danger to himself and others alike (Appendix B2).

The dark gothic castle, in parts unrealistic, fits perfectly into the conventions of German expressionism and is placed in stark contrast to the suburban neighbourhood that is the main setting of the film. The cheerful pastel colours are not realistic either. This contributes to the subjective feeling of the film. In the way that German expressionist films tend to put a strong emphasis on the psychological and subjective, Edward's point of view is often assumed either openly or subtly, too. An example of his viewpoint is the dinner scene with the family in which the camera mainly shows his perspective, placing the scissors in the foreground while he watches the others (Appendix B3). The use of unrealistic pastel colours, then, is another technique of emphasising subjectivity, as Burton points out: "[i]t was seen from Edward's point of view, a slightly more romanticized view of the world. I like dark colours better, but they weren't too dissimilar from what was already there" (93).

Popular themes of German expressionism are found in the film as well. As mentioned above, a strong focus is placed on Edward's subjectivity and his inability to cope with the normality that he is forced into. According to the town psychiatrist, "[i]t seems clear that his

awareness of what we call reality is radically underdeveloped" (Burton and Thompson). He is

perceived as a freak and a monster, a perversion of nature, while at the same time his

strangeness attracts the people from the neighbourhood, who do not understand that he would

like to be normal like everyone else. As soon as their fascination has waned, his popularity is

cast aside. This issue can be seen as a characteristically reflexive element, a reflection of the

nature of and relationship between cinema and audiences and the short-lived popularity of

certain works of art. The unfair accusations find an audience in the shallow townspeople, who

immediately develop a mob mentality and go after him. Despite his retreat to the castle, they

are only satisfied when Kim persuades them that he is dead. The mob scene is reminiscent of

the one in *Frankenstein* (Appendix B4). Burton confirms this influence, claiming that

"[a]gain, when you grow up watching these things you make analogies to your own life. I had

always felt that growing up in those kinds of neighbourhoods the only time you'd ever see the

neighbours all together was if there was an accident or something out front" (Salisbury 98).

The theme of human (or animal) experimentation is central to the film because it is

one of the very issues that Edward's freakish existence embodies. He is an unfinished

creation. According to his flashbacks, his creator was about to give him real hands, but died

before he could complete his work. His flashbacks show more strange machines that do not

seem to make much sense and look rather spooky. Surprisingly, this setting is the only one in

which Edward is treated as a proper person instead of a monster, featuring touching scenes in

which his creator takes the time to help him develop mentally and to educate him. Outside the

setting of his creation, he is never fully accepted and turns out to be highly destructive

towards himself and others, although he never means any harm. In fact, the only times he

actually loses control over himself are triggered by Kim's boyfriend (or, later, ex-boyfriend),

resulting in actual intended violence. Other moments of destruction, even to the point of

hurting himself and others, are accidental, but contribute to his and the family's status as

social outcasts. His inexperience with other people enhances his strangeness and his inability

to adapt, rendering him a perfect victim for other people's schemes such as the robbery. In the end, he is back in the castle where he belongs – ironically for his own safety, not for others'.

Edward is a tragic anti-hero, a character type often shown in German expressionist films, who struggles with his own nature and society at large. By creating a character like him, Burton voices criticism on societal dynamics. Creating the character when he was a teenager, he is a reflection of his own feelings: "It was the feeling that your image and how people perceive you are at odds with what is inside you, which is a fairly common feeling. I think a lot of people feel that way to some degree, because it's frustrating and sad to feel a certain way but for it not to come through" (87). The film is thus a reaction against societal categorisation and pressure, against not being accepted as who and what you are. Although linked to Burton's own feelings as a teenager at school and in suburbia, Burton claims that

> the film is not autobiographical, because it was important for me to be as objective as possible. That's why I felt very lucky to have Johnny [Depp] because he brought to it a lot of themes that are nearer his life which, when I started to talk to him, I liked very much. I could look at him and draw upon his world, in a way. (...) He's a normal guy – at least my interpretation of normal – but he's perceived as dark and difficult and weird, and is judged by his looks. But he's almost the opposite of this perception. So the themes of *Edward*, of image and perception, of somebody being perceived to be the opposite of what he is, was a theme he could relate to. (91-92)

Therefore the creation and perception of Edward's character is indeed influenced and triggered in parts by Burton's own experience in his teenage years, but is realised and strengthened much more by the insights and experience of Johnny Depp.

Conclusion

Certain elements that are predominant in German expressionist cinema are mirrored in both works under analysis, with allusions to the movement (or films thereof) both stylistically and thematically. This influence is more dominant and obvious in *Vincent* and can only be found in subtle variations in *Edward Scissorhands*. The analyses suggest that Tim Burton was and is indeed influenced by the movement, although to which extent is an issue that can only be speculated upon. At any rate, according to the director there was never a conscious choice to direct any of the films in the style of German expressionism, but given his tendency towards horror and the obscure, he is likely influenced in some way by films of this variety. Other influences are more important and more personal to him as a director. He mentions inspirational people in his life, people who repeatedly collaborate with him on his films. Among those are Johnny Depp and, until his death, Vincent Price. Price takes part in both films under analysis, as the narrator in *Vincent* and Edward's creator in *Edward Scissorhands*. After their successful work on the latter, Johnny Depp and Tim Burton continued to collaborate on many more films that capture the unique Burtonesque flavour that many audiences have come to admire.

Although a direct and intended mirror of the German expressionist movement cannot be established in Burton's works, given that he himself does not see those aspects as foregrounded, his works certainly carry some of its characteristics, especially those of intermediality, subjectivity and dark, obscure themes implemented in inventive and original ways. All these contribute to the attractiveness of his works and his international renown in a manner that is best described by Johnny Depp in the foreword to *Burton on Burton*: "He is an artist, a genius, an oddball, an insane, brilliant, brave, hysterically funny, loyal, nonconformist, honest friend. [...] I have never seen someone so obviously out of place fit right in. *His* way" (xii, emphasis in the original).

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Word Count: 2811 (excluding quotations)

Appendices

Appendix A: *Vincent*

A1: Vincent and his cat

A2: Use of shadows, chiaroscuro effect

A3: Distortion of setting

Appendix B: *Edward Scissorhands*

B1: Gothic setting of the castle

B2: Edward's first appearance

B3: Dinner scene

B4: Suburban mob