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### **Snipping at the Seams**

“A lot of things you see as a child remain with you...you spend a lot of your life trying to recapture the experience” (Andac). Renowned director Tim Burton’s explanation for the source of the creative aspects in his films allows for his viewpoint to be taken into account when he presents certain topics in his work. Drawing upon a childhood filled with the suburban lifestyle and ideals, Burton challenges the ways of his upbringing through his feature-length film, *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). The motion picture tells the tale of Edward, a man created by the Inventor, who lives alone upon a hill in an enormous mansion. Since the Inventor died before carrying out his final plans, Edward remains unfinished, left with scissors for hands, and therefore spends his days tending to the gardens of his home. Life changes for Edward when an Avon representative, Peg Boggs, comes to his door. Seeing his miserable state, she takes him home, adopting him as a member of the family. The surrounding neighborhood welcomes Edward at first, even encouraging him to open a business cutting hair and hedges. However, as Edward falls for the Avon lady's daughter, Kim, the surrounding community turns on him due to suspicion and Edward’s unfortunate tendency to cut whatever lies closest to him. Through his use of contrasting images, colorization, costumes, and visual motifs, Tim Burton creates a world that magnifies the pitfalls of suburban culture in this optically dynamic film.

As the first section of the film presented, the title cards make the first impression on the audience, setting up the unfolding story. Accompanied by unconventional instrumental music in the background, the title cards for *Edward Scissorhands* are written in white block letters that are placed at an angle, distorting the image and invoking unease in the audience. The title “Edward Scissorhands” appears in the same fashion, while its orientation as a pair of scissors reinforces the name. This image opens up just as a pair of scissors would, revealing some of the contraptions that the Inventor has devised and providing background on the origin of Edward. This text leads the audience to discover the various settings of the film, which play integral roles as symbols of contrast.

The mansion that proves to be Edward’s true home does not receive much care due to the lack of inhabitants that it was designed for. Lit by only low key lighting from an above source, which the audience infers as the sun or moon, insufficient windows let in a minimal amount of light. As a result, shadows are cast down across the landscape of the fortress and the many spiderweb-encrusted contraptions within, adding to its sinister demeanor. In particular, when Peg first encounters Edward, the shots containing her point of view are lit by only a side light in the rear of the shot, turning the curious Edward in to a mysterious and treacherous shadow that approaches ominously. The side light shines through a jagged hole in the roof, which gives the impression that something has been released from the house through force. This foreshadows Edward’s liberation from the cage of his home and his entrance into suburbia. Similarly, Burton felt trapped by his community as a child, and preferred to escape to the limits of his imagination for comfort. The black walls of the castle are starkly contrasted by the bright and colorful community down the hill, creating a visual separation between the areas and emphasizing the

differences in lifestyles. The surrounding neighborhood in which the Boggs family resides contains a vibrant disarray of track homes in uniform colors, a notion to the ideals of conformity in the 1960s. Illuminated by high key lighting, Burton fills the community with picturesque elements of suburban culture that he remembers: manicured lawns, children playing in the yard, and neighbors walking their dogs, accentuating the utopian atmosphere created by the restraints of suburbia. Yet, despite the outer appearance of orthodoxy, Burton reveals certain aspects of the town that are not as obedient, something that he was likely to be familiar with due to his apparent disregard of the word “traditional.” These aspects are hidden cosmetically, as evident by the interior of the home of Esmeralda, the outspoken and outcasted religious neighbor that condemns Edward as a monster. The large cross and numerous religious symbols, low key lighting from votive candles, and a massive organ create a cathedral-like atmosphere that compliments Esmeralda’s spiritual character. However, Esmeralda’s inability to escape every aspect of communal rule, exemplified by the exterior of her home, contradicts her eccentric nature and depicts how the fear of being different in this era often overrode personal preference and belief.

The community in which Peg and her family live also hosts a number of profound characters that don kaleidoscopic apparel. Color, especially in regards to costume, can arguably be the most prominent form of visual design that Burton and his crew manipulated for this film. By dressing in mismatched colors, these villagers provide a contrast to Edward’s own ensemble, emphasizing his disconnect from the public. Ironically, their outlandish wardrobes go as far as to make Edward’s unique attire seem normal to the audience. The black jumpsuit that the Inventor outfits Edward in resembles a crude straightjacket, an inclination to Edward’s apparent disturbed state. The buckles, belts, and chains that enlance Edward seem to be an attempt to contain the

entity of Edward, a notion to how the Inventor kept Edward locked away from the rest of the world. The clothes that Peg later allows Edward to have are an ordinary pair of black pants, a white dress shirt and black suspenders. The black pants are a recognition of the lonely life he had been living, while the white dress shirt represents the tolerance for new and unknown concepts that slowly creeps into the suburban culture. Void of color, white often symbolizes innocence and purity, one of Edward's characteristic due to his separation from the rest of the world. As those that have not been exposed to wrongdoing are often the most conceding of the unfamiliar, the image of white in this film epitomizes the slowly changing ideals of the era towards a diverse society. For example, the audience first meets Peg's husband, Bill, dressed in all white. However, the audience does not wonder why Bill accepts Edward's presence in his home so easily, since he has been presented as open-minded by his white attire. Edward's suspenders hold the most significance, however, as his first attempt to put them on results in him accidentally cutting them off. This foreshadows Edward's inability to keep his place in society and his ultimate expelling from suburbia.

Kim's wardrobe interacts with Edward's attire as a contrast and a compliment. At the beginning of the film, she dresses in color like the rest of her friends and family, adding to Edward's jumpsuit uncanny design. However, as her relationship with her boyfriend Jim starts to deteriorate, white slowly mixes into to her costumes as she begins to develop feelings for Edward. She eventually wears an outfit that contains a similar meaning to Edward's suburban clothes. She wears a white blouse with a red skirt, the white representing her gradual acceptance of Edward and the color showing that the influence of her community still affects her. Kim's most memorable costume of the film, however, makes its debut during the climax of the film.

The striking white ensemble that she wears for the neighborhood Christmas party signifies her transformation into a tolerant person and her recognition of her love for Edward. Edward and Kim's contrasting outfits create a balance between the couple, as if they complete each other. The white dress also beautifully displays the blood that was shed during the scuffle between Edward and Jim, making Kim's lie of their concurrent deaths more convincing to the neighborhood.

The visual motifs that appear throughout the film add an element of depth to the film that could otherwise not be created from a two dimensional film strip. Scars are a characteristic that are unique to Edward in this story, despite the fact that he ends up creating a few on other people during his stay in the neighborhood. A painful reminder of a dangerous incident, the scars that Edward has on his face were not present when he was first created; they are shown only after his caretaker had passed away and Edward was forced to fend for himself. These little nicks become an obsession for Peg, as she insists on using her Avon cosmetic skills to find a way to conceal them, and subsequently Edward's past. However, Kim's scar on her hand from Edward's sudden movement serves as her reminder of him and their unconventional love, not the fact that he injured her. Likewise, the cut that Edward gives the Inventor's cheek when he discovers his death displays that Edward will always have an impact on the innovator. The scissors that caused the scars are a dangerous yet beneficial apparatus whose purpose lies in debate, constituting the center of the plot.

The scissors that substitute Edward's hands prove to be both his weakness and strength. Their sharp edges have prevented him from performing simple tasks, accidentally harmed his loved-ones, and cast him out of the community as a threat. In the scene where Peg and Edward are featured on a television talk-show, the scissors are attributed to a physical disability, as if

Edward's hands were something that only hindered his abilities. The audience members kept referring Edward to doctors, asking him if he would like to be "fixed." However, as Kim found, the weakness that was seen by those in the community had become so much a part of Edward, that by removing his scissors, one would destroy the part of him that makes him strong in his unique ways. Burton attempts to incorporate a social topic within in his film, as this aspect of the plot addresses the many erroneous ways in which the disabled or mentally challenged are viewed by society. Nonetheless, Edward's peculiar hands allow him to positively express himself by snipping away at hedges, hair, and ice, making an artistic contribution to suburbia.

Referenced a number of times in the film, snow holds a significant meaning to the plot and moral of the film. The opening of the film starts with Kim's granddaughter asking her about where the snow that falls on the town comes from, which results in Kim's retelling of the story. No snow references are made throughout of the film until the night of the neighborhood Christmas party, when Bill staples a fluffy sheet of fake snow to the roof of his home while Edward uses his carving skills to create ice sculptures in the Boggs' yard. Edward's method of cutting captures the audience's attention due to the restriction on how much actual snipping the audience sees, something attributed to the eccentric style of Tim Burton and his team. By only showing the moving scissors and bits of the discarded material being thrown everywhere, the audience has been granted the task of imagining exactly how Edward creates his work, adding to the magic of Edward's incredible skills. The exaggerated effect produced by the frenzied whirl of shreds that results from Edward's work has even been referenced in other films, most noticeably in the modern Christmas movie, *Elf* (2003). Edward's rapid shredding of the ice results in a flurry of snowflakes falling into the yard, setting up one of the most remarkable scenes of the

movie. Kim later discovers Edward working on carving an ice angel and proceeds to dance in the snowfall that expels from his work. At the end of the film, an elderly Kim reveals to her granddaughter that despite all of the years that have passed since she has last seen Edward, the snow that now falls on the village proves that he lives on, making ice sculptures. A number of ice sculptures are shown occupying the Inventor's Castle afterwards, followed by a shot of Edward casting snow upon the town below by sculpting a block of ice, confirming Kim's theory. Scientifically speaking, ice has no color, however, in film it appears white, which has already been noted as a symbolic color in the film. Therefore as Edward shreds the ice, he carves out some of the clarity that he was exposed to by his encounter with Kim, and the tolerance that resulted from it. By laying snow down on the city that shunned him, Edward provides the town with a beautiful occurrence, in the hopes of proving his usefulness to society.

The choices that shaped the visual style of *Edward Scissorhands* allowed Tim Burton to present his audience with his objective view of the suburban culture. Addressing society's problem of rejecting the abnormal due to fear and a lack of understanding, Burton also provides the classic story of a love that transcends all boundaries. His work exemplifies the need for a psychological adjustment in society to change the status quo, not just projects that are merely snipping at the seams of the issue.

**Work Cited**

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