Chapter 4

Children’s Literature according to Tim Burton: The Triumph of the Grotesque and the Gothic

You can’t label what he does. It’s not magic, because that would imply some sort of trickery. It’s not just skill, because that seems like it’s learned. What he has is a very special gift that we don’t see every day. It’s not enough to call him a film-maker. The rare title of ‘genius’ is a better fit – in not just film, but drawings, photographs, thought, insight and ideas.

Johnny Depp on Tim Burton

4.1 Introductory

My original intention in writing this final chapter about Tim Burton was to proceed by following the same method adopted for the analysis of the illustrators previously taken into consideration. Having aligned on my desk all the books, articles and critical essays by and about Tim Burton gathered during the past three years of research, I stared at the

blank page on my Mac monitor, falling prey to the “white-paper syndrome”. Then my mind went back to July 2012, when I went to the Cinémathèque Française in Paris to visit the exhibition of almost five hundred drawings, sketches, gouaches, photographs, Polaroids, puppets and statuettes realised by Tim Burton.\footnote{The first exhibition’s venue was the MoMA from November 2009 to April 2010.} Leaﬁng through the pages of the thick exhibition catalogue and the recent The Art of Tim Burton, an anthology which includes all the artwork realised by the American artist, the images started to mix up with the texts of the different biographies of Tim Burton. At that moment I realised that it would be impossible to deal with Burton as I have done with the other illustrators.

Why? The answer is quite simple: it is impossible to separate Burton’s artistic production from his life, because his art is his life. It could be rightly pinpointed that this is also valid for the illustrators previously taken into consideration, but, as far as Burton is concerned, the overlap between his life and his work represents the distinguishing feature of his artistic production. As remarked by Ken Hanke,

> His films most certainly are haunted. They are all possessed by the spectre of his childhood. Perhaps all artists draw to some degree on their youth. Possibly the very nature of creative endeavour is an extension of childhood, a kind of intellectualized play where the fantastic imaginings of youth are made real. If this is true, then Tim Burton is an artist who has extended that kind of creative play further than anyone else has dared, and in ways that lesser mortals would never have considered.\footnote{Hanke, Ken, Tim Burton: An Unauthorized Biography of the Filmmaker, Los Angeles, Renaissance Books, 1999, pp. xiii-xiv.}

Hanke mainly focuses on Burton’s films, but I think that the equivalence between his life and his work is something which characterises all his imaginative universe — illustrated stories included — thus making him unique.

All began in Burbank, where Burton lived that “disaffected youth”\footnote{Magliozi, Ron, “Tim Burton: Exercise the Imagination”, in Magliozi, Ron, He, Jenny, eds., Tim Burton, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2010, pp. 9-15, p. 9.} which was to become his Muse. He began to lump together all his discontent into art and to seek relief and comfort in the visual media and in the art of drawing. An often-neglected aspect concerning Burton’s movies which I find particularly relevant is that their origins stand in
his drawings. For Burton conceptual sketches and illustrations in which he creates “the look, feel, and tone of his characters and sets”\footnote{Gallo, Leah, “Boy from the Burbank Lagoon”, in Frey, Derek, Gallo, Leah, Kempf, Holly C., eds., \textit{The Art of Tim Burton}, Los Angeles, Steeles Publishing, 2009, p.6.} are always the starting point when he begins to work on a new project. “It is only after he has drawn and re-drawn the same thing that he looks and thinks: this must mean something.”\footnote{Gallo, Leah, “A Brief History”, in Frey, Derek, Gallo, Leah, Kempf, Holly C., eds., \textit{The Art of Tim Burton}, cit., pp. 8-13, p. 13.} This is how his creative process — which is characterised by a “non-verbal way”\footnote{Ibid.} — works. According to Leah Gallo, Burton is “a visual storyteller”,\footnote{Ibid., p. 8.} a definition which could also perfectly describe the illustrators previously taken into consideration. As already explained throughout these pages, the aim of the present dissertation is to examine Burton’s work in order to explore the connection between his artistic production and the grotesque and Gothic picturebooks analysed in the third chapter. In addition to this, I shall focus on remediation, as the principle which conveys his early work and the tradition it forms into new media.\footnote{For the definition of remediation cfr. p. 28.} To achieve this last purpose, I will not examine in detail each single movie in his filmography, but I shall rather take into consideration his entire artistic production, to highlight the whole creative process, from the first sketches of an idea to the final expression of it, even in a very different and popular media. Burton’s creative process, in fact, is not limited only to his movies. “His need to draw reaches far beyond his films”,\footnote{Gallo, Leah, “Boy from the Burbank Lagoon”, in Frey, Derek, Gallo, Leah, Kempf, Holly C., eds., \textit{The Art of Tim Burton}, cit., p.6.} states Leah Gallo. “It permeates his life. He draws anywhere, anytime, with anything.”\footnote{Ibid.} Some of the drawings exhibited at MoMA — which were realised on casual surfaces such as note pads or cocktail napkins — are a clear evidence of it.

\footnote{Gallo, Leah, “Boy from the Burbank Lagoon”, in Frey, Derek, Gallo, Leah, Kempf, Holly C., eds., \textit{The Art of Tim Burton}, Los Angeles, Steeles Publishing, 2009, p.6.}
\footnote{Gallo, Leah, “A Brief History”, in Frey, Derek, Gallo, Leah, Kempf, Holly C., eds., \textit{The Art of Tim Burton}, cit., pp. 8-13, p. 13.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid., p. 8.}
\footnote{For the definition of remediation cfr. p. 28.}
\footnote{Gallo, Leah, “Boy from the Burbank Lagoon”, in Frey, Derek, Gallo, Leah, Kempf, Holly C., eds., \textit{The Art of Tim Burton}, cit., p.6.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
4.2 Biographical Sketch

As already stated, all began in Burbank, California, where Timothy Walter Burton was born in 1958. His father, Bill, worked for the Burbank Department of Parks and Recreations, while his mother, Rickie, owned the Cat’s Plus, a gift shop which sold cat-themed knick-knacks. Bill and Rickie had another son, Daniel, three years younger than Tim. Burton felt estranged both from his family — when twelve years old he went to live with his grandmother — and from Burbank and its surroundings, and consequently he took refuge in his favourite pastimes. “As a child I was very introverted”,\(^{417}\) says Burton remembering his childhood. “I occupied my time going to see monster movies, watching television, drawing, and playing in the local cemetery.”\(^{418}\)

Watching horror and science-fiction films and television shows, listening to punk music, writing and illustrating poems and children’s books, directing and starring in self-made Super-8 films: these became the constant activities of his childhood and adolescence. “Art became both his catharsis and a way to escape into a fantasy world.”\(^{419}\)

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\(^{418}\) Burton, Tim, “Artist’s Statement”, in Magliozi, Ron, He, Jenny, eds., Tim Burton, cit., p. 6.

Drawing in particular started to play an important role in Burton’s existence. Ron Magliozzi, one of the curators of his exhibition at the MoMA and at the Cinémathèque Française, stresses that “for Tim Burton, drawing is exercise for a restless imagination.”\(^{420}\) Paradoxically, this is the reason why Burton felt frustrated at the art school. At the age of eighteen, in fact, Burton won a scholarship to attend the California Institute of the Arts (Cal Arts), where Walt Disney Studios had just set up a training school for prospective animators. Averse to categorization and authority, he did not appreciate the fact that at school “you were taught the Disney way.”\(^{421}\) He started to feel inadequate because he could not draw like the rest of the students. But then something changed, and we can appreciate the process in his own words:

> Society beats things out of you. I remember going through art school, and you’ve got to take life drawing, and it was a real struggle. Instead of encouraging you to express yourself and draw like you did when you were a child, they start going by the rules of society. They say, ‘No. No. You can’t draw like this. You have to draw like this.’ And I remember one day I was so frustrated — because I love drawing, but actually I’m not that good at it. But one day something clicked in my brain. I was sitting sketching and I thought, ‘Fuck it, I don’t care if I can draw or not. I like doing it.’ And I swear to God, from one second to the next I had a freedom which I hadn’t had before. From that point on, I didn’t care if I couldn’t make the human form look like the human form. I didn’t care if people liked it. There was this almost like drug-induced sense of freedom. And I fight that every day, someone saying, ‘You can’t do that. This doesn’t make any sense.’ Every day it’s a struggle. It’s just a question of trying to maintain a certain amount of freedom.\(^{422}\)

At the end of each school year the students had to present an animated project in the hope of being chosen to join Disney’s animation team. Burton’s graduate project was the four-minute animated film *The Stalk of the Celery Monster*. The plot is quite simple: what is initially thought to be a mad doctor’s torture chamber is eventually revealed to be a

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\(^{422}\) Ibid., p.7.
dentist’s office. Burton took inspiration from one of the illustrations he had drawn in his sketchbook. The short “demonstrated Burton’s peculiar taste for merging the gothic with the everyday”\textsuperscript{423} and, indeed Disney saw in him a promising talent, because in 1979 Burton started his four-year apprenticeship with the Disney studio.

At first he was enthusiastic about the job, but he soon realised that he was not in the right place. “What’s odd about Disney is that they want you to be an artist, but at the same time they want you to be a zombie factory worker and have no personality.”\textsuperscript{424} His first work was as member of the animation team for \textit{The Fox and the Hound} (1981), a film which shows the unlikely friendship between the fox Tod and the hound Copper. Subsequently, he was named conceptual artist for \textit{The Black Cauldron}, a Gothic story with references to war and evil magic. The animated film was released in 1985 but none of the nearly two hundred drawings which Burton realised were eventually adopted.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{blackcauldron_concept_drawing}
\caption{Tim Burton, concept drawing for \textit{The Black Cauldron} (c1982)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{423} Magliozi, Ron, “Tim Burton: Exercise the Imagination”, in Magliozi, Ron, He, Jenny, eds., \textit{Tim Burton}, cit., p. 10.

Figure 143 - Tim Burton, concept drawing for *The Black Cauldron* (c1982)

Figure 144 - Richard Dadd, *Robin Goodfellow*  
(Detail; 1849)
For both movies, Disney Studios prompted a much more realistic style, very far from Burton’s Gothic penchant and grotesque freedom. However, the early 1980s represented a significant period in Burton’s life because he started to develop

An aesthetic foundation that would serve as an imaginative resource for the studio films and other independent projects that followed. Signature themes and key stylistic traits, such as creature-based notions of character, the use of masks, and body modification, began to emerge. His interest in the theme of adolescent and adult opposition in particular came to bear on his choice of subject matter, and how he adapted this material for movies.\textsuperscript{425}

In order to fight his growing frustration, once again Burton sought refuge in drawing. In 1982 he created a children’s book entitled “Numbers” which included illustrations of the numerals from one to ten depicted as unnatural animals or insect creatures. Although we cannot speak of a direct influence, the book strongly reminds us of Crowquill’s \textit{The Tutor’s Assistant}.\textsuperscript{426}

\textbf{Figure 145} - Tim Burton, “Numbers” (1982)

\textsuperscript{425} Magliozi, Ron, “Tim Burton: Exercise the Imagination”, in Magliozi, Ron, He, Jenny, eds., \textit{Tim Burton}, cit., p. 11.

\textsuperscript{426} Cfr. p. 82.
Figure 146 - Tim Burton, “Numbers” (1982)

Figure 147 - Alfred Crowquill, The Tutor’s Assistant (1843)
In the same year he also wrote a children’s poem entitled “Vincent”. Neither book was published, but “Vincent” became the first movie directed by Burton.

However, the rejected drawings he had realised for The Black Cauldron, as well as the sketches created for other Disney projects, caught the attention of Disney executive Julie Hickson. She thought that Burton’s talent was underestimated and, together with the Head of Creative Development Tom Willhite, she decided to give Burton the opportunity to produce his first completely personal project. Thus “Vincent” became a five-minute animated short realised with the stop-motion animation of three-dimensional models. Burton realised a series of drawings to create a storyboard of the movie, illustrating it shot by shot. The film tells the story of Victor Malloy, a seven-year-old boy who imagines to be his favourite movie star Vincent Price. The young boy carries on a series of mad experiments and eventually finds himself alone in the dark, haunted by a nightmare and quoting the last lines of Edgar Allan Poe’s poem The Raven. It is impossible not to notice the autobiographical references contained in this film. Vincent Malloy is Burton himself, the lonely child from Burbank who liked watching the adaptations of Poe’s works directed by Roger Corman and performed by Vincent Price, the actor also became Burton’s idol.

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427 A filming technique in which objects, such as clay models or puppets, are photographed in a series of slightly different positions so that the objects seem to move. Merriam-Webster Dictionary http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stop-motion. (accessed February 28, 2014).
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Figure 148 - Tim Burton, concept drawings for Vincent (1982)

Figure 149 - Tim Burton, concept drawing for Vincent (1982)
Vincent was followed by other two projects in which Burton’s childhood interests converge. *Hansel and Gretel* (1983) is a live-action short revisiting the well-known fairy tale by the Grimm brothers. Burton realised it for the cable network The Disney Channel and, as for Vincent, he created a complete storyboard of the movie. He decided to direct a movie starring only Japanese people. Actually the witch is performed by a Japanese male actor and the final scene also includes a martial art combat between *Hansel and Gretel* and the witch. Here the great influence that *Godzilla* (1954), as well as martial arts, becomes evident.

After *Hansel and Gretel* Burton storyboarded and directed another live-action short entitled *Frankenweenie*. As the title suggests, this was his own version and homage to James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). Once again the protagonist is a young boy, named Victor Frankenstein, who like creating Super 8 movies (an evident autobiographical reference) in which the star and protagonist is his beloved dog Sparky. When Sparky dies because of a car accident, Victor decides to reanimate it. The drawings of Sparky with the parts of his body stitched up remind us of the classical movie portrait of the creature, in the several adaptations of Mary Shelley’s masterpiece *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. But also the features of Lurch, as drawn by Addams, may have inspired Burton’s portrait of the dog.

*Figure 150 - Tim Burton, concept drawings for Frankenweenie* (1984)
Figure 151 - Tim Burton, concept drawings for *Frankenweenie* (1984)

Figure 152 - Charles Addams, unpublished cartoon
Despite the fact that Burton’s first project represented something new, and introduced techniques, themes and motifs very popular in today’s cinema industry, Disney did not feel completely at ease with them. Disney productions were quite traditional in their visual style – and they did not intend to jeopardise their global popularity by betraying the expectations of millions of Disney fans. It is worth noticing that in those years there were several young creative artists who started within the Disney Studios and then left them to follow their own inspiration and career.\textsuperscript{429} As a consequence, Vincent ran just for two weeks only in one theatre, Hansel and Gretel was aired only once on television, and Frankenweenie hit the big screen only in 1992. Later on, in 2012, Burton directed a new version of Frankenweenie, changing it into a full-length animated movie. In 1984 the release of Alladin and His Wonderful Lamp marked the end of Burton’s collaboration with the Disney studio because he

Never felt at home in a large company that was too buttoned down, too cautious and sensible. He knew that if he was to continue he would always have to negotiate in that way, which was sometimes exhausting: to offer pledges to the system in exchange for the opportunity to construct his distinctive world.\textsuperscript{430}

After the experience at Disney Studios, Burton had to face the challenge of finding a place in the Hollywood film industry, without forfeiting his style and inspiration to a firm requirement. According to Mark Salisbury, he has fully achieved his goal:

Although Burton continues to hold his position at the very top of the Hollywood A-list, a director whose very name will guarantee not only an audience but a studio green-light, in almost all other respects he and Hollywood maintain a respectful distance from one another. His films may well have reaped in excess of a billion dollars worldwide, but they’re as far from being slaves to common-denominator

\textsuperscript{429} The pioneers of the defection which led fourteen animators to leave Disney to start an individual career, were Don Bluth and Gary Goldman in 1979. With the purpose of "restoring "animation to something better than it was", they founded the Don Bluth Productions which realised some well-known movies such as The Secret of N.I.M.H. (1982), An American Tail (1986) and All Dogs Go Heaven (1989). For further information see the article "An Animation Story: Don Bluth and the Disney Defectors". In HDNet Movies http://www.hdnetmovies.com/bts/ananimationstorydonbluthandthedisneydefectors/(accessed February 28, 2014).