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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## APPROACHES TO *ALICE IN WONDERLAND* (TIM BURTON 2010)

*Alice in Wonderland* (Tim Burton, 2010) is not an adaptation of Lewis Carroll's classic children's book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but might best be described as a kind of sequel. In the original book, published in 1865 and its companion, *Through the Looking Glass and what Alice Found There*, published in 1871, Alice was a fearless, outspoken and logical little girl, who navigated the nonsensical world of Wonderland with remarkable equanimity. In the 2010 film, Alice is grown-up, a young woman struggling to recover from the death of her father, having to make her way in the restrictive world of genteel Victorian society. The original Alice in Wonderland exists as a subtext in the film, not simply in terms of the familiar characters at the centre of the story, but also in terms of the question that drives the narrative: What has happened to the sprightly little girl who managed the nonsense world of Wonderland with such aplomb? This is a question about the process – or even the consequences – of growing up and about a world that takes a brave, bold child and turns her into a timid and uncertain woman who feels unable to control her destiny.

### The literary context: Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*

While Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* plays fast and loose with historical context, the question at the centre of this film picks up on a genuine contradiction between the feisty seven-year-old Alice and the images of virtuous womanhood that dominated the Victorian period in which Lewis Carroll was writing. In fact, the *Alice* books were among the first books written for children that made no effort to be 'improving'. Not only were these books funny, silly and fantastical, they parodied the moralistic stories and verse that children of the period were inflicted with. A terrific resource for comparing Carroll's irreverent and nonsensical parodies with the original is the *The Annotated Alice* edited by Martin Gardner in 1960 and updated in 1990.<sup>1</sup>

Lewis Carroll's determinedly non-didactic books of nonsense were immediately and hugely popular, as they coincided with a new middle class understanding of childhood as something separate and discrete from the responsibilities and hardships of adult life (despite so many Victorian children being condemned to a life of labour). Yet, particularly in the case of girls, this idea of childhood liberty was at odds with Victorian notions of Christian virtue – the fantastical preposterous space carved out by Alice's imagination presented a challenge to the mythology of feminine innocence and purity. (There is so much written about the *Alice* books but a useful and reasonably accessible essay about *Alice* and images of children in Victorian literature is: Auerbach, Nina, '*Alice in Wonderland: A Curious Child*'.)<sup>2</sup>

All societies struggle over the messages and meanings that should predominate and by which they will be defined. In particular, Victorian society is remembered for its unusually energetic repressiveness. Yet, the nineteenth century was also an era of invention and innovation. In the character of Alice both of these aspects of Victorian thinking are open to scrutiny. However, while Alice is constantly discovering that scientific reason does not apply in Wonderland, her admirable openness to the new experiences that Wonderland offers and her constant revision of what she has been taught as a result of 'new evidence' marks her out as a child of her era: Her eye fell upon a little bottle that stood near the looking- glass.

There was no label this time with the words 'DRINK ME,' but nevertheless she uncorked it and put it to her lips.

*'I know something interesting is sure to happen,' she said to herself, 'whenever I eat or drink anything; so I'll just see what this bottle does. I do hope it'll make me grow large again, for really I'm quite tired of being such a tiny little thing!'*<sup>3</sup>

### Apply these ideas to Tim Burton's film

- Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* also highlights the oppositions that underpinned Victorian society, between imagination and convention, discovery and tradition and exploration and domesticity.
- How are these ideas worked through in the film?
- Which characters represent which values?
- According to Martin Gardner, the editor of *The Annotated Alice*, the books provide a 'vision of the mindlessness of the cosmos'.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, Alice doesn't learn anything and there is no narrative resolution. In contrast, Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* provides a message and narrative resolution.
- How does this affect the representation of the world of Underland and the characters that Alice encounters?
- Compare the way that the nonsense poem *Jabberwocky* is treated in *Through the Looking Glass* with its presentation in Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*. The difference between the two treatments of *Jabberwocky* is the key to the fundamental differences between the purpose and narrative intention of the film and those of the *Alice* books. A version of *Jabberwocky* can be found here:  
<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15597>

### The place of *Alice in Wonderland* in Popular Memory

Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* does not require a prior knowledge of the Carroll original for it to make sense as a story. However, most people are familiar with the Wonderland world, in the same way they are familiar with the story of Robin Hood or Camelot, and Burton's *Alice* plays with this familiarity. *Alice in Wonderland* has become part of shared culture thanks in part to a series of screen adaptations and abridged picture books, but also because images such as the grinning Cheshire Cat and the crazy Mad Hatter are so powerful they have 'exceeded' the context of the story. Tim Burton observes:

*These iconic characters have been a part of our culture for so long now, close to a century and a half, in fact, and under the fabric of our world, that we all know certain images or have certain ideas about them, whether or not we have read the original books.*<sup>5</sup>

### Share impressions and memories of *Alice in Wonderland*

- Ask students to describe their idea of how Alice should look.
- The image of Alice that dominates the popular consciousness is the one produced for the 1951 Disney animation. Why is this the case?
- What are some of the most memorable aspects of the *Alice* story?
- Ask students to list all of the characters and events that they associate with *Alice in Wonderland*.

### Discuss the cultural place and role of classic texts

- Make a list of stories that have been continually retold and characters who continue to have a hold on our imaginations.

- What is special about these stories?
- What qualities does a story or a character need to have in order to remain relevant to subsequent generations?
- What other classic books, films or plays have left a lasting impression even if rarely read, watched or performed?
- How does this happen? Why?

### The Imagery of *Alice in Wonderland*

Arguably, the images and characters from Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books are more memorable than the ideas and the events. Although Lewis Carroll loved wordplay and puzzles, he also had a highly visual imagination and created characters and settings that were both distinctive and memorable. Carroll's remarkable capacity to build a vivid and fantastical world and populate it with original characters was enhanced by the illustrations drawn for him by John Tenniel. In the years since the initial publication of Carroll's books, many other illustrators have added their own visual interpretations. Tim Burton describes his own connection to the *Alice* stories as being based on the imagery:

*And it's the imagery that has stayed with me since I first flicked through a copy of Alice in Wonderland, and continues to intrigue and haunt and fascinate me today, be it through the beautiful drawings of all the great illustrators whose renditions of Carroll's classic creations I referred to while making Alice in Wonderland, or via the multitude of references to Alice that I see and hear in music and videos and songs.<sup>6</sup>*

For long-time Burton collaborator, composer Danny Elfman, the *Alice* imagery made an equally strong impact but in a less positive way:

*We had it on the bookshelf. There was a picture of Alice with her neck distended very long. It scared me and actually began what became a lifelong obsession with physical anomalies. I had many nightmares about this girl with an incredibly long neck.<sup>7</sup>*

### Explore the different interpretations of the *Alice* story through the illustrations

An interesting project would be to collect together examples of *Alice in Wonderland* illustrations done by different illustrators and analyse the way each illustrator has responded to the story and what s/he has added to the *Alice* tradition. John Tenniel is the first and most famous illustrator, with – arguably – Arthur Rackham next in line. However, the *Alice* books have captured the imaginations of many artists and illustrators including Salvador Dali. A website put together by *Alice* enthusiast Lauren Harman has links to a wealth of *Alice* illustrations: <http://www.laurenharman.com/alice/illust>.

*Alice in Wonderland* costume designer, Colleen Atwood, sought inspiration for her designs from the Tenniel illustrations – part of a determination to bypass some of the later influences. For instance, her *Alice* bears no resemblance to the 'costume-in-a-bag' version of *Alice* that has become associated with Halloween and costume parties.<sup>8</sup>

When a visual tradition is so strong and so well-established it can be a struggle to add an original interpretation. This is one of the singular achievements of Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*. The film offers a newly-imagined Wonderland, but rather than erasing the prior visual tradition, it enriches and adds to what has come before.

### Activities

- Students may like to challenge themselves to come up with new illustrations that add something extra to the tradition of *Alice in Wonderland* illustrations.
- Compare one of Burton's Underland/Wonderland characters to previous versions and consider its place in the visual tradition of the *Alice* stories.

### The Two Alices

Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books are playful and celebrate the freedom of the world of the imagination. The seven-year-old Alice has an amazing capacity to take in new experiences which she tests against the lessons about the world that she has dutifully learnt as a well-brought-up middle class child. The resulting clash between the nonsense of Wonderland and the conventions of British Victorian society highlights not only the absurdity of each of these worlds but Alice's capacity to make her way in both.

In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice realises that managing a garden of temperamental talking flowers requires quite a bit of skill and a modicum of aggression

*'Never mind!' Alice said in a soothing tone [to the Tiger-Lily], and stooping down to the daisies, who were just beginning again, she whispered 'if you don't hold your tongues, I'll pick you!'*<sup>9</sup>

Carroll is interested in, and parodies, the moralising tales and lessons that Victorian children were inflicted with but, rather than being bogged down in these lessons, Alice finds them either irrelevant or magically rewritten to fit the nonsense world she finds herself in. (For instance, the rhyme 'How doth the little busy bee improve each shining hour' becomes 'How doth the little crocodile improve his shining tail'.)<sup>10</sup>

In Burton's interpretation, nineteen-year-old Alice Kingsleigh, the film's protagonist, does not have the seven-year-old Alice's capacity to try out the ideas she has learnt and then abandon them when they don't work in their new context. As a result, Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* is a sombre exploration of the way that experience can close down the imagination and limit one's dreams.

Alice Kingsleigh has not only lost the love and support of her father but also her brave independence and imaginative spirit. Flashbacks to her childhood reveal her father to be someone who encouraged dreams and welcomed the disruption of the real that they bring. In response to Alice's concerns about the craziness of her dreams, her father does not reassure her she is normal but tells her 'all the best people are crazy'. Charles Kingsleigh celebrated difference and individuality, believing 'in six impossible things before breakfast'. However, after his death, Alice finds herself increasingly strangled by a world of conformity. Instead of being encouraged to find out who she is, Alice is expected to remake herself according to other people's specifications.

### Discussion questions:

- Even before Alice goes to Underland, glimmers of the unconventional little girl bubble to the surface. What are some of the indications that the old Alice is only in hibernation?

- What about when Alice arrives in Underland? Clearly she has little self-confidence and believes she has lost her adventurous spirit, but don't we see more than a glimmer of the old Alice (remembered by the Underworld characters) from the beginning?
- When and in what circumstances does Alice reveal the adventurous and curious spirit that has been stifled by the world of conformity?

### **Alice and Identity**

The idea of the self is central to the Lewis Carroll books. Alice is constantly losing track of who she is, or being mistaken for somebody else. Not long after falling down the rabbit hole she finds herself asking:

*I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, "Who in the world am I?" Ah, that's the great puzzle!*<sup>11</sup>

The notion of identity is explored through Alice's constant changes in shape and size, the Wonderland characters' continuing misrecognition of her and in her own confusion about how she fits into this alien world. Burton's Alice is similarly beset by uncertainty about who she is, but her crisis of identity relates to the world above the rabbit hole. In this everyday world, only her father recognises her for who she is, whereas everyone else just sees what they want to make her into. In contrast, when she arrives in Wonderland, Alice is filled with a kind of negative certainty: she is certain she is not the brave heroine the Underland characters believe her to be.

Mia Wasikowska describes the story as :

*a coming-of-age adventure – Alice finding herself again....suddenly you're 19 and you're an adult and you have all these expectations on you, either from society or your family to be something....how much do you sacrifice yourself and how much do you want to hold on to what you want to do to be happy?*<sup>12</sup>

While the Underland characters see the same brave and independent Alice that her father saw, Alice can no longer identify with this vision of herself. Yet, she is of course much more intrepid than she gives herself credit for. By pretending that everything that happens in Underland is a dream, Alice tries to strike a balance between her negative image of herself and the brave Alice brought to life to fulfil the prophecy in the Oraculum. One of the few places where Alice is not recognised as the heroine she will prove herself to be is at the Court of the Red Queen. When the Red Queen imperiously asks her to identify herself, she hesitates and becomes labelled as 'Um from Umbridge', a moment straight out of Carroll's Alice.

### **Discussion questions and activities**

- Why is Alice so reluctant to believe she is the Alice mentioned in the prophecy?
- Burton's film alludes to and echoes a number of episodes from both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Compare the responses of the two different Alices to the strange experiences they undergo.

- When the seven-year-old Alice changes size and shape, her clothes adapt accordingly. The clothes of the nineteen-year-old Alice, however, stay the same size and need to be remade. What is the effect of the constant reclothing of Alice?
- Students may like to play with this idea by designing a costume and reworking it for a different-sized body.

### All a Dream

In both *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, the challenge posed to Alice and her view of the world is resolved when Alice wakes up to discover that she was dreaming. However, in *Through the Looking Glass*, this 'resolution' is filled with uncertainty when Alice finds herself having to decide whether she has been part of the Red King's dream or if he was part of hers. This uncertainty radiates out to the reader who is asked: 'Which do you think it was?'<sup>13</sup> Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* works in quite the opposite direction, with Alice insisting that she is part of a dreamscape but being forced, in the end, to accept the impossible. In the final moments of the film, the blue butterfly – Absalom – is a reminder that dreams can be real.

### Alice and dreaming: Discuss

- Think about Alice's determined belief that the whole thing is a dream. When and why does she insist on this? What is the result?
- How much is Alice's idea of dreaming a homage to her father and the lost dreams of her childhood?
- A number of critics have interpreted Wonderland as a door to Alice's unconscious? Does this kind of interpretation work for Underland?
- Why are so many stories driven by the idea of dreaming?

### Alice in Wonderland: A Tim Burton film

As well as bringing his own extraordinary visual imagination to the film, Burton extends and enriches the themes explored with reference to his ongoing preoccupation with, and affinity for, society's outsiders.

*For Burton, a filmmaker continually drawn to characters who are outsiders or misfits, characters who don't belong or don't feel as if they belong in the world they live in, Carroll's flawed creatures are ideal material.*<sup>14</sup>

The film poses the question, 'What if Alice returned to Wonderland when she was older?' a question that opens the way for an exploration of the struggle over identity, place and meaning that is such a significant part of growing up.' In the opening scene at the garden party, Alice struggles against the weight of expectation pressing down on her. She feels increasingly uncertain about who she is, as she is reshaped according to the wishes of others in the world above the rabbit hole. In Underland, despite her reluctance to recognise herself in the strong and heroic figure recorded in the Oracle, Alice finds a place for herself. Her capacity to identify and empathise with outsiders like Tweedledee and Tweedledum, Bayard and, most especially, the Mad Hatter is the key to her growing stature in the Underland world.

When describing his personal and creative motivation for the development of the character Edward Scissorhands, Tim Burton referred to the feelings of alienation he had as a teenager when he felt he couldn't communicate.

*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. --- Tim Burton<sup>15</sup>*

At first glance, Edward Scissorhands and Alice seem very different characters, particularly as Edward is doomed to always keep people at a distance while Alice has a finely tuned ability to create connections with the Underworld folk. Nevertheless, they both struggle with similar feelings of alienation and isolation, as they try to work out how to grow up in an unsympathetic world. With this in mind, think about the similarities and differences in the respective futures offered to each of these characters.

As a character, Alice is defined by loss, the loss of her father, of her childhood self and of the dreamscape of Wonderland. The question that drives this adaptation of the original *Alice* stories highlights the ongoing presence of the seven-year-old Alice as a reminder of a lost past. It could be said that Burton's Alice is haunted by the original Alice. Yet, paradoxically, the grown up Alice is paler, thinner and altogether less substantial than the robust little girl of the original stories, implying that she is just a faded copy, or perhaps the ghost, of the original. When the Mad Hatter meets the nineteen-year-old Alice for the first time, he comments that she doesn't look anything like herself. Her quest is therefore to reunite with her lost self. The chasm between an ideal version of oneself and the lived reality is a theme that links many of Burton's characters including *Batman*, *The Corpse Bride* and *Ed Wood*.

The idea that Alice is a figure cut adrift, struggling not only to find her place in the world but to fix on an identity for herself is reflected in her clothes. As Alice shrinks and grows, her clothes fail to adapt, emphasising the continuing necessity for alteration, readjustment and making-do. The motif of stitching and remaking is a constant in Burton's work and, as in the case of Alice, implies both a struggle over a stable identity and the creative capacity for repair and adaptation. In a particularly evocative scene, Alice repairs the eye of the Bandersnatch who reciprocates by fixing her wound with his saliva.

### Discuss: the 'Burtonesque' outsider

- What other Burton characters struggle with their place in a hostile world?
- Burton's outsider characters are full of pathos, but this is often tempered by their optimistic willingness to stitch themselves back together. Choose an outsider character from one of Tim Burton's films and consider whether their pain is balanced by a kind of hopefulness.
- Alice is not the only outsider in Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (in both the world above and the one below). Which other characters are outsiders and how are they depicted?

### The Mad Hatter

The relationship between Alice and the Mad Hatter (also known as Tarrant Hightop) is the emotional centre of Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice recognises the Hatter as a like-minded soul, similarly condemned to being the odd one out and defined by loss and isolation. Left alone and in exile due to the trail of destruction wrought by the Red Queen,

the Hatter is tragic figure. He is also a classic Burton outsider, combining a failure to fit in with a touching pathos. However, less typically, he also carries within him a barely suppressed violence. He is a man of rapidly changing moods, an attribute mapped in the changing colours of his (digitally enlarged) eyes and suggested in the shredded layers of his silk coat:

*One of the things Tim and I talked about early on, is the idea that he would be so pure in the sense that you see, instantly, what he's feeling. So much so that his clothes, his skin colour, his hair, everything, reflects his emotion. So when he's beaming, you get this kind of bright effect and everything comes to life, like a flower blooming, very, very quickly. Same for the other side of the coin. He would wilt and kind of darken. -- Johnny Depp<sup>16</sup>*

This change is also mapped in his accent which is a sweet liting English lisp when he is in a gentle mood and strident Scots when he is enraged. Johnny Depp describes the switch between accents as a way of registering the Hatter's impulse to take on a different personality in order to face the different demands placed on him:

*The switching between accents is the safety mechanism that kicks in when he needs to become tough, when he needs to become angry, when he needs to be protected, when he's fearful. --- Johnny Depp<sup>17</sup>*

### Explore the character of the Mad Hatter

- Focus on a scene where the Mad Hatter changes accents. How does this moment add to our understanding of and response to this character? How does it add to the story?
- Track the Mad Hatter's changes up until his dance at the end.
- Some viewers don't like this dance, as it seems so incongruously silly in the midst of the richly grotesque and fantastical world that the film presents. What do you think of this moment? Is it a moment of metamorphosis or one of his changing moods?

Like Alice, the Mad Hatter is quite different from Lewis Carroll's Mad Hatter but bears the traces of the original who it has been suggested is a mad rather than nonsense character.<sup>18</sup> The madness of Carroll's Hatter was rooted in the real life mercury poisoning that afflicted Victorian Hatters due to the mercury used in the manufacture of hats, a piece of historical fact that contributes to the sense of tragedy and vulnerability that permeates Johnny Depp's portrayal of this character.

In Carroll's *Alice*, the Hatter and his companions are condemned to an eternal tea party (because the Hatter quarrelled with Time and it's always 6 o'clock),<sup>19</sup> a fact that overlays the character and his companions with a certain existential angst. In contrast, Burton's Hatter sees himself as a revolutionary and, unlike his literary forebear, seems able to progress past this eternal teatime once Alice arrives. Nevertheless, the tea party scene highlights his state of exile and feelings of futility.

Burton's characters often wear their internal psychological state on the outside of their bodies in the form of costume and make-up. Costume designer Colleen Atwood constructed the Mad Hatter's costume using extraordinary detail (even though it would subsequently be recreated digitally using 3D technology). The multiple layers of fine silk used to form his suit

were burnt off in places both to give an aged look but also, due to the resulting variation in hue, to suggest his changing moods. Numerous pockets contain materials for creating hats and odd bits of embroidery, multiple mismatched buttons and lots of darning suggest a character who is constantly creating, recreating and making do. Like Alice, the Mad Hatter picks up on Burton's fascination with 'stitched together' characters:

*I was into that whole psychological thing of being pieced together. Again, these are all symbols for the way that you feel. The feeling off being pieced together. – Tim Burton<sup>20</sup>*

Whereas Alice will emerge 'remade' at the end of her time in Wonderland, the Hatter is a more damaged character, who must constantly work to keep the pieces of his personality together. This ongoing effort is the key to his appeal and, while heart-rending, is also tied to ideas of optimism, creativity and energy.

*In the end creativity is the saving grace of Tim Burton's heroes, whether they appear on paper as many-limbed, multi-tasking monsters, or on screen as woebegone humans sculpting shrubs and ice, inventing tall tales, directing exploitation films, slitting throats, or surviving Wonderland. Their example of imaginative activity, as a response to conditions of disconnection and isolation, is the overarching message of Burton's work. --  
- Ron Magliozzi<sup>21</sup>*

#### Discussion point: characters and creativity

- Think about the creative 'work' the Mad Hatter must do to keep himself together and compare this to a similar effort made by characters in films like *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Mars Attacks!*, *Corpse Bride* and *Edward Scissorhands*.

#### Discussion points: character and costume

- Refer to Colleen Atwood's filmed interview on the Burton Collective website (<http://tbcollectivenews.blogspot.com/2010/04/video-atwood-on-wonderland-costumes.html>) When Atwood designed the costumes for the film she actively interpreted the characters' personalities as well as the role each one plays in the film. Atwood has regularly worked as costume designer on Tim Burton's films.
- Why is it so important that a director like Burton should have such a strong relationship with his costume designer?
- How much and in what ways did Atwood's creative perspective contribute to *Alice in Wonderland*?

## The Mad Hatter and Burton's clowns

By representing the personality of a character on their surface with costume and makeup, Burton's work connects with performance modes like pantomime and is rooted in his fascination with fairy tales and the dark worlds they explore.

*Fairy tales allow a form of escapism into worlds of fantasy and the supernatural, while often remaining grounded by particular morals and lessons. --- Kate Warren<sup>22</sup>*

The Mad Hatter shares the 'otherworldliness' of characters like Edward Scissorhands and Jack Skellington, characters whose destiny and identity are represented in their appearance.

These characters are also versions of the clown figures that appear so regularly in Burton's work. Burton has commented on the dangerous and subversive power of clowns (<http://www.creativecreativity.com/2010/01/tim-burton-on-creativity.html>). Characters like The Joker, Beetlejuice and Willy Wonka embody this idea, while clown figures like Edward, Jack and the Mad Hatter reinterpret this theme of subversiveness within the tradition of the clown as a solitary, sad figure. Each of these characters must struggle to express himself creatively in a hostile or uncomprehending environment. Moreover, the Hatter has to battle with the darkness and anger within himself as much as with the cruel reign imposed by the Red Queen.

Tim Burton has often talked about his feelings of kinship with monsters, strange creatures and freaks. He considers that they have a 'soulfulness' that makes them more human than the people who pass as 'normal' in the everyday world of conformity.

### Discussion Points

- With this in mind compare the Mad Hatter and Alice's suitor Hamish.
- Burton's clowns and creatures are often linked to the idea of the 'carnavalesque': 'a liberating mix of comedy and the grotesque in defiance of the status quo'.<sup>23</sup> Find out more about this idea.
- Think about the way the world of Underland relates to the everyday world above the rabbit hole.

## The Red and White Queens

The Red Queen is both a clown and a freak, marked out by the big head teetering above her tiny body. The character is a fusion of the Queen of Hearts from *Alice in Wonderland* and the Red Queen from *Through the Looking Glass*. While the original Queen of Hearts constantly called for heads to be lopped, it is clear in Carroll's work that her threats are empty and her power illusory. (After all, she and the rest of her retinue are 'nothing but a pack of cards'.) Like a child, the Queen responds to the anger of the moment and then forgets all about it. This childishness is very much part of Burton's Red Queen, but the scores of heads floating in the moat of around her palace are testimony to the bloody consequences of her irrational threats. Helena Bonham Carter who plays the character in the film says that the Red Queen

*is a bit like a two-year-old in her tantrums. Basically she's like a spoiled child. Everything's done for her. She has absolutely no compassion for anybody else's feelings, totally oblivious to anybody else's feelings apart from her own. She has no heart, even though she's the Queen of Hearts.*<sup>24</sup>



Tim Burton  
 Untitled (*Alice in Wonderland*) 2009.  
 Ink and coloured pencil on paper.  
 Private collection © 2010 Tim Burton

As both spoilt child and psychopath, completely unable to identify with the suffering of others, the Red Queen evokes both horror and laughter. By expressing her childish impulses in such a brutal and gruesome manner, she draws attention to the flipside of mythologies of childhood innocence. At the same time, despite her extraordinary destructiveness, the continual referencing of the Queen's childishness means that she also takes on an element of pathos. Of Bonham-Carter's portrayal of the queen, actor Ann Hathaway observes,

*Her characterization is so lovely and demanding, not child-like but childish, selfish and impossible to please, and then at other times really vulnerable and sad, because you know this person is going to be lonely forever because they're just so darn selfish.*<sup>25</sup>

In the same way as other memorable Burton monsters, the Red Queen's warped psyche is exhibited on the outside of her body in the form of her monstrously large head. The look of the Red Queen was inspired by Bette Davis's imperious – and cartoonish – embodiment of Queen Elizabeth I in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (Michael Curtiz, 1939). Davis's high forehead and shaved eyebrows are taken to their most extreme in the Red Queen, thanks in part to the wonders of digital technology which enabled the Queen's head to be enlarged to an absurd degree in post-production. It is in fact, the Red Queen's monstrous head perched aloft her tiny body that underlines her humanity, however twisted and warped. Her preference for courtiers who are equally physically challenged points to an uncertainty lying beneath the clownish mask.

### Discussion Points

- The largeness of the Red Queen's forehead creates a visual association with a small baby. (Note that when animating the young Bambi, animator Marc Davis took the drawings of a faun and enlarged the forehead and shortened the jaw so that it would look more like a baby.)
- What other aspects of the Red Queen's appearance and behaviour could be considered cute?
- What is the effect of the contrast between the Red Queen's cuteness and her brutal behaviour?

The Red Queen's court is populated with defenceless animals treated with extraordinary cruelty. Her wholesale exploitation of any animal that comes into her midst is extrapolated from the Queen of Hearts' croquet game in Carroll's *Alice*, where flamingos are used as mallets and hedgehogs as balls. In both of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books, Alice is actually quite cavalier about this use of animals, and has been described as having a 'courteously menacing relationship' with the animals she encounters.<sup>26</sup> In Burton's *Alice*, this menace has been completely transferred over to the Red Queen, who not only punishes the extremely appealing frog who stole her tarts but decides to eat his family as well. The sight of tiny monkeys holding up heavy furniture patiently supporting the Queen's weight, ravens supporting the chandelier and pigs being used as footrests is a bizarre play on an animation convention that stretches from *Snow White* (1937) through to *The Flintstones* (1960-66) and is digitally reprised in *Enchanted* (2007).

By using the techniques of cuteness in such a negative and subversive way, Tim Burton casts doubt on the whole aesthetic of innocence that underpins the vision of childhood that drives so much cinema. Anne Hathaway distinguishes between childish and child-like when describing the Red Queen but, in fact, both adjectives contribute to an understanding of this

character's psychological make-up. For instance, she demonstrates the taste and excesses of a child in her preference for bright colours, her tacky blue eye-shadow and her 'more is more' attitude to the red hearts adorning every bit of her person including the soles of her shoes. Once again Colleen Atwood offers great insight into the Red Queen's character.

*I wanted to keep it playful and keep it a little bit cheesy because the Red Queen is, in fact, a bit tacky.*<sup>27</sup>

As both childish and child-like, the Red Queen becomes synonymous with the two sides of childhood – the dark and the light. In Lewis Carroll's *Alice*, it is made clear that the Queen of Hearts is ineffectual and, like a child, she imagines a power that she just doesn't have. However, in Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*, the Red Queen takes these impulses to their murderous extreme.

### Discussion Question

- The Red Queen is comic as well as horrible. This combination of attributes makes her grotesque. This way of representing people and the world as strange and contradictory is deliberately unsettling and asks us to question our fixed understanding of the world and reality. How does the characterisation of the Red Queen do this?

The Red Queen's sister, the White Queen, adds a further dimension to the Red Queen's grotesque embodiment of the dark and light side of childhood. The White Queen presents herself as a pacifist and, under her rule, Underland was a gentler place. However, she is not the virtuous opposite of her evil sister. Rather, it is possible to discern the same impulses and energies within her, but she keeps them firmly in check.

She comes from the same gene pool as the Red Queen. She really likes the dark side, but she's so scared of going too far into it that she's made everything very light and happy. But she's living in that place out of fear that she won't be able to control herself.<sup>28</sup>

### Discussion Questions

- In what ways does the White Queen reveal the darkness that she is so desperate to hide?
- The White Queen and the Red Queen are engaged in a particularly deadly version of sibling rivalry. What are some of the White Queen's techniques for competing with her sister?
- *The White Queen is the Beverley Hills version of the Red Queen --- Colleen Atwood*<sup>29</sup> What does Atwood mean by this?
- Tim Burton has commented that 'what is perceived as light and dark is completely open to interpretation'.<sup>30</sup> How does this way of seeing the world contribute to an understanding of characters like the Red Queen and the White Queen?

## The Imaginative Universe of Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*

As well as the vivid and unique characters that Burton creates, he is renowned for his extraordinary capacity to create imaginative universes that offer a place for working through real world issues of morality and identity but also have a logic and integrity of their own:

*Sumptuous production design sprouts seemingly from a stream of unmitigated inventive consciousness. Settings are not limited by the parameters, logic, and physics of reality, operating instead by rationales of Burton's own creation. --- Jenny He<sup>31</sup>*

These other worlds, while complete and highly realised, are usually placed in contrast with the everyday world, which is represented as stultifying and prosaic. In *Alice*, Alice Kingsleigh flees a world that is crushing the imaginative life out of her. The pitiful Aunt Imogene, lost in her madness waiting for her prince to come, is one victim of this deadly environment but so is Alice's married sister, who is tied to a faithless cad. In this context, as frightening and devastated as the Underland world may be, its dark energy and twisted vitality makes it a much more interesting place than the world above the rabbit hole that Alice has left behind.

In reimagining Wonderland, Burton created a dark, haunted landscape. Rather than the fresh primary colours associated with the imaginative world in the books, the visual landscape of *Alice in Wonderland* is both worn-out and damaged, evoking lost and broken dreams. As the story progresses and the characters move towards a restoration of the world they once knew, the colours of the film become brighter. The garden landscape brings to mind the exotic jungle landscapes of French post-impressionist painter Henri Rousseau, with darkly bright flowers contrasting with dark green leaves and shadows. For the most part the exterior landscapes were constructed in as rich and dense a style as the interiors, with occasional expanses of sky: 'there are definite moments in the film where we let it breathe, where the frame opens up'.<sup>32</sup>

### Activity

- Focus on a single scene in *Alice in Wonderland* and describe the way the setting, use of light, colours and costumes add to the events taking place.

The two most significant interior settings are the palaces of the Red and the White Queen. In the Red Queen's palace, the ubiquitous dark red that dominates the otherwise gloomy interior represents her bloody reign and is a constant visual reminder of the severed heads floating in the moat and the death and destruction that she has brought to the world of Underland. The reflection of the moral and psychological inner world of the characters of a film in the mise-en-scène (everything that the audience sees) is a technique of visual storytelling that has its roots in a style of filmmaking called German Expressionism. One of the key aspects of this style is the contrast between light and dark, a technique that is used to great effect in many horror films. In the case of the visual representation of the Red Queen there is an interesting interplay between this expressionistic depiction of dark cruelty and a more cartoon-style jokiness. This interconnection between the horrible and the comic is known as grotesque, and is a style of representation synonymous with Burton's vision as a filmmaker and is very much informs the Red Queen's portrayal.

### Discussion Points

- The severed heads floating in the moat are a particularly shocking image. Describe the impact that they have, with particular reference to the moment when Alice is forced to use them as stepping stones to cross. Is this moment made less confronting by the obviously stylised, computer-generated quality of this image?
- How do the heads floating in the moat affect our response to the Red Queen?
- While we know that the animals treated so cruelly by the Red Queen are computer-generated, they look quite realistic. The tortured expressions on their faces remind us of their pain and their subjugation. Yet, there is also something quite funny about the Red Queen's expectation that these small creatures should suffer such discomfort in order to carry out such useless activities. What is the effect of the combination of humour and cruelty in these scenes?

Just as the White Queen is not the opposite of her wicked sister but a contained, repressed version of her crazed, bloodthirsty sister, her monochromatic visual surroundings are not simply the pure, unblemished opposite of the dark and corrupt world of the Red Queen's court. In fact, each queen's castle is based on Disney's Fantasyland castle and, in each case, Burton requested a slightly 'off' version of the fairy tale original. The neo-gothic beauty of the White Queen's world is a clear allusion to the picturesque school of painting that developed in the middle of the eighteenth century. This was an ideal of beauty that connected with the notion of sublime – an experience of the natural world that inspired both awe and terror. If you look at the White Queen's palace, it has the sweeping views, craggy mountainscapes and thundering waterfalls that were such an important part of this way of depicting the world and which continue to feed into modern-day notions of natural beauty. Unlike the dark, scorched landscape associated with the Red Queen, the White Queen's world makes you think of the gothic idea of reaching for something greater than what can be found in everyday life. The castle and the landscape around it are an elaborately staged and showy version of the sublime, suggesting both the White Queen's desire for something more than her constrained life inside the castle and the fact that her 'whiteness' is part of a design and a performance rather than a straightforward symbol of goodness.<sup>33</sup> While the hearts in the Red Queen's castle play on the fact that she doesn't have a heart, the chess pieces in the White Queen's castle suggest that she is less ethereal and more of a hard-headed strategist than she lets on.

### Activities

- The interior design of the Red Queen's castle was designed to be squatter and heavier-looking than the White Queen's floaty, translucent world. Note down some of the design elements that define each of these worlds.
- Note elements of the White Queen's world that suggest she is less ethereal than she lets on (for instance, the carefully mown chessboard squares of grass).

## Escape to another World

When talking about the success of the original Carroll stories, *Alice in Wonderland* producer Jennifer Todd focused on the fascination of an escape to another world.<sup>34</sup> As a filmmaker, Tim Burton has an exceptional capacity to conceptualise and design visual landscapes and imaginary worlds that have an integrity of their own. In creating the world of *Alice in Wonderland*, Burton built on the unforgettable imagery of the original, acknowledging and then branching off from a long creative tradition of artists creating their individual visions of the world and characters featured in the *Alice* books. In reimagining *Alice in Wonderland* for this darker extra chapter to the original story, Burton has been given the licence to meld his own aesthetic with Lewis Carroll's more light-heartedly grotesque outlook. Of his perspective, Burton has commented

*I never think of things as dark or light. I've always felt that you couldn't even pull apart light and dark, they're so intertwined. --- Tim Burton*<sup>35</sup>

### Activities

- With this in mind, focus on some of Burton's other films and compare the worlds presented in these productions and the one presented in *Alice in Wonderland*.
- Some people writing on film use the idea of the 'auteur' to describe the distinctive vision that some exceptional filmmakers bring to their work. Burton's work, which has been described as offering a 'world of dark daydream and bright pastel nightmare',<sup>36</sup> demonstrates the auteur's capacity to make films according to a 'distinctive, creative sensibility'.<sup>37</sup> From your knowledge of *Alice in Wonderland* and your familiarity with other films made by Tim Burton, list some of the distinctive features of Burton's filmmaking practice.

You may be interested in reading Ben Andac's discussion of Burton's filmmaking career as he considers whether Burton might rightly be judged an auteur. Andac concludes:

*Love him or loath [sic] him, Burton is a director who has made an impact—both in the industry and on the cinema-goers—and whose films, so special in their childlike reverie and cathartic blend of horror and black humour, warrant his inclusion amongst the great visual filmmakers of past and present. --- Ben Andac*<sup>38</sup>

The script of *Alice in Wonderland* was in place before Burton applied his own creative vision to the project. Scriptwriter Linda Woolverton is responsible for the narrative trajectory of the film along with Alice's characterisation. Burton signed on to do the film after reading the first draft of the script. (You can download a PDF of this script at Scriptcollector, <http://scriptcollector.blogspot.com>) When Woolverton was asked if Burton's recruitment meant that she began writing a 'Tim Burton movie' rather than fine-tuning her own 'Alice' concept, she noted that this was completely unnecessary as 'it was already in that weird, wild Lewis Carroll place anyway, which is kind of perfect for Burton'.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Woolverton's story reimagined Alice as an outsider, the kind of character closest to Burton's heart.

*What I liked about Linda Woolverton's take on the story when I read her script was that Alice was an outsider, a girl who doesn't quite fit into her society, her culture, and is trying to find her way in the world. --- Tim Burton*<sup>40</sup>

When making his films, Tim Burton has generally eschewed digital creative processes in preference for physically crafted imaginary worlds and hand-made special effects. In part, this preference relates to his own artistic practice, but also references his love for the hand-made illusions and slightly rough-at-the-edges special effects that were part of the signature of the B-Grade movies that he loved so much as a child in Burbank. The sophisticated 3D technology of *Alice in Wonderland* is a real departure from this way of engaging with the magic of filmmaking. Yet, as a mix of motion capture, digital animation and live action, the film explores new territory in a distinctively Burtonesque way. Burton comments that rather than being completely caught up in a particular way of making films, he is interested in the medium that will best enable him to realise the movie that he has in his head prior to commencing filming. In the case of *Alice*, he felt that the 3D would give it an interestingly hallucinatory feel.<sup>41</sup> However, for a director who conventionally relies so heavily on physical sets for atmosphere, the green screen, motion capture aspect of the film was undoubtedly alien.

Initially, all of the characters in *Alice in Wonderland*, except for Alice, were going to be motion capture. However, Burton found this too alienating and decided to incorporate characters such as the Mad Hatter, the Red Queen, the White Queen, Stayne and the Tweedles. Even though most of these characters were digitally altered, their presence in the film gives the characterisation a light and shade that would have been much harder to achieve in purely motion capture characters.

*This is his first real big thing with the computer and digital world. But the big thing he always brings is heart and soul. He needed to have that human element. --- Helena Bonham-Carter<sup>42</sup>*

### Discussion Questions

- In what respects does the human element add to the world created in *Alice in Wonderland*?
- One of the reasons Tim Burton was drawn to the project was that he appreciates the way that the original 'captures that dream state and that internal quality about why we use fairy tales or folk tales to figure things out in our life and culture'.<sup>43</sup> What are some of the visual techniques used in Burton's *Alice* to evoke this idea of the dream?

Tim Burton has been criticised for being more concerned with the way that films look than with story and narrative. This is a criticism that has been made about *Alice in Wonderland*. However, this point of view is based on a particular set of conventions that privilege one kind of feature film over another. This hierarchy of quality is one that Tim Burton has always rejected in favour of a focus on characters, themes and imaginary worlds. Although Burton's films are dominated by his unique imagination, they encourage an imaginative identification on the part of their audience.

**When studying *Alice*, students can learn more about Burton's distinctive vision by engaging creatively with his vision. Some possible activities are:**

- Recreate one of the events depicted in Burton's film in another form: comic, stop motion animation, film, short story.
- Imagine and describe an event from the years between Alice's departure from Wonderland and her return.
- Imagine what happens next to one of the key characters presented in Burton's *Alice*.
- Focus on a minor character or creature and describe their response to the events taking place in Underland, or their experience of life as part of the court of either queen.
- Design a new Underland character and describe how it fits in with the world that Burton has created.
- Take an event or character from one of the original *Alice* books that is not in Burton's version and reimagine it from a 'Burtonesque' perspective.

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