

Little Burton Blue: Tim Burton and the Product(ion) of Color in the Fairy Tale Films The Nightmare before Christmas and The Corpse Bride by Debbie Olson

Introduction

Color is the language of modern fairy-tales. Color is also the language of advertising. Children's films, particularly animated films, are constructed around and negotiated within capitalist consumer culture, intricately weaving commodities and consumption with fairy tale lands and utopian spaces. Whenever an animated film hits the theaters it is "part of a package. . . that consists of various commodities attached to it: a program, an illustrated book, a doll, a poster" and many other products that seek to capitalize on children's desire to continue the experience of the film's fantasy world (Zipes 8). How much do children's films influence a child's future consumer choices? For example, do the pastel shades of the Disney palette or the deeply saturated colors of Tim Burton's films help inform, construct, or motivate a child's future consumer tendencies? Though there are numerous studies that seek to gauge the effects of sex and violence on the child viewer, there is much less done on how children negotiate, incorporate, or resist color association that may precondition children as consumers. Are fairy tale films propaedeutical towards creating childhood nostalgia for certain palettes within visual marketing? And do those colors instill and/or inform broader ideological values that then construct future product loyalty? To answer some of these questions, I will examine how the unique palette in Tim Burton's films may function to condition children to idealize and commodify their own childhood by creating product identification through color symbolism. I will look closely at how the unique palette in Burton's The Nightmare before Christmas (1993) and The Corpse Bride (2005) works to associate commodities with childhood utopia.

Childhood as Commodity

Since World War II, television and mass media advertisers have re-imagined childhood into a quasi-Victorian, untainted vision of innocence that works to seduce adults into desiring a nostalgic return to an imagined state of perfection. Cook argues that childhood in the post-depression era became a "site for commercial activity" (112) with the rise of industrialization and over time evolved in such a way that "a child's value was measured less and less in economic—monetary terms and became constituted increasingly in sentimental—emotional ones" (113). For example, Shirley Temple was the physical manifestation of purity and the social desire for the spiritual innocence that childhood represented-- Temple's identity and body commodified in both film and real life.

Most of the Victorian images of perfect childhood are today represented by young cherub-faced girls and are exhibited in a plethora of idealized nostalgia on postcards, in coloring books, picture books, commercials and advertisements, television and film. As a result, mass media has created a naturalized collective memory of childhood as a "time that refers back to a fantasy world where the painful realities and social constraints of adult culture no longer exist," which is then embellished by advertisers who market a variety of products that promise to help return adults to that whimsical prelapsarian state (Spigel 185). Today, childhood as a site of consumerism has united with its romanticized emotional representation to create products that are marketed effectively to both adults, for nostalgic reasons, and to children, who, by consuming

the products that represent "ideal" childhood, become active participants in the creation of their own commodified mythology.

Throughout the post-war years, the media industry increasingly shifted the notion of children as influencing agents used to persuade their parents to purchase goods and services that were marketed to children, to "sovereign, playful, thinking consumers" who are now one of the fastest growing market demographics, particularly in this age of niche markets and kids-only television networks like Nickelodeon, Nickelodeon's TV Land, The Cartoon Network, Noggin, Discovery Kids, and The Disney Channel (Kapur "Television" 125). The advent of children's cable networks afford advertisers "a ripe environment through which to address children as consumers" (Spegil 204) in both programming and advertisements. In early attempts by television and Hollywood films (mainly Disney) to "mass market childhood. . . childhood got branded sweet and cuddly, cute and tiny" and took place in fantasy realms of pure Disney pastel palettes that reinforced the whimsical notion of the perfect childhood (Kapur 57). As Ellen Seiter and Vicki Mayer argue "many aspects of children's toy and media worlds have remained unchanged since the 1950s" (Seiter and Mayer 120) and are the most visible in children's films. The divinity and purity of a prelapsarian state is "at the heart of the bourgeois cult of the beautiful child. . . . [because] childhood itself [is]" one of the most successful products sold to American consumers (49). I argue that the idealization of childhood *through color* in film doubles as a marketing strategy that works to reinforce for the child the desire for goods that allow them to revisit the utopia of the film world, and for adults, creates desire for products--packaged and advertised in the same color palette as the film-- that promise a return to that idealized childhood.

In today's niche market, advertisers work through Althusserian interpellation in that the film's numerous contrasts of deep saturated colors against drab monochromes unconsciously "hail" the child viewer, who then connects certain product coloring to the fantasy world portrayed within the films *mise en scene*. Fisk argues that "In responding to the call, in recognizing that it is *us* being spoken to, we implicitly accept the discourse's definition of 'us'. . . . we adopt the subject position proposed for us by the discourse," (53) a subject position that is immersed in and shaped by color. Assuming the child viewer is placed in a particular subject position by a film's images and discourse presented through a particular palette, children may become preconditioned to favor certain product colors over others, colors associated with the desired fairy tale utopia in children's film. As a marketing strategy, product advertisers work to " (re) define commodities as beneficial/functional for children. When goods become framed as 'useful' they become means to ends rather than intended for mere consumption" (Cook 115). As color is also one of the primary languages of advertising, Burton's distinctive palette in his fairy-tale films may help children learn to associate, identify, and desire products that are advertised and packaged using similar color palettes. Burton's unusual and highly stylized saturated palette, as a marketing strategy, works to increase the child viewer's idealization, mythification, and commodification of their own childhood.

The Color of Childhood

Childhood products (toys, games, clothing) come in a variety of colors and the market has conditioned consumers to associate particular product palettes with childhood. Along with product logos and advertising jingles "color is one of the many marketing tools that global managers use to create, maintain, and modify brand images in customer's minds. . . .[companies]

strategically use color to communicate desired images and reinforce them to consumers" (Madden 90) in the hopes of creating long lasting brand/product loyalty, a marketing strategy that is also symbiotically connected to films' use of similar color palettes.

The most dominant marketer of children's films and products is the Disney corporation. Disney's strategic marketing of products based on its films is one example of the film palette used as an advertising tool to guide children towards products that are associated with the images they've seen in a particular Disney film. Media fantasy and fairy tales for children have been the Disney company purview since its inception. Disneyland and Disneyworld are the spatial recreation of childhood, structured to reinforce the experience of Disney films fantasy worlds within a cacophony of products. Disney is the symbol of childhood itself and markets a wide range of products to convince consumers they can recapture the essence of the idealized childhood. Disney animated films are a site of consumerism in that the films are the base from which products are then marketed that promise to revisit the experience of the film. Zipes points out that "as commodity, the fairy-tale film sacrifices art to technical invention, innovation to tradition, [and] stimulation of the imagination to consumption for distraction" (Zipes 8). As Henry Giroux argues "Disney was one of the first companies to tie the selling of toys to the consuming of movies" (Giroux 118 n20) and many times, especially in recent years, Disney products associated with a film are sometimes released *before* the actual film itself, relying on film trailers and internet promotions to communicate the desire for the fantasy world the film delivers. The heavy promotions of children's films are also heavy promotions for the specific palette within the film world.

The Disney film palette is rich with pastel pinks, blues, light reds, greens, yellows: all of the primary shades with just a few marginal colors on the side. Disney products also replicate the palette in the films so as to reinforce product association and identification with the fantasy of the film. For Disney, "art . . . becomes a spectacle designed to create new markets, commodify children, and provide vehicles for merchandizing its commodities" (Giroux 158). The strategic marketing of similar children's products by other companies who adopt the Disney color schemes count on consumer association with the Disney palette to boost their sales: "The meanings associated with different colors are important to marketers because the tools used to communicate brand image are mechanisms of meaning transfer" particularly meanings associated with nostalgia for utopian childhood (Madden 91). Products that are marketed to children jump on the color coattails of the Disney palette in order to take advantage of the industry standardization of childhood, which is embodied in Disney colors: "As the fairy tale was 'standardized' so that it could transcend particular communities and interests, it structurally fit into the economic mode of production during the 1930s and 1940s know as Taylorism or Fordism. Films were [are] intended to be mass-produced for profit as commodities," (Zipes 6) including all associated merchandise. The palette of children's products for years has reflected the Disney pastels. Even television cartoons and advertisements marketing children's products were mainly composed of pastels up through the late 1980s. With the advent of new computer technologies and graphics in the mid 90s, however, new colors associated with childhood began to emerge. Along with today's changing social conditions for children, the palette of childhood is also changing. The pastels of the 40s – 50s Victorian childhood innocence are being replaced with bold, gritty, urbanesque, computer-enhanced deeply saturated dark colors that reflect a change in the notion of childhood itself. Today's childhood is no longer viewed as a Victorian utopia;

however, the nostalgic *desire* for the Victorian idealistic childhood is still a viable marketing strategy. Today's children are growing up with a new palette that represents a different kind of childhood, and when they reach adulthood, that palette will be used to market childhood, not as a Victorian utopia, but as a return to the fantasy worlds depicted in today's fairy tale films. The advent of computer games and graphics has changed the color scheme associated with childhood—many toys, books, games, and even clothing now reflect the color schemes of popular computer-generated worlds. Disney has been slow to adopt the deep saturated colors and still produces almost all of its films and products in the same pastel colors of the Victorian childhood ideal; however, a new crop of fairy-tale films has emerged that I believe has been instrumental in changing the palette of American childhood. Tim Burton is one of the top directors of this new style of fairy tale film.

The Burton Hue

Part of Burton's success is his "ability to transform colour into a commodity, to make it the source and content of a vast network of communication, a communication with high visibility in public space," a space that is beyond just the screening of his films (Elliot 5). Burton's highly stylized juxtaposition of deeply saturated colors against bland backgrounds of peachy/beige or his trademark gray/blue work to create a new kind of fantasy realm full of contrasting colors that is then replicated and marketed to children in a variety of products (and not necessarily limited to products based on the film itself). Television commercials and print magazine ads have recreated the saturated colors of the Burton palette as a marketing strategy that entices consumers to associate the colors of the product with the fantasy realm in film. Each new Burton film targeted towards children also brings with it a bevy of products based on the film, but the films palette alone acts as a tool that may precondition its young audience to associate the films saturated colors, often marginal colors rather than primary, as desirable, thereby reinforcing their future adult tendencies to prefer colors that invoke nostalgia for the fantasy film world that "insinuates itself into their[children's] lives as 'natural history'". It's as though the film has always been there" (Zipes 8). That naturalization of the film's fantasy world, and its colors, frames later adult product/color associations. According to Elliott, "colour communication—and particularly its standardization—speaks to all . . . visions of communication. Colour itself circulates as a type of commodity and the 'information' contained within Starbucks green, for instance, is easily read by its target audience" (Elliott 1). Though most all of Burton's films utilize the contrast between deep saturated colors and lackluster earth tones to emphasize his themes of dark vs. light, I will look closely at the color usage in The Nightmare before Christmas (1993) and The Corpse Bride (2005) and how a similar palette has manifested itself in a variety of product marketing.

The Color of Nightmares

In The Nightmare before Christmas, color represents warmth, fulfillment, and happiness for Jack, which contrasts sharply with the dull peachy/beige of his Halloween world. Jack is unhappy with his life and just needs *something*. The film tells the audience that something Jack needs is *color* and he finds it on the Christmas tree in the woods. The brightest colored tree in the circle of holiday trees is the Christmas tree and it is the deep, bright colors that bewitch Jack. As he travels down inside the tree, in rabbit-hole fashion, numerous brightly colored objects wiz past him and then he lands in Christmastown where everything is warmly saturated storybook shades

of red, blue, magenta, fuchsia, purple/violet and green against the soft blue/white of the snowy north pole. Burton's palette incorporates a strategy that was used in The Wizard of Oz (1932), which "contrasted color and black and white—color Oz looked exotic; black and white Kansas looked ordinary. In the end, the fantasy land had more presence than the real land. . . in these movies color gave the objects pictured a presence of a fantastic type" (Leibowitz 364). To Jack, the colorful world of Christmas town is an exotic exciting place, full of life and an aura of magic.

The palette in *Nightmare* contrasts the peachy/beige of Jack's Halloween world with the softness and ethereal palette of Christmastown. Christmas in today's postmodern age is more than anything else a holiday for and about commodities; and most are marketed specifically to recapture the fairy-tale ideal warmth and happiness of a utopian, Dickensian ideal of Christmas. Through color the film highlights the desirability and transformative quality of the Victorian/Dickensian vision of Christmas. Jack's discovery of the brilliant colors in Christmastown works on the audience to demonstrate what Goodwin calls the "motives of displacement," which creates an "invitation to consumers to identify themselves with a fantasy world" (Goodwin 93). Jack is attracted to the *color* of Christmastown, though he has no understanding of the meaning of Christmas itself. As Jack travels through Christmastown he sings, "I want it, oh, I want it for my own!" The goal of the film is Jack's quest to capture (to *own*) the colors that give him such a feeling of warmth and fulfillment, a message that is reinforced by the marketing of products associated with the film as well as conditioning children to associate products similarly colored that promise a return to the warm fantasy of the film. Jack then goes on a mission to discover the meaning of the bright happy colors. But Jack eventually equates *ownership* of the brightly colored objects to capturing the essence of the feeling they invoke. To own color is the essence of happiness. Jack does not understand Christmas, but when Jack puts on the red Santa suit he believes he then becomes Christmas. It is the *color* of the suit that, for Jack, makes the holiday and brings fulfillment; a message that may condition children's preferences for products in similarly saturated colors that are unconsciously associated with providing the same fulfillment.

The Palette of the Dead

Burton's common theme of light vs. dark frequently manifests itself in the juxtaposition of the living vs. the dead. The binary light/dark in *Nightmare* and *Corpse Bride* is also analogous to the juxtaposition of adult vs. childhood. In *Corpse Bride*, Burton pits the boring, strictly organized world of the living against the freedom and youthful vitality of the world of the dead. That contrast is reinforced through color. The color of the living (adult) world in *Corpse Bride* is a bland shade of grey/blue and peachy/beige that, in contrast to the brilliant colors of the underworld, reflect the rigid, drab, lifelessness of adulthood. In contrast, the vibrant colors of the underworld and the invigorating liveliness of the inhabitants is punctuated by the deep saturated palette of richly textured shades that weave together objects and (dead) people in a swirling dance of vitality. The *Corpse Bride* palette draws the viewer into a world full of dissent and disruption (nothing in the underworld goes "according to plan" vs. the almost neurotic scramble to "stick to the plan" in the world of the living) and makes that chaotic underworld more desirable by its juxtaposition with the blandness of the world above.

The protagonist in Burton films usually arrives at the color-filled world through some kind of transformation or rabbit-hole journey (James and the Giant Peach, Beetlejuice, The Nightmare

Before Christmas, Planet of the Apes, Corpse Bride) where "the descent into color often involves lateral as well as vertical displacement; it means being blown sideways at the same time as falling downward" (Batchelor 41) in a swirl of color and pizzazz, where objects and creatures full of more life and character than those in the real world the protagonist left behind are discovered. In Corpse Bride, Victor is whisked away from the drab and stressful adult world and into the lush colors of the underworld through the kiss of his dead bride. Neff argues that "Children's filmmaking, which tends to encode its ideas in simplistic, emotionally charged images, provides a spectacular forum" (Neff 56) for expressing the longing for an alternate world. *Corpse Bride* uses "rich colors and textures, a panoply of visual messages [that] entice, exhort, and explain" the desirability of that alternate world (of the dead) using color contrast (Scott 252). Victor's character is as weak and neurotic as the adults that surround him in the living world, but through his time in the lively underworld he gains both confidence and strength, traits that the characters in the underworld possess in abundance. Socially, the message is a paradox in that death is made to seem preferable to life, and yet, in the end as Victor puts the cup of poison to his lips in order to be a part of the beautiful underworld forever, Emily stops him, allowing him to live. She sacrifices her happiness so that Victor can wed Victoria and live. Yet, the film has constructed an uncomfortable nostalgia for the land of the dead, paradoxically full of color and life.

Though Corpse Bride does not feature particular objects as the desired goal, the driving force is still economic. The plot's conflict is the result of two families vying for either wealth or status. Victoria's family is titled, but has no money, whereas Victor's family is the "nouveau riche" --no class but lots of cash. Victoria's parents' cold and calculated "desire to commodify and appropriate any aspect of marginalized culture that might be 'useful'" (Neff 54) to the salvation of the family fortunes is the sentiment that drives the frenetic race to marry Victoria to whoever can rescue the family from poverty. In the adult world, Victoria and Victor do not choose their mates, or their life path. They are bound by duty and responsibility and are not free. But Emily, and the other characters in the underworld are free to choose their own destiny: the film ends with Emily turning into a flock of (grey/white and colorless) butterflies that soar up in the sky, disappearing into the grey/white moonlight. Burton "make[s] extensive use of the interplay of neutral (black and white) and weighted [color] domains" (Evans 46) to reinforce audience longing for the more colorful underworld in Corpse Bride, leaving the viewer saddened at the thought of Victor and Victoria living a long, drab, colorless life in the above world.

The message of Corpse Bride, however, is problematic for its child audience in that the film creates a disturbing desire to return to the land of the dead, as opposed to staying with the living. The film sets up a "displacement, then, [which] 'neutralizes' a real hierarchy and substitutes, instead, an inverted, imaginary one" that privileges death over life (Goodwin 96). That privileging is the result of the use of deeply saturated colors that draw the viewer to identify "real" life with color, and hopefully, identify deeply saturated product colors with the imagined fantasy world of the dead in the film. Burton's films have created a new dimension of the idealized visual memory of childhood by "directing the meaning of the visual, anchoring hue to a particular idea, theme, or message. . . . It becomes obviously commodified, packaged and sold as a vehicle for increased sales, while verbally rooted in a particular time" (Elliot 8). Burton's frequent juxtaposition of death vs. life (in Beetlejuice the underworld is an infectiously fun place compared to the crazy meanness of the living world) and functions to alter the Victorian idealized innocent childhood into

a strange reversal of innocence— Burton presents a childhood utopia that is dark, necromantic, gritty, and *knowing*. Burton's protagonists tend to gain knowledge or insight that separates them from adults and the adult world. Gaining special knowledge in Burton films is not from *believing* in magic, but from *experiencing* fantasy or the magical through color in a way that can, ultimately, be more easily associated with products and clothing that are also colored in dark, saturated, urbanesque colors.

Toy Store(y) (Conclusion)

Though the Victorian ideal of childhood is still very much marketed, the reality of childhood today is nowhere near the utopian innocence it was perceived to be in the 50s-70s. Today's childhood is filled with technology that in some instances replaces socialization and discovery of the world with an internal isolation that relies on stimuli from sources other than human to achieve a sense of adventure, belonging, camaraderie, and culture. Computer games, iPod's, television, and film all provide those connections for the modern child, which has resulted in the adultification and, by default, the urbanization of today's childhood. The vision of children innocently dancing through fields of flowers wearing pastel colors and white Keds shoes, watching rainbows and playing in the sand, has evolved into images of children dancing to rap and hip/hop through their iPod earphones, negotiating around traffic and gangs while wearing dark street colors and adorned with a variety of bling. These changes in the conception and experience of childhood are replicated in the changing colors of children's films. These changes in attitudes about the childhood experience are then replicated in products and marketing strategies directed towards children. Marketers "anticipate a viewer who knows certain pictorial conventions and who shares visual experiences with the makers" (Scott 256) in a community of color associations. The dark, deep saturated colors of music videos, TV shows and films also mimic the dark reality of drugs, crime, sex, school shootings, isolation, and technology that inhabit today's childhood. As Elliott argues "between sixty-two and ninety percent of a person's first impression of an item comes solely from its colour" (1). Children learn color preferences through a complex process of association over time. As babies, the toys adults surround their child with also help the child learn to associate comfort, fulfillment, and happiness with the color of the object dangled in front of them. As the child grows and is exposed to visual media of various types the color associations are expanded, as are the child's experiences while viewing. Depending on the visual media, color association involves a "simple motion of relaxation-tension-release [that] is created by moving from and to points of dynamic symmetry, from one point of visual [color] balance in spatial composition to another" (Evans 46). And though "reactions to color are considered highly individualized, universal color preferences are thought to exist. For example, blue is the color most frequently chosen by adults" (Madden 93). A child's experience within the cacophony of media color may help to establish their palette preferences later in life. Films play a large role in establishing those color preferences especially the highly saturated and stylized color palette in Burton's films.

In the capitalist quest for constant consumers, marketers rely on consumers' "learned vocabulary of pictorial symbols and . . . complex cognitive skills . . . Thus, advertising images can be understood as a discursive form, like writing, capable of subtle nuances in communications or, like numbers, capable of facilitation abstraction and analysis" (Scott 264). As Elliott argues marketing use of color is a systematic process of developing color associations between product

and desired fantasy through certain stages of color association. Colour analysts have theorized three types of color consumers: Color Forwards—"the twenty percent of the population who are generally younger, attuned to new colour trends and willing to embrace them; Color Prudents" wait for a color to gain acceptance before adopting it and comprise about fifty-five percent of the population. They "depend on the 'information' conveyed by degrees of display or by high visibility, which might come from a combination of media/marketing use (in retail or the like). . . . As such, the information flow in question is not verbal. . . . but purely visual; and Color Loyalists, who comprise twenty-five percent of the population and are profiled as middle-aged with busy lifestyles who have no interest in "fashionable colour culture" (Elliott 2). Product manufacturers produce products in the palette of popular children's films to take advantage of children as Color Forwards, who are color malleable—their loyalty to specific colors has not yet been established. As child viewers are presented with the color schemes of utopian worlds within films, such as Burton's, products are then created and marketed in those palettes in the hopes of creating color loyalty that will last through the other two stages of color consumption.

Visual media functions as an advertising vehicle for the cultural production of color and color associations, which influence consumers worldwide. The cultural production of color association is only "one mechanism for creating [brand] logos that are recognizable and evoke positive brand and/or corporate images" (Madden 103) in relation to products that promise to deliver temporary childhood utopia. Films are another form of the cultural production of color association. And in a consumer culture, that production of color becomes entwined with the ideologically coded desire for eternal youth. That strategy depends on the idealization of childhood, no matter how it changes, which then becomes an "artefact of colour, in short . . . a social phenomenon, a vivid expression of place and space" (Elliott 7) that, in Burton's films, becomes the idealized vision of childhood that young viewers today will desire to return to (through consumption) as they grow into the unfortunate and unmagical condition of Adulthood.

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