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# Tim Burton's Christmas Chaos: Abject Transgression in *Batman Returns*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and *Edward Scissorhands*

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## ABSTRACT

Tim Burton's Christmas trilogy, *Batman Returns*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and *Edward Scissorhands* are all characterized by his trademark features. These include characters with ambiguous identities, apparently “normal” worlds adjacent to spaces associated with difference and exclusion, and the inevitable intrusion of the latter into the former. Alongside this, the three films display distinct elements of bodily disgust and decay, corresponding to Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject. Together, these aspects resonate with concepts of abjection as relevant to incoherent identities, differentiated spaces and corporeality. In particular, there are scenes where parental figures attempt to steer their surrogate ‘children’ towards socially acceptable behavior and adulthood, also a key component of Kristeva's theory. Utilizing textual analysis of the films' key scenes and respective narrative trajectories, this article therefore argues that Burton's Christmas films are especially susceptible to Kristevan analysis through their qualities of abject space, parental influence and incoherent identity, as well as their elements of bodily disgust and boundary transgression.

I've exorcized my Christmas demons. Growing up in Burbank, I responded to the holidays, especially Halloween and Christmas, because they were the most visual and fun in some respects. The best I can decipher from the whole thing is that when you grow up in a blank environment, any form of ritual, like a holiday, gives you a sense of place. Most other countries are rich with ritual, but I guess America is a relatively new country and a fairly Puritan one [...] So holidays, especially these two, were very much a grounding or a way to experience seasons, because in California, you don't get any (Burton in Salisbury 2006, 124).

Tim Burton here refers to the completion of his three consecutive “Christmas films,” *Edward Scissorhands*,<sup>1</sup> *Batman Returns*,<sup>2</sup> and *The Nightmare Before Christmas*<sup>3</sup> (directed by Henry Selick but produced by Burton), the trilogy all characterized by his trademark features. These include characters with ambiguous identities, apparently “normal” worlds adjacent to spaces associated with difference and exclusion, and the inevitable

intrusion of the latter into the former. Alongside this, the three films display distinct elements of bodily disgust and decay, corresponding to Julia Kristeva's<sup>4</sup> notion of the abject. Together, these aspects resonate with concepts of abjection relevant to incoherent identities, differentiated spaces,<sup>5</sup> and corporeality. In particular, there are scenes where parental figures attempt to steer their surrogate “children” towards socially acceptable behavior and adulthood, also a key component of Kristeva's theory. Utilizing textual analysis of the films' key scenes and respective narrative trajectories, this article argues that Burton's Christmas films are especially susceptible to Kristevan analysis through their qualities of abject space, parental influence and incoherent identity, as well as their elements of bodily disgust and boundary transgression. Such features generally seem discordant with the spirit of Christmas and indeed, contrast with Sheila Whiteley's claim that the Christmas film's “associated sentiments of harmony and goodwill continue to provide an ideological discourse that informs its popular interpretation: a

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concern for the family, children and family-centred activities, the rituals and expectations framing gift-giving and receiving, and an idealised nostalgia for the past which prioritizes themes of neighbourliness, charity and community” (Whiteley 2008, 2). Rather, Burton promotes Christmas through the trilogy as a highly traumatic and disruptive if memorable event. This corresponds with John Mundy’s observation that while “Christmas movies have always acknowledged the ambiguities enshrined in our experiences of the festive season, [...] the darker, dystopian elements of Christmas have become increasingly evident in movies such as *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984), [...] *Gremlins* (1984), the animated musical *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) and [...] *Deck The Halls*” (Mundy 2008, 166).

## 1 | Kristeva and Abjection

As noted, such darkness is expressed in Burton’s Christmas films through means of abjection, Kristeva being one of its key exponents and which she describes through a range of features connected to subjectivity. While this primarily involves the development and maintenance of a coherent adult identity through rejection of what may be deemed other in terms of somatic aspects, it also entails psychic elements. For Kristeva, the constitution of a coherent subjectivity follows the physical and psychological separation from the mother, this separation itself a form of abjection (of the (m)other). The subject in process subsequently begins to recognize and exclude various sources of bodily contamination relating to the detritus of the body: “Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage and muck” (Kristeva 1982, 2).

As well as the exclusion of contaminating waste, the rejection of what is deemed other can extend to other forms of difference, manifesting in xenophobia and racism. The constitution of subjectivity is thus dependent on boundaries, usually psychic but can assume the form of political borders in the case of nationalism, or physical containment in the case of institutions of exclusion and detainment. As Engin Isin and Kim Rygiel note:

abject spaces are those in and through which increasingly distressed, displaced, and dispossessed peoples are condemned to the status of strangers, outsiders, and aliens (e.g., refugees, unlawful combatants, insurgents, and the conquered) and stripped of their (existent and potential) citizenship (rights of becoming political) in various emerging frontiers, zones and camps around the world.

(2007, 181)

Spatial contexts are significant to Burton’s trilogy in that one world inevitably encroaches upon another and, because it is when the boundaries between “normal” and other are transgressed that abjection occurs, results in disorder. In general, any transgression that “disturbs identity, system, order” and “what does not respect border, positions, rules” is liable to abjection (Kristeva 1982, 4).

Frequently, the physical architecture of such spaces compounds a sense of abjection through symbolic or literal suggestions of corporeality and bodily disgust as suggested by Barbara Creed in her analogy between the spaceship in *Alien*<sup>6</sup> and the archaic mother, rendered through the spaceship’s “dark, labyrinthine passages” (1993, 16). In certain institutions that, like Creed’s analysis of *Alien*, function symbolically as maternal bodies, there exist processes that aim to threaten and compromise subjectivity and therefore induce abjection. This may be through physical hardship and the attempted “breaking” of a prisoner, or through control measures that aim to regulate or inhibit bodily function, as occurs in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.<sup>7</sup> These control measures are usually administered by the disciplinary institution to dehumanize its inmates and thus it effectively functions as a controlling maternal figure that aims to repress those aspects relevant to adulthood, such as sexuality. Any loss of these features infantilizes the subject in process and threatens a return to abjection such that “the jettisoned object is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 1982, 2).

Such instabilities of identity can also be found typically in the horror film’s shapeshifters, as further noted by Creed, as well as in science fiction where cyborg bodies mesh artifice with human components.<sup>8</sup> In the cases discussed here there are similar obvious ambiguities and shifts in identity, wrought through bodily anomaly and psychic distress, and having associations with alternative, othered spaces. It is these criteria that are examined in the following article to ascertain that the chaotic scenes of Burton’s Christmas trilogy result from spatial transgression, consistent with Kristeva’s theory of abjection. While Burton’s productions have already been subject to analysis in terms of their spatial characteristics<sup>9</sup> and marginalization of the other,<sup>10</sup> the trilogy discussed here has not hitherto been examined in relation to the connections between Christmas and abjection, and how their tropes deviate from conventional Hollywood yuletide films. One exception, as noted, is Mundy’s brief discussion of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* which, he contends, “reinforces the orthodox ideologies associated with the majority of Hollywood Christmas movies, the ‘miraculous’, ‘magical’ power of Christmas triumphant over acknowledged dystopian elements of the festive experience” (Mundy 2008, 166). However, I suggest that taken as a trilogy, the three films present Christmas as a disruptive entity, articulated through abject perspectives.

### 1.1 | Batman Returns

*Batman Returns* is set in Gotham City and opens with an exterior long shot of a huge mansion accompanied by the sound of a woman screaming, followed by the cries of a newly born infant. A cut to the mansion’s grand interior sees a nurse and doctor hurriedly leaving a room, looking shocked, followed by the sound of what we assume are the father’s anguished cries, suggesting that the child is in some way malformed. A subsequent close-up of the parents, who appear to be wealthy socialites, standing side by side sees them looking out at a snowy landscape, sipping cocktails before slowly turning to look at the infant, now encased in a barred box. As a hand reaches out through the bars and snatches their pet cat, they turn back towards each other slowly and deliberately, as if confirming their

plan of action. This is clearly the case since immediately thereafter, the two now push a pram onto a bridge and drop a basket, presumably containing the unwanted infant, into the river below. Overall, the sequence suggests that the abandoned child represents a threat to their affluent lifestyle and image. As Tina Chanter notes “[s]triving to establish or maintain their identity, subjects abandon others to abject states, often in an attempt to consolidate boundaries that are threatened” (Chanter 2008, 2).

The opening credits track the infant’s journey from the river into a dark underground sewer system, the undersides of Gotham contrasting with the snow-laden city above and literalizing abject space through links with bodily waste. The opening sequence thus establishes a dichotomy of spaces typical of Burton’s films, namely, that of a series of dark convoluted tunnels and sewers underlying a seemingly “normal” upper world, this network of underground passages “resembling the interior convoluted nature of the physical body” as well as “the primitive nature of the id” (Pheasant-Kelly 2017, 4), both associated conceptually with abjection. The bridge from where the parents throw child into the river becomes a recurring symbol of the boundary between these two spaces. In this case, the sewer is not only implicitly abject in its concerns with bodily waste and its architectural parallels with the interior body but is rendered further abject in that it emerges that antagonist Max Shrek (Christopher Walken), an unscrupulous industrialist, is pumping toxic waste into the drainage system.

As the basket containing the infant comes to rest on an underground ledge, a medium close-up frames a colony of penguins crowding round it; it transpires that they rescue the infant and a flashforward of 33 years reveals the physical anomalies of the now adult “Penguin” (Danny DeVito), a semi-humanoid being with flippers for hands and a long pointed beak-like nose. Penguin’s underground associates also include a troupe of circus performers featuring clowns, stilt-walkers and assorted others dressed in carnivalesque style, known as the “Red Army.” Typical of Burton’s films, the inhabitants of this nether world intrude upon the city above, a spatial transgression that transiently disturbs order. Here, the turning on of the Christmas tree lights is disrupted when Penguin and the Red Army infiltrate the city square, making their entrance disguised as a giant gift-wrapped box which suddenly explodes and unleashes chaos on the Christmas scene. Their carnivalesque appearance belies their macabre intentions as they direct machine guns on the gathered crowds and set fire to toys in shop windows, Penguin’s ultimate intention being to trap Shrek. Indeed, Shrek ends up in the sewer confronted by Penguin, framed first in long shot, emphasizing his shuffling penguin-like gait and hunched demeanor, and then in close-up revealing the details of his amorphous facial features: long unkempt black hair, darkened eyes and mouth, pallid skin, and long pointed nose. In short, Penguin is an abject being, a combination of human and non-human animal, that, as Kristeva puts it, “confronts us [...] with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal* [italics in original]” (Kristeva 1982, 12), an amorphous figure who is initially unaware of his real identity.

Threatening to reveal Shrek’s polluting activities, Penguin insists that Shrek helps him to reestablish himself in Gotham City, saying “I’ve been down here too long, time for me to ascend, to

remerge, I want to find out who I am.” Penguin subsequently seeks out his real parents, the Cobblepots, discovers that they are both dead, and assumes his birth name of Oswald Cobblepot. Despite his newly claimed citizenship, it proves impossible to disguise his abject origins; for example, when Shrek, in the guise of surrogate father, entices him with raw fish, Cobblepot tears voraciously at the raw fish that hangs from his mouth. Here, he is framed in close-up to amplify the sense of disgust and in the same sequence, he bites the nose off another character, blood streaming from his mouth. There are other remnants of his abject origins—his teeth are blackened and black fluid constantly exudes from his mouth. However, under the controlling “parentage” of Max Shrek, and after making the false claim that he has saved the mayor’s child, Cobblepot becomes Gotham’s new mayor.

As Shrek’s surrogate child, Cobblepot is encouraged to behave in a more adult fashion and in the role of Gotham’s mayor, he changes his costume, wearing a top hat and waistcoat, attracting crowds that carry placards stating, “Oswald means order” and “Cobblepot can clean it up.” In rejecting his sewer origins, there is thus a suggestion of attaining a coherent adult identity that is consistent with orderliness and a refusal to be “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 1982, 4). Coupled with speeches to public audiences he enters the symbolic, using language as a means of orderly communication (Kristeva 1984, 25). Nonetheless, this newly claimed symbolic identity is short-lived, exposed when he is making one such speech. Here, Batman jams the frequency of the microphones and instead, plays a recording of Cobblepot’s previous rambling, incoherent tirade about the city and its inhabitants, leading him to be reviled by the city’s people, and ultimately in exasperation, to revert to his former primitive self. In other words, his mastery of language is curtailed, such that he regresses. Returning to the bridge, he jumps into the semiotic, watery world of the sewer on a giant duck-shaped boat, further consolidating his regressive infantile state and goes back to the penguin colony. In this way, descent into the sewers offers Cobblepot a comforting security, akin to the pull of the maternal body, which as Kristeva notes has “the sway of a power that is securing as it is stifling” (Kristeva 1982, 13). Ultimately, having been foiled by Batman, Cobblepot reverts to his former status of non-human animal with plans to steal the first born of the city, and kill them. However, this ploy fails, and ends with Selina Kyle (Michelle Pfeiffer), Shrek’s timid secretary, electrocuting Shrek to death.

Indeed, Cobblepot is not the only source of unstable and incoherent identity. Selina is likewise initially presented as somewhat infantilized and lacking in ego, appearing physically and verbally subservient to Shrek. This is signaled not only through her reticence with language, having only a tenuous hold on the symbolic but is also expressed through the pink-colored *mise-en-scène* of her entire apartment which is littered with toys and other childish paraphernalia. Her telephone calls inevitably include a daily message from her mother, suggesting the difficulty of breaking away from the maternal figure. As Kristeva notes “an ego, wounded to the point of annulment, barricaded and untouchable, cowers somewhere, nowhere, at no other place than the one that cannot be found” (Kristeva 1982, 47). This situation changes, however, following Selina’s accidental discovery of Shrek’s plans to illicitly take over the power supply

of Gotham, with the result being that he pushes her through a window causing her to crash to the ground. Although seeming to be fatally injured, Selina is revived by a number of neighborhood cats which gather round and begin gnawing at her fingers whereupon she regains consciousness and thereafter assumes a completely different persona. Her ego now fully restored, she duly destroys the child-like décor of her apartment, and stitches together a black vinyl cat costume replete with claws.

Selina Kyle thus transforms into Catwoman, her shifting identity also matched by that of Bruce Wayne (Michael Keaton) and his alter ego, Batman. In her development towards an adult identity, Catwoman not only becomes linguistically articulate, confident, and somewhat sexualized but ultimately kills Shrek. Even so, as the film progresses, her costume begins to fall apart and as Peter Piatkowski observes, begins “unravelling in places, with the stitching breaking, allowing for tufts of blonde hair to emerge or peeks of scarred and bruised skin. By the close of the film, when her ambiguous ending draws near, she is in complete disarray both physically and mentally, and any pretense of a cat costume is abandoned” (Piatkowski 2021, 189). One might argue therefore that she, like Edward Scissorhands and Oswald Cobblepot, regresses to her former abject status. However, this is not exactly the case, since despite her seeming visual decline, Catwoman not only kills her nemesis but is seen to survive in the closing scenes. Arguably, this reflects the possibility that Selina Kyle’s transformation is not only reflective of Burton’s preoccupation with the outsider but is also rooted in the contemporaneous cultural contexts of gender politics and third wave feminism.

## 1.2 | Nightmare Before Christmas

*The Nightmare Before Christmas* too deals with a dichotomy of spaces, though in this instance, the two realms are geographically distant and characterized by their respective connotations of Christmas and Halloween. Even though one does not overlie the other directly as is often the case in Burton films, the two realms still distinguish the dead from the living. This animated feature centers on Jack Skellington (Chris Sarandon), the Pumpkin King of Halloween Town who is responsible for its annual Halloween celebrations. Halloween Town features an assortment of ghosts, ghouls and monsters, as well as a number of Frankensteinian creatures conjured up by Doctor Finkelstein (William Hickey), including Sally (Catherine O’Hara), a fully fabricated character. Sally is literally stitched together, and her limbs often get torn off such that she has to sew them back on.

Out wandering one day, looking for an alternative celebration to Halloween, Jack comes across Christmas Town. Here, he is fascinated by the traditional iconography of Christmas, from illuminated Christmas trees, baubles, snow and presents alongside Christmas rituals such as standing under the mistletoe, and gatherings around an open fire. As in other Burton productions that differentiate the living from the dead, the color palette of Halloween Town is predominantly muted and contrasts with the brightly colored *mise-en-scène* of Christmas Town. Jack Skellington tries to elucidate the meaning behind Christmas by concocting various mathematical equations involving unlikely components such as chestnuts and Christmas cards, as well as carrying out a series of scientific experiments—he puts a holly

berry under the microscope, crushes a bauble, and dissects a teddy bear—to try to decipher the meaning behind Christmas. But, as Kimberly Baltzer-Jaray notes in her philosophical analysis of the film, “the essence of Christmas is not a physical object and it is not exhausted by the physical things associated with it [...] the essence of Christmas is intangible, immaterial, eternal, and ultimately metaphysical” (Baltzer-Jaray 2014, 158).

Jack is so beguiled with the idea of Christmas that on returning to Halloween Town he decides to transform it into Christmas Town. Accordingly, he galvanizes the inhabitants of Halloween Town to make toys as gifts, musicians to recreate Christmas carols, the doctor to “create” reindeer, and three “trick or treaters” to kidnap Santa Claus (Ed Ivory) with Jack intending to take Santa Claus’s place. However, Jack is physically extremely thin and tall, unlike the short and somewhat rounded Santa Claus, and is thus entirely unconvincing. In other words, like Cobblepot, he tries to assume another identity but is not credible in that role. In fact, Sally tells him that “you don’t look like yourself at all.” Moreover, he finds it impossible to steer away from his Halloween origins—his sleigh is comprised of a coffin and the reindeer take skeletal forms, creating an inauthentic copy. As Baltzer-Jaray notes, “Jack projects his own subjective point of view onto Santa Claus [...] when he calls him ‘Sandy Claws’” and describes him as a “fearsome king with a mighty voice” who is “like a lobster, huge and red...with big arms” (Baltzer-Jaray 2014, 164). Jack’s assumption of Santa Claus’s identity, much like that of Cobblepot’s attempted change, results in disaster and chaos because as he delivers the toys around the world, the toys themselves turn out to be Halloween-based, frightening the children. They include serpents which devour entire Christmas trees, as well as bats, vampire toys, a shrunken head, and a killer duck with sharpened teeth. As Baltzer-Jaray further notes, even though Jack tries to replace Santa Claus, he is not convincing because “Jack and the others do not have the same subjective consciousness as Santa Claus or the people of Christmas Town” (Baltzer-Jaray 2014, 164).

In Jack’s absence, Oogie Boogie (Ken Page), Halloween Town’s monstrous bogeyman, threatens to kill the real Santa Claus along with Sally. Oogie Boogie is not only monstrous in its actions but, it transpires, is composed of maggots, larvae and insects which intermittently fall away from its green bulbous body, encapsulating the decay that Kristeva associates with the corpse. For Kristeva “[t]he corpse [...] that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool and death [...] refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death” (Kristeva 1982, 3). Sally is able to release Santa Claus because her sewn together body has the capacity to revert to its component parts, so her disembodied hands can act autonomously. While such corporeal fragmentation has abject implications, the sentience of autonomous body parts (and other inanimate objects in the film) also has uncanny resonances. In this respect, Freud claims that uncanny feelings occur in relation to automata when “there is an intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one” (Freud 1955, 233). Meanwhile, as a result of Jack’s unconvincing Santa Claus impersonation, he is shot down by the military, the debris of the sleigh and his body strewn across a snow-covered

cemetery scene, signifying the incompatibility of the two worlds. Because of Jack's attempt to become Santa Claus, Christmas is again disrupted as Halloween spills over into Christmas. Ultimately, order is restored as the real Santa Claus is reinstated.

### 1.3 | Edward Scissorhands

The events of *Edward Scissorhands* again unfold around Christmas, signaled initially by falling snow in the opening sequence where an elderly woman (Winona Ryder) (who transpires to be Kim Boggs) recounts them in flashback to her granddaughter. Thereafter, the scene cuts to sunny rows of pastel-colored suburban houses as a friendly Avon lady, Peg Boggs (Dianne Wiest) tries to sell her wares to her neighbors. Having little success, she turns her attention to her side-view mirror, the camera cutting to close-up, framing a Gothic mansion elevated on a hill situated high above the pastel suburbs. As she approaches the Gothic mansion hoping for more success, low-angle shots first accentuate its imposing nature followed by camerawork that circles around exquisite garden topiary. This fluid movement around the mansion's gardens contrasts with the linear shots that earlier panned across the bland square gardens of the suburbs, further emphasizing the difference between the two spaces. Entering the mansion, Peg is miniaturized in extreme long shots that amplify its cavernous interior. Dressed in pink and calling out, "I'm your local Avon representative," she appears entirely incongruous in the cobweb-laden dark vast house, signifying an initial permeation of one world into another. She then encounters its sole inhabitant, Edward Scissorhands (Johnny Depp), but at first, only sees his scissor hands opening and closing as they glint in the light before he emerges from the shadows. A seemingly strange character dressed in black leather, with scissors for hands, he also appears somewhat childlike. When Peg asks what happened to him and the whereabouts of his parents, he naively responds "he didn't wake up," referring to the death of his creator (Vincent Price).

The film recounts how Peg, feeling sorry for him, invites Edward to move in with her family. Like Cobblepot and Selina, Edward is infantilized, both in his limited dialogue and awkward demeanor, leading Peg to act as a surrogate parent, guiding him in what to wear (she provides her husband's clothing), and how to act. Although his attire invites suggestions of sadomasochism, as noted by Carol Siegel,<sup>11</sup> Alexandra Hackett describes him as asexual, as lacking in competitive drive and observes that his blades are "instruments of caution" rather than cruelty (Hackett 2021, 258). His innocence is further evident when one of Peg's neighbors, Joyce (Kathy Baker) attempts to seduce him, because he does not understand her advances. Also similar to Cobblepot, Edward is an outsider, and othered through the fusion of human and non-human parts. In fact, one of Peg's neighbors who appears to be a religious fundamentalist labels Edward as a "perversion of nature" that "you must expel." In other words, there is an abject quality to him. At the same time, because there is a perpetual fascination with the abject since it persists at the periphery of our consciousness and must therefore be constantly policed (McAfee 2004, 48), the townsfolk are initially captivated by Edward's difference. He becomes useful for his topiary but especially to the female community for shaping their pet dogs' fur and cutting their hair, eventually

becoming a television celebrity, pointing towards a fully fledged subjectivity. However, any aspirations to adulthood are negated when he approaches the bank for a loan to set up a business and is refused on account of him having "no job, no experience, no social security card."

Kim and Peg then prepare for a Christmas party, with Edward outside making ice sculptures. Exploiting his naivety, Jim (Anthony Hall), Kim's boyfriend, encourages Edward to break into his house in order to steal electronic goods belonging to Jim's father. The burglar system, however, traps him within the house and he is then framed by Jim for housebreaking, leading to the community ostracizing him. Confused and anguished, he tears off the clothing given to him by Peg, revealing his black leather suit and symbolically discarding his newfound socialized self. In anger, he destroys the topiary that he has created throughout the neighborhood. When Kim subsequently rejects Jim and hugs Edward, the combination of sentiment and trauma triggers a memory about the death of his 'father,' the inventor, who, seen in flashback, presents him with his new hands as a Christmas present but, at that same moment, suddenly has a heart attack and drops to the floor. In the flashback, Edward reaches out but accidentally damages the hands and his creator dies before Edward can have them transplanted. In a well-acknowledged replay of James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), the townspeople chase him back to the mansion where Jim tries to kill him and injures Kim, leading Edward to retaliate and kill him. Kim goes ahead of the mob to witness what happens and then leaves Edward in the mansion, returned to his former seclusion—the story reverts to the present with a now elderly Kim telling her granddaughter "before he came down here, it never snowed and afterwards it did."

## 2 | Conclusion

Burton's Christmas trilogy all feature dichotomous spaces that comprise "normal spaces" juxtaposed with other or abject spaces—the sewer in *Batman Returns*, the mansion in *Edward Scissorhands* and Halloween Town in the *Nightmare Before Christmas*. These abject spaces are inhabited by correspondingly othered beings who are in some way different, each having incoherent or undeveloped subjectivities. It is when these individuals transgress boundaries between the two worlds that disorder results, this occurring in all three films at Christmastime. Each presents characters that have an ambiguous or shifting identity, and who are encouraged in the case of *Edward Scissorhands* and *Batman Returns* to attain a more coherent adult subjectivity via a surrogate parent whom they ultimately reject. In each instance, the character returns to their prior state with the exception of Selina Kyle who maintains her newly established feline status. Blood, corporeality and bodily disgust are features of all three films, from Edward's accidental injuries, through to Cobblepot's facial detritus and the insectivorous insides of Oogie Boogie. While the three films revolve around anomalous bodies and abject spaces, one might argue that Selina Kyle's redefined persona resonates with contemporary third-wave feminist politics. Regardless, together they signal the marking of the Christmas season that Burton suggests is otherwise unremarkable in California. Moving away from the feelgood conventions evident in other Hollywood

films centered on the festive season—such as *It's A Wonderful Life*, *White Christmas* and *Love Actually*,<sup>12</sup> Burton's Christmas trilogy presents the holiday as a disruptive and abject if memorable event in line with Mundy's claims.

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## Data Availability Statement

The author has nothing to report.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *Edward Scissorhands*, directed by Tim Burton (20th Century Fox, 1990).
- <sup>2</sup> *Batman Returns*, directed by Tim Burton (Warner Bros. 1992).
- <sup>3</sup> *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, directed by Henry Selick (Touchstone Picture, 1993).
- <sup>4</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1982).
- <sup>5</sup> See Frances Pheasant-Kelly, *Abject Spaces in American Cinema: Institutional Settings, Identity and Psychoanalysis in Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).
- <sup>6</sup> Ridley Scott, director. *Alien* (20th Century Fox, 1979).
- <sup>7</sup> *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, directed by Milos Forman (Fantasy Films, 1976).
- <sup>8</sup> See Frances Pheasant-Kelly, "Cinematic Cyborgs, Abject Bodies: Post-Human Hybridity in *Terminator 2* and *Robocop*." *Film International* 9:5 (2011): pp. 54–63.
- <sup>9</sup> See Frances Pheasant-Kelly, "The Abject, Carnavalesque and Uncanny," in *A Critical Companion to Tim Burton*, edited by Adam Barkman and Antonio Sanna (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), pp. 15–28; J.P. Telotte, "Tim Burton's 'Filled Spaces': Alice in Wonderland," in *The Works of Tim Burton: Margins to Mainstream*, edited by Jeffrey Weinstock (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 83–96; Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "Burton's Bowl: Constructions of Space in the Films of Tim Burton," in *A Critical Companion to Tim Burton*, edited by Adam Barkman and Antonio Sanna (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), pp. 3–14.
- <sup>10</sup> See Alexandra Hackett, "Asexuality and Social Anxiety: The Perils of a Peculiar Body," in *Tim Burton's Bodies: Gothic, Animated, Corporeal and Creaturely*, edited by Stella Hockenhull and Frances Pheasant-Kelly (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 245–259; Marie Liénard-Yeterian, "Tim Burton's Curious Bodies in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*: A Contemporary Tale of the Grotesque," in *Tim Burton's Bodies: Gothic, Animated, Corporeal and Creaturely*, edited by Stella Hockenhull and Frances Pheasant-Kelly (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), pp. 233–244; Michael Lipiner and Thomas Cobb, "The Grotesque Social Outcast in the Films of Tim Burton," in *Tim Burton's Bodies: Gothic, Animated, Corporeal and Creaturely*, edited by Stella Hockenhull and Frances Pheasant-Kelly (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), pp. 203–218.
- <sup>11</sup> See Carol Siegel, *Sex: Radical Cinema* (Indiana University Press, 2015); Siegel, Carol. "Tim Burton's Popularization of Perversity: *Edward Scissorhands*, *Batman Returns*, *Sleepy Hollow*, and *Corpse Bride*," in *The Works of Tim Burton: Margins to Mainstream*. Ed. Jeffrey Weinstock (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 197–216.
- <sup>12</sup> *It's A Wonderful Life*, directed by Frank Capra (Liberty Films, 1946); *White Christmas*, directed by Michael Curtiz (Paramount, 1954); *Love Actually*, directed by Richard Curtis, director (StudioCanal, 2003).

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