Exploring the Musical Genius of Danny Elfman in Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*

The 1990 fantasy classic *Edward Scissorhands* directed by Tim Burton, follows the story of the peculiar, yet gentle artificially made man, Edward (Johnny Depp). Created by an imaginative inventor (Vincent Price), Edward is essentially a robot with the understanding of compassion, equipped with life-like features such as a human face, body, hair and almost all identifying traits for a person, except for his hands. Following the death of the inventor, Edward is left seemingly unfinished, with an array of scissor parts as makeshift hands. As local saleswoman Peg Boggs (Dianne Wiest) stumbles upon the abandoned mansion where Edward resides, she looks past the shocking appearance of the boy and warmly takes him in as one of her own. Throughout his experience living with the Boggs family, Edward learns the etiquette of humanity and social interaction after years of isolation.

As the story unfolds, Edward falls deeply in love with Peg Boggs' eldest daughter Kim (Winona Ryder), despite criticism and mockery from Kim's overbearing boyfriend, Jim (Anthony Michael Hall). This enchanting, romantic yet gothic film is underscored by the melodic harmonies of renowned composer, Danny Elfman. In tandem with Burton's eerie, outlandish motion picture, Elfman's soundtrack perfectly encapsulates the mysterious, whimsical nature of the film and Edward's journey. Through sequences featuring Peg's initial discovery, a heist gone wrong, an intimate moment between two lovers and the ultimate demise of the enemy, Danny Elfman has created the perfect soundscape to exemplify the exuberant mind of the iconic Tim Burton.

The first noteworthy musical sequence occurs within the first ten minutes of the film at approximately 0:08:19. After a troubling day as an Avon saleswoman, making no sales to the townsfolk, Peg decides to venture to the old deserted manor atop the hill overlooking the

picturesque town. We first hear the ominous instrumental music as Peg turns the side view mirror of her car to face the gothic cathedral-looking castle known as Edwards abode. The deep woodwinds and eerie violins backed by choral and orchestral arrangements continue as she travels to the mansion's gates, setting the tone for something sinister brewing. This concept shows how non-diegetic music can elicit an emotional response from the audience, in this case, it is an unsettling, nervous feeling (Neumyer et al, 2010). There is a slight tension and release as Peg continues up the driveway, where the flutes get progressively louder and the bass more intense. Until finally, the melody explodes with dense brass intertwined with delicate harps, creating a perfect juxtaposition of horror and fantasy that emulates the film's ambiance.

The tune then transitions into a dream-like, sensual sound as Peg enters the mansion's grounds to see the luscious florals and eccentrically trimmed shrubs. The brass instruments fade into the background and we are left with the harmonious sounds of enchanting flutes, harps and angelic soprano voices. This musical modulation exemplifies not only a shift in tune but a change in atmosphere, portraying the concept of narrative cues which guide the viewer's emotions from a tense and anxious feeling to a calm, relaxing sensation (Cohen, 2013). The eerie violins intensify as Peg enters the mansion, reintroducing the ghostly choral elements as she looks around the entryway and makes her way to the attic where she finds Edward. As we get our first glimpse of Edward, the volume of the timpani is heightened building suspense to his reveal, only to revert to the soft, shimmering tune of the xylophone as he steps into light. The music is used as a commentary on Edward's internal state, inadvertently describing his dynamism as a character as his startling appearance has little to do with his compassionate disposition (Gorbman, 1987).

The second sequence I would like to discuss takes place around 1:03:41 of the film. In this scene, Jim has convinced Edward to break into his father's vaulted room by using Kim to persuade him to do so. As the gang tiptoes into Jim's house, we hear the quick tempo of the bassoon backed by a strong bass from the tuba, communicating the sneaky intentions of the characters showcased in the scene. When Edward successfully picks the lock to the barricaded room, the door suddenly shuts behind him locking from the outside. There is an element of a crescendo here as the tuba grows progressively louder until it is interrupted by the booming sound of the door slamming, trapping Edward inside the room.

The tempo quickens as Edward becomes flustered trying to open the locked door with his scissor hands. His facial expression in combination with the sound effects of the security alarm and distant police sirens portrays Edward's emotions during this scene and despite his lack of dialogue, the music helps to exemplify these feelings (Cohen, 2013). The film then pans to an outside view of Jim's home where police cars come hurtling to a stop, and we hear the tempo of the tuba rapidly grow, drums/trumpets clamouring loudly and a single string high-pitched synth. As the deafening sounds die out, the synth remains as the film cuts back and forth between the police officer calling for Edward and the lovable misfit trapped amongst the riches. Once the officers disable the alarm system, there is a subtle sound of melancholic violins representing Edward's capture.

The final and my personal favourite musical sequence in the film is the iconic 'Ice Dance' scene, transitioning into Jim and Edward's final battle. At 1:15:51 of the movie, the melody consisting of serene orchestral elements and soft bell-like celestas floods the audience's ears. This lovers' ballad titled 'Ice Dance' acts as a leitmotif for Edward and Kim, as you can hear it play faintly in the background in almost every intimate moment between the pair,

throughout the film even before this legendary scene (Kalinak, 2010). As Kim dances angelically through the snow emerging off Edward's ice sculpture, the celesta, harp and wordless choir capture the beauty of her character and the romance shared between the two lovers. This exquisitely captivating scene comes to a halt as Jim appears on screen and the grave, menacing instrumentals begin to sound.

Startled by Jim's arrival, Edward accidentally cuts Kim with his hand leading to an intense fight scene, followed by Edward fleeing back to the mansion on the hill. At 1:31:43, Kim races after Edward, quickly running up the elongated staircase in the estate's foyer, the music following her footsteps rising in tempo as each step progresses. The melody is frantic and multi-textured before returning to the lovers' leitmotif as the pair reunites yet again. When Jim emerges from the dark corner of the mansion's attic, the dramatic, sinister instrumentals begin. They continue throughout the final fight scene, presenting boisterous sounds of the French horn, trombone, crashing cymbals and low-registered strings through staccato and tremolo notes. This intense scene comes to a close as Edward stabs Jim in the stomach, administering the fatal blow to his short-lived enemy. The baritones fade as Jim falls through the attic window to his impending doom, as the rhythmic sounds of choir vocals and the death bell toll rings throughout our ears. The lovers are forced to say their final goodbyes to protect the safety of Edward as the townsfolk storm the mansion, eager for his head. The ethereal orchestral tune of the couple's leitmotif is heard as they part ways for all of eternity, never to see one another again. Towards the end of the film, we see older Kim telling a story to her granddaughter about the strange man she once loved, only now to be connected by the sight of snowfall cascading over the quaint town.

This film has been known as one of Danny Elfman's most remarkable scores throughout the 1990s and into his present-day career (Wright, 2006). Elfman and Burton work profoundly well together to create not only a cinematic masterpiece but a deeply emotional and impactful soundtrack that corresponds to the film flawlessly. The melodic blend between obscure and romantic elements truly conveys the duality of Edward's journey, representing themes of individuality, love and humanity. Danny Elfman's musical genius is exemplified through sequences featuring the discovery of the beloved outsider, Edward's troubling confrontation with the law and a passionate love affair with a bittersweet ending. With the combination of several, multi-layered orchestras, whimsical waltz-like tunes and overall ethereal melodies, this film has been and will continue to be one of my favourite motion pictures of all time.

Works cited:

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