

# LEWIS CARROLL IN TIM BURTON'S LAND: AN ANALYSIS OF *ALICE IN WONDERLAND*<sup>1</sup>

Paulo Henrique da Silva Gregório  
Ilza Matias de Sousa

**RESUMO:** Este artigo analisa o *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), de Tim Burton, bem como a sua relação com os livros *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* e *Through the Looking-glass*, de Lewis Carroll. Partindo da ideia de que o filme não é uma mera transposição daqueles textos literários para a tela, o principal objetivo deste artigo é observar como a adaptação de Burton dialoga com eles e como o tema do horror é trazido à tona. Recorrer-se-á às ideias de Julia Kristeva sobre horror e à noção de *rostidade*, elaborada por Gilles Deleuze e Félix Guattari, para se compreender quais fatores no filme podem causar horror a espectadores.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Alice in Wonderland*; Lewis Carroll; Tim Burton; horror.

**ABSTRACT:** This article analyses Tim Burton's movie *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) as well as its relationship with *Alice's adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the looking-glass*, by Lewis Carroll. Departing from the idea that it is not a mere transposition of the source texts to the screen, the main goal of this article is to notice how that movie dialogues with them and by what means Burton's adaptation brings out the theme of horror. Julia Kristeva's conception of horror and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of *faciality* will be used to understand what factors in the movie can horrify spectators.

**KEYWORDS:** *Alice in Wonderland*; Lewis Carroll; Tim Burton; horror.

Considered the Seventh Art since 1911, the cinema can be regarded as a medium capable of embracing a range of artistic expressions, such as literature, music and dance. Literature, in particular, has been a relevant source for moviemakers since the beginning of the nineteenth-century, when *Le voyage dans la lune* (1902) – movie adapted from Jules Verne's *From the earth to the moon* and H. G. Wells' *The first man in the moon* – was released. After this, a lot of other novels made into movies appeared and, for this reason, one can state that the history of cinema is widely overrun of movies based on literary works.

Although literary language and cinematographic language are different – whereas the first one makes use of the words to evoke images, sounds etc, the second one has the image as a main resource, which speeches and music are mixed with –, their goal is similar: telling a story. Moreover, the script needs to be taken

---

<sup>1</sup> Este artigo foi originalmente apresentado como trabalho final para a disciplina Tópicos em Literatura Comparada V, ministrada pela Prof<sup>a</sup>. Dra. Ilza Matias de Sousa (UFRN) e pelo Prof. Dr. Antonio Eduardo de Oliveira (UFRN).

into account, due to its relevance: the cinematographic work is a result of the representation of the text presented in the script. In this sense, it would be impossible to conceive a movie without a single word (with exception to silent movies), and thus, in a movie based on a novel the script can be regarded as the main point of contact between the literary text and its representation for the cinema.

The adaptations of novels prompted a long debate, which still comes out every time a movie based on a novel is released. In general, those discussions emanate from a tension between people who prefer the novel and those whose preference is the movie. Actually, this argument involves questions related to certain elitism, since some lovers of literature tend to regard it as a more legitimate form, older, unlike the cinema, which is regarded by them as a mass medium, and, thus, impossible to be an art as pure as literature is. Obviously, in these debates the particularities of those two types of languages are not taken into account.

The making of a novel into a movie is not merely a question of transposition. In this sense, it would not be appropriate to discuss about loyalty or treachery to the literary work, since adapting is not “a question of ‘tracing’ the story replacing the words by images, but of realizing the interpretation of the story”. (MARTÍNEZ, 2005, p. 57). Analyzing the arguments that revolve around movies based on literary works, Bluestone (*apud* HOLLANDS, 2002, p. 7) concludes:

What happens therefore, when the filmmaker undertakes the adaptation of a novel, given the inevitable mutation, is that he does not convert the novel at all. What he adapts is a kind of paraphrase of the novel – the novel viewed as raw material... That is why there is no necessary correspondence between the excellence of a novel and the quality of the film in which the novel is recorded.

Movies based on very well-known literary works tend to provoke a number of discussions. Whether the adaptation is a good one or not, comparisons between the book and the movie are sometimes inevitable. About the moviemakers, they in general choose one of these routes: either retelling the story in order that the actions correspond exactly to those presented in the novel, or dialoguing with the source text so that the moviemaker's *sui generis* traits are brought out more strongly. This is the case, for example, of the much-anticipated Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), based on Alice's adventures by Lewis Carroll. In this adaptation, Burton not only retold the well-known story by Carroll, but he also left his own trait, though timidly, in comparison to some of his previous works.

In fact, both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the looking-glass and what Alice found there* by Carroll served as sources for Burton to create the movie. The first one was published in 1865 and the second one in 1871, and both of them are exam-

ples of the literary nonsense genre. As Tibbets and Welsh (2005, p. 9) point out, “both books seem to be so much of a unit that they are frequently confused. They are altogether different however.” In *Wonderland*, after falling down a rabbit hole, Alice, a seven-year-old girl, has to face a number of situations in a place where everything is unusual: animals and plants can speak; there is a kingdom under the power of a queen whose main goal is put off the head of anyone who wishes to defy her authority; characters that sing nonsense songs. Whereas this book is based on a pack of playing cards, the other one, in turn, has the game of chess as theme. Passing through a mirror, Alice finds out a countryside that is laid out in squares, just like a chessboard. She moves across the chessboard towards the eighth rank, where she would become a queen (an offer made by the Red Queen) and along her journey she meets a lot of creatures, as well as in *Wonderland*.

Perhaps as a result of its popularity with adults and children, “since 1903 there have been 15 movie versions of the Alice Books” (TIBBETS & WELSH, 2005, p. 9). One of the most famous ones is an animated featured released in 1951 by Walt Disney, which combines elements of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the looking-glass*. In this version, most scenes correspond almost exactly to those presented in the books, although the screenwriters have inserted new ones. In this sense, since the movie tries to reproduce exactly the characters and incidents of the books, one can state that the Walt Disney’s version seems to do a mere transposition of the source text to the screen, what differs from Tim Burton’s adaptation, which is going to be analyzed from now onwards in this essay. Our aim is to find out how Burton’ versions dialogue with the Alice books by observing in what manner the theme of horror, that is so common in his movies, is brought out by him.

#### ALICE AS A RESULT OF BURTON’S GOTHIC IMAGINATION

It seems that not only the images from living in a suburbanized area in Hollywood, during his childhood and adolescence, but also Gothic tradition in literature and cinema have served as inspiration to Burton. He “grew up watching things like *The brain that Wouldn’t Die* on Saturday afternoon television (BURTON *apud* ANDAC, 2003). This environment gave birth to his taste for eccentric things, that later would become his trademark. After well-known *Batman* (1989), one of his first most well-received movies was released in 1990: *Eduard Scissorhands*. According to Andac (2003), its precedent “isn’t *Batman* at all, but the surreal, gothic shorts *Frankenweenie* and *Vincent*” that “featured ‘fish of water’ themes in which elements of gothic horror were introduced into a contemporary suburban milieu”.

The Gothic tradition in literature grew out of the interest “in the aspects of experience that refuse to succumb to the rule of reason” (BYE, 2010, p. 5). As Punter and Byron (*apud* BYE, 2010, p. 5) point out,

Where the classical was well-ordered, the Gothic was chaotic; where the classical was simple and pure, Gothic was ornate and convoluted; where the classics offered a world of clear rules and limits, Gothic represented excess and exaggeration, the product of the wild and the uncivilized, a world that constantly tended to overflow cultural boundaries.

Moreover, Gothic literature tried to “reconnect with the ‘dark’ side of life and human nature” (BYE, 2010, p. 5), and this aspect, along with those ones referred to above, can be regarded as points of contact between the Gothic and Burton’s works. In *The Nightmare before Christmas* (1993), for example, the celebration of Christmas is completely deformed by the citizens of Halloween Town, a dark world where monsters, vampires, ghosts and a number of other creatures live. Whereas the usual Christmas is full of typically Christian elements, in Halloween Town it is altogether different: it is a kind of Halloween in which there is a monster, Jack Skellington, acting as a Santa Claus. Unlike the real world, the fantastic one is lively, funny, and its inhabitants seem to act naturally, as if they were detached from any rules, which leads to a complete anarchy. In *Corpse Bride* it is also possible to notice the discrepancy between people’s world and cadavers’. The atmosphere of the first one is pale, monotonous, with constrained characters whose main goal is getting money and social rise; in the second one, darkness and colors are mixed and the only concern of its characters is to have fun. This movie “is Burton’s most complete exploration of the relationship between life and death and involves a particularly playful and positive representation of the idea of the afterlife.” (BYE, 2010, p. 39).

It seems important to make some considerations about the relevance of the rite of passage in Tim Burton’s movies, through which his characters transit from a universe to another one, that are clearly demarcated. In *The Nightmare before Christmas*, for example, Jack finds out another reality, different from that he was used to, after passing through a portal located in a tree; in *Corpse Bride*, in turn, the dead bride makes her supposed husband live with her underground by passing over her grave; finally, in *Alice in Wonderland* the Rabbit hole functions as passage for Alice going in Underland. In this latest case, in particular, the passage represents not only a physic motion from a place to another, an isolated fate; it also represents the beginning of a change that will later impact Alice’s life, since in Underland she learns to make her own decisions, and this autonomy is reflected upon the route she chooses to take after going back to “reality”.

Although Burton brings out elements from Alice books, he transforms their plots so that another story comes out. In his adaptation, Alice is no longer a seven-year-old girl; instead, she has become an adult, and returns to Wonderland twelve years after the first time she was there. But this time her visit is not accidental: she is attracted to the Rabbit Role because the inhabitants of Underland, the world she is transported to, were in need of her aid. She is destined to slay the Red Queen's Jabberwocky and restore the White Queen to power, since the first one had become a cruel ruler. As soon as Alice slays Jabberwocky and, consequently, frees Underland from Red Queen's tyranny, she returns home, and then refuses the marriage proposal she had got before falling into the Rabbit Role.

In view of this plot, we can ask the following question: how does the horror appear in this movie, since it is a rewriting of a literary text in which, apparently, there is not any reference to elements of horror? In fact, it seems inappropriate to classify both Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the looking-glass* as narratives of horror, since they were not written to horrify readers at all. In spite of that, the author makes use of some themes that could be related to terror, like the beheadings and Alice's identity crisis. As well as Carroll, Burton does not probably have the intention of terrorizing audiences, even though the horror is much more evident in the movie than it is in the books. So, from this point on, we are going to analyse which themes Burton explores in *Alice*, intending to bring out the theme of horror.

## IDENTITY AND HORROR

Alice's identity crises are key issues in Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the looking-glass*, since a range of conflicts in both plots revolve around them. Her identity is questioned every time by the inhabitants of Wonderland, what makes her doubtful about who she really is. Besides, her height is changed several times according to what she eats or drinks (a piece of cake, a bit of the edge of a mushroom, or an unknown drink), and that also raises questions about her own identity. In the following fragment, after articulating a lot of nonsensical words, Alice talks to herself:

'Dear, dear! How queer everything is today! And yesterday things went on just as usual. 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!' And she began thinking over all the children she knew that were of the same age as herself, to see if she could have been changed for any of them (CARROLL, 2004, p. 21-22).

These sorts of doubts go on in *Through the looking-glass*, since she is confused even with a monster, as it can be noticed in this passage: “The Lion looked at Alice wearily. ‘Are you animal – or vegetable – or mineral? He said, yawning at every other word. ‘It’s a fabulous monster!’ the unicorn cried out, before Alice could reply” (CARROLL, 2004, p. 227). As a result of her uncertainties, she is said what to do every time, and that doesn’t please her: “Everybody says ‘come on’ here,’ though Alice, as she went slowly after it [the Gryphon]: ‘I never was so ordered about in all my life, never!’” (CARROLL, 2004, p. 94).

In the movie, Alice, although twelve years older, seems to be still in confrontation with the same question: “Who am I?” One of the reasons for that is probably the nightmare she frequently has, in which she wanders through an unknown place and talks with queer creatures. She does not understand why the same bad dream insists on disturbing her like that. It is from the nightmare that Alice finds out her own identity that has maybe got lost after her father’s death, when she started to be under her mother’s cares. At the beginning of the movie, there is a scene in which the little Alice asks her father if she has “gone round the bend”, and he gives her the following answer: “I’m afraid so. You’re mad, bonkers, off your head. But I’ll tell you a secret. All the best people are.” Thus, her father did not use to impose rules on her to be followed; she was a child and, as such, was allowed to fancy (even though, in this case, her dreams are less imagination than facts she brings back to the mind during her sleep) just like all other children.

Otherwise, Alice’s mother wants her daughter to be pursuant to rules imposed by the social environment in which they were inserted. In her point of view, Alice is destined to become a housewife, and then, in order to achieve this goal, she would have to behave properly, wear suitable clothes, and even deny herself, all for fear of not getting married. But Alice does not let herself be ruled by those impositions; actually, she doesn’t seem concerned about them. Contrariwise, she prefers to spend her time thinking about certain things like “what it would be like to fly”, and also fancying situations in which ladies appear in trousers and men wear dresses. Her sister, after telling her Hamish is about to ask for her hand, notices Alice seems uninterested in the imminent wedding. So she decides to warn her sister about the dangers of refusing such an important offer: “You’ll be soon 20, Alice. That pretty face won’t last forever. You don’t want end up like Aunt Imogene [an unmarried woman]. And you don’t want to be a burden on Mother, do you?”

That situation Alice has to face seems to be in accord with the idea of abjection, that “refers to the negative feelings associated with that which is outside ‘the norm.’” (BROWN, 2011). In this sense, because someone is considered strange and

different, feelings of abjection towards them “are an inherit defence mechanism”, since any attempt at closeness or familiarity would represent their inclusion in a minority. (BROWN, 2011). Thus, for the abject provokes fear, it could be related to the idea of horror. According to Kristeva (1982, p. 15),

The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.

When Alice’s sister advises her about the danger of becoming someone as lonely and mad as Aunt Imogene, she shows how her aunt’s condition frightens her. Imogene represents the exact image of abjection, since no one wants to be like her; in other words, her condition horrifies everyone else who is considered “normal”. Alice, in turn, would have to decide if she wants either to assume an undesirable marriage or remain a single woman for the rest of her life. It seems that she could not choose a way different from those ones, because they were the only alternatives society had given her. In this sense, one can state that the conflict Alice has to face is impregnated with a kind of horror, since she does not get to find a proper way by which she could assume her real identity, which is not linked to any social rules at all, but to the idea of freedom instead.

When Alice gets to Underland, she notices that her identity is questioned by the beings from there. Differently from what happens to Carroll’s Alice, they don’t want to know who she is, but if she is the person they have been waiting for a long time instead. Because of that, they not only tell her every time who she must be, but also what she must do, as well as it happens in the books. Once again, Alice has to follow rules and accept what is imposed on her, until the moment she decides to deny any imposition and take her own path.

## GAME AND POWER: HORROR

Both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the looking-glass* by Carroll bring out elements of card games and chess games, respectively. The *Looking-glass* plot, in particular, revolves around the rules of chess: Alice, intending to become a queen, has to move over a chessboard by skipping from a square to another. About the characters, most of them are chess pieces, such as White Queen, White King, Red Queen, Red King, knights and pawns. Alice, in turn, after getting to the “country”, is led to obey the rules of chess, as if she was a mere piece of it. In this sense, the characters

do not take her opinions and points of view into account; they are pieces of a game and, as such, have their functions established in advance.

As for Burton's adaptation, it follows the logic presented in Alice books: there is a game and its rules have to be taken into account. Alice needs to act as a heroine in order to free Underland from Red Queen's tyrannical government. In this sense, one can state that her role is previously defined, although, in this case, she can decide if she wants to accomplish it or not. These questions related to the chess game can be associated with a situation in which it is possible to identify the presence of horror: the social game. It often leads people to make decisions contrary to their desire, all because of particular interests. Alice would have to marry a man she was not interested in because of social rules: a woman, to be esteemed, needs to get married and dedicate herself exclusively to the care of her husband and children. The idea of submission is presented in this situation, since women's commitment seems harder than men's. There is a scene in the movie that exemplifies this statement. Before Alice's possible husband asks for her hand, his mother calls her apart to tell her how she would have to look after her dear son Hamish. In this case, it is possible to notice that his obligations as a husband are not brought out, as if only women had to follow them.

A connection could be made between the idea of the pre-arranged marriage and the battle between Alice and Jabberwocky. There is a scene in which Alice, before the imminent battle against that monster, is advised by the White Queen: "Alice, you cannot live your life to please others. The choice must be yours, because when you step out to face that creature, you will step out alone." If Alice accepted Hamish as her husband, her family and everyone else who had imposed the marriage on her would not be together with her in the wedding bed. That is why it is possible to associate the undesirable marriage with a battle against the Jabberwocky, in which the image of horror is presented.

But differently from the "real world", in Underland women are not submissive; they occupy a position that is more elevated than other people in the country. The Red Queen, for example, was responsible for the destruction of Underland, which used to be a peaceful place, with green gardens, before her rising to the throne. In Alice books, the queens appear as active figures, whereas the kings can be regarded as passive ones, since they either sleep every time or make decisions without conviction. Burton's Red Queen incorporates characteristics of Queen of Hearts, and the main signal of her tyranny is the phrase "off with their heads", which is professed several times during the movie. Before the menace of having their heads cut off, the inhabitants of Underland prefer to avoid fighting against her force.



The beheadings can be understood as a metaphor for the exclusion of those who dare to either subvert the order or to cheat the rules of the game. As well as the Red Queen, the society in which Alice is inserted cuts off the head of anyone who does not suit its expectations: a single woman; someone who does not dress properly; a person who says nonsensical things; all of them are victims of that society. It seems that the particularities are not taken into account; standardization is what matters. Making distinctions between head and face, Deleuze and Guattari (2005, p. 170) state that the first one is included in the body, but the second one is not.

The face is a surface: facial traits, lines, wrinkles; long face, square face, triangular face; the face is a map; even when it is applied to and wraps a volume, even when it surrounds and borders cavities that are now no more than holes. The head, even the human head, is not necessarily a face. The face is produced only when the head ceases to be a part of the body, when it ceases to be coded by the body, when it ceases to have a multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code – when the body, head included, has been decoded and has to be *overcoded* by something we shall call the Face.

Departing from this perspective, the face can be understood as a person's particularities, singularities, which are not taken into account by the Red Queen, since her only concern is the head itself. Thoughts and ideas are made in our heads, and from them it is possible to question certain order, break up standardizations. Because of that, the Red Queen does not hesitate to cut off heads.

Therefore, according to the analysis above, it is possible to state that the theme of horror is presented in Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*, although it is not a horror movie. The director dialogues with the source texts and prints his trademark in the story by bringing out dark sceneries, nightmares, unusual characters, such as the Mad Hatter. Dealing with questions of identity and social rules, Burton explores the theme of horror in a pertinent way, which can lead spectators to think about things capable of arousing horror even nowadays, such as imposed marriages and tyrant governments.

## BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

ALICE in Wonderland. Directed by Tim Burton. Walt Disney Pictures, 2010. DVD (108 minutes).

ANDAC, Ben. Tim Burton. *Senses of cinema*, n. 25, 2003. Disponível em: <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/burton/#b1>>. Acesso em: 20 mar. 2011.

BROWN, Thomas. *Writing the novel – The theory of abject in horror*. 2011. Disponível em: <<http://www.suite101.com/content/writing-the-novel---the-theory-of-the-abject-in-horror-a243228>>. Acesso em: 22 mar. 2011.

- BYE, Susan. *Tim Burton's gothic imagination*. Melbourne: ACMI, 2010.
- CARROLL, Lewis. *Alice's adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-glass*. London: Collector's Library, 2004.
- DELEUZE, Gilles & GUATTARI, Félix. *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Translation by Brian Massumi. London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- HOLLANDS, Neil. *Adaptation of novels into film – A comprehensive new framework for media consumers and those who serve them*. 2002. 75 pages. A Master's paper for the M.S. in Library Science degree. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2002.
- KRISTEVA, Julia. Approaching abjection. In: \_\_\_\_\_. *The powers of horror*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. p. 1-17.
- MARTÍNEZ, M. J. F. Literature and cinema. History of a fascination. *J Med Mov*, n. 1, p. 57-59, 2005. Disponível em: <[http://campus.usal.es/~revistamedicinacine/numero\\_3/ing\\_3\\_pdf/editorial\\_ing.pdf](http://campus.usal.es/~revistamedicinacine/numero_3/ing_3_pdf/editorial_ing.pdf)>. Acesso em: 18 fev. 2011.
- TIBBETTS, J. C. & WELSH, J. M. *The encyclopedia of novels into film*. New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2005.

*Recebido em 30.04.2011*

*Aceito em 30.05.2011*