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## Michael Giltz

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# DVDs: Is Tim Burton Any Good?

Posted March 31, 2008 | 09:24 PM (EST)



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Director Tim Burton is one of the most successful artists in Hollywood. He's a "brand name" director who sells tickets a la Steven Spielberg, Alfred Hitchcock and other iconic figures. You know what to expect: quirky projects, a strong visual

flair, black humor and excellent actors. His movies are often acclaimed and usually massive worldwide successes. I love his taste in projects and talent and invariably get excited by the movies he's making...and invariably disappointed when they come out.

The latest example: *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber Of Fleet Street* (\$34.99; DreamWorks). Surely this project is tailor-made for him: a Gothic musical with buckets of blood and a role suited to Burton's partner-in-crime Johnny Depp. And yet (again), the movie doesn't come close to working: the biggest crime here is not the cutting of throats but the lack of trained throats. You really shouldn't make a movie with one of the best and most challenging scores in Broadway history by casting people who can at best deliver only one-tenth of the song's power. Depp, Helena Bonham Carter, Alan Rickman, Timothy Spall, and even Sacha Baron Cohen -- couldn't they have cast at least one person who can sing?

Whatever keeps *Sweeney Todd* from coming alive, the film is hardly alone in the Burton canon when it comes to projects that seem like perfect fits but don't come close to delivering. Burton's feature debut was the delightful *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure* in 1985, but I give most of the credit for that to Paul Reubens. (Just look at the brilliant TV show he oversaw as well.) *Beetle Juice* in 1988 was an offbeat hit (again, most of his movies are commercially successful) but even at the time it seemed barely above the level of a so-so sitcom.

1989's *Batman* should be unassailable -- it drew inspiration from dark re-imaginings of *Batman*, featured soaringly oppressive sets and a (wildly over-praised) performance from Jack Nicholson as the Joker. But have you watched it lately? The movie is remarkably stolid. Keaton looks lightweight as Bruce Wayne, Kim Basinger is a joke as the love interest, Nicholson is beyond scenery chewing (the "scary" scene where we watch the Joker dance to a song by Prince is just embarrassing) and

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the action scenes are incompetent.

Need further proof? Check out 1992's *Batman Returns*. We all fondly remember Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman (she really was great) but ignore the tediousness that dominates the rest of the film, from the endless backstories of the villains (like the original, it's a movie where Batman seems to play second fiddle) to the insanely awful action "climax" featuring penguins waddling around with missiles strapped to their backs.

In between those two is *Edward Scissorhands* from 1990 and since a lovely performance can hide many flaws, this one holds up pretty well. But anything other than Johnny Depp is obvious and flat here, like the heavy-handed satire about cookie cutter suburban living. 1994's *Ed Wood* is easily Burton's best work -- ironically a loving homage to a director who lovingly made bad movies.

*Mars Attacks!* (1996) is just a misfire, the word that typifies everything from here on out. *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) seems like a slam dunk when you hear about it but holds no interest after you've seen it once. *Planet of the Apes* is a legendary 2001 disaster, *Big Fish* (2003) just aimless whimsy, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) creepy (and visually just a rehash of the original) and *Sweeney Todd* emotionally flat. That's a lot of duds surrounding the one or two movies that might make you say, "But I liked that."

The one area where Burton has been consistent, the one area where he perhaps should have been focused all along, is animation and stop-motion movies. His shorts *Vincent* and *Frankenweenie* are droll, the marvelous *Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas* was directed by Henry Selick but has Burton's heart and soul, and *Corpse Bride* is a solid follow-up. So with two new projects apparently in the works, I'll hold out the most hope for the feature-length animated version of *Frankenweenie*. The other project is a new adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* and of course it makes sense, it seems an obvious project that should bring out the best in him and...and...we've been down that road too many times before.

Also out this week: *John From Cincinnati: The Complete Series* (\$59.98; HBO), which features creator David Milch's commentary on the pilot and finale -- he's profane and quirky and wonderfully random but you still won't have a clue as to what's going on in this metaphysical surf show; *Father Knows Best Season One* (\$34.99; Shout) lacks the bite of *Leave it To Beaver* or the kitschy appeal of *The Brady Bunch* and certainly never approaches the heights of *I Love Lucy* but families don't change that much and it's comforting to think that at least one time long ago life seemed that simple; Ron Livingston stars as a crusading Vietnam Vet in *Music Within* (\$27.98; MGM) and he's happy to be upstaged throughout by Michael Sheen as a wheelchair-bound buddy; one of the most beautiful actors ever is celebrated in *The Alain Delon 5-Film Collection* (\$39.98; Lions Gate), with movies ranging from the 60s to the 80s and throughout Delon's savvy taste in scripts like *The Swimming Pool* and *Diabolically Yours* kept him from being just a pretty face; the Coens aren't the only brothers to triumph as a team, as demonstrated by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, who see three of their films released on DVD including *Fiorile*, *Kaos* and their masterpiece *The Night Of The Shooting Stars* (\$26.98 each; Koch Lorber); Blue Man Group's *How To Be A Megastar Live!* (\$19.99; Rhino), a DVD of their latest concert (a mock discussion of how to create the perfect concert performance) with a CD and tons of extras makes one thing clear -- if Blue Man Group weren't so commercially popular, they'd get more props from critics; *Reservation Road* (\$29.98; Universal) is apparently paved with good intentions, since an acclaimed novel by John Burnham Schwartz, a solid director in Terry George and an excellent cast including Mark Ruffalo, Joaquin Phoenix, Jennifer Connelly and Mira Sorvino failed to make the slightest impression with audiences or critics; the eighth and final season of *That '70s Show* (\$49.98; Fox), which includes interviews from the final week on the set of a show that definitively proved casting is everything; flashy new packaging can't disguise the fact that *The Girl Next Door* (\$14.98; Fox) is sub-sub-par *Risky Business* but since star Emile Hirsch went on to do great work on *Into The Wild*, don't be so quick to dismiss the talent as much as the project they were working on; for people (like me) who never tire of the Beatles, snatch up *John, Paul, Tom & Ringo -- The Tomorrow Show with Tom Snyder* (\$24.99; Shout), which includes two full episodes with Lennon and one each with McCartney and Starr; TV can hit great heights but it's often just comfort food, as demonstrated by Ted Danson's genial crank on the unremarkable but successful *Becker First Season* (\$36.98; Paramount); *The Cutting Edge: Chasing The Dream* (\$26.98; MGM) is another sequel to the modestly enduring ice-skating romance, but this time the hockey player...is the girl (!) and if that sounds like an exciting twist you'll probably enjoy it or at least enjoy looking at the cute leads Francia Raisa and Matt Lanter; the only *Law & Order* franchise where emoting isn't against the

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rules continues with *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit Year Six* (\$59.98; Universal); and the best TV mystery show where being a card-carrying member of the AARP means you're MORE likely to get a guest-starring role continues with *Murder, She Wrote Eighth Season* (\$49.98; Universal).

So tell me: do you think Tim Burton is over-rated, under-rated or just an offbeat sensibility that somehow connects with audiences again and again?

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lastvisibledog See Profile I'm a Fan of lastvisibledog permalink Burton has always frustrated me a great deal - interesting material, fantastic casts, wonderful visual sense . . . and, yeah, most of his films leave me wanting. I'm constantly surprised at how obvious his films seem considering the ingredients that go into them and dismayed at how obvious his story sense is - like the need to have a motivation for Depp to investigate murders in Sleepy Hollow (wasn't his being a detective enough?) or to boil all of Willy Wonka's life down to daddy issues. Even though I liked those two films, I still finished watching them with a sense of "And . . .?" as I do any movie of his that I sit through.

Jamaica to two islands in Antarctica has

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Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 10:24 PM on 04/02/2008

**WilliePilgrim** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of WilliePilgrim](#) [permalink](#)

Well I hope Mr Burton reads this critique of his work and really takes it to heart so he'll stop being such a loser and who knows, maybe one day he too will be a pop-culture critic on Huffington Post...he can always dream, can't he?

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 03:40 PM on 04/02/2008

**Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

Well, I'd rather hear your appreciation of Burton than mocking someone who isn't completely enthusiastic. As I said in my initial post, Burton is of course one of the most successful and acclaimed film directors in Hollywood and if he's like most artists, he won't waste much time reading reviews whether they're bad or good. More power to him. I never feel he's churning out trash a la Michael Bay. All his projects seem heartfelt. And if you read carefully you would have heard me saying positive things about Pee-Wee's Big Adventure, Ed Wood, and of course I feel his real talent is for animation, such as his early shorts and The Nightmare Before Christmas (the best film he's associated with). Is that really petty or mean of me or are you unwilling to hear anyone say anything negative about artists you like?

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 05:00 PM on 04/02/2008

**Baz13** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Baz13](#) [permalink](#)

The flaws in Burton's work are what make it endearing. No amount of perfect Hollywood blockbuster could match the sentiment in his films.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 02:33 PM on 04/02/2008

**Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

There's definitely something to be said for heartfelt sentiment. And as I said above, no one would accuse Burton of churning out anonymous product. Whatever their flaws, his movies are clearly HIS.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 05:01 PM on 04/02/2008

**ErnestineBass** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of ErnestineBass](#) [permalink](#)

So when can we expect to see YOUR movie hit the cineplex, Michael?

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 12:24 PM on 04/02/2008

**Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

At the moment, I'm working on an epic poem. It just seemed less cliché than having a screenplay in my desk drawer that will never get made. :)

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 05:01 PM on 04/02/2008

**Sumocat** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Sumocat](#) [permalink](#)

My impression of Tim Burton's work is that some people love some of it all of the time. My wife loves Sleepy Hollow and NBX, but didn't care for Sweeney Todd, while her friend, who isn't a Burton fan, loved ST. I hated Mars Attacks! but my best friend, who is a theater buff, loved it. Stylistically, Burton's work is very consistent, but otherwise, somehow he hits different notes for different people within the same films.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 10:27 AM on 04/02/2008

**Michael Giltz** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

**HuffPost's Pick**

You make a good point. For a major director, there's no strong consensus on his best work. He really does have such a range of oddball movies that many of them have their advocates. You can usually find a fan to defend even the most obscure movie. But unlike Spielberg or Coppola or Hitchcock, (all of whom would have a short list of "best" films that most would agree on) there's no such unanimity for Burton. maybe that bodes well for the future of his body of work.

Favorite Flag as abusive Posted 05:04 PM on 04/02/2008

**celiedh** [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of celiedh](#) [permalink](#)

Michael, what is the best way to submit a DVD to you for review?

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 10:18 AM on 04/02/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Typically, I have so many DVDs to cover every week that I can only include DVDs that have been released that week or at most a week or two before. Was the title theatrically released? Is it a film? You can always go to my website [www.popsurfing.com](http://www.popsurfing.com) and see more info about contacting me there.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 05:05 PM on 04/02/2008

Guitarsandmore See Profile I'm a Fan of Guitarsandmore permalink

There are so many formula movies in the industry that Tim Burton's craziness becomes comic relief; a breath of fresh air amidst stagnant clouds of sameness. I swear if I have to watch one more detective story I'm going to start throwing stuff at the wall.

Granted some of his movies are outstanding while most of them just sort of stand out.

We liked Beetle Juice and still like it very much. We like Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. Ed Wood was outrageous! What a piece of Americana! I liked the Bat Man movies.

I know what you mean about the emptiness in his movies but there are many people that are living their lives in sort of a pointless manner with no big purpose. Not everyone wants to run for president and not everyone is multidimensional or following some deep meaning to its logical conclusion. It's just not there.

My thirteen year old cousin loved Sweeney Todd so I know we are all going to have to watch it now.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 01:41 AM on 04/02/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Like others, you highlight the facet of Burton that keeps you (and me) going to his movies. They are personal passion projects, not just product created to fill release date slot. I agree with you 100% on that.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 05:06 PM on 04/02/2008

CroatianCritic See Profile I'm a Fan of CroatianCritic permalink

You have to understand Burton's strengths to appreciate his ability. While I do agree that "Batman" and "Mars Attacks" did not hold up well and "Planet of the Apes" was a disaster, his movies succeed due to two reasons: 1) His unique visual style, and 2) His strong characters. I read Burton's autobiography in film school back in the late 90s and he admitted that writing a story is very difficult for him. He likes to focus on particular ideas or characters that he has created. That is why "Beetlejuice, Pee-Wee's Big Adventure, Edward Scissorhands, Ed Wood, and Big Fish(Sorry, I disagree with your assessment on this movie. I thought this was the most original movie he has ever done)" are so solid. There is an originality to his stories and as an artist, his cinematography and emotional attachment to his characters comes through very well in the final product. Can you not see the wonderful character development that takes place between father and son in "Big Fish?" What about the quest for meaning that Jack Skellington entails in "The Nightmare Before Christmas?" Even you admit that the strength of the "Batman" films is the character development and not necessarily how the movie develops or ends? If you understand his limitations as a director and keep an open mind on the ideas that he is promoting in his movies, his movies can be quite enjoyable.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 09:31 PM on 04/01/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

You're right, Croatian Critter, I do find things to enjoy in Burton's movies -- usually a particular performance or character. And certainly The Nightmare Before Christmas (directed by another) is the best thing his name is attached to. As for Big Fish, having read the book, I guess I felt Burton didn't expand on or improve anything in the book. I suppose if I didn't find his movies enjoyable or interesting on some level, I wouldn't keep seeing them. His visual style is also perhaps his biggest plus (which made Charlie and the Chocolate Factory such a puzzle to me -- they just copied the production design from the original). Thanks for reading.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:40 AM on 04/02/2008

jj See Profile I'm a Fan of jj permalink

You hit the nail on the head.

Burton would make a wonderful Art Director.

It's as if Burton has cool looking scenes in his mind but little to no passion for the overall narrative.

(btw, It absolutely worked for Pee Wee's Big Adventure - wonderfully creative scenes and silliness wrapped in the loose macguffin of 'boy looks for lost bike.')

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 08:09 PM on 04/01/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Yes, JJ he would make a great art director. I'm gonna steal that neat summation and use it as my own whenever I talk about Burton with people down the road. It sums up what I was trying to say in seven words.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:41 AM on 04/02/2008

DennyCrane See Profile I'm a Fan of DennyCrane permalink

Burton is god-awful. All style and no substance. He ruined Batman. Instead of respecting the source material, he rewrote the characters, the story, miscast the characters and turned it into a Tim Burton movie. The only movie of his that I could sit through was Big Fish, but even that wasn't that good. It's ironic. A movie about a man who loves to tell big stories made by a man who's a rotten storyteller and for whom the story is a hindrance.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 04:34 PM on 04/01/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Well, I prefer the irony of a man whose best film is a loving homage to a man who makes bad films in Ed Wood. But your irony vis a vis Big Fish is a good one too. Maybe that's why he idolizes the storyteller in Big Fish so much; he finds it lacking in himself.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:43 AM on 04/02/2008

Ken Volok See Profile I'm a Fan of Ken Volok permalink

Almost hit the target bullseye, except I thought The Corpse Bride was pretty boring and the animation less impressive than Nightmare Before Christmas'. :-|

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:25 AM on 04/01/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

I agree it's not nearly as good as Nightmare. But I guess I'm just a sucker for stop-motion and found it a decent followup nonetheless.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:44 AM on 04/02/2008

ORSunshine See Profile I'm a Fan of ORSunshine permalink

I think Tim Burton is great. So I politely disagree with your sentiments of emptiness or emotionally flat. I sat in Sweeny Todd and tears slid down my cheeks at the discovery that the old woman had been his long-lost love, with anger at Helena Bonham Carter's character for the lies and deception. Her portrayal of a crazed filthy shopkeeper was phenomenal (and I was a bit disappointed that she didn't get any larger attention during the awards shows).

Beetlejuice is on my top 10 -- Michael Keaton was never better and the story is touching and philosophical, approaching a topic that cuts to the quick in all of us in an entertaining and thoughtful way.

If anything, Corpse Bride failed to hold my attention. But I've watched the Nightmare Before Christmas numerous times and hold it in the top 10 animated films. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory was far more entertaining than the original, and although the dark reveal was left out, it was far more implied than the original and I would think the producers may have had something to do with its elimination.

My opinion is instead that there are a few duds, surrounded by a great body of work that I thoroughly enjoyed -- Big Fish and the Batman movies included.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 10:47 PM on 03/31/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Thanks for weighing in orsunshine and saying you politely disagree rather than saying I'm a big fat jerk -- which would be the usual online approach to a discussion. Given the very strong reviews for Sweeney Todd, you're far from alone on liking that movie. As soon as I saw it, I predicted it would be disastrous and yet it went on to do solid business, get some great

reviews and Oscar nominations. It was probably sixth or seventh in voting for Best Picture. To elaborate, I thought as acting, Helena Bonham Carter and was arguably the best thing in the movie. (I found the shock of white hair in Depp just cliched and distracting.) She found a nice saucy tone in her speaking scenes. And if you've never seen a good stage production or listened to Angela Lansbury on a recording, you might think she's done just fine with her big numbers. But just fine isn't good enough for some of the best comic tunes in Broadway history. What she and Depp deliver in a decent manner should be show stoppers. It probably didn't help that I'd just seen a terrific Broadway revival with Michael Cerveris and Patti Lupone that put them to shame. Your feeling that he's made a few duds surrounded by a solid body of work is certainly the overwhelming consensus as far as critics and box office. Maybe we'll both be pleased by Alice in Wonderland. I know we'll both see it.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:51 AM on 04/02/2008

JamesA1102 See Profile I'm a Fan of JamesA1102 permalink

Burton's a hack. Always was and always will be.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 10:40 PM on 03/31/2008

grendl See Profile I'm a Fan of grendl permalink

He's only as good as his scripts.

"Ed Wood" was a great script, with structure and Tim Burton followed it to the letter, and nailed it.

"Big Fish" was a rambling mess, with false pathos everywhere, and obligatory grotesqueries walking around a circus tent.

As I said in one of your past posts he totally blew "Planet of the Apes", the monumental moment when Taylor says his first line, and of course the Rod Serling ending which was integral to that story. Why remake a story then take out the best parts? I guess to somehow justify remaking a good movie.

And the reveal he left out of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory", when Willy Wonka looks down to see Charlie the only child left standing simply says "Oh, no one else left? You won."

It shows a profound lack of narrative know how on Burtons part to rob Charlie Bucket of the chance to prove himself ethically worthy of the grand prize.

"Pee Wee" was great, as you say due largely in part to Rubens. "Scissorhands" wasn't as good a movie as it thought it was, "Beetlejuice" fun but uneven and ultimately empty. And "Batman" the worst casting ever for the caped crusader. And the Joker shouldn't be paunchy.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 10:22 PM on 03/31/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

I suppose every director is only as good as his scripts but in Burton's place it's clear he can't do anything about weak ones or rather doesn't know when they're weak. Yes the reveal he left out of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory was an idiotic change, especially since it was one of the crucial changes from the rather flat novel that made the original movie work in the first place.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:53 AM on 04/02/2008

BigCheese See Profile I'm a Fan of BigCheese permalink

Some of the credit for Pee-Wee's Big Adventure should go to the late, great Phil Hartman. He co-wrote the script with Rubens.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 06:12 PM on 04/01/2008

Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

Oh absolutely. All due credit to Phil Hartman, who played a key role on the Pee-Wee movie and daytime show and was so irreplaceable on NewsRadio. I still miss him.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 12:54 AM on 04/02/2008

grendl See Profile I'm a Fan of grendl permalink

Movies are so much more interesting than real life.

So...

"Batman Returns" really only had one redeeming quality, and that was Michelle Pfeiffer's take on Cat Woman. The movie probably should've cast her character as the lead role, and dropped Walken's Max Shreck (not like he needed another job), a useless villain when you have the Penguin to battle the winged crusader.

But Burton blew that too. As you say in your article the real penguins were ridiculous, you almost felt sorry for them having to carry Devito's body, and those missiles around. I always feel bad for animals in lousy movies, they really don't have the choice to read the script, and can't possibly know their likenesses will be immortalized in absolute crap films.

"Ed Wood" was a surprise, I must say, because it was top to bottom a very good film. Even Depp wasn't bad at it, but Landau really hit the ball out of the park with his take on Bela.

Seems like Burton suffers the same malady as Terry Gilliam, they try to make up for their utter disdain for narrative convention and the three act structure, with visual bombardment.

♥ Favorite ⚙ Flag as abusive Posted 10:40 PM on 03/31/2008

🔒 **Witkacy** See Profile I'm a Fan of Witkacy permalink

I would NEVER compare a top-flight animator/director like Terry Gilliam to an affected (and corporate-owned) pastiche-artist like Burton...You are way off-base: did you forget that Gilliam's first film - co-directed with Terry Jones - was Monty Python and the Holy Grail???

And if you haven't seen Brazil - because I'd think that only a person who's never seen it could compare Gilliam to Burton! - then you've missed a masterpiece (something Burton may in fact never make, since I'm sure he considers Ed Wood as an exception from his normal creative "vision")...Even Gilliam's "critical failures" such as Tideland are infinitely more interesting than Burton's neo-gothic nonsense (he reminds me of no one more than Floria Sigismondi--the same retreat into gothic pastiche, style without vision)

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Wow, Michael, you are dead on with this one. I hadn't really thought about his career this way, but yeah, you see a Burton flick, enjoy it while still being disappointed, and then move on. I haven't felt the urge to buy any of his films on DVD (and I have a lot); the only one I'd like to get someday is Ed Wood, which I agree is his best.

The one director most comparable to Burton is Terry Gilliam. And what a difference! Gilliam, whose films have nowhere near the box office take as Burton's, has produced so many more great, memorable, gotta-have-on-DVD films. (There's no justice, is there?)

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