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Close Reading

Beetlejuice and its Extraordinary Film Elements

When it comes to films about death in the 1980's, not many people don't think about the movie *Beetlejuice*. *Beetlejuice* was released in 1988. The movie was filmed in the United States in the town of East Corinth, Vermont. It was directed by Tim Burton, produced by The Geffen Company, and starred Alec Baldwin as Adam, Geena Davis as Barbara, and Michael Keaton as Betelgeuse. In the movie, a young couple finds themselves in the afterlife after a deadly car crash. This couple must then navigate the afterlife while also trying to deal with a new family moving into their house. This new couple completely changes the house, and the main couple is forced to attempt everything to get them out, even possibly recruiting Betelgeuse, an evil character known for his trickery and disgusting ways. Throughout this essay, I would like to focus on a specific scene: the death scene. This specific scene introduces the entire plot of the movie and is arguably the most influential scene throughout the entire movie. I am here to argue that the editing, lighting, and atmosphere of the scene are superb.

While *Beetlejuice* did not particularly contain any specific editing techniques, such as montage editing, there was a singular scene of editing choices that stood out to me. The scene in which the couple drives off the bridge has some particularly good editing choices. The first comes when the director shows a shot of the dog on the road and then cuts to a close-up view of the couple's faces. He could have chosen to zoom back out to the car but chose to cut to the family's face so that we could see the exact moment doom strikes (noticing the dog) on their

faces. After seeing the dog for a brief second, we then move inside a shaky and panicky care ride. This clearly builds suspense to the idea that the car is going to crash. We then move into some fast editing showing the different shots of the crashed car's situation. We go from the couple to the car teetering,



Figure 1: Bridge Death Scene

to the reason the car is teetering, then back to the couple's faces as the car begins to fall. This fast editing showcases the stress of the situation, almost showing how life can change quickly. I thought of it as truly showing viewers how the characters' lives are “slashing” before their eyes. The final shot in the scene is perhaps the most important. The scene ends with an awkward long shot of the car slowly sinking. After the quick editing of the last few shots, this one really feels like the director wanted viewers to linger on this, to feel like they are drowning themselves. As an added bonus, we get to see the aftermath of the dog looking down at the water and shaking his tail, an almost funny/happy approach to death.

The lighting throughout the movie was very atmospheric. In the scene we analyze in particular, the lighting seems very normal. It follows the dark and damp filter put on the rest of the movie, but it specifically draws attention on the last shot of the scene before we see Barbara and Adam in the house carrying on the rest of the plot. The final

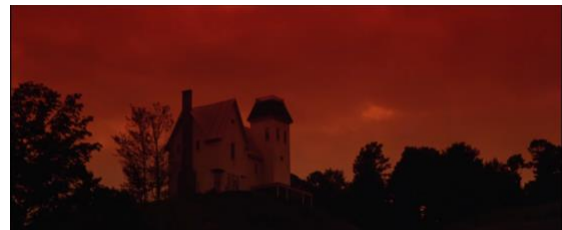


Figure 3: Dark Image of the House

Figure 2: Light image of the house

shot before the couple tries to escape the house is meant to be a foreshadowing/leading shot into the next scene. The shot is of the house they are then trapped in, after death, is overcast in red with very deep grey tones. This is meant to indicate sadness, an element of scariness, and an overwhelming mood shift from the beginning of the film. If you are to compare the end-of-scene shot with the establishing shot, the house looks dramatically different.

The entire scene also is an amazing example of the usage of leading lines and rules of thirds. While the couple is out and about on the town, Burton uses a lot of rule of thirds to keep the watchers eyes on the subject of the film. I have attached some examples of these. As for leading lines, the scene uses leading lines to make us focus on the couple mainly when they are in the house. This is important because the house is cluttered and our focus needs to be drawn to the main subjects.



Figure 5: Leading Lines draws our eyes to the couple



Figure 4: Rule of Thirds

Despite my own tastes and not necessarily enjoying Beetlejuice, it had a lot of film themes that allowed me to broaden my knowledge. From the bad jokes, dark lighting, and choppy editing, the film makes a great film to analyze. As a huge fan of other Tim Burton movies, it was wonderful to not only see more of his work but also see Claymation before big

films like *The Corpse Bride*. *Beetlejuice* was a good way to learn more about Tim Burton and the choices he makes while making the film. The grungy feel of the entire movie was my favorite part to analyze and see throughout the movie. No movie has had a better atmosphere to analyze, especially the specific death scene.