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The Paradox Of Transvestism In Tim Burton's Ed Wood

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Abstract

Tim Burton's quasi-biopic *Ed Wood* (1994) features Johnny Depp as a transvestite that does not conform to any established conventions and who disrupts fundamental binarisms about basic human nature and identity. The image of Wood/Depp dressed in an angora sweater, blouse, skirt, tights, heels, wig and make-up is highly comical but it also undermines gender definitions and subverts the status quo. Such a confusing amalgamation of opposing gender signifiers disrupts the highly regulated semiotic system of clothing, constructing and equally deconstructing gender and gender differentiation. The divergent theoretical standpoints of Marjorie Garber and Robert Stoller are useful in illustrating the slippery nature of gender and what the transvestite signifies in *Ed Wood*. Garber argues that the transvestite is an important site of cultural anxiety disturbing the assigned sartorial boundaries between "male" and "female", thus exposing the artificiality of the assigned social and cultural paradigms that clothing signifies. Stoller's understanding of gender is quite the opposite to Garber's, as he places an emphasis on the "real" sex of the cross-dressed individual and rejects the theory that transvestism, drag or cross-dressing can alter one's original gender. For Stoller, gender cannot be transcended and for the male transvestite wearing feminine clothes allows him to reinforce sexual difference, thereby paradoxically emphasising his masculine identity: The image of Depp in this role equally conforms to both of these arguments whilst also dismissing them. This article also consider Depp's star persona, as his feminine face and lean body connotating androgyny.

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