

# Accept the aesthetic art analysis with Tim Burton's Big Fish as an example

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**Abstract.** Reception aesthetics posits that audiences are not passive recipients of information but active participants in the interpretation and creation of films. From the perspective of reception aesthetics, the interactive relationship between audiences and films can be explored more comprehensively. This approach enables an analysis of how films derive vitality and meaning through audience interaction, reveals the socio-cultural connotations and aesthetic value of cinematic art, and examines the variations in audience reception across different social, historical, and cultural contexts. Ultimately, by drawing on the theories and methodologies of reception aesthetics, new narrative techniques and expressive methods in filmmaking can be explored, fostering continuous innovation and development in film art to meet the growing spiritual and cultural needs of audiences. "Big Fish" blends reality and fantasy, incorporating a wealth of emotional elements into its surreal and imaginative cinematic style. This allows audiences to navigate between fantasy and reality, experiencing profound emotional resonance. From the perspective of reception aesthetics, Big Fish successfully triggers aesthetic expectations and facilitates aesthetic communication between the audience and the film through its diverse expressive techniques and unique artistic style, thereby contributing to a rich and varied cinematic art.

**Keywords:** Big Fish, reception aesthetics, horizon of expectations, implied audience

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## 1. Introduction

Reception aesthetics, introduced by German literary scholar Hans Robert Jauss in 1967 at the University of Konstanz, centers on the audience and their reception of artistic works. Jauss argued that a work, even when printed in book form, remains incomplete until it is read by an audience.

Reception aesthetics emphasizes audience response, portraying the relationship between texts and their interpretations as a form of dialogue. This theory asserts that in the process of textual interpretation, the audience and their individual concretization of meaning play a central role. The concretization of the audience is the source of a work's meaning, while an indeterminate text merely serves as a vessel for meaning.

Reception aesthetics consists of two major components: the historical perspective of literary works and reception theory. Both are audience-centered. The former, influenced by hermeneutics, challenges the traditional objectivist historical perspective of positivism, arguing that the history of literature is the process of its interpretation by audiences across different eras, shaped by varying aesthetic sensibilities. The latter proposes theoretical frameworks and models of aesthetic appreciation based on audience reception, such as the horizon of expectations and the structure of appeal.

## 2. Literature review

After Edward sees his own death through the eyes of a witch, he no longer fears dying in any other way. He negotiates with a giant who preys on villagers' livestock, assuming the role of a heroic figure in the town. Upon reaching the utopian town of Spectre, which everyone longs for, he ultimately chooses to leave, seeking progress within industrial civilization. These elements in the film are not merely products of Edward's imagination; they reflect the protagonist's life philosophy and attitude—he is someone who bravely steps out of his comfort zone, dares to explore, and maintains an optimistic outlook. Throughout the film, Edward continuously narrates his dreams and pursuits, inspiring like-minded individuals—those who harbor dreams and refuse mediocrity—to forge ahead. He encourages them to confront their fears, embrace challenges, and break free from their comfort

zones to explore, create, and realize their self-worth. Even in the face of setbacks and failures, Edward's journey illustrates that every fall is an opportunity to rise again, and every challenge is a chance for self-transcendence. In this vast world, anyone can become the Edward of their own story—as long as they dare to dream and act upon their aspirations, they can shine brightly on the journey of life.

Similarly, Edward willingly works at a circus without pay, solely to learn one fact about the woman he loves each month—an act that may resonate with those struggling with love. His talent for persuasion might impress those striving for success in their careers.

Complex realities often constrain human thought, yet the flowers of fantasy blooming from the soil of reality can construct a pure world, intuitively revealing spiritual pursuits. Why do humans exist? What do people desire? What should one do with their life? These existential questions may find answers within the fantastical narrative of *Big Fish*. Moreover, as a film rooted in American capitalist ideology and set against the backdrop of a bubble economy, *Big Fish* presents a distinctive perspective on reality. To Edward, his existence is meaningful because he believes he is meant to help others. He sees himself as unique and thus takes on tasks that others would not. When he arrives in Spectre, a secluded utopia, he finds soft grass, poetry by the bonfire, and goddesses bathing in the water. Yet, he chooses to leave because he realizes he has arrived "too early"—his life's journey is not yet at a point where he should stop. What Edward truly desires is a white picket-fenced house that he earns through years of separation from his wife. He aspires to protect Spectre with his own abilities amid the bubble economy. His actions seem to transform into a grand narrative—many of his feats appear incredible, yet his profound understanding of human values enables him to maximize human potential, achieving the seemingly impossible. This, in turn, resonates with audiences of all ages and social standings [1].

### 3. Analysis of *Big Fish* from the perspective of horizon of expectations

#### 3.1. Themes

*Big Fish* presents a rich and profound thematic structure. Through the legendary life of the protagonist, Edward, the film showcases his courage, resilience, and optimism. At the same time, it explores fundamental human themes such as family, love, growth, and the meaning of life, making the film emotionally engaging and thought-provoking.

The film's multi-dimensional thematic meanings resonate differently with audiences of various ages and experiences. Middle-aged viewers might find themselves understanding their fathers better, gaining comfort from recognizing their own fathers' stories. Young viewers might be captivated by Edward and Sandra's romance, reinforcing their belief in love and commitment—believing in the idea of "loving one person for a lifetime." Those striving forward in life might relate to the giant Karl, recognizing the value of friendship, equality, mutual support, and companionship on their journeys [2].

Whether it is family, love, or friendship, or themes of growth, life, ideals, and reality, the film evokes deep emotional responses from the audience. These themes spark reflection on family and human emotions. Each theme understood by the audience establishes an emotional connection with the film. Viewers interpret these themes based on their personal experiences and aesthetic standards. Some may be drawn to the film's fantastical elements, appreciating its imagination and creativity, while others may be moved by its emotional storytelling, considering it deeply touching. As long as an audience member resonates with any of these aspects, the film aligns with their "horizon of expectations," successfully triggering aesthetic judgment and emotional resonance, fostering a profound interaction between viewer and film, ultimately achieving psychological "acceptance."

#### 3.2. Narrative techniques

Firstly, from a narrative perspective, *Big Fish* employs a third-person storytelling approach, presenting Edward's legendary life through his son Will's perspective. This narrative technique allows the audience to gradually understand Edward through his son's retelling, experiencing the subtle evolution of their father-son relationship as the story unfolds. As they watch, audiences are not only engaged with the plot but also interpreting Edward's stories through Will's eyes. This process of interpretation itself is a form of aesthetic reception. Will's journey—from misunderstanding his father to ultimately understanding and helping him complete the final chapter of his life's fairytale—satisfies audiences' expectations for a "happy ending." Will's shifting attitude toward his father adds depth to the film's narrative. As he grows older, he transitions from skepticism and disbelief in his father's stories to resentment and avoidance, and finally, upon his father's illness, he re-evaluates everything. This complex emotional trajectory satisfies the audience's curiosity and desire for exploration, enhancing both aesthetic enjoyment and emotional engagement. The universally recognizable father-son conflict structure also fosters strong emotional resonance.

One of *Big Fish*'s most outstanding aspects is its exceptional visual artistry and meticulously crafted audiovisual effects. The film's settings are complex and varied, such as: The eerie, desolate swamp where the witch resides during Edward's childhood; The dreamlike grandeur of Spectre, the utopian town encountered on his journey; The surreal transformation of the circus owner into a wolf; The romantic elegance of Edward's marriage proposal to Sandra. These dynamic settings align with the audience's expectations for diverse storytelling, immersing them in the film's enchanting world. Danny Elfman's musical score also contributes significantly, ranging from eerie and suspenseful to soft and melodious, from tranquil to uplifting. The varied musical

elements perfectly complement the film's different visual motifs. Here, music is not merely a background element but a vehicle for conveying characters' emotions, carrying historical significance and cultural psychological depth. The soundtrack guides the audience in capturing emotional nuances, fulfilling their aesthetic expectations.

Tim Burton's use of vibrant colors and fantastical settings creates a world full of magic and mystery. Through delicate cinematography and carefully selected music, he allows audiences to immerse themselves in the narrative, experiencing characters' emotional shifts and inner worlds. The film's narrative techniques effectively draw the audience into the story, fostering subconscious engagement with its elements. These artistic choices enhance the film's appeal and provide audiences with profound aesthetic experiences, ultimately fulfilling their aesthetic expectations [3].

### 3.3. Artistic style

Beyond its narrative techniques, *Big Fish* is infused with magical realism, blending fantasy with reality. From the glass-eyed witch in the swamp to Edward befriending a 20-foot-tall giant, from traversing a haunted forest and arriving at the idyllic town of Spectre to meeting conjoined twins and witnessing the transformation of the legendary big fish—these elements immerse audiences in a world of magic. However, these stories are not purely fictional; they represent Edward's embellishments and romanticized interpretations of reality, creating a seamless fusion of dreams and real life. As audiences engage with these narratives, they do more than appreciate the film's fantasy elements—they also reconstruct the truth behind the stories through their imagination and understanding. This process encourages viewers to see beyond the whimsical surface, contemplate real-life themes, and ultimately uncover their own interpretations of reality. This interplay of fantasy and reality fosters deep audience engagement, enhancing their aesthetic expectations and reigniting a childlike sense of wonder.

While *Big Fish* is not strictly a children's film, it undeniably carries a fairy tale essence. Elements like witches, utopias, and giants all have their counterparts in classic fairy tales. In this world, a circus master transforms into a werewolf under the full moon, a town's residents never age, and a legendary fish represents both Edward's life of adventure and his boundless imagination and love for life. Each scene in the film feels enchanted, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, making audiences feel as though they have stepped into a whimsical yet profoundly touching fairy tale world. Underneath its fairy tale exterior lies a deep exploration of human nature, family, love, and dreams. Edward's imaginative stories reflect his love for life and hope for the future. Even when facing death, he remains optimistic and resilient. These qualities embody the most valuable aspects of fairy tales—timeless wisdom and emotional depth. This is why *Big Fish* transcends age barriers and continues to captivate audiences.

From the perspective of the horizon of expectations theory, *Big Fish* successfully meets and surpasses the audience's aesthetic expectations, offering a refreshing cinematic experience. By employing diverse narrative techniques and a unique artistic style, the film fulfills the audience's anticipations. At the same time, the subtle ambiguities and layered storytelling create an "aesthetic distance" between the audience and the film, providing space for personal reflection and exploration. The intricate balance of thematic and artistic beauty aligns with viewers' aesthetic psychology, allowing them to experience the grandeur and timeless charm of cinematic art through alternating cycles of expectation and revelation.

## 4. The "implied audience" behind the film

### 4.1. Horizon of expectations

In reception aesthetics, the "horizon of expectations" is a core concept. It refers to the audience's intentional expectations of a work before engaging with it. These expectations have a relatively defined scope and serve as a "frame of reference" for understanding and evaluating the work. The horizon of expectations manifests in two forms: the literary horizon of expectations, which is formed based on past aesthetic experiences and tends to be narrower, and the life horizon of expectations, which is broader and shaped by past life experiences.

From an aesthetic expectation perspective, *Big Fish* weaves a vivid and thought-provoking dreamscape through its profound themes, captivating narrative techniques, and distinctive artistic style. This allows the audience to enjoy the viewing experience while also receiving emotional nourishment and deep inspiration. In terms of life expectations, viewers may see reflections of themselves and their fathers in the protagonist, resonate with the film's underlying spirit and philosophy, and contemplate themes of growth, life, and exploration—ultimately finding a closure between reality and fantasy.

### 4.2. Concept

Wolfgang Iser introduced the concepts of the "structure of appeal" and the "implied audience." According to Iser's theory, the structure of a text anticipates the presence of a recipient, and the audience's response signifies the text's inherent appeal. Gaps in the text serve as "blanks"—open-ended connections within the text's referential field that prompt the audience to fill in these gaps, connect missing links, and construct new perspectives. Therefore, according to Iser, appeal is the fundamental structural feature of a film text, forming the basis for the audience's re-creative engagement. This interactive relationship between a film's appeal and the audience's re-creation ensures that the "implied audience" permeates the entire filmmaking process. During production,

filmmakers constantly envision a potential audience and engage in an implicit dialogue with them. Once the work is completed, the audience's role is embedded in the text's structure. The "implied audience" thus represents the predetermined viewing actions within the text rather than actual audience demographics [4].

### 4.3. Symbolic meaning

Lastly, the film extensively employs metaphor and symbolism. The central image of the "big fish" represents the wonder, challenges, and growth of life. At the beginning of the film, the big fish appears as a near-mythical entity swimming at the boundary between reality and fantasy. It is not only a manifestation of natural forces but also a witness and guardian of the protagonist Edward's adventurous youth. Each appearance of the fish marks a pivotal moment in Edward's life, serving both as a challenger—testing his courage and wisdom—and as a guide, leading him toward the unknown and self-transcendence. As the story unfolds, the fish gradually merges with Edward's character, embodying his bravery, freedom, and resilience in the face of life's hardships. The fish's seemingly impossible miracles also reflect Edward's longing and pursuit of a beautiful life. In the end, as Edward transforms into the big fish, he embraces his own story and continues his journey of limitless exploration and passion for life [5].

Beyond the big fish, other symbols in the film—such as the daffodils, the witch, and the giant—carry profound meanings. The daffodils symbolize love and romance, the witch represents mystery and power, and the giant stands for bravery and adventure. These symbols repeatedly appear throughout the film, intertwining with the plot to create a unique aesthetic experience. When the audience engages with these symbols, they are not only drawn to their external forms but also interpret their deeper meanings through imagination and understanding. This process fosters emotional resonance, allowing viewers to align their inner thoughts with the narrative and achieve a profound connection with the film.

## 5. Conclusion

Will once said:

“Have you ever heard a joke so many times that you forget why it was funny?

But then you hear it again, and suddenly, it's new.

And you remember why you loved it in the first place.

I think that was the final joke my father told.

Father had told the same story so many times that he eventually became the story himself.

And just like that, even after he was gone, his story lived on, making him an eternal legend.”

A seemingly boastful father spent every waking moment telling people about his legendary experiences—just like a romantic yet thrilling fairy tale. Will, initially captivated by the stories, eventually grew skeptical, leading to a strained relationship with his father. However, during his father's final moments, he began to see his father's surreal encounters from a new perspective, retracing his father's life journey—visiting the witch at night, traveling with a giant, discovering utopia, pursuing a romantic love story, meeting conjoined twins, encountering a werewolf ringmaster, and stepping into the ghost town... Each fantastical episode resonates deeply with the audience.

From the perspective of reception aesthetics, *Big Fish* successfully evokes audience resonance and aesthetic acceptance through its rich storytelling techniques and unique artistic style. While watching the film, viewers can analyze the plot and characters, but more importantly, they can connect their own life experiences and emotions to the story, using imagination and association to comprehend its deeper meanings and aesthetic value. This process fosters personal value construction and allows the audience to experience the magic of cinema.

The film delves into the essence and meaning of life. Edward, through his fantastical stories, paints his life as a grand adventure—suggesting that life should not be mundane but full of exploration and imagination. To him, life's value lies in experiences, in the unique people and events encountered along the way. At the same time, the film intricately portrays the reconciliation and deepening of familial bonds. Will initially resents his father's constant storytelling, believing he was merely spinning tall tales, which causes their estrangement. However, during his father's final days, Will listens and begins to understand the love and passion for life embedded in his father's stories. Eventually, he accepts and carries on his father's spirit, completing the journey of reconciliation and inheritance.

The theme of dreams runs throughout the film. Edward always carries a deep curiosity for the unknown and a relentless pursuit of his dreams—from leaving his hometown for an adventure to experiencing life in fantastical realms. He never stops chasing his dreams. This unwavering pursuit inspires viewers to bravely follow their own dreams in real life, just like Edward, and to create their own extraordinary life stories.

With its unique fantastical narrative, stunning audiovisual language, and profound, touching themes, *Big Fish* shines as a brilliant gem in the world of cinema, continually inspiring audiences to reflect on life, family, and dreams.

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