

robert stromberg

designs a situationist
wonderland

Text **Tino Schaedler and Oliver Zeller**
Image **Disney Studios**



Re-envisioning *Alice in Wonderland*, director Tim Burton blends Lewis Carroll's Victorian tale with its sequel, *Through the Looking Glass*. He uniquely mixes live action, digital creatures and sets – even the almost ordinary character of Stayne is actor Crispin Glover's head mounted on a CG body.

Wonderland is a landscape of lush gardens, full of giant mushrooms and anthropomorphic flowers, where even static swirly trees appear to be characters. Except in this revisionist fantasy, Wonderland is Underland, an expressionist land in decline after years of subjugation by the egotistical Red Queen. Here the bright colours of Burton's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* are cross-pollinated with *Sleepy Hollow* to form a darker Wonderland, envisioned by production designer Robert Stromberg, most recently responsible for the Academy Award-winning design

of the jungle landscapes of *Avatar's* Pandora.

Aside from the transitioning room, only the castles of the Red and White Queens (played by Helena Bonham-Carter and Anne Hathaway respectively) serve as the up-kept architectural sets of the film. Yet it is a decidedly non-architectural set that proves most striking: the outdoor tea party where we first encounter Johnny Depp as the Mad Hatter, the free spirit of Wonderland suppressed by the evil Red Queen, and some of his even crazier cohorts. A skewed arrangement of overlapping tables cobbled together with chairs and (broken) china litter the space. Set against a dilapidated windmill reminiscent of the mad plight of Don Quixote, its distorted blades suggest that war has been waged against it.

It's a dishevelled and distraught scene, yet playful and whimsical; a constructed situation where space and

characters are all performers. In essence it captures the ideology of the 1950s to 1970s' situationist movement, which pursued the construction of new situations by 'freeing the passions, never working, living without dead time'. The situationists espoused an architecture capable of instigating these new situations, allowing a transformation of daily reality based on an individual's desires and situation. This was explored by situationist co-founder and architect Constant in his anti-capitalist utopia, New Babylon; a modern nomadic city.

The tea party in *Alice* is not borne of utopian ideals, however, but is a rebellious action against the Red Queen's dystopia. The party represents an ideal situationist place, dedicated solely to a social life for all and stripped of all architectural constraints. Even the full tables offer no restrictions as the Mad Hatter walks over them upon Alice's arrival.