The issue of inter-racial sexual desire is highly problematic within American culture. "Miscegenation," defined as sexual relations between black and white characters, was severely censored for many years under the Hays code. As the representational space where questions of racial and sexual identity converge, inter-racial sex maintains an aura of taboo (as can be witnessed in any TV date-based game show). Debates around questions of racial and sexual representation can benefit from a re-evaluation of the structures of portrayals of inter-racial sex in Hollywood narrative. One recent film that particularly calls upon conventional cultural constructions of race and sexuality is Bearnard Rose's 1992 film Candyman, based on a short story by Clive Barker, epitomizing the pathologizing tendency of conventional representations of inter-racial desire. Utilizing the horror genre, Candyman plays with the fear of and desire for inter-racial sex between black men and white women, a particularly charged part of sexual discourse. At the heart of horror's generic narrative is the repression of aspects of sexuality. What rebounds from this repression is a monstrous form of sexual desire. In Candyman, the nature of repressed sexuality is tied up with race; it is the fear and horror of miscegenation--the potential of white women's attraction for black men, and vice versa. Candyman takes the fear of miscegenation to an extended, monstrous form when the black male body becomes the grotesque site for the eruption of these racial/sexual fears and the white woman's body the site where these fears are played out. Yet there is an elusiveness in the film's treatment of a double stereotype of excessively sexual black masculinity and white feminine purity, creating an ambiguity in the film. The film evokes these stereotypes, yet through its supernatural horror narrative takes them to an excess that starts to deconstruct their representational function.

In Candyman, two anthropology graduate students, Helen (Virginia Madsen) and Bernadette (Kasi Lemmons), from the University of Illinois in Chicago investigate urban folklore. Through interviews they become interested in the mythical figure of Candyman. As their investigation continues, they learn the legend of a black man brutally murdered in the Cabrini Green public housing projects of Chicago at the turn of the century because of his sexual liaison with a white woman. The man's ghost continues to haunt Chicago and he can be invoked by calling his name into a mirror five times. When called, he appears with a hook attached to the bloody stump of his hand and does dastardly deeds. The film develops the relationship between the Candyman (Tony Todd) and the white anthropologist, Helen. Helen is the protagonist, a middle-class white academic married to an anthropology professor.
Candyman is a complex film that invites multiple and, often, contradictory readings. Such aspects as the geographical cityscape and urban planning are used to explore the issue of boundaries and the fear invoked by the transgression of designated spaces, the boundaries established between the binary oppositions between black and white; male and female; middle class and working class.

Through the use of graphic transitional sequences, Candyman establishes the cityscape location as a vital part of the film. The city is represented graphically as a geometric play of lines and spaces, roads that divide the city into territories on the basis of race and class. The spatial territories take on narrative significance as Helen's investigation of the Candyman's murders lead her to the architectural discovery that the condominium building in which she lives is built on the same plan as Cabrini Green. The ghetto building is cut off from the "gold coast" by the highway and the "El", whereas her building is on the other side of this barrier. Hence, the building "on the right side of the tracks" has been converted to luxury condos. In this scene Helen and her African-American co-researcher Bernadette are in Helen's luxury apartment. Helen displays her plans for the two buildings. She then opens the curtains of the window to demonstrate the difference between the apartment buildings' locations. The cityscape becomes an aesthetic backdrop to her luxury home, the white woman's traditional domestic space, and Helen's window looks out to display the territories of the city, the space beyond her control. Her gaze is above the life of the streets, aestheticized for her behind the safety of her window. Helen continues her investigation of the ghetto and its crimes from the comfort of her own home.

Later in the film there is a parallel scene that resonates with this one. After having been implicated in one of Candyman's crimes, Helen views her slides of Cabrini Green in her living room. This time, instead of opening the curtains on the cityscape, she closes them and projects images of the city--the ghetto--onto the wall of her home. This is another disruption of boundaried space, bringing the forbidden parts of the city into her home, internalizing an exterior space. The images of the seedy, rundown ghetto apartment contrast graphically with the beauty and order of her surroundings. This scene ends with the violent arrival of Candyman into Helen's home.

The horror moment of Candyman takes place through this double crossing of boundaries. Helen leaves her safe world and the academic spaces of the university to investigate Cabrini Green, the space beyond her control. This invokes the retaliation of Candyman, who crosses the space from the inner-city black projects into Helen's spaces and life - the university and, most disturbingly, her home. He enters through the bathroom mirror, an entrance invoking many symbolic interpretations. He breaks through from behind the mirror, violently putting an end to any narcissistic contemplation, or interaction, Helen might have with her self-image.

Freud's famous article that contextualizes the uncanny foregrounds the space of the home and the familiar, and its relationship to the uncanny. Freud suggests that the home is a memory of the womb, "the former Heim (home) of all human beings,"(1) and that this is a source of uncanniness for men about female genitalia. The space of the home is an imperative of the horror genre (e.g., the many Nightmares on Elm Street).(2) Often, as with Candyman, the home in the horror film is associated with women victims--a home penetrated and disrupted by a phallic killer. Candyman situates the horror of past racism, the lynching of the living Candyman character in the nineteenth century, in the present-day home of a white, liberal, middle-class couple.
Helen's invocation of the Candyman is a complex process. In comparison to the earlier invocations of the Candyman, Helen summons him in the mirror as a joke with Bernadette, but it is not until the later parallel scene that he arrives, not from behind her, but from behind the mirror. With the exception of the story in the opening sequence, Candyman's other appearances are in the black ghetto community to which he symbolically belongs and where he is seen "at home." At the same time, he has to be "invited" into white people's homes. This invitation not only takes the form of summoning in the mirror, it is also through association with the sexual and intellectual excesses of white women.

The opening sequence invocation of Candyman bears resemblances and important differences to Helen's interest in him. The story is told in flashback. Narratively, it is justified as an interview that Helen is conducting with a freshman girl about urban folklore. She tells the story of Candyman's murder of a young baby-sitter in a suburban home. The victim, Claire, is in the process of seducing a local motorcycle-riding "bad boy," Billy. They summon Candyman in the mirror as a test game with each other. Claire, in the absence of Billy, finally completes the summons and is violently murdered by Candyman.

Candyman functions in this story as the racial other that embodies the sexuality of the white relationship. As Tania Modleski suggests in Feminism Without Women, black characters often function in dominant Hollywood narratives as embodiment of the sexuality of white relationships. (3) Candyman's invocation is used as erotic foreplay for Claire and Billy. As Billy calls his name, he simultaneously caresses Claire's breasts. She resists, he fails some manhood courage test by not completing the five Candymans. His invocation is a way for the characters to express their desires. Claire uses Candyman as a way to initiate. She displaces her desires on or through Candyman, disavowing her own sexuality onto the black male "other." Candyman, unlike some of the examples Modleski suggests, oversteps this erotic function of black commentary on white sexuality through his excessive masculinity and hyper-phallic status. Unlike the black women who can embody aspects of the natural and eroticize white relationships in safe terms, Candyman's sexuality is excessive and ultimately destructive.

Candyman's arrival is not the perfect completion of Claire's desire for sex with Billy. Instead, he functions as a punishment for Claire for harboring those desires. Representing the monstrous excessive sexuality of the black man in the racial unconscious, Candyman brings not sexual satisfaction, but a violent death. This can be seen as an unconscious desire on the part of Claire for the bad boy, but also as punishment for her desires. This use of Candyman as the punishment for sexual desires is in line with generic conventions of the slasher/horror film. As Carol Clover illustrates in her book Men, Women and Chainsaws: "killing those who seek and engage in unauthorized sex amounts to a generic imperative of the slasher film."(4)

Candyman also functions in this scene in a more complex way, as the horror of the other, the unknown and unexplained threat that contrasts with the normality of the white middle-class existence. He represents the fear that "we are not safe in our `safe' homes". He also represents the fear of unleashing internal desires, both sexual and violent.

Claire contrasts with Helen in interesting ways. They are the only people who willingly invoke the Candyman. They are both blonde and conventionally beautiful--a white femininity that contrasts most with Candyman's black masculinity. Candyman is clearly their racial and gender opposite.
Helen is less sexual than Claire. Claire's invocation of Candyman is mostly related to her sexual desires—a way of simultaneously testing and impressing Billy. Helen's interest is academic, yet with a similar aspect of transgression. As Claire transgresses the expected sexual passivity of white femininity, Helen transgresses her social positioning through her intellectual activity. She is attempting to invoke the Candyman to demystify or deny his powers, thereby proving her intellectual superiority to those who still believe in him, freshman college kids and the African-American ghetto community.

Helen's process of demystifying Candyman's myth is played out as an attempt to fix the narratives and sub-narratives of the legend. The tension is developed between the different ways of transmitting this story; the verbal recounting that maintains the Candyman myth, and the documenting of the stories with the intent to disprove them. The film subtly critiques Helen's anthropological impulses. In the first part of the film (before we actually see Candyman), there is a repeated motif of storytelling. These serve narratively to give the back-story to the Candyman legend. A series of verbal accounts of Candyman include: the freshman in the opening scene, Kitty the cleaner, Anne-Marie, Purcell (the snotty long-haired academic) and Jake. These accounts are substantiated by the newspaper report and Helen's investigation. Helen's process is to document these accounts; you see her recording them, entering them on computer and photographing them, attempting to capture and disprove Candyman's legend. The newspaper stories are unreliable journalism; they are elusive and inconclusive by nature; they cannot tell who Candyman is, or who committed the crimes. Candyman's announces his own form of representation when he says to Helen, "I am the writing on the wall, the whisper in the classroom, without these things I am nothing." He is represented not only through the stories but through the graffiti also. Unlike the work of the painter Candyman, who was killed to make way for the killer Candyman, graffiti is an elusive artform, always under threat of being removed or altered, and is not "fixed" in the sense of a revered art object.

Helen attempts to fix the elusive verbal stories into a containable narrative form, and through this containment disprove them. The perpetuation of Candyman as myth depends on his elusiveness and being uncontained within the boundaries of safe narrative. This concept of fixing relates to Homi Bhabha's discussion of stereotypes:

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of "fixity" in the ideological construction of otherness. As the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism is a paradoxical mode of representation, it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition.(5)

Bhabha's idea of the ambivalence of the play between the fixedness of the stereotype and its constant repetition is at play in this film. Candyman is fundamentally about the stereotype of black male sexual excess. It is a film that is, however, complex and slippery in its ideological stance toward that stereotype. There seems to be a play at the heart of the film with the construction of the stereotype, as Bhabha defines that construction. The film's ambivalence arises from the tension between Helen's attempt to fix Candyman, and with him black masculinity, into controlled discourse and the elusiveness of Candyman's legend--the cycle of killing that must be, in Bhabha's words, "anxiously repeated."(6)

This tension at the heart of the film is similar to the play between a rational explanation for the
horrific events portrayed and a supernatural explanation. This play is central to what Tzvetan Todorov defines as "the Fantastic." Todorov theorizes the fantastic genre as occupying the space of hesitation between what is perceived in the text as rational or supernatural. On an initial level, this doubt is experienced by a character in the film. It also extends beyond the experience of that character into the perception of the reader/viewer. The fantastic is experienced as moments of textual doubt, both on the diatonic level and projecting these onto the viewer. The issue of perception is central in this. The audience is offered the central character with whom to identify, in this case Helen, so that it experiences the doubt through her. Beyond the character's doubt is also the audience's doubt in the veracity of that character's perceptions of the action, producing a further level of ambiguity. The social functioning of the fantastic genre, as defined by Todorov, is also of interest. He suggests that the fantastic genre, with hesitation between the rational and supernatural explanations (the "uncanny" and the "marvelous"), allows socially taboo subjects to come into play in discourse.(7)

In Candyman this play between rational and supernatural explanations is central to a reading of the film. Despite what the film shows in graphic visual terms, of the murdering practices of Candyman, all the audience witnesses of these events are either structured as flashbacks, as people recount the urban folklore tales of Candyman's works, or from Helen's point of view. The rational explanation is offered, for those who would wish to accept it, that Helen is the crazy person responsible for the deaths of the dog, of Bernadette, of the doctor and the abduction of the child. In this rational reading Candyman is a figment of Helen's imagination. She is insane, committing murders that she attributes to a fictional character. The hesitation that Todorov sees as a prerequisite for the fantastic is, arguably, sustained throughout the film and beyond. A convenient explanation could be given for all the murders.

The rational reading of the Candyman murders do not lessen the impact on racial discourse. In fact, the ambivalence between these two explanations heightens the obsession with racialized codes. One third of the way through the film, an artificial closure is reached. Helen proves rationally, with police help, that the Candyman murders are attributable to Cabrini Green drug dealers. During a visit to the projects alone, Helen meets a boy who shows her a public toilet, claiming it as the location of one of Candyman's victims. In the story that the boy recounts, part of which is shown in flashback, a boy, described as retarded, leaves his mother in a grocery store to use the toilet. While there, he is attacked by Candyman, his genitals cut off and thrown in the toilet. After hearing the story, Helen enters the scene of the crime to photograph it. It is defaced with graffiti, some of which is feces, writing the slogan "sweets to the sweet"--indicating Candyman's presence. She opens one stall, raises the lid and in the toilet is a nest of bees--also associated with the Candyman and his demise. After she examines the second stall, with a broken toilet, four African-American men come and attack Helen. One holds her, as another smashes her eye with a hook.

Helen's encounter with the four men (by implication drug dealers(8) and according to the police officer gang members) is the real turning point of the film. It offers the first rational explanation for the Candyman murders in Cabrini Green. If the rational explanation is followed through then it is also the moment that Helen turns from a "normal" middle-class academic woman into a psychotic killer. Through this encounter with aggressive, underclass black men, Helen internalizes the myth of Candyman and starts acting it out. During the abduction in the toilet she is merely struck in the eye with a hook. The position of the scene within the structure of the story, however, makes the
act of violence take on even greater significance. The attack on her eyes can be seen as an attempt to blind her, to put an end to her investigating gaze. Helen has crossed the line. She has seen too much of the lives and fears of Cabrini Green people. It is her curiosity, her desire to see for herself, that has led her to this place.(9)

Helen's tendency to cross borders takes on further meaning in this scene. She not only crosses racial and class spatial borders, in entering the men's room, she crosses a gender line. Throughout the film, and in the short story on which it was based, Helen's academic ambition is for her research to exceed that of her husband, Trevor, and of the character Purcell (underdeveloped in the translation from movie to film). She is aided by Bernadette but not in competition with her. Helen's ambition to exceed the men she works with is what leads her to trouble and to Cabrini Green. It could be argued that she is attempting to exceed the limitations of gender placed on her, metaphorically crossing the line into the male-dominated territory of the university as she crosses the line into the men's room of the public toilet. Her beating in this toilet and subsequent battles with Candyman could be seen as a punishment for transgressing socially proscribed gender roles, as well as positions of class and race.

Also at play in this scene is the threat that popular culture represents of the rape of white women by black men. If we look at not only what happens in this scene but also take into account the cultural myths of inter-racial sexuality and the subsequent action of the film--particularly in the case of the rational explanation--this scene functions as a symbolic rape scene. If this explanation is followed, Helen's change from sane to insane is traceable from this moment. By internalizing the Candyman myth, she is in some sense possessed by Candyman. The construction of white female purity is relevant to the way this scene is structured. Blackness is equated with the impure, and fear and horror is inspired by the penetration of the "pure" white woman by the racial other. Frantz Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks invests in the idea of blackness signifying sexual excess for white women, a sexual excess equated with madness.(10) Helen's investigation of black masculinity, in the rational reading of the film, leads to madness.

The other side of this rational/irrational split is the supernatural--the Candyman. Following the narrative as supernatural, the racial and sexual themes also predominate. Helen's fascination with the Candyman originates in an academic interest in proving his non-existence, therefore proving herself superior to those who still hold a primitive superstitious belief in him. The interest develops after the turning point in the film where she has ostensibly proved that his existence has a rational explanation. What then occurs is a battle between her and the Candyman for the life of Anne-Marie's child and for Helen's return to normality.

Although adversarial, the relationship that develops between Helen and the Candyman is eroticized and is played out as a coming together of the abnormal couple that is common to the horror genre. The generic tradition epitomized by such horror classics as Dracula is of the monstrous terrorizing the "normal" world, in some way intimately connected with a white women character who is his opposite. The scenes between Helen and Candyman are strongly erotic; Candyman is trying to seduce Helen into death. In one scene he asks for a kiss, which she resists. After Helen realizes the failure of her marriage, her next encounter with Candyman is a scene of passion and seduction. Candyman asks her to surrender to him, in exchange for releasing the child he is holding hostage. He carries her across the room and lays her on a coffin-like slab. He then caresses her with his hook, running it up her skirt as he continues his seduction
speech. She caresses him, but in doing so discovers his flesh is eaten away and swarming with bees. As he kisses her bees emerge from his mouth, turning the seduction horrific and grotesque. In the scene that follows, Candyman and Helen are burning together in the pyre built and lit by the Cabrini Green residents. He holds her back as she tries to escape with the child. Here they recreate Candyman's lost family, and momentarily display the potential of a mixed-race family before Helen escapes to return the child to its mother. These final scenes that unite Helen and Candyman follow Helen's attempt to return to Trevor from the psychiatric hospital. She goes home to find that Trevor's young student girlfriend has moved in to her home. Parallel to the early scenes of Candyman's invasion of her home, Helen is faced with Stacey, a figurative, if not literal, "home-wrecker." The failure of her relationship with Trevor, the feeling that he is treacherous and unworthy, increases Candyman's grotesque attractiveness.

Helen's relationship to Candyman is complex. Toward the end of the film it is implied that she is the lover he died for, reborn. She sees in his home her own face on the mural portraying his death. Helen's sexuality is tied up with that of the Candyman. Inter-racial desire functions as the taboo broken that lets loose the narrative of horror. In this there is no racial ambiguity. The characters are played for maximum contrast. Helen is an unambiguous white blonde woman and Candyman is unambiguously a black man. Helen's femininity is highlighted, as it also highlights her cultured, frail, "pure" whiteness. Her whiteness ultimately goes beyond the positive associations to the realm of the negative as Helen reaches a stage of power and immortality in death. In death she is recoded as hyper-white. Through this power she can return to revenge herself on Trevor, who symbolizes part of her mortal ineffectiveness. As Richard Dyer suggests in his article "White," whiteness is coded in Hollywood films as synonymous with positive associations or, at least, with normalizing ones. He develops the trajectory where "white" taken to the ultimate point can represent death, as blackness is sometimes seen to represent life.(11) Helen looks more the part of the dead brought to life than Candyman does. Her death brings her past the created whiteness of her coffin (where she appears made up, is surrounded by flowers, in a white gown) to the whiteness of her immortality. Here in the scene where she returns from the dead, her whiteness is extreme and ghostlike. Her killing of Trevor is particularly phallic and orgasmic. Death and sex are ultimately intertwined in the horror film--in the words of Candyman--"a tale to make lovers cling closer in their rapture."

To reach this immortal state, where she ambiguously either replaces or is joined with Candyman, she must take on some of his racial characteristics, figuratively turning dark through the fire that chars her body. Helen's body becomes the symbolic grotesque site for the potential of mixed race, inter-racial desire. Helen also takes on blackness in her unconscious state when she "blacks out"--generally the time when the murders are committed. The burning is a peculiar scene that replays Candyman's death at the hands of the white lynch mob.(12) As Candyman was destroyed by the nineteenth century white community, Helen is killed by the black community; both sides wittingly or unwittingly destroy the potential of the mixed race family.

Candyman's relationship to Helen relates to his past and the myth of his creation. As Carol Clover points out, there is a psycho-sexual motivation for the killings in many horror films. Starting with the prime example of Psycho, she shows the trauma of gender confusion, incestuous families and traumatic childhood experiences motivating the actions of slasher films'
Guess who else is coming to dinner: racial/sexual hysteria in Candyman.

Killers. Candyman's moment of conversion to monster is racial as well as sexual. His death at the hands of the white lynching mob is for the racially and sexually motivated crime of miscegenation. For this, his hand is cut off, he is beaten, covered in honey and then left near a beehive, where he is stung to death. Once dead his body is burned and the ashes scattered over Cabrini Green, where he returns to haunt the populous. Candyman's death is a symbolic castration that turns his loss of sexual power into the murderous hyper-phallic hook.

Candyman's destructive capacity originates from his castration/death, which is motivated by what Homi Bhabha identifies in Fanon as the racial primal scene--the moment where the system of racial otherness is called into place.

There are two primal scenes in Fanon's Black Skin White Masks: two myths of the origin of the marking of the subject within the racist practices and discourses of a colonial culture. On one occasion a white girl fixes Fanon in a look and turns to identify with her mother...."look, a Negro...Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened"....Equally, he stresses the primal moment when the child encounters racial and cultural stereotypes in children's fictions, where white heroes and black demons are proffered as points of ideological and psychical identification.

The moment when Candyman becomes killer is the moment when he is identified as "Black Man" rather than just "Man," this moment is synonymous with castration and death. Candyman is identified as black, and that moment symbolically functions as the turning point from not just man to black man, but becomes by extension the stereotype of black masculinity - monstrous and demonic.

White feminine purity and black hyper masculinity are stereotypes at the heart of conventional racial representation. Disproving these stereotypes is one approach to criticism, as is the process of allowing for or validating the possibility of non-horrific inter-racial sexual expression. Candyman, as a product of stereotypical expectations, can illuminate some of the ways in which these stereotypes are structured and how these structures operate. It also shows evidence of the places where the excess of these representations point to both the contradictions and the attractions that allow these stereotypes to perpetuate.

Candyman is a dense and complex film in its structuring of racial and sexual fears and stereotypes. It is full of elusive ambiguities as well as conventional representations. Following a pattern of Hollywood horror films, it deals with potentially interesting and transgressive content, but without recourse to any type of formal experimentation or innovation. It also demonstrates a complexity of its structures of identification as the audience crosses gender and racial identification lines. This is most satisfyingly (to me) played out in the last scene. The final pleasure the film offers, its most predictable moment, is the ritualistic, orgasmic and brutal destruction of the treacherous white male, liberal academic--a morsel of pleasure for the nonwhite--male in a white male world.


Guess who else is coming to dinner: racial/sexual hysteria in Candyman.

(3) Tania Modleski Feminism Without Women (New York: Routledge, 1991). Interestingly in relation to Modleski’s discussion of embodiment is the fact that Candyman technically does not have a body anymore, but exists in ghost form. He is a disembodied embodiment that displaces the sexual onto the violent.


(6) Bhabha, 66.


(8) The word "candyman" is used as slang for a drug dealer.

(9) Freud's discussion in "The Uncanny" of the fear of damage to the eyes as displaced sexual anxiety is also relevant here. See also Samuel Weber "The Sideshow, Or: Remarks on a Canny Moment" MLN 88/6 Dec. 1973.


(12) The motivation for the bonfire is clearer in the short story - it is built and burnt for Guy Fawkes day. The translation to the film and U.S. context lacks a motivation for what Jake just describes as "the party."


(14) Homi K. Bhabha, 76.