"How much did you pay for this place?"

Fear, Entitlement, and Urban Space in Bernard Rose's *Candyman*

Aviva Briefel and Sianne Ngai

Is it a privilege to be haunted, or afraid? Is fear somehow endowed with the status of an inalienable right or property, conferring dignity or legitimacy on the individuals who experience it? Can fear or the control of fear thus be used as a cachet or as a means of justifying and confirming predetermined claims to cultural power? In restricting the representation of fear or anxiety to figures we immediately recognize as privileged, the past two decades of horror and slasher films suggest that being frightened is paradoxically a sign of empowerment. Victims in these films are consistently white, suburban residents engaged in the middle-class routines of moving to a single-family home, celebrating holidays, or going on vacation. The characters who seem to have the most claim to being afraid are thus themselves owners or future inheritors of property, as if the entitlements of material ownership automatically extend to the psychological or affective realm. Our thesis is that because all horror or Gothic narratives derive from this point of private proprietorship, one that produces anxieties about proprietorship in general, these narratives subsequently establish anxiety as a form of emotional property. Fear or anxiety constitutes "property" on several levels of meaning: as something inherent/inherited, as a lawful claim or title, as well as a concrete possession. The genre of the horror film presents owning a house in particular as a form of proprietorship that automatically entitles the buyer to the experience of fear, as if fear itself were a commodity included with the total package—just as sophisticated alarm systems and security guards have become standard components of the purchase of an upscale home or condominium.

In Sean Cunningham’s *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980) and Wes Craven’s *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1985), for example, two landmark films in this genre, the fear-provoking figures of Jason Vorhees and Freddy Krueger emerge foremost in the context of a territorial struggle between those who own property and the cooks, janitors, and caretakers whose labor earns them the right to live there. Freddy is a maintenance man who lives in the basement of the suburban high school his victims
attend; Jason is the son of Camp Crystal Lake's cook. Significantly, we learn that both figures were themselves subjected to experiences of fear and violence similar to the ones they later impose on their victims: Freddy is attacked and set on fire by a mob of angry parents, who accuse him of abusing their children; Jason's cries for help while drowning are ignored by the summer camp's middle-class counselors. The originary experience of fear felt by these economically marginalized figures who stand in a peripheral relation to the property they maintain and inhabit will be repressed and supplanted by the fears of the property owners, who will come to occupy the subject position of the haunted. It is with this secondary, derivative fear that the horror film begins, while the fear of the haunter is relegated to a historical past that is never visually represented. The contrast between the different relations of the haunted and haunter to the property at stake makes the question of proprietary rights central to the horror film. If home ownership as the starting point for horror narratives automatically entitles homeowners to fear, then it would seem also to exclude non-property owners from having their own rights to anxiety. The struggle we see in the horror film is not only a struggle over property, but a struggle over who has the right to be afraid.

Why this transfer of the right to fear as emotional property or entitlement from one social group to another? It may be no coincidence that the emergence of the horror film is often viewed by critics in relation to Reaganism, particularly since the release of Cunningham's trend-setting film occurred in the same year as the former movie actor's election. As Douglas Kellner writes,

Post-1960 horror films . . . have presented, often in symbolic/allegorical form, both universal fears and the deepest anxieties and hostilities of contemporary U.S. society. A subtext of these films is the confusion and fright of the population in the face of economic crisis; accelerating social and cultural change; a near epidemic of cancer, industrial diseases, and AIDS; political turmoil; and fear of nuclear annihilation. The wide range and popularity of post-1960s Hollywood horror films suggests that something is profoundly wrong with U.S. society and a probing of these films may help reveal something about the sources of contemporary fears.¹

While Kellner implies that these films focus their attention on the increasingly changing sociopolitical topography of a new age, it seems that their concern is actually with spaces resistant to change; namely, white, middle-class environments, as foregrounded in Nightmare on Elm Street's nostalgic, soft-focus depiction of suburbia. Among the social and cultural shifts to which Kellner alludes, the changing demographics of the American middle class in this period may have been a
particular source of anxiety motivating the horror film’s characteristic presentation of its victims as a homogenous, unchanging group. Despite the detrimental cuts in social programs which reinforced racial and economic inequalities during the Reagan-Bush era, the increasingly multicultural reality of American society in this period—and, specifically, the upward mobility of a few minority groups—threatened the traditional topography of “middle-classness” by diversifying its spaces. In particular, as William Julius Wilson notes, “the exodus of black middle-class professionals from the inner city [in the 1970s and 1980s] has been increasingly accompanied by a movement of stable working-class blacks to higher-income neighborhoods in other parts of the city and to the suburbs.”

Anxiety about the racial diversification of suburban communities may explain the horror film’s investment in depicting the haunted as a stable control group, comprised almost exclusively of white individuals who are virtually interchangeable in every narrative in which they appear. In both Nightmare and Friday the Thirteenth, the white, middle-class affiliation of the victims is so strongly pronounced that they are barely individuated, existing merely as a set of “neighborhood” types: the jock, the prankster, and the preppy prude. In contrast, aside from their common working-class origins, the haunters or fear-provoking figures vary in appearance from film to film, markedly distinguished by props ranging from hockey masks to steel claws, and by their methods of killing. Whereas the horror genre standardizes the constituency of the victim group, the subject position of the haunter fluctuates. In this manner, the white middle class’s ability to maintain itself as a cohesive, autonomous group from film to film ultimately suggests a fantasy of its resilience to the changes embodied in the diverse faces of the haunter, who functions as an emblematic representation of change itself. The recent horror film is thus primarily a survival narrative of a homogenous class of property owners.

As such, the genre not only indexes white middle-class anxiety over the racial diversification of suburban enclaves due to trends in upward mobility, but also anxiety related to an obverse yet concurrent phenomenon: the displacement and subsequent dispersion of lower-income individuals from contained inner-city neighborhoods following Reagan’s drastic cuts in public housing funds:

The housing crisis for the poor reached a new level of severity under policies of deliberate cruelty during the Reagan and Bush administrations. From 1977 to 1980, during the Carter administration, the federal government added an average of 290,000 new families each year to the list of those receiving housing assistance. However, after ousting Carter from the White House in 1980, Reagan slashed federal housing allocations from $30 billion
in fiscal year 1981 to barely $8 billion in 1986. The number of available housing units dropped sharply in virtually every city.³

While this legislation obviously worked to further disempower people at low-income levels, the elimination of sufficient housing raises the troubling question of where these newly displaced individuals would go. The horror film’s insistence on preserving the intactness of its middle-class control group of victims may also bear witness to an irrational fear of infiltration from those evicted from subsidized housing.

Released in 1992, the year officially ending the Reagan-Bush regime, Bernard Rose’s Candyman marks an interesting deviation within the genre by introducing African Americans, figures most obviously excluded from the restricted suburban landscapes of prototypical films such as Nightmare and Friday the Thirteenth, as both killers and victims. Significantly, the setting shifts from a middle-class enclave to the Cabrini-Green housing projects in Chicago. This shift dramatizes Candyman’s distance from earlier films by directly acknowledging a type of social fear that seems furthest removed from the concerns of the traditional horror film: the everyday reality of urban violence in low-income neighborhoods.

The plot centers around the anthropological research of two graduate students at the University of Illinois: Helen Lyle, a blonde woman, and her partner Bernadette, who is black. Helen and Bernadette are in the process of researching and ultimately debunking urban legends for a collaborative thesis. The film begins with Helen interviewing a white teenager about Candyman, a bogeyman who can be invoked by the ritual of saying his name five times in front of a mirror. In the teenager’s narrative, an urban legend transmitted by a “friend of a friend who knew someone,” a baby-sitter invites her boyfriend to the house and dares him to perform the incantation. The boyfriend pronounces the name four times before going downstairs. Alone, the baby-sitter stares at her reflection in the mirror and utters the final “Candyman.” An indistinguishable figure flashes behind her, followed by a shot of the living-room ceiling from the boyfriend’s perspective, punctured by a hook and seeping with blood. Later, Helen and Bernadette jokingly replay the teenager’s version of the story by beginning the incantation, which only Helen completes. Nothing seems to happen.

The legend of the baby-sitter begins to seem true when Archie Walsh, a British professor played by the director, retells the Candyman myth as an historical narrative:

Candyman was the son of a slave. His father had amassed a considerable fortune from designing a device for the mass-producing of shoes after the
Civil War. Candyman had been sent to all the best schools and had grown
up in polite society. He had a prodigious talent as an artist, and was much
sought after when it came to the documenting of one’s wealth and position
in society in a portrait. It was in this latter capacity that he was commis-
sioned by a wealthy landowner to capture his daughter’s virginal beauty.
Well, of course, they fell deeply in love, and she became pregnant. Poor
Candyman! The father executed a terrible revenge. He paid a pack of brutal
hoonigans to do the deed. They chased Candyman through the town to
Cabrini-Green, where they proceeded to saw off his right hand with a rusty
blade. And no one came to his aid. But this was just the beginning of his
ordeal. Nearby there was an apiary: dozens of hives filled with hungry bees.
They smashed the hives and stole the honeycomb and smeared it over his
prone naked body. Candyman was stung to death by the bees. They burnt
his body on a giant pyre and scattered his ashes over Cabrini-Green.

A black janitor tells Helen a third version of the urban legend, which
attributes the death of a woman living at Cabrini-Green to a contem-
porary “Candyman.”

Intrigued by these stories, Helen persuades the hesitant Bernadette
to accompany her to do field research at the scene of the crime, in
order to complete their project. Helen eventually returns to Cabrini-
Green alone and asks Jake, a young boy, to show her where Candy-
man lives. The reluctant child takes her to a public bathroom in which
she is cornered by a gang from the projects, led by a tall black man
holding a hook. With the proclamation, “I hear you looking for
Candyman, bitch. Well, you found him,” he hits her face with the
hook and knocks her unconscious. After identifying the gang leader
who calls himself “Candyman” in a line-up, Helen is informed that
the police have finally succeeded in catching the perpetrator of the
recent crimes at Cabrini-Green.

Myth intrudes uncannily into contemporary reality when the fantas-
tactical Candyman (played by Tony Todd) confronts Helen in an empty
parking garage, where he tells her, “I came for you.” Overcome by
this encounter, she loses consciousness and mysteriously wakes up in
the projects, where she is arrested for the abduction and suspected
murder of a single mother’s baby. In the events that follow, she also
emerges as the prime suspect for the gruesome murders of Bernadette
and a psychiatrist at the hospital where she is committed. After escap-
ing she returns, again mysteriously, to Cabrini-Green where she dis-
covers Candyman in a Gothic lair hidden within its structure. He asks
her to become his bride in exchange for the missing baby’s life, a
promise that entails the sacrifice of her own. Ultimately, Helen discov-
ers that she is a reincarnation of the landowner’s daughter from the
professor’s narrative. Now carrying a hook herself, she rescues the
baby from a burning heap of garbage which recalls the pyre in the professor’s story, and which finally consumes her. The film ends when her husband Trevor, mourning her death, utters the name “Helen” five times in front of a bathroom mirror. Holding a hook in her hand, she slaughters him, to the horror of the young teenage girl who discovers him.

Rose’s decision to concentrate terror at the site of a high-rise housing project populated by working-class African Americans rather than the conventional suburban locale could be described as a sensationalist maneuver, particularly since Cabrini-Green has been the subject of national attention since its inception in 1955. Helen’s perusal of microfiche newspaper articles on the recent elevation of crimes at this site points to the film’s awareness of the controversy surrounding Cabrini-Green. As one urban sociologist notes, “The press, radio, and television have not hesitated to remind Cabrini Green [sic] residents that the place they call home is a slum. . . . The mass media has shaped the image of the Cabrini Green neighborhood as much as the residents themselves.”

This widespread notoriety reached its peak in the early 1980s, when Chicago public housing became synonymous with the violence perpetuated within its boundaries. Although the Henry Horner projects and the Robert Taylor Homes were also singled out by the media as extremely dangerous sites, Cabrini-Green ultimately gained the most notoriety after the eleven murders and thirty-seven gun injuries reported in the first two months of 1981. Likewise, in 1992 it once again attracted national attention with the shooting of a seven-year-old boy by an unknown sniper in one of the buildings. The unconventional use of a well-known urban setting in Candyman is particularly striking as films within the horror/slasher genre traditionally feature anonymous locations:

The stalker film is almost always positioned in a middle-class American community, which fosters a degree of likeness to that of the viewing audience or, at least, to their American ideal. But this setting is never identified as an existing geographical location: the destinations are fictional—“Camp Crystal Lake,” “Haddonfield, Illinois,” or merely unspecified. This generality gives them the ability to represent a place that is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, but yet distinctly American.

While in its setting and engagement with contemporary social issues Candyman seems to align itself with the genre of the “ghetto film,” it could be more accurately described as a slasher film that takes place within the ghetto. Unlike pioneer films such as John Singleton’s Boyz N the Hood (1991) and Allan and Albert Hughes’s Menace II Society (1993), which represent drive-by shootings as the central threat to
inner-city residents, Candyman substitutes the omnipresent gun for a hook. The three weapons in the film, Helen’s hook, the hook carried by the gang leader Candyman, and the hook bloodily integrated into the arm of the Tony Todd Candyman, point to its participation in the slasher film’s standard use of archaic objects. As Carol Clover writes, “In the hands of the killer, at least, guns have no place in slasher films. . . . In some basic sense, the emotional terrain of the slasher film is pretechnological. The preferred weapons of the killer are knives, hammers, axes, ice picks, hypodermic needles, red hot pokers, pitchforks, and the like.” In addition, Candyman conspicuously veers away from the social realism of the “ghetto film” and its characteristic emphasis on the overcrowdedness and noisiness of a public housing setting. When Bernadette and Helen are discussing their plans to research this place first-hand, we are made to believe that it will fit the conventional representation. Bernadette worriedly tells Helen, “I won’t even drive past there. I heard a kid got shot there the other day,” to which she replies, “Every day.” When the film actually takes us to Cabrini-Green, however, we see only a few tough-looking teenagers who mildly threaten the women before they disappear. In place of the expected images of guns and gangs, the film depicts the Cabrini-Green projects as a void haunted by a single man with a hook.

In substituting the threat of the many for a singular killer, Candyman indicates its allegiance to the 1980s horror film, despite its referencing of the social. In this genre a terror such as Freddy Krueger can permeate the collective unconscious of a group of suburban teenagers through their dreams. Candyman deviates from this model, however, by claiming that such myths can no longer naturally and effortlessly intrude into a community. By making its protagonist a pragmatic anthropologist, it implies that myths can be consciously sought and uncovered as well as dreamed or imagined. Whereas the teenagers in Nightmare involuntarily fantasize about a figure guiltily repressed by their parents, Rose’s heroine actively pursues the legend through interviews, recordings of oral histories, and newspaper articles. Similarly, while monsters like Freddy and Jason do not allow their victims the option of requesting their presence, the invocation of Candyman is a complicated ritual involving volition on the part of the caller. Candyman is thus trapped in the same subservient position as the ex-slave’s son in the professor’s narrative: he is a black man for hire, at the beck and call of consumers in a service economy.

Immediately following Helen’s assault by the gang leader Candyman, there is a confused interchange between her and Jake. After having identified her assailant, she tries to allay Jake’s fears that Candyman will retaliate against him for having shown her his hideout.
JAKE: Candyman will get me.

HELEN: Candyman isn't real. He's just a story, you know, like Dracula or Frankenstein. A bad man took his name so he could scare us, but now he's locked up, everything's going to be okay.

JAKE: *perplexed* Candyman ain't real?

HELEN: No.

Helen misunderstands Jake's anxiety, assuming that he is referring to the legendary Candyman she has so far only encountered in the white teenager's and British professor's stories, instead of the gang leader. By positioning Candyman as the successor in a lineage of European monsters (Dracula and Frankenstein), Helen reveals her own desire to establish him as a part of the project's literary canon as well. This scene points to how she has created her own hybrid mythology by combining narratives from both popular culture and academia. Bernadette unconsciously seems to comment on Helen's tendency to read the events at Cabrini-Green in relation to these white mythologies when she says, "Helen, this is sick. This isn't one of your fairy tales. A woman got killed here."

The miscommunication between Jake and Helen suggests that she in fact believes or has some investment in believing that the inhabitants of Cabrini-Green are deceived by the fantasy she initially sought to repudiate. En route to their first visit to the projects, Helen condescendingly rebukes Bernadette for her reluctance to proceed with her plan of using Cabrini-Green as the site for their field research. Glancing at Bernadette while she fumbles with her mace and pepper spray, Helen comments sarcastically, "What's with the arsenal, Bernadette? We're only going eight blocks."

BERNADETTE: You're the one who got us dressed up like cops.

HELEN: I said dress conservatively.

BERNADETTE: No, we look like cops.

Dressing "conservatively," for Helen, implies dressing inconspicuously; an attempt to signal neutrality or sameness. However, Bernadette's rebuttal calls attention to the fact that this vestmental code could be received suspiciously by a different community of readers, as a marker of intrusive authority rather than anonymity. By responding defensively, Helen refuses to acknowledge the possibility that her status as an intruder into this community cannot be altered, in spite of efforts to downplay signs of social difference:
HELEN: Why are you trying to scare me?

BERNADETTE: I'm not trying to scare you, Helen. I just want you to think. The gangs hold this whole neighborhood hostage.

HELEN: (angry, stops car) Okay, let's just turn around then. Let's just go back, and we can write a nice, little boring thesis regurgitating all the usual crap about urban legends. We've got a real shot here, Bernadette. An entire community starts attributing the daily horrors of their lives to a mythical figure. Now, if Trevor and Archie were in on this, do you think they'd chicken out?

BERNADETTE: In a second.

HELEN: Exactly.

"An entire community starts attributing the daily horrors of their lives to a mythical figure." With her assessment of the Cabrini-Green inhabitants' relation to the figure called Candyman, Helen implies that she understands the origins of their social reality better than they do. For her, they are naively translating reality into fiction. Helen fails to consider the possibility that to position herself as an educator, she may actually need to believe that they believe in the legend. From the privileged standpoint of an outside authority, Helen constructs herself as a missionary of social truth, as if in expiation of white liberal guilt. This stance is evinced in the defensiveness of her response to the idea that she is in fact responsible for Bernadette's death and for the disappearance of the baby from Cabrini-Green. Alluding to an unspecified and repressed part of her consciousness, she insists, "That's not possible. I'm not capable of that. No matter what's going wrong, I know one thing—that no part of me, no matter how hidden, is capable of that." Her use of the abstract pronoun "that" increases the extent of her responsibility to encompass not only the two individual victims involved, but the ills of modern society as a whole.

Helen's assertive expedition into the high-rise projects recalls an event highlighted by the media in 1981, when Chicago mayor Jane Byrne moved into Cabrini-Green to help restore order following a particularly violent period in the project's history. As Alex Kotlowitz recounts, "Along with a contingent of police and bodyguards, she stayed for three weeks. . . . But that single act by Byrne, more than any murder or plea for help, highlighted the isolation and alienation of these poor, mostly black inner-city islands. It was as if the mayor, with her entourage of police, advisers, and reporters, had deigned to visit some distant and perilous Third World country—except that Cabrini-Green sat barely eight blocks from the mayor's Gold Coast apartment."
iatory gesture is all the more ironic in light of the fact that under her administration, the Housing Department’s Home Acquisition Program was reduced by $2.8 million in 1982. During her term in office, Byrne also destroyed 16,177 residential units in black and Latino neighborhoods, while building only 12,811. Not surprisingly, in 1983 the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless estimated that the number of homeless people in the city was between 12,000 and 25,000.9

Helen’s conversation with Bernadette en route to the projects reveals that her own house is also eight blocks from Cabrini-Green. She repeatedly alludes to the fact that this proximity is only geographical, while a world of social difference separates her condominium from the projects. At the same time, however, Helen can only establish this difference by using her own dwelling as a map to read the other space. Her major discovery in researching the history of Cabrini-Green is that her own building was originally intended as public housing, but was transformed into overpriced condos because no structural barrier separated it from the wealthy Gold Coast.

HELEN: My apartment was built as a housing project.

BERNADETTE: (in disbelief) No.

HELEN: Yeah. Now take a look at this. (Walks over to the window and draws curtains.) Once it was finished, the city soon realized there was no barrier between here and the Gold Coast.

BERNADETTE: Unlike over there where you’ve got the highway and the El train to keep the ghetto cut off.

HELEN: Exactly. So they made some minor alterations. They covered the cinder block in plaster, and they sold the lot off as condos.

BERNADETTE: How much did you pay for this place?

HELEN: Don’t ask. (Walking to bathroom.) Now, wait till you see this; here’s the proof. (Detaching the bathroom mirror.) The killer, or killers, they don’t know which, smashed their way through the back of this cabinet. See, there’s no wall there. There’s only a medicine chest separating us from the other apartment.

Helen turns her Lincoln Village apartment into a template for Cabrini-Green, using the gap between the adjoining condos as an explanation of how the murders at the projects took place. This analogy supports the hypothesis she propounds as a means of debunking the myth that she believes that the inhabitants of the projects believe. The spectral housing project Helen imagines concealed within her own building posits Cabrini-Green as a Gothic house-within-a-house; cinder blocks hidden under a layer of white plaster. As the architectural
ghost of Helen’s domestic space, Cabrini-Green thus embodies a set of buried economic and social relations underlying the structure of Lincoln Village.

Though Helen’s discovery of her building’s invisible substructure is compelling, her hypothesis is flawed. Her theory about the lower-class origins of her building is undermined by the fact that Chicago’s projects were mostly based on commercial designs for upper-middle-class housing:

The Cabrini-Green apartment slabs, which ranged from ten to nineteen stories high, resembled high-rise factories with exposed concrete frames filled in with glass and brick. They followed the architectural style pioneered by Mies van der Rohe, who had built his first concrete-frame commercial apartment building in Chicago in 1949. Public agencies were probably attracted to this kind of architecture for the same reason that many real-estate developers are partial to modernist design: repetitive, stripped-down, and undecorated buildings can be decorated quickly and inexpensively.

However, it’s one thing to build apartment towers for the upper-middle class—as Mies usually did—and quite another to embrace them as solutions for housing the poor. The well-off have doormen, janitors, repairmen, baby-sitters, and gardeners; the poor have no hired help. Without restricted access, the lobbies and corridors are vandalized; without proper maintenance, broken elevators do not get fixed, staircases become garbage dumps, and broken windows remain un replaced; without baby-sitters, single mothers are stranded in their apartments, and adolescents roam, unsupervised, sixteen floors below.

Helen is correct, then, in assessing that her building is in some sense a template of Cabrini-Green, but she disregards the economic factors differentiating these structures despite their architectural similarity.

As Bernadette notes, the highway is one of the urban landmarks maintaining the division between racially and economically segregated neighborhoods. This image of the highway is a predominant motif in the film, at once marking our entry into its narrative space with the opening credits, and connecting its various scenes. Nearly every time the film switches locales, the camera takes us over the highway, following its straight path to an implied destination. As a structure that at once separates and connects relationally, the highway functions as a line of repression separating two linguistic neighborhoods that cannot be crossed without producing a symptom.

This theory of divided neighborhoods may be useful in understanding the relationship Helen constructs between Lincoln Village and Cabrini-Green. Faced with the myth as a free-floating element in search of a home and resembling a disembodied spirit looking for a new body to haunt, Helen extracts the ghost of a housing project from Lincoln
Village, and relocates this spirit in the buildings at Cabrini-Green. Because the film presents the projects as an evacuated space, a hollow shell, it reinforces their image as just a body anticipating its inhabitation by a soul. Averaging seventy dwelling units per acre of residential land and housing over 10,000 people, it seems strange that Cabrini-Green should be portrayed as an empty wasteland in Rose's film. Aside from the three or four young males gratuitously positioned around the building's entrance when Helen and Bernadette arrive, Candyman's version of Cabrini-Green is strikingly deserted.

The ghost of the tenement in Lincoln Village for which Helen conveniently finds a home at Cabrini-Green is set loose like the homeless bees in the professor's narrative. Having stolen their original home, the hive or honeycomb, the mob hired by the landowner to punish Candyman releases this mass into the city. The image occurs in the beginning of the film, in which a close-up shot of a swarm of bees is followed by their disoriented flight in the midst of Chicago's crowded skyline. Candyman's association with the bees seems to elucidate another function they adopt in the film. Like the ghost Helen uproots and relocates to Cabrini-Green, these bees appear frustratedly seeking a new dwelling. The professor's description of the bees as "hungry," an unusual characterization of an insect that produces its own home in the form of food, indicates an unnatural and fundamental poverty connecting the bees to the inhabitants of the projects, who have been deprived of adequate housing by institutionalized racism. The eviction and subsequent displacement of the bees as implied by the film's leitmotif of these insects in unnatural locations (suspended in swarms above skyscrapers, overflowing a toilet, and deep in the pitch-black interior of Cabrini-Green) is accompanied by anger, as evinced in the ominous tone with which Candyman pronounces his voice-over. This anger recalls the fact that bees attack only from fear, in an effort to protect the threatened hive.

In addition to imposing her belief in the conglomerated Candyman myth onto the inhabitants of Cabrini-Green, Helen seems unaware or ignorant of the fact that this myth is one she has extracted from two white sources: the academic's romanticized narrative and the teenager's generic ghost story. Though Helen smirks (not surprisingly) after hearing the latter, she immediately assumes that the black janitor is referring to the same Candyman as the one in the teenager's narrative. Entering to clean Helen's office, the janitor overhears the end of the tape-recorded interview in which the teenager repeats Candyman's name.

JANITOR: Candyman, huh?
HELEN: Yes, you've heard of him?
JANITOR: Mm-hmm. You doing a study on him?

HELEN: Yes, I am. What have you heard?

JANITOR: Everybody scared of him once it get dark. He live over at Cabrini. My friend told me about him.

HELEN: Cabrini-Green?

JANITOR: Yeah, in the projects. I live on the South Side so I don’t know too much about it, but my friend she know all about it. Her cousin live over at Cabrini. They say he killed a lady.

HELEN: Can I talk to your friend?

Responding to Helen’s eager request, the janitor asks her friend, who is conveniently outside mopping the hallway, to come into the office.

JANITOR: Tell her what you told me about the Candyman.

JANITOR 2: Well, all I know is that there was some lady in a tub and she heard a noise.

HELEN: Do you remember her name?

JANITOR 2: I think her name was Ruthie Jean, and she heard this banging and smashing like someone was trying to make a hole in the wall. So Ruthie called 911 and she said there’s someone coming through the walls.

JANITOR: They thought the lady was crazy, right?

JANITOR 2: Mm-hmm. So she called 911 again and they still didn’t believe her. When they finally got there she was dead.

HELEN: Was she shot?

JANITOR 2: No. She was killed with a hook. (Makes ripping noise.) You know?

JANITOR: It’s true. (Responding to Helen’s expression.) Yeah, it is. I read it in the papers. Candyman killed her.

JANITOR 2: Yeah, but uh . . . I don’t know nothing ’bout that.

Contrary to Helen’s immediate conclusion from this conversation, the janitors are discussing the Candyman who later emerges as Jake’s gang leader from Cabrini-Green, the same man identified by the police detective as one of the project’s overlords.

In this manner, the three distinct Candyman scenarios (teenage horror story, academic narrative, urban reality) converge in Helen’s consciousness alone. This is somewhat obscured by the fact that Rose reverses the sequence of shots conventionally used to determine a hypotactical relationship between the dreaming subject and the dream.
Hollywood films conventionally use a close-up of the dreamer’s face as a point of departure for the fantasy into which it dissolves. In this case, however, the fantasy precedes its site of production and seems to lead an independent existence. The dream thus becomes disembodied from the dreamer. *Candyman* begins with an image of bees eventually absorbed into a close-up of Helen’s face, as she listens to the tale told by the teenager. While such a juxtaposition of shots would normally imply that the first is producing and controlling the second, here it seems that the second counter-intuitively releases the first. This reversal of causality between the projecting/narrating consciousness and the projected/narrated image diverts us from the suspicion that Candyman may actually be a hybrid creature spliced together from the various stories housed in Helen’s imagination. Solipsistically, Helen believes that Candyman has come for her.

As a connective mechanism, her consciousness performs the same rhetorical function as the object in the film: the hook that hooks the various stories together. The disturbing implication of this parallel structure is that Helen’s mind is in fact coeval with this weapon from the traditional white slasher film. The equation of white liberal consciousness with a metal hook is dramatized by the penultimate scene of *Candyman*, which could be described as the narcissistic fantasy of a woman imagining her own funeral. Helen sees herself mourned by the two communities she seeks to conflate: white, middle-class academia and the entire population of Cabrini-Green. The funeral scene is framed and hence entirely contained by two identical close-up shots of Helen’s face inside the closed coffin, as if to establish her point of view. To the surprise of the white mourners, a procession of inhabitants from the projects silently enters the cemetery, led by the single mother whose baby Helen supposedly rescued, and Jake, who gratefully drops Helen’s hook into her grave. The sound of the hook clanging against the metal coffin is immediately followed by what seems to be a reaction shot of Helen’s immobile face, concluding the sequence. This scene at once refers to and contrasts dramatically with the far from narcissistic moment at which Helen is struck by the Cabrini-Green Candyman’s hook while sleuthing in the men’s bathroom.

The funeral fantasy could be seen as an attempt to rectify the anticlimax of Helen’s encounter with the reality she sought to mythologize. Through his humiliating blow to the face, the Cabrini-Green Candyman marks Helen’s intrusion into a space to which she did not belong yet which she nevertheless tried to claim. A crucial turning point in the film’s development, the mortifying experience of being knocked unconscious by the gang leader’s hook, thrusts Helen into the epicenter of the myth she previously attempted to repudiate. Here
the film shifts from one narrative dimension to another; from its previous gestures at social realism to the supernatural. This is reinforced by the abrupt transition from the narrative’s focus on the two graduate students’ excited involvement in their research to the eerie calmness of Helen’s solitary entry into the vortex of the Candyman myth. In a deserted parking lot, Helen produces the Tony Todd Candyman as a deus ex machina after her wounded face has healed, as if to extricate her from the reality she unexpectedly encountered at Cabrini-Green. By facilitating Helen’s disavowal of this confrontation with the all-too-literal gang leader, the legendary Candyman enables her to insert herself at the center of the hybridized narrative from which he emerges. The hook as object instantiates the complete reversal of Helen’s ideological stance; from skeptic to believer; from dream interpreter to dreamer; from debunker of myths to mythic heroine. In its rudimentary engagement with contemporary social issues, Candyman seems to offer an oblique yet affirmative response to the question of whether privilege inheres in being haunted. As Judith Halberstam writes, “While the film on some level attempts to direct all kinds of social criticisms at urban planners, historians, and racist white home-owners, ultimately the horror stabilizes in the ghastly body of the black man whose monstrosity turns upon his desire for the white woman.”

According to Halberstam’s reading, the film’s surface acknowledgment of relevant social problems masks its pervasive racism: “No amount of elaborate framing within this film can prevent it from confirming racist assumptions about black male aggression towards white female bodies.” While this is true, what may even be more suppressed is the fact that Candyman is less a film about the implications of being haunted than about the superior privilege of transforming oneself into the haunter, now from the external standpoint of liberal empathy. If the traditional horror film ultimately posits fear as a cachet for its white, middle-class victims, Candyman’s protagonist seems to want to reverse this dynamic by reclaiming the originary fear of the killer, as if to offer proof of her distance from the victim control group. In the passage from victim to victimizer, Helen’s self-mythologization as a female Candyman is perhaps an attempt to rectify the originary supplantation of the haunter figure’s fear, by putting herself in his role.

Helen’s insertion of herself within the myth she creates exposes the disparity of her sources. Like Frankenstein’s monster, her fantasy is patched together from elements particular to each version of the story. The British professor’s influence is detected in the presentation of Candyman as a noble yet suffering prince. Recalling the maimed hero of a Brontë novel, he is a tragic figure who intimidates while generating pity. Tall, handsome, eloquent, and clad in a fur-trimmed black cape,
Helen’s Candyman speaks in a Romantic vernacular, demanding “one exquisite kiss” and seductively repeating the refrain, “Be my victim.” This literary paradigm is most pronounced when Helen translates the Candyman legend into a domestic melodrama. In this version of the story, Helen wanders into Candyman’s lair in a trancelike state. His chamber, entered through a series of tunnels, exists deep within the structure of Cabrini-Green, again recalling the house-behind-the-house motif of the Gothic genre. She hesitantly approaches Candyman’s peacefully sleeping form to the accompaniment of sentimentalized piano music. When he awakes and states, “Helen, you came to me,” her eyelids flutter as the camera goes into a soft-focused shot of her face. As if in a swoon, Helen’s body goes limp as Candyman intones, “Surrender to me now.” Alternating between their two profiles, the camera spins dizzily, suggesting their engagement in a dance. Candyman then lifts Helen into his arms and carries her to a raised platform resembling both an altar and a bed.

In this scene, sexual seduction is conflated with the lure of self-mythologization. Helen is equally enticed by Candyman’s physicality and by his promises of immortality in legend: “Our names will be written on a thousand walls. . . . Our crimes told and retold by our faithful believers.” The equivalence established between mythic inscription and sexuality is emphasized by the juxtaposition of Candyman’s erotic caresses with his prophetic statement, “We shall die together in front of their very eyes and give them something to be haunted by. . . . Come with me and be immortal.” With the consummation scene that follows, Helen and Candyman seem to be reenacting every step of the professor’s narrative. The scene thus appropriately closes with Helen reading the words, "IT WAS ALWAYS YOU HELEN," presumably scrawled on the wall by Candyman, and staring into the painted eyes of what appears to be her nineteenth-century counterpart: the woman impregnated by the son of an ex-slave. This marks a mirror stage in Helen’s consciousness, a moment at which she clearly identifies with an image construed as a more complete and satisfying, legendary version of herself. The cathartic identification is enhanced by the camera’s alternation between her real eyes and those of the ideal image.

For Helen to install herself within the postbellum myth legitimately, however, she cannot position herself as a desiring agent. By definition, myths cannot be autobiographical, as they are atemporal and trans-historical narratives. As the Ovidian tradition illustrates, myths about ordinary mortals require either their self-effacement or transformation. In their encounters with the gods, human beings only gain mythological status by turning into things: a tree, nightingale, flower, or, in Helen’s case, a picture. To reach this inanimate state, she must thus reconcep-
tualize her role in the Gothic story by turning what initially seems to be sexual pleasure into the degradation and pain accompanying acts of martyrdom. She positions herself as partaking in a shameful, self-sacrificial bargain, in which she promises to “surrender” herself to Candyman in exchange for the missing baby’s life.

HELEN: The child. We had a deal.

CANDYMAN: Surrender to me now, and he shall be unharmed.

(Helen appears to acquiesce by swooning into his arms.)

CANDYMAN: We have a bargain.

This exchange of vows immediately before Candyman takes Helen to the bed/altar suggests an unsanctified form of union, a marriage ceremony without a presiding authority or priestly sanction. In the absence of the mediating figure guaranteeing the social validity of their alliance, the relation between Helen and Candyman is made to reflect the illegitimacy of miscegenation in the original story. It shares the ambiguity of an equivocal pregnancy, which the professor’s story seems to imply was the result of a rape. In this manner, Helen’s conflicting responses to Candyman could be read as a way for her both to gain access to the prohibited object of desire, and to keep him the racist stereotype of a black rapist at the same time. Candyman remains both a handsome prince and a threatening assaulter.

While Helen assimilates the professor’s narrative into her private version of the Candyman myth by structuring it as a family romance, she also draws from the teenager’s ghost story. The romantic imagery of the former is abruptly dispelled by Helen’s apparition as a Freddy Krueger figure in Trevor’s bathroom after he performs the requisite incantation by repeating her name in front of the mirror. Once she has gleefully disemboweled him with her hook, Helen’s husband is discovered by his teenage girlfriend, who screams uncontrollably while clutching a kitchen knife. This almost comic scene pays its respects to the eighties horror/slasher genre, in which terror almost always takes the form of kitsch. Helen even utters a Freddy Kruegeresque one-liner when she quips, “What’s the matter, Trevor? Scared of something?” Likewise, referring to the genre’s common sequencing of sex followed by graphic violence, Helen orgasmically moans while ripping her hook through Trevor’s body. The open-endedness of this concluding scene prepares us to anticipate *Candyman II*, establishing yet another alliance with the slasher film tradition through its exploitation of the sequel.

The closing credits of the film are accompanied by an image of Helen as a martyred saint, complete with a halo of fire around her head,
painted on the wall behind the altar at Cabrini-Green. The camera’s slow zoom onto the painted figure’s face reverses the conventional dreamer/dream shot sequence of the opening scenes. Once again, Helen’s face, this time in its mythical form, seems to claim the preceding events as if they had been projected from her consciousness from the beginning. In switching us back to the Gothic environment of family romance from the teenage ghost story, the film suggests that the legend produced and controlled by Helen’s consciousness is a merger of highbrow literary romance and popular horror story. This amalgamation of high and low elements is reinforced by the manner in which the architecture of the nineteenth-century Gothic revival is internalized within a contemporary public housing project; even featuring “stained glass” comprised of graffiti written over windows.

In her full assumption of both the guilt and glory of the Candyman legends, Helen recalls Eve in *Paradise Lost*, who similarly proclaims herself the central protagonist of Milton’s narrative by an admission of culpability that situates her as the only possible redeemer of the Fall: “All by me is lost, / Such favor I unworthy am vouchsafed, / By me the Promised Seed shall all restore.” Helen strategically deploys white liberal guilt to access the space of the other and install herself as both savior and culprit. As if unsatisfied with the marginal position allocated to the heroine in the professor’s tale, she must assume both her role and that of Candyman, whose status as suffering hero earned him immortal fame. Substituting her own martyrdom for his, her maneuver recalls that of the heroine of Craven’s *Nightmare*, who can only consider her victory against Freddy Krueger complete once she has positioned herself as ultimately responsible for his existence as well as for his downfall. As Nancy informs Freddy at the end of the film, “I know you too well. . . . I take back all the energy I gave you. You’re nothing, you’re shit.” Similarly, in *Friday the Thirteenth*, Alice cannot emerge unscathed from the massacre at Camp Crystal Lake without having committed an equally gruesome act herself: decapitating the serial killer with an axe. As the sole figure able to defeat the horrific monster, Alice occupies the subject position Carol Clover describes as “Final Girl,” while also constituting herself as both victim and perpetrator. Survival in the slasher film is thus already predicated on the haunted’s identification with the haunter. Taking this necessary condition one step further, Helen colonizes the latter position completely. Upstaging Candyman’s status in both the literary and the kitsch narratives, she edges out her competitor by appropriating his hook, his name, and his violence.

By using the Final Girl scenario as a vehicle for her initiation into the lineage of canonical haunters, Helen revises the position of the
female heroine in the conventional slasher film. Referring to this teenage prototype, Clover writes:

The one character of stature who does live to tell the tale is in fact the Final Girl. She is introduced at the beginning and is the only character to be developed in any psychological detail. We understand immediately from the attention paid it that hers is the main story line. She is intelligent, watchful, levelheaded; the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the pattern and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation. We register her horror as she stumbles on the corpses of her friends. Her momentary paralysis in the face of death duplicates those moments of the universal nightmare experience—in which she is the undisputed "I"—on which horror frankly trades. When she downs the killer, we are triumphant. She is by any measure the slasher film's hero. This is not to say that our attachment to her is exclusive and unremitting, only that it adds up, and that in the closing sequence (which can be quite prolonged) it is very close to absolute.¹⁵

The "privileged understanding" available to the Final Girl as haunted is compounded in Candyman by Helen's added privilege of having taken over the role of haunter, as if to reclaim the property rights of the haunter which had been suppressed in the conventional horror movie. More than just living to tell the tale, she ultimately is the tale.

The imaginary relation Helen constructs between herself and the inhabitants of Cabrini-Green brings to mind the failed reciprocity in Hegel's master/slave dynamic, in which the master relies on the slave to produce an image of his own identity. In claiming the new privilege of being the haunter, through the liberal stance of empathetic identification with the Other, as well as the prior privilege of being the haunted, Helen bridges and subsumes both roles within her consciousness. So much is at stake for her in trying to assume the slave's position that she literally has to move into Cabrini-Green, the site where she has determined that the myth belongs, as if following the ghost she initially expelled from Lincoln Village. In her last visit to Cabrini-Green, this time without the mediation of the highway, she wears a polyester uniform stolen from a nurse during her escape from the mental institution. This uniform connects her to the only person from the projects with whom she truly interacts; the single mother of the missing baby, who wears a similar garment. In fantasy, Helen finally achieves the vestmental inconspicuousness she sought on her first visit to the projects, this time successfully assimilating into the environment of Cabrini-Green and thereby positioning herself as entitled to the property shared by its inhabitants.
Helen’s desire to eradicate the social barrier that the highway represents marks her ultimate belief in what she had initially sought to disprove: the supposed mythmaking of the residents of Cabrini-Green. Revising the terms of Hegel’s dialectic, Helen constructs a myth for the slave that can now be believed by the master. Whereas in Hegel’s original scenario the slave fully comprehends the master while remaining incomprehensible to him, Helen’s imposition of the white Candyman legend onto the project’s inhabitants eliminates the one aspect of power the slave maintains. By revising her own belief system to correspond to what she believed the Cabrini-Green inhabitants to believe, Helen sacrifices her privileged social position to participate in what she has turned into the slave’s myth. The master thus gains the territory of knowledge or psychological property previously demarcated as the slave’s. Occupying the stance of the former, Helen’s production of myth allows her to claim an understanding of the slave far superior to his understanding of the master or himself.

In its attempt to surpass the horror film’s standard collapse of the barrier between the imaginary and the real, Candyman tries to eliminate social distinctions as well. While the film purports to subvert binary oppositions, its agenda appears less to undermine the difference between white, middle-class mythologies and those of the economically disempowered than to force the former onto the latter, subsuming the marginal into the privileged term. This suggests that the horror film ultimately may be an inadequate vehicle for addressing the issues Candyman wants to address, despite Rose’s innovative attempt to revive the genre for the 1990s, and to accommodate the post-Reagan-Bush era’s greater investment in social awareness. Perhaps to succeed in this endeavor, the horror film would have to accept its own annihilation, since, as Candyman demonstrates, belief in social reality murders myth. This paradox is already incorporated within the film in the form of a newspaper headline read by Helen during her preliminary research of the murders at Cabrini-Green: “What Killed Ruthie Jean? Life in the Projects.” In response to the formulaic question asked by all horror films, What killed X?, Helen ignores the answer already provided by the headline to create her own answer. Like its heroine, Rose’s film must begin dreaming at the exact point at which reality strikes it in the face, losing itself in the madness of its hybrid mythology.

NOTES

1. Douglas Kellner, “Poltergeists, Gender, and Class in the Age of Reagan and Bush,” The Hidden Foundation: Cinema and the Question of Class,

Published by Duke University Press


5. Witold Rybczynski, *City Life: Urban Expectations in a New World* (New York: Scribner, 1995) 166. As Rybczynski writes, "Television journalists drew parallels with violence-ridden Sarajevo. This sounds far-fetched, but I was struck by how much the bleak background the television reporters did indeed resemble a war zone. The littered expanse of bare earth, the abandoned cars and broken windows, the battered apartment blocks with walls covered in graffiti and piles of garbage in the corridors."


13. Incidentally, *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* was directed by Bill Condon in 1995. In this sequel, Candyman (Tony Todd) returns to haunt the descendants of the landowner responsible for his murder during their Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans.


15. Clover 45.