**WHO MAKES THE HOOD?: THE CITY, COMMUNITY AND CONTEMPORARY FOLK HORROR IN NIA DACOSTA’S *CANDYMAN***

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**From Britain to US**

Folk horror is traditionally located in the rural landscape where the power of nature creates a sense of isolation compounded by an individual’s exclusion from communities, initially defined by a triumvirate of British films — the “unholy trinity” of *Witchfinder General* (1968), *The* *Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1971), and *The Wicker Man* (1973) and continued in a later wave of British stories typified by the woodland trilogy of Ben Wheatley’s *Kill List* (2011), *A Field in England* (2013), and *In the Earth* (2021). In folk horror as Adam Scovell defines it, the “folk” of the definition is the ethnographic practices of a people or community, its folklore and superstitions, and where he acknowledges the “horror” through which these practices are depicted is “open to fluctuating meaning” (2017, 6).

In North American filmmaking, folk horror shares many of the themes of its European counterparts in that stories are often focused on a clash between the modern and the arcane, the ordinary and the uncanny. The genre is typified by the enemy within and situated in place and the hierarchies of power that govern communities and is commonly located in rural environs — evident in the TV movie *Crowhaven Farm* (1970), and superlative cinematic releases *Children of the Corn* (1984) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). The religious fervor of British films, whether pagan or puritanical, often shifts focus in North American folk horror to stories that reflect the impact of slavery or colonialism. This is evident in the country’s own recvent wave of films in the genre, from the early New England puritans of Robert Eggers’ *The Witch* (2015), the contemporarysettingsof Upstate New York in Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017) and coastal small town location of *Us* (2019), to the struggling Oregon town that features in *Antlers* (2021). This group of US folk horror films are connected by roots that sit in the black American experience or Native American folklore, rather than calling back to European traditions.

As Dawn Keetley has observed, the most important conflict in the genre involves humans and their relationship to their environment. She notes that “In folk horror, things don’t just happen *in* a (passive) landscape; things happen *because* of the landscape. The landscape does things; it has efficacy” (2015).

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This convention of folk horror is certainly true of the *Candyman* film franchise, which began in 1992 with director Bernard Rose, and where the central story of each film is evoked by its location and a connection to slavery, and racism encountered by its occupants. A twist of the film series is presented in the way with which the origins of this action are drawn from a *built* rather than *natural* environment and in an urban, rather than rural, locale. The Candyman character at the center of the story is a hook-handed spirit who can be summoned by saying his name five times in front of a mirror; whose summoners are then stalked and murdered by him. He is connected to a past that haunts the neighborhood in which the legend is born in the film, and a story recounted by its occupants. Each component of the character is born from longstanding legends. The Hookman is a familiar urban legend originating in the US of the 1950s, of an escaped serial killer with a hook for a hand who preyed upon courting couples (Brunvard 2003). Similarly, the notion of summoning a spirit through an incantation made in a mirror is well-established, though originates in a much older tradition, the summoning of Bloody Mary or its Japanese equivalent of Hanako-San (de Vos 2012). In addition to the mythos, part of the storyline has its origins in the widely-reported expeerience of Ruth McCoy, a resident of the Grace Abbot Homes, another Chicago housing authority project, who had called 911 in 1985 reporting that someone had attacked her, having climbed through the bathroom cabinet of her apartment. This home invasion technique had been widely reported in the city before McCoy’s experience, facilitated by intruders entering homes by way of the pipe chase that separated each apartment of the block. Although police responded to the call and knocked on McCoy’s door, they left when they received no answer — McCoy was found two days later having been shot and killed in her own home (Bogira 2014). This device, of the Candyman occupying and emerging from the walls of apartment buildings is repeated in DaCosta’s film,

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These tropes are common across the original *Candyman* film of 1992 and, to a lesser extent, in its two sequels, though Nia DaCosta 2021 movie is notable in that its the first film to return to the location of the original — Cabrini-Green, an urban housing project in Chicago.

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This connection to a city, rather than a rural location, echoes the franchise’s source material — Clive Barker’s short story *The Forbidden* (1985) — where graffiti in the Spector Street Estate, a public housing project situated in Liverpool in the UK, is the subject of a study by an academic researcher. In the original story, the action is contemporary to the book’s publication, as the occupants of Spector Street —a working-class community consigned to a concrete tower—recount to a visiting sociologist the story of the Candyman, and how they are haunted by him. The impact on communities in folk horror’s more traditional rural settings is often shaped by the impact of humans on their environment and the anxiety or tension this predicates. In *Candyman* this tension centers on how it is the built environment that is a force that impacts, restricts, and imposes malevolent power upon its residents. In DaCosta’s film, it is redevelopment that is the catalyst for anxiety, and serves as a residual dread that haunts both the landscape and its residents.

**Spectral Cities: Folk Horror, Urban Legend and the Built Environment**

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Nia DaCosta’s *Candyman* embodies the fluidity of the folk horror genre — taking the conventions common to both British and US films defined as the “folk horror chain” by Scovell — a sense of isolation, skewed belief systems or morality with a happening or summoning (2017). In this film, all of these elements of the chain are present, yet the urban setting breaks the chain presents a question as to the significance of the rural to folk horror as a genre and this is something I’ll return to.. Kier-La Janisse has observed that folk horror can be found “anywhere people […] displace other people or other cultures, or where older traditions are being transported to new environments” (2021).

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As Summerisle is to *The* *Wicker Man*, so DaCosta presents Cabrini-Green as an island, albeit one in which glass and steel tower blocks and creeping gentrification have displaced its occupants and their understanding of themselves rather than water, religion and an outsider.

VIDEO

What we do see of the city is accentuated through how DaCosta chooses to present it. Unusual points of view are consistent throughout the film and begin with an inversion of the camera that views the city upside down in the title sequence. This point-of-view presents a disconcerting viewing position for the audience as the camera floats through the city looking up at skyscrapers disappearing into fog rather than down on rooftops and teeming streets from the traditional helicopter shot. This choice conjures unusual lines and shapes and leaves buildings free of the typical markers of a city — vehicles, pedestrians, and street signage. The effect evokes notions of the witch with the ability to fly or levitate, and the position is disconcerting — in that the camera appears both of the air, in that we cannot see its anchoring in its tilt towards the sky, but also strangely grounded in reality in that it doesn’t rise or fall, merely floats. In the context of the wider film, this can be read as an othering of the city an *almost* human point-of-view but one which takes an unusual, and newly seeing, perspective of the familiar.

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In DaCosta’s articulation of the *Candyman* mythos, the stark neighborhoods of Barker’s 1980s gothic and Bernard Rose’s original film are reimagined in what is now left of Chicago’s Cabrini-Green projects following the redevelopment of the district that began in the 1990s (Guzzardi, 2011). The housing project was one of a number built or expanded in the 1950s and 1960s, populated largely with African American residents and poorly funded and maintained by the city authorities (Bogira 2014). In folk horror, the landscape is often a contested, liminal, space of the uncanny — situated beyond the ordinary and mundane, but one marked by what has gone before as a palimpsest or a shared remembrance of the collective past —buried secrets forming ley lines that connect the present to distant history. *Candyman* occupies this liminal space of a *remembered* real constructed of the mythological and the historical, where the original population and their children remain haunted by the mythologies of the place; candy spiked with razor blades, homeless men who live in walls, child abduction, and a suicide.

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The processes of gentrification have purified the location to some extent but it is unable to erase its memory so easily — the ground on which the housing project stood carrying a “hauntology” of a cultural past that can never be scrubbed away, and this is serves persistent stain on the lives of those who live there.

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In a scene that takes place early in the film, contemporary artist Anthony and his gallerist partner Brianna (Treyonah Parris) are questioned by Brianna’s brother Troy (Nathan Stewart-Jarrett) as to why they had purchased their new apartment in a neighborhood troubled by its long history. He recounts a number of myths of the place. “The neighborhood is haunted,” says Troy. “Everywhere is haunted” responds Anthony.

VIDEO

Prompted by his conversation with Troy, Anthony explores what remains of the original Cabrini-Green projects meeting laundromat owner William (Colman Domingo) who recounts to him the origination of the Candyman myth; of a hook-handed homeless man named Sherman Fields (Michael Hargrove) who had been unlawfully beaten to death 25 years earlier by police. As William explains to Anthony — “a story like that, a pain like that…lasts forever,” suggesting that legends such as Candyman are the manner with which society handles its traumatic history.

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This recounting of the story prompts Anthony to begin painting a series of work around the hook-handed figure and though a playful exchange with Brianna, he conducts the summoning ritual himself as part of a conversation with her — an act that is revealed to have successfully opened the portal for Candyman to haunt Anthony, by way of a brief shot of the city from the point-of-view of the inverted camera that follows the scene.

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The theme of reflection is represented literally through the many mirrors within the film used to summon the Candyman, but also in other reflective surfaces — elevators, windows, and vehicles which all reveal his presence. This notion is echoed in how characters navigate the filmic world and not just *what* we see of the city but, more importantly, *how* it is revealed to us as an audience. The many interstitial images that break up the story show rail and road intersections, tunnels and subways, bridges, walkways, corridors, and rivers — these liminal, *connective*, spaces are portrayed as malevolent—shown in darkness, absent of people and accompanied by a disconcerting score.

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They serve a similar purpose to the mirrors and walls that serve as portals connecting the real world of Anthony to its ‘wyrd’ (Rodgers, 2019) counterpart, occupied by Candyman. Marcus Harmes has noted that lingering shots of landscape can help to craft the elevated world required by rural horror (2013) and in Candyman these shots both call back to the strange viewing position of the opening titles, prompting the audience to consider the landscape as one of menace.

**Say His Name**

Writing about the original *Candyman* film, Mikel Koven notes that the very method of summoning the Candyman — repeating his name five times in a mirror — serves as an act of folkloric ostension. The summoning ritual itself is familiar to traditional horror, conducted by characters who face the consequences in each edition of the franchise, but in *Candyman* it is the recounting of the legend to other characters that presents the film as occupying a folk horror tradition — a passing on of knowledge (1999: 168). The significance of this recounting of the legend is important in understanding the wider connotation of the *Candyman* narrative, where the ritual of telling others is more important than the ritualistic summoning itself. This mechanism meets Simon Bronner’s description of the “folk” of “folk horror” as one of a recounted tradition, bound up in people and carried between groups through both intergroup, and intergenerational, storytelling (2017). Anthony inherits the story from Troy and then William, before recounting it through his art and the initial summoning with Brianna. These powerful aesthetic choices further accentuate the power of the ostension or, in DaCosta’s own words, to demonstrate how the “telling of the story, is as important as the story itself” (2021). Matilda Groves defines folklore “as the wisdom of the common people,” noting that it is not just the people encountering the uncanny that is important, but that these people are those who “tell the story. They are the story” (2017). In this reading of the folk horror genre Grove notes that this retelling through ostension serves to draw an audience further into the story through the purposes of a restricted narrative, where both protagonist and audience gain story information in the same moment. In *Candyman* there is no omniscient narrative - the audience learns of Sherman Fields’ murder and the connection of this event to a Candyman mythos that leads back much further into the past at the same time that the information is revealed to Anthony in its retelling by William. Groves suggests that this device – of ostension within restricted narrative storytelling - serves to prevent the othering of the characters within a wider narrative; by being told these stories in the same moment as Anthony the audience joins him to become the folk of this “folklore” (2017).

Adam Scovell describes one of the key criticisms of his “Folk Horror Chain” as the emphasis on rural landscape, presenting in a later essay a number of films situated in the urban environment which may otherwise satisfy his criteria – citing the London Underground setting of *Death Line* (1972) as a specific example of what he defines as “Urban Wyrd” (2015). He suggests that one of the key differences between the urban and rural landscape is how the former retracts to create its sense of isolation, while the latter expands. Nia DaCosta’s *Candyman* frames its spaces as enclosed or encroached by the city, And Anthony as increasingly closed in – in rooms, lifts, corridors. SLIDE

This urban landscape is often not viewed horizontally or from above, but from below, looking up to the sky through its floating camera.. DaCosta’ elegant aesthetic choices provide the necessary expanse within the city blocks, the impact accentuated through a film that expands the liminal spaces so central to its narrative – mirrored surfaces – to the connective tissue of the city; the transport network of roads, railroads, subways, and bridges. Folk horror reflects a lived experience and to exclude urban characters is to deny the understanding of the city as a landscape like any other, one that is capable of presenting a palimpsest of meanings, or memory, of hauntology and is perhaps one more powerful to the contemporary audiences that live within them.

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I challenge you. Look in a mirror. Say his name five times. “Candyman, Candyman, Candyman, Candyman…”