

Creative geography, creative connections: Candyman

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AUDIOVISUAL ESSAYS

Creative Geography, Creative Connections: *Candyman*

This audiovisual essay foregrounds creative connections and overlooked histories in the relationships between a number of films, their creators and the spaces and social contexts with which they interact. Making use of a concept map – which proved to be a valuable structuring device for developing non-linear, non-hierarchical approaches to film history in ‘Say, have you seen the Carioca?’ – the essay centres on a film, *Candyman* (Rose, 1992), and its ‘spiritual sequel’, *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021), the latter deliberately created in dialogue with the former and exploring related material from a different perspective. Our journey into the web of correspondences begins by foregrounding the mirrored qualities of this relationship, but later the map indicates further connections to explore, both within the artistic communities of the present and pursuing themes and structures into the past. As was the case with ‘Carioca’, the challenge is to find a form for the essay that is appropriately contained and complete while simultaneously indicating that more of these traces could be productively followed – and perhaps will be in the future. Mapping becomes an appropriate metaphor in another sense as the films, and the aspects of them foregrounded in this video essay, are concerned with urban space and the institutional racism of planning policy.



The essay embraces the fabric and materiality of the horror films it works with: a jump scare underlines a connection; some of the textures of the film and the phenomenological responses they might invite are important to the audience experience – all with a minimum of spoilers. Both versions of *Candyman* are unimaginable without their scores – if that is the right word for the soundscape created by Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe for the 2021 film – and the music provides plenty of scope for affective engagement with the material. Music is one factor in the rhythmic qualities of the material, both in its original context and in its recut form, and the rhythmic dimensions of editing, involvement and critical interjection are designed to play out dynamically for the viewer. Colleagues whose views I sought on the video prior to publication have commented on how detailed an argument is made while deploying a relatively small number of words. I am not against using words or voice over in an

audiovisual essay – see, for example, this [recent collaboration](#) with Douglas Pye, which makes voices both central to the experience and part of the subject of the essay – but in this case it was important to let the films speak for themselves, and to each other, rather than imposing a commentary over them. And a voiceover in my British middle class accent would not have been an appropriate or effective means of contributing to the discussion. Instead, the richness of the material takes us a long way, its organisation in the essay amplified by selective captions which draw on a close engagement with the footage and the places it represents. I hope the result is an essay that successfully ‘borrow[s] the aesthetic force of the moving images and sounds that constitute [the] object of study ... for [its] own critical work’ (Keathley 2020).

Ben Austen’s excellent book *High-Risers: Cabrini-Green and the fate of American Public Housing* proved invaluable for this project and provided a source of inspiration for the 2021



Candyman's director Nia DaCosta and production designer, Cara Brower. *High-Risers* is wonderfully well-researched, with many interviews with Cabrini-Green residents as well as perspectives on the wider sweep of Chicago – and, indeed, United States – housing policy. Austen captures both the positive community experiences of Cabrini-Green and the terrifying consequences of poor housing policy decisions. The book includes a good passage on the original *Candyman* which recognises that the film responds to the disjunction between the real lives lived in Cabrini-Green and the irrational fears attached to its reputation. (2018: 179–83)

High-Risers provided information which I was able to triangulate with other sources – not least comparing footage from the films with archive photographs and contemporary views from Apple Maps and Google Street View – to chart the historical and geographical richness of the films.¹ Churches proved a way of anchoring the past of different neighborhoods to the recent present – successfully identifying Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church, where Martin Luther King Jr preached in 1966, was one of a number of rewarding moments of enquiry. Establishing that the view from Helen's picture window really does include high-rises at

Cabrini-Green and appreciating, during the process of finding an appropriate form to emphasise this, that the tallest is also framed in a mirror on her wall was a moment of distinctively *videographic* research, a detail of the design I had not recognised in thirty years of watching the film. Then, moving to Los Angeles in the final stages of the essay, there was the excitement of realising just how proximate the houses of McQueen and McDaniel were, not to mention the shock of discovering how closely they sit to the encroaching freeway. The complexity of the films' relationships to the real spaces in which they are set is borne out by these connections to place, and matters of horror and fantasy map onto pressing real world concerns.

With these thoughts in mind, I would also recommend the fascinating article by Brower, '*Candyman: The Art of Horror*', which covers a number of valuable topics, and comments on the importance of *High-Risers* for her and DaCosta. The article describes how Brower advocated to use the remaining Row Houses for the new film, and made the case to use the Stranger's Home Church (formerly the site of Walker's mural) as a location (including interiors!). She also discusses how DaCosta had determined 'from the beginning' on setting Finley's home in Marina City, and the mixture of location

dressing and set construction that were involved in achieving this. There is also a revealing section on how she and other colleagues – notably curator Hamza Walker – worked with contemporary Chicago artists on the film, providing another example of the way the film achieves what my colleague Lúcia Nagib (2020) calls 'passages to the real'. For those interested, this website (<https://www.candymanmovie.com/impact/>) provides more information about the artists whose work features in *Candyman* (2021), making available some of the materials which also feature in the DVD extras, including features on the score, a roundtable on Black Horror chaired by Colman Domingo, and an educational companion guide created with the Langston League.

Candyman (1992) begins, and this essay begins and ends, with an aerial view of an eight-lane urban road – the Dwight D. Eisenhower Expressway. This isn't a route which you would be likely to take to travel to Cabrini-Green from the Loop, but it is another example of a major infrastructure project driven through a minority neighborhood. In 1950 the Near West Side of Chicago was almost 40% African American, and residents of Greektown and Little Italy were also displaced by the construction of the road (Loerzel, no date). The University of Illinois Chicago's campus – including the now demolished Circle Forum, which features in both film and essay – was similarly created at the expense of these neighborhoods.

A final note in relation to an aspect of the 2021 film that features prominently in the essay: scholars of cultural anthropology and urban studies Jesse Mumm and Carolina Sternberg's recent article 'Mapping Racial Capital: Gentrification, Race and Value in Three Chicago Neighborhoods' provides a detailed engagement with the dynamics of home improvement, house prices and the perceived ethnicity. They conclude:

In gentrifying neighborhoods of color in Chicago, the presence of white residents amid moments of increased white discourse on gentrification affect property value regardless of the built environment changes associated with material improvement. Conversely, and applicable to the three neighborhoods we have examined, material improvements in majority Black and Latino blocks are not equally reflected in the large gains in property value

compared to blocks with more presence of white population. [...] In sum, gentrification – as a social idea that affects property value – depends less on the sheer amount of properties upgraded as it does on the social value ascribed to the upgraders. That value rests today inordinately on the social construction of race. (2022: 31)

Though Cabrini-Green is not one of the neighborhoods studied, Mumm and Sternberg's conclusions provide plenty of support for Anthony's account of the gentrification process in his debate with Finley in Marina City.

Watch the audiovisual essay here:

<https://vimeo.com/746837405>

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¹ The use of mapping and imaging technologies for understanding other media is itself a developing Digital Humanities method. I used Street View, behind the scenes, in making 'Carioca', as discussed and illustrated in [this article](#). Sustained uses of the methodology include Booth Wilson's video essay 'Landscape in Paradigms: Ford's Monument Valley' or, in another direction, the extraordinary work of [Forensic Architecture](#).