

“The suffering black male body and the threatened white female body”: ambiguous bodies in Candyman

Article

Published Version

Donaldson, L. F. (2011) “The suffering black male body and the threatened white female body”: ambiguous bodies in Candyman. *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* (9). ISSN 2009-0374 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/36210/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher’s version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <http://irishgothic horrorjournal.homestead.com/Candyman.html>

Publisher: *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

'The suffering black male body and the threatened white female body': ambiguous bodies in Candyman

Lucy Fife Donaldson

Race is not a subject often directly encountered in the horror film, despite the highly charged conflict of black and white constituting a central oppositionary structure in American culture and in its cinema. That this conflict is dramatised in specifically physical terms, as in the threat of miscegenation that permeates the dramatic chase scenes of D. W. Griffith's films, resonates with the emphasis on the body's importance for horror's excesses, so that opposition of black and white bears a suggestive relationship to the poles of monster and victim.(1) Linda Williams, writing on race and melodrama, suggests that there are two key icons which articulate the moral dilemma of race for America: 'the suffering black male body and the threatened white female body'. (2) Williams' articulation of these embodiments as entwined, presents a correspondence between aspects of black and white experience (as well as between male and female) which destabilises the more common impulse to see race as opposed, polarised as the language around black and white suggests.

Candyman (Bernard Rose, 1992) marks the introduction of an African-American monster to the horror mainstream. As well as combining a threatening physical presence and gruesome method of attack, Candyman (Tony Todd) seemingly offers an embodiment of divided racial stereotypes based on fears of miscegenation through his attention to the film's blonde heroine Helen (Virginia Madsen). Elspeth Kydd maintains that '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'.(3) Although Kydd suggests that ambiguity is created in the film's treatment of racial stereotyping, 'the excess of these representations point to both the contradictions and the attractions that allow these stereotypes to perpetuate', the general tenor of her argument is to see the film as perpetuating the usual oppositions of race and gender.(4) I would like to suggest that the apparent duality of gender, race and character types in the film are challenged by much more complex strategies of embodiment and representation. In particular, the film places emphasis on the connectedness of Candyman and Helen, of monster and victim, who are both ambiguously embodied, becoming more like doubles than clearly defined binary figures.(5) Exploring the roles of monster and victim as experienced through the body points to the way physicality is being used and presented, particularly through performance, to offer further layers of complexity that undermine straightforward binaries of black/white or male/female. From this basis, the article will consider how the relationship between violence and the body affects the presentation of horror's central roles of victim and monster.

Prefacing his discussion of the embodiment of whiteness, Richard Dyer observes that 'to represent people is to represent bodies'.(6) Through attention to the physical – the details of the body in movement and expression, as well as its placement within the visual style of the film - I intend to explore how the seemingly fixed roles of monster and victim are in fact more fluid than first apparent, and that these can co-exist in the same body. Candyman's physicality and the way it is presented foregrounds the oscillations between violence and suffering, the relationship between the body and the violence inflicted on and by it, ambiguities which are also found in Helen's development, thus enhancing the film's striking preoccupation with the shifting parallels between monster and victim.

Candyman is centred on the investigations of two research students writing a joint thesis on urban legends: Helen, who is white, and Bernadette (Kasi Lemmons), who is a light skinned African-American or possibly of mixed race. Helen is introduced to the Candyman legend by a white middle-class undergraduate at the University of Chicago, who places him in a suburban setting killing white middle-class teenagers who invoke his presence in the mirror, and then by a couple of African-American cleaners at the university who claim he killed Ruthie-Jean, another African-American woman, in the projects. The tonal and generic contrasts between the stories, as well as the three told later in the film, are central to building ambiguity about the monster before we see him.(7) They also efficiently dramatise a divide between race and class that pervades the film, setting up a striking play of visibility/invisibility between white and black communities as well as increasing the sense of anxiety and intrusion when they cross. Making such a point, however does not deny that the film employs an oppositional structure and certain types within certain social contexts that go with it: smug white male academics; aggressive black males in gangs; there are no white inhabitants of Cabrini Green, just as there are no black inhabitants of Helen's condominium.

I have explicitly noted the racial backgrounds of the characters in order to start to foreground the fundamental difference in perspectives between the white world of middle-class academia, unconcerned with the everyday reality of its research subjects and the African-American underclass, inhabiting a violent and emphatically real ghetto. Significantly, the racial divisions which permeate the structure of the fictional world are entirely an invention of Bernard Rose's adaptation of Clive Barker's short story *The Forbidden*, on which the film is based. Rose brings race to the forefront by transposing the action from Liverpool to Chicago, a city which became an important urban settlement for African-Americans during the first half of the 20th Century, and brings with it a complex history of racial tension. This interest in racial dynamics is foregrounded by his use of real-life housing project, Cabrini Green, then an infamous Chicago landmark dominated by violence, drug gangs and terrible conditions. The choice of Cabrini Green as site of Ruthie Jean's death and therefore a key location in the film (some scenes were actually shot there) thus immediately situates the narrative in the context of racially polarised worlds – sheltered white middle-class academia set against the poverty and violence of the inner-city African-American experience – which is further dramatised by the (fictional) architectural doubling of Helen and Ruthie Jean's apartments.

By the time Helen and Bernadette reach Cabrini Green a great deal of tension has accumulated around the prospect of their intrusion into a community very different from the domestic and academic spaces so far occupied, and furthermore between their investigation and the realities of the environment they find themselves in. The importance of the social context in this respect is emphasised by John Gibbs who recognises that '[c]onsistent with this emphasis on the social reality of the projects, the film's shocks at this stage are organised around the dynamic created by a pair of middle-class women intruding into a community that is not their own'. (8) The most immediate threat is not from a supernatural source, but rather from neighbourhood gangs, who Helen already believes are using the Candyman myth to control the building. Thus, the way race and racial divides are represented by the film is specifically important to the construction of a monster who is afforded invisibility by the black community's fear of him and is then made visible again by the intrusion of a white woman.(9)

Andrew Tudor sees horror as based on a fundamentally oppositional framework:

[t]he structure of oppositions serves as a more precise formulation to the kinds of narrative space in which this order – disorder – order sequence is played out. Typically, a horror movie will exploit the tensions implicit in a particular contrast, confronting known with unknown.(10)

This could be a suggestive way to look at the genre, and one that keys into the oppositions – both visual and in our experience of each fictional world – drawn on by Candyman's narrative and visual strategies. Nevertheless, it also establishes narrow confines, confirmed in Tudor's proposal that there are just three types of horror narrative (knowledge, invasion, metamorphosis) and three types of characters (victims, monsters and experts). (11) He goes on to assert that, '[i]t is rare to find a horror movie that singles out individual protagonists for the kind of sustained characterising treatment routinely found in other more 'serious' forms'.(12) The opening of Candyman, in which Helen is introduced to the Candyman legend by an undergraduate she is interviewing for her research into urban legends, seems to suggest that it is explicitly involved in singling out an individual protagonist. The camera's close relationship to Virginia Madsen secures her centrality in the stylistic strategies of the film, while attention to the details of her performance offers characterisation designed to involve the viewer, not only with the action but with what is going on around it.

Rather than upholding the separateness of horror characters as Tudor presents them, the rest of the film's narrative merges the roles of expert and victim, as Helen's investigations draws her into the dangerous spaces of Cabrini Green and she is attacked by gang members, and then placed into the positions of victim and perpetrator by Candyman himself. Indeed, engagement with Helen is much more complicated than as if she was a plain victim, or even a straightforward heroine. Her

investigations encourage sympathy, anxiety and elements of critical distance. Although she central to the majority of scenes and thus to our experience of the film, and we might feel anxiety for her as she moves through the dangerous spaces of Cabrini Green, Helen's behaviour also reveals arrogance and ambition. Gibbs proposes that Helen's manner and ways of seeing are indicative of her academic department, learnt behaviour from those she wishes to supersede: her egotistical husband, Trevor (Xander Berkeley), who is conducting an affair with a student, and the patronising Professor Purcell (Michael Culkin), who smugly informs Helen and Bernadette of his expertise on "the hook man".(13) Helen's overconfident attitude is qualified, and perhaps tempered, by the degree of their condescension, and her status as postgraduate student, and therefore not yet a full-blown academic, is significant to this.

Central to the ambiguities in the construction of Helen's character is the way the film makes us aware that her investigations focus on the housing projects solely as a source of data, rather than the realities of living in the space. During the trip to Cabrini Green Helen and Bernadette encounter a graffitied slogan 'Sweets to the Sweet' painted across the side of an apartment, a moment in which the placement of the camera and the editing – apart from the camera's pan across the graffiti – places emphasis on Madsen and Lemmons looking rather than on the details of the space. Attention to Madsen's performance further demonstrates that her response is distanced from the reality of the space. The potency of the graffiti as material for her research eclipses the inherent danger of their surroundings: Helen relaxes into her purpose as investigator, Madsen confidently positioning her body to take a photograph, the gesture assertively investigative. At this the film reminds us of the dangers of looking, or more precisely the dangers of looking with an exclusively investigative gaze. The shock of the door to the apartment opening affects both women physically, as previously controlled postures are disrupted and replaced with surprise and rapid movement. Through this scare – which shocks us in our complicity with their looking – they are, in effect, warned to remember their fearfulness. As Gibbs observes, Helen's response to the graffitied slogan, as well as other details of expression and appearance (that she keeps her gloves on while introducing herself to Anne-Marie, an inhabitant of Cabrini Green), and the contrast of Bernadette's more cautious approach, draw 'attention to some of the limitations of Helen's way of conducting herself'.(14)

The role of the female investigator in the horror film has been explored by several writers, including Linda Williams who picks up on investigation and its place in the relationship between victim and monster, arguing that an investigating gaze is punished explicitly through this connection: 'the woman's look of horror paralyzes her in such a way that distance is overcome; the monster or the freak's own spectacular appearance holds her originally active, curious look in a trance-like passivity that allows him to master her through her look'.(15) Rhona Berenstein similarly aligns the act of looking with persecution or victimisation, as she suggests that: 'the cropped image of a woman gazing at an unseen threat has the kind of cultural and marketing clout that streamlines analysis and affirms the simplicity of visual symbols'.(16) Mary Ann Doane insists that '[t]he woman's exercise of an investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimisation. The place of her specularisation is transformed into the locus of a process of seeing designed to unveil an aggression

against itself'.(17) Through such approaches, investigating women are understood as victims, persecuted for demonstrating agency.

That the execution of investigation places the female body not as spectacle, but rather active presence, pursuing and progressing the narrative is frequently ignored, as is the engagement and attitude offered by the look. Charlene Bunnell argues that the journey (whether psychological, physical or both) is a stock gothic device for revealing themes and enhancing characterisation, thus underlining the mode's emphasis on affect and experience rather than action.(18) Indeed, investigation has a long history in the gothic narrative, typically being undertaken by female characters who must move through dangerous spaces in order to make discoveries, actively solving narrative mysteries in the process. Ellen Moer suggests that '[a]s early as the 1790s, Ann Radcliffe firmly set the Gothic in one of the ways it would go on ever after: a novel in which the central figure is a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine'.(19) Questions of agency and victimisation in relation to horror films are subject to debate by various writers, most prominently in Carol J. Clover's discussion of the 'Final Girl' figure of the slasher film, who she suggests achieves agency, but at the cost of her femininity, which connects her to the ambiguously gendered killer and thus also draws a connection between monster and victim. However, more problematically Clover suggests that her 'unfemininity is signalled clearly by her exercise of the "active investigating gaze"'.(20) Rather than limiting female investigators to either agency or victimisation, or viewing the latter as the inevitable result of the former, Moer's writing usefully embraces the possibility of a duality that more forcefully conjures the complexities of response to the execution of investigation. The roles of monster and victim as embodied by Candyman and Helen presents opportunity to understand a similar simultaneity between them, one that seeks to more fully evoke the experience of watching and allows for a complexity of response.

Although Candyman is glimpsed at the start of the film and his legend discussed by several different characters, the initial meeting between him and Helen is our first experience of his physical presence. Significantly, the scene occurs after Helen has identified the gang member who attacked her, claiming to be Candyman. At this point in the narrative, it seems that she has resolved the material reality of the legend, by revealing that the drug gangs have been playing on fear of Candyman to keep the community quiet. Shortly after, Bernadette gives Helen 35mm slides retrieved from the attack and informs her of a publisher's interest in their research. The sequence which follows dramatises Candyman's introduction to Helen as both conversational and disruptive, the materially divergent strategies around camera placement, editing and performance support and dissemble boundaries of race, class, gender and space that the film has been building up to prior to this point.(21)

As Madsen is making her way through the university car park, looking excitedly at the slides, the camera tracks beside her in a medium shot. This is then interrupted with a cut to a close-up of Tony Todd's feet, which begin to move towards the camera. The film returns to Madsen who puts away the slides, shaking her head excitedly as though inwardly astonished and delighted at their

existence, and reaches for her car keys, the camera panning right as she turns towards the trunk of her parked car. The film cuts back to Todd's feet, as he continues towards the camera. Cutting back to Madsen – now in a medium shot – a deep male voice intones “Helen” and she stops closing the trunk, her smile dropping slightly, and turns around, looking about the car park, then frowning a little and calling out “Yes?”. The voice calls her again, and as Madsen turns away the camera does so too, placing her on the right, with Todd, now still, in the far distance on the left hand side of the frame. Madsen calls out “Who is that?” and the film cuts to a long shot of Todd as he raises his head. The film returns to Madsen from the front as she strains to look off-screen, tilting her head and softly repeating the question. The film then cuts between Todd who repeats her name, and the previous shot of Madsen, who turns to the car as he continues “I came for you”. Here a shot of the graffitied head and mouth that Helen encountered beyond Ruthie Jean's apartment momentarily interrupts the cutting between Todd and Madsen. Madsen stumbles against the back of the car, facing away from the camera. Another quick flash of the graffitied portrait appears and Madsen leans on the car, fumbling with her sunglasses. The insert is repeated once more and Madsen drops her glasses and grasps at the car, turning round again to face Todd, her face exposed. The film cuts back to Todd, who has remained exactly as he was, before returning to a close-up of Madsen's face as she blinks and struggles to focus. A rapid cut-away, to the close-up of her face previously seen on her second visit to Cabrini Green as she was taking photos, interrupts this shot twice, and when the film returns to Madsen the second time her pupils are dilated and her gaze unfocused. The cut-away is repeated once more, and when the film returns to Helen in the car park she asks “Do I know you?”, her voice slow and without expression. At this point Todd starts moving towards the camera, the film setting up a series of reverse field cuts that contrast his determined movement towards her and Madsen's transfixed and unmoving expression.

Although Helen addresses Candyman boldly at first, Madsen holding herself assertively as she shouts across the car-park without removing her sunglasses, the stylistic strategies concerning Candyman's appearance are significantly disruptive: his presence interrupts Helen's progress back to her car, the tracking shot which follows her, the silence of the soundtrack and ultimately the narrative's trajectory. Candyman's manifestation at this stage intervenes in the process of rationalisation, allowing the supernatural, more fragmentary and perhaps less coherent narrative experience to take over. The disembodiment of his call adds to his supernatural quality as much as his otherworldly deep tone. That his appearance coincides with the moment when everything seems to be resolved, which moreover validates her blinkered arrogance, operates as a considerable caution to Helen's rationalised certainty and her ambitions.

Helen's fearless, even curious reaction informs our own, although the memory of the recent attack on her and her isolation in this moment certainly promotes anxiety on her behalf. The presentation of Todd actively asserts the materiality of Candyman's presence over Helen, the combination of body and voice rendering him more powerful. At this point in the sequence the entirety of his body is revealed alone in the frame, Todd's distance from the camera effectively obscuring the detail of his physicality or expression, keeping us and Helen separate from any insight into his reactions or other elements of his inner life. This withholding downplays his human qualities: his presence is

emphatically unknown and unknowable as a result. His face remains in darkness so that the intentions behind his words are still manifested as ominous, maintaining the threatening nature of his progression. Without any detailed access, his body – through his almost militaristic posture with hands held behind his back, and emphasised by the line created by his coat – is singularly commanding and powerful: he doesn't need to come to her or demonstrate violence to achieve disruption.

Rather than attack Helen physically, Candyman interrupts her cognitive processes, as represented by the cuts to the graffitied mural of his face and then to her looking at it. Candyman's disruption is structured as part of Helen's visual experience, placed between shots of Madsen stumbling and blinking, which disables Helen's physical composure, thus signalling the authenticity of Candyman's identity, as well as his supernatural status. He radically alters her physicality in order to make her vulnerable: Madsen's body changes from confident and relaxed to panicked and frail as she stumbles and falls. Towards the end of the sequence, the close-ups of Madsen's face reveal that Helen is hypnotised by Candyman's presence. Her expression becomes passive and unfocused, accentuated by softened lighting which highlights her eyes, which become fixed in a trance-like stare.(22) The treatment of their interaction thus plays with a dislocation of mind and body, which is followed up by the blackouts she suffers in his presence and her apparent mental breakdown. The link here between looking and punishment would seem to directly support Linda Williams' argument that an investigating gaze is punished explicitly through the connection between the woman and the monster whose appearance 'holds her originally active, curious look in a trance-like passivity that allows him to master her through her look'.(23)

This isn't the only way to experience the moment, however. To articulate their exchange as punishment ignores the complexities of engagement built into the narrative, the combination of anxiety for Helen and critical distance from her places the moment much more ambiguously. Although the moving camera offers alignment with Helen's movement, her sunglasses, in particular, cut us off from the detail of her expression and thus the possibility of interiority, which places us at an emotional distance from her. The affect of Helen's transformation is complicated by her previous agency, which is still an important consideration even now, as she is specifically not just a helpless victim.

Moreover, Madsen does not simply portray Helen in the terms given to her by writers such as kydd who asserts that 'Helen's femininity is highlighted, as it also highlights her cultured, frail, "pure" whiteness'.(24) Rather, I would seek to emphasise that Madsen's performance of capability combines mind and body and is, although unequivocally that of a middle-class white woman, not particularly frail or feminised and is indicative of her specific cultural positioning. In the context of the film's depiction of an emphatic social and racial divide, Helen's whiteness links her to the academic world – represented as operating with a limited perspective, concerned with research and hierarchy, oblivious to experience of the everyday as anything other than as potential subject matter – and in doing so her own ambition and transgressive desires to outdo her (male) superiors as well

as the limitations of her perspective, both in cultural and literal terms. As Richard Dyer emphasises in his writing on whiteness, black and white is not always organised down binary lines.(25)

In consideration of the potential for opposition contained within representations of race it is pertinent to attend to what is brought up in such a confrontation between white woman and black man, particularly in thinking through the connective implications of the editing decisions and the place of this within a horror narrative. Is this scene, and the film as a whole, merely trading on conservative notions of miscegenation, as some commentators have been quick to claim, or is there something else to be fleshed out? Laid out flatly, the contents of *Candyman*'s narrative suggest a certain amount of conservatism, perhaps placing schematic conflicts based on oppositions (racial/gendered/socio-economic) structured to articulate white fears and expressive of the fears of miscegenation that have informed American cinema since its depiction in D.W. Griffiths' *The Birth of a Nation* (and before).

The connection between white femininity and vulnerability is an enduring image in American culture. Richard Dyer's reflections on movie lighting, and more specifically the angelically glowing white woman and aspirational quality of whiteness, is most revealing in contextualising this tendency in American history through its representation on film: '[t]he white woman as angel was...both the symbol of white virtuousness and the last word in the claim that what made whites special as a race was their non-physical, spiritual, indeed ethereal qualities'.(26) Fears about the excessive physicality of black men draw from deep-seated prejudices, which compliment this idealisation of white femininity: the iconography of what Donald Bogle terms 'the brutal black buck', a violent archetype that 'played on the myth of the Negro's high-powered sexuality, then articulated the great white fear that every black man longs for a white woman ... the ultimate in female desirability, herself a symbol of white pride, power, and beauty'.(27) The cultural power invested in material representations of white, and black, and evocative horror presumed at the meeting of Helen and *Candyman* can be forcefully indicated in the way Lillian Gish came to be the paradigmatic vulnerable white victim of D.W. Griffith's melodramas exactly because her fair skin and hair set her visually against the images of non-white men who threatened her innocence.(28) That *Candyman* is organised around such concerns is certainly a perspective held by Judith Halberstam, among others, who states that 'no amount of elaborate framing ... can prevent [the film] from confirming racist assumptions about black male aggression towards white female bodies. Monstrosity, in this tired narrative ... remains anchored by the weight of racist narratives'.(29) I would suggest that the way physicality is used and presented draws on contrasting archetypes that complicate this evocation, as with the combinations of heroine and victim embodied by Helen, thus revealing ways in which seemingly tired narrative structures can be developed. Halberstam's claim in particular doesn't account for the ways in which the film foregrounds the fundamental differences in perspectives between the white world of middle-class academia, as located in lecture theatres, condos and nice restaurants and the attitudes that go with these spaces, and the African-American underclass, which is tied explicitly to Cabrini Green.

After Candyman has transfixed Helen in the car park, a tear visibly rolling down her cheek, the film starts to reveal the detail of Candyman's embodiment through a series of shots that bring us closer to Todd, and Madsen as she is entranced. From here on Todd's face is visible, the lighting allowing us to see his face clearly for the first time. Still moving forwards, though now in a medium shot, Todd perceptibly breathes in and then out, the film then cutting to a close-up of his hooked hand, the camera moving with it as Todd lifts his arm in a flourish, inviting her to "Be my victim". The film cuts to a closer shot of Madsen, her mouth now slightly open, her hypnotised gaze held in the same way as before, the camera moving gently towards her. The film cuts to a close-up of Todd as he repeats "Be my victim", still moving forwards, the camera tracking backwards to maintain its framing of him. The film returns to a close-up of Madsen's eyes, which, as Todd continues his speech off-screen, roll upwards, her eyelids flickering as her head sways slightly.

There are ways in which this part of the scene, and the earlier elements previously discussed, seem to present Candyman within the terms of his monstrosity, his excessive physical presence emphasising the intimidating nature of his corporeality and supernatural qualities. Such characteristics are made prominent through the introduction of Todd's performance, his body uncertain and withheld from us at first, the relationship between camera and performer focusing on his supernatural qualities and then later his physical power. Having successfully hypnotised Helen, Candyman calmly breathes in and out deeply, the hint of a smile on Todd's face, before the close-up of his face gives way to a close-up of his hooked hand. The details of Todd's expression in this introduction give the impression that he is experiencing a certain amount of enjoyment in the embodiment of this monstrosity, as though savouring his return to flesh.⁽³⁰⁾ This is then compounded by the expressive gesture he makes with his arms, which retains the elegance of his body and operates as a rather theatrical invitation to her, as well as an expression of his purpose in brandishing the hook. There is no getting away from his frightening physicality; his right arm, with its still bleeding stump and large vicious hook, fills the frame, the camera following its movement closely so that we cannot escape from its terrible appearance and the implications it carries. In this manner Candyman's body offers an insight into the violence he will inflict. The stories related about him during the film all dwell on the brutality of his monstrosity and the way his body is shown here foregrounds these concerns, showing the hooked hand in close-up, detached from the more appealing and less threatening aspects of his body.

Yet the different manifest elements of his character complicate our engagement with him. In this moment, and throughout the film, Candyman is revealed to be sophisticated as well as barbaric. The more human and cultured elements of his presence are shown most prominently through the combination of his movement and costuming. The lack of violence in his movement on this occasion, as well as the elegance of his body – elaborated by the flourish of his hook – counters the violent intensity of his determination. When he is finally placed in a close-up the handsomeness of Todd's features is immediately apparent: he doesn't look like a monster, his face unmarked and his expression intense. He appears dignified, his head held high and posture upright, his movements unhurried and purposeful. His voice, while still unnaturally deep, gradually softens and becomes seductive, his language refined. The details of his costume, which include a white cravat and fur-

trimmed coat, accentuate the distinguished aura his quality of movement and physicality presents, making him appear more like a dandy than a monster. Derived from minstrel songs and sketches that sought to disparage the perceived pretensions of black northerners, the idea of the black dandy – a caricature satirising blacks attempting to live like whites – was, according to Robert C. Toll, founded in white anxiety over black class mobility.(31) These concerns key directly into his narrative history, originally an artistic and educated son of a slave, the replacement of his paintbrush with a hook a poignant consideration. Through such details, which evoke his historical context, he offers a stark contrast to the African-American working-class as depicted in the film so far.

Attention to physicality demonstrates that the film is engaged in a complex and self-conscious relationship to representational stereotypes which evoke the concerns of race and class, resulting in a less transparent depiction of Candyman as man and monster. Candyman's frightening physicality – his right arm with its still bloody stump and large vicious hook– offers an insight into the violence he will inflict, promising brutality and making us frightened for Helen's own vulnerable body, evoking both sympathy and fear. However, it also bears the markings of violence done to him, the exploitation of his body drawn out further by a combination of disregard for, and anxiety of, his physical form by his attackers. The act of torture represents a castration in its historical context, which then instigates the taking of revenge and significantly is the sight of his monstrous embodiment, the source of our terror. His physicality and the way it is presented foregrounds violence and suffering, he is materially both monster and victim.

To take the discussion of race and gender further, the way in which Helen and Candyman's meeting is constructed, through their corporeal presence and our access to their bodies, is suggestive of a reciprocal relationship, one that has interconnections, rather than oppositions. From examining strategies around the introduction of Candyman in this moment, we can start to see the ways that his embodiment, which bears the markings of his torture, corresponds to the key icon of the suffering black male body. Moreover, the connectedness of Todd and Madsen's placement goes some way to offering an intimate connection with, or even doubling of the threatened white female. The bulk of his frame in combination with sophisticated attire, as well as Todd's rhetorical flourishes, connect him to the romantic gothic hero, as recognised by Brigid Cherry: '[h]e is the tall, dark, handsome foreigner of feminine horror, but here the mysterious European aristocrat of Dracula (and the Gothic in general) is transformed into the tragic figure of the oppressed African-American male'.(32) Helen's own oscillations between heroine, victim and later monster, equally confound the rigidity of the vulnerable white female. Blackness, like whiteness, is not presented simplistically: both are framed as slave and victim, both exploited by the capitalist structures of white patriarchy and involved in transgressing such boundaries. So, while there is an undeniable erotic charge to their interaction, to characterise this as merely dramatising and perpetuating fears of miscegenation is to ignore the ways in which Candyman and Helen are visually, physically and ideologically linked, rather than opposed.(33) They are tied together further by the narrative, which establishes a historical connection between the characters; as the torture inflicted on Candyman was motivated by his relationship with an aristocratic white woman, and his pursuit of Helen becomes a kind of recreation

and dissembling of the original act of transgression and oppression, which significantly doesn't end with the creation of a couple.

Helen's final appearance in the film more fully embraces the doubling motif as the sequence repeats the complexities bound up in Candyman's simultaneous embodiment of victim and monster, in the appearance and presentation of Madsen's body. Moreover, that it is Candyman's relationship with Helen which transforms her from capable and threatened investigator to victim and eventually monster: destabilising Helen's certitudes and narrative coherence, more fully embeds their connectedness. After her death in the bonfire which also kills Candyman, Helen materialises for her husband Trevor in the bathroom mirror, her head burnt, her skin extremely white, and dressed in her white burial outfit. Her altered, and apparently supernatural, presence is accompanied by a strobe light effect that sporadically lights up the dark bathroom. Madsen appears in a close-up, now in the same space as Xander Berkeley, the strobe making her skin even whiter, her burnt head clearly visible and her features dramatically pronounced by their contrast with her whitened skin. The film cuts to a close-up of her hand grasping a metal hook, before cutting again to a close up of Berkeley's face as he reacts to her hook being rammed into his body.(34)

This final scene continues the depiction of Helen as determined and physically capable, full of life even in death, directly confounding the values Dyer articulates in his suggestion that 'whiteness qua whiteness ... is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death'.(35) Strikingly, the spatial presentation of Madsen's performance offers a certain amount of alignment with Helen, inviting an intricate engagement with her based on tensions between anxiety, sympathy and distance in death as in life. This appearance complicates the representation of her body, continuing her ambiguous construction much like Candyman himself: both monstrous and victimised, dead and alive, her body lifeless but active and capable. Indeed, that certain elements of the scene echo strategies of the stylistic assembly of Candyman – the view of Helen in the mirror alongside her victim, the close-up of her hand/hook, her expression of pleasure – marks the likeness as part of the way Madsen's performance is placed.

The doubling of Helen and Candyman further problematises fixed interpretations of racial relationships, as well as the narrative roles of victim and monster, presenting them as changing and multifaceted, even interchangeable. An important aspect of the effect of the ambiguities created between the apparent poles of monster and victim is this creation of a bond between them that comes to guide the course of the narrative. Moreover, because the relationship between Helen and Candyman is articulated through the material details of the performers' bodies and the ways in which they are staged for the camera, it allows their connectedness to inform our experience of the film beyond the narrative itself, thus becoming its central dynamic. The expression of gothic motifs through performance – the significance of the body in creating a doubling, and in its enactment of certain repetitive situations such as Helen's journeys into the derelict spaces of Cabrini Green – support the gothic mode as not involved in articulations of rigidity, but rather ambiguity. The blurring, or doubling, of victim and monster is a crucial part of dramatising this ambivalence, and

one repeated in other visual strategies of the film's mise-en-scène, such as the identical layout of Ruthie-Jean and Helen's apartments, the repeated motifs of eyes, mirrors and death by fire.

In his account of *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943) Robin Wood suggests that the superiority of the film is located in 'the poetic resonances, the suggestive ambiguities and uncertainties' rather than its narrative.(36) The structure of *Candyman* follows a similar emphasis on ambiguity and uncertainty. The two films, coming from very different eras in filmmaking, make for a suggestive comparison for precisely the reason that they appear to set out a range of structural oppositions – black/white, male/female, human/inhuman, life/death, reality/the supernatural – then proceed to destabilise the divisions between them.(37) The ambiguous embodiments of victim and monster in *Candyman*, its main characters at once capable and vulnerable, victimised and threatening, key directly into these oppositions.

Dana B. Polan suggests that such ambiguity is specific to the post-studio era horror film:

part of the significance of recent horror films lies in the way they reflect or problematise [the] simple moral binary opposition to suggest horror is not something from out there, something strange, marginal, ex-centric, the mark of a force from elsewhere, the in-human. With an unrelenting insistence, horror films now suggest that the horror is not merely among us, but rather part of us, caused by us. [my italics] (38)

While this is a revealing comment in relation to *Candyman*, its correspondence to *I Walked with a Zombie* (amongst others, for example *White Zombie* [Victor Heplerin, 1927]) suggest that there are many ways that this is not limited to recent horror. The connecting dynamic between threat (them) and threatened (us), can be seen across the history of horror supplying textual weight to Robin Wood's thesis of horror's articulation of the 'return of the repressed'.(39) As he suggests, there is a clear relationship between the cause of the threat and its constitution, which permeates each film from its material details, such as the suggestive comparisons between bodies both threatening and threatened, and further to much wider cultural concerns of how each is positioned in relation to questions of colonialism. Through this latter context, the weight of 'caused by us' is highly significant to questions of white anxiety and monstrosity.

Investigating the embodiments of monster and victim offers an opportunity to engage with the representation of the body and the corporeality of performance, within a horror specific framework. Attention to engagement with them directs consideration of the body, and issues of race and gender; to be responsive to their material articulation, followed by cultural/ideological articulation (rather than the other way round). Detailed attention to embodiment thus underlines the hypothesis that oppositions are fleshed out and dramatised by bodies, appreciably shaping our

experience of them beyond binaries of race and gender, and thus enriching understandings of genre. In addressing these dynamics in relation to *Candyman*, I aim to have demonstrated that commitment to a detailed approach offers an intricate and rewarding critical interaction, one that evokes the experience of watching and the complexity of our engagement with these figures that substantially blur the boundaries of monster and victim.

1. Such examples of Griffith's concern with the threat of miscegenation includes: *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance* (1916) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919).
2. Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), xiv.
3. Elspeth Kydd, 'Guess Who Else is Coming to Dinner: Racial/Sexual Hysteria in *Candyman*', *Cineaction*, 36 (1995), 63.
4. *Ibid*, 72.
5. The double (doppelgänger, shadow figure, mirrored reflection) is a device 'which allow[s] a character to perceive more clearly and personally both worlds and both sides of his or her self'. Charlene Bunnell, 'The Gothic: A Literary Genre's Transition to Film' in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1984), 83.
6. Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 14.
7. The other people who recount the legend are: the white professor Purcell (Michael Cullin) who tells the history of *Candyman* over dinner; Anne-Marie (Vanessa Williams), a young African-American woman who lives in Cabrini Green and repeats the cleaners' version of events; and Jake (DeJuan Guy), an African-American boy who Helen meets on her second visit to Cabrini Green, and repeats a different but still supernatural story.
8. John Gibbs, 'What killed Ruthie Jean?: Architectural design in *Candyman* (1992)' in *Close-Up 01: Filmmakers' Choices/The Pop Song in Film/Reading Buffy*, eds John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 72.
9. Although the focus of my discussion is on Helen and *Candyman*, it is worth mentioning that Bernadette's place within the film's representation of race, as a middle class African-American woman, is also made ambiguous. While there are some aspects of Bernadette's behaviour that in combination with her race situate her as bound by racial divides (potentially troubling in this context is her deference to white academia, and desire to cause no trouble), it is significant that Lemmons' performance doesn't fit such a narrow conception of her character. Rather she foregrounds Bernadette's pragmatism, which corresponds to the way in which she moves more cautiously through both white and black environments – her ability to see and understand the implications of both sides – as the source of her unease.

10. Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1987), 82.
11. *Ibid*, 81-130.
12. *Ibid*, 112.
13. Gibbs, 74.
14. *Ibid*, 73.
15. Linda Williams, 'When the Woman Looks' in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds Mary Anne Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 86.
16. Rhona Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies. Gender, Sexuality and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1.
17. Mary Anne Doane, 'The Woman's Film: Possession and Address' in *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp & Linda Williams (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1984), 72.
18. Bunnell, 79-100.
19. Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (London: W. H. Allen, 1977), 91.
20. Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 48.
21. See Gibbs for a more extensive elaboration of the boundaries built into the stylistic strategies of the film. Gibbs, 69-82.
22. The appearance of her eyes echoes the moment when – having returned to Cabrini-Green alone – she took more photographs in the space behind Ruthie Jean's apartment.
23. Williams (1984), 86.
24. kydd, 71.
25. Richard Dyer, 'White' in *Screen*, 29, 4 (1988), 45.
26. Dyer (1997), 127.
27. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1973, 2006), 14.
28. Lillian Gish's performance, and the importance of her skin tone, in relation to Griffith's films and the construction of the romantic relationship is discussed in more detail by Virginia Wright Wexman. An anecdote she quotes about Gish's casting reveals the importance of this contrast of skin tone: '[Gish's] major role in *Birth of a Nation* came about one day when she substituted for Blanche Sweet in a rehearsal of the scene in which Elsie Stoneman is accosted by a mulatto. "During the hysterical

chase around the room, the hairpins flew out of my hair, which tumbled below my waist as Lynch held my fainting body in his arms," Gish has recalled. "I was very blonde and fragile-looking. The contrast with the dark man evidently pleased Mr. Griffith, for he said in front of everyone, 'Maybe she would be more effective than the more mature figure I had in mind'". Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating the Couple: Love Marriage, and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 48-49.

29. Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic, Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (London: Duke University Press, 1995), 5.

30. The choice of title for the sequel, *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (Bill Condon, 1995), also places this issue of embodiment, and thus the tangibility of Candyman's presence, as crucial to his representation.

31. Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

32. Brigid Cherry, 'Imperfect Geometry: Identity and Culture in Clive Barker's 'The Forbidden' and Bernard Rose's Candyman' in *Monstrous adaptations: Generic and thematic mutations in horror film*, eds Richard J. Hand and Jay McRoy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 59.

33. For further discussion of the eroticism of their relationship see Cherry, 48-63.

34. The hook is thrown into her grave by the little boy Jake.

35. Dyer (1988), 44.

36. Robin Wood, *Personal Views: Explorations in Film* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1976), 221.

37. A key aspect of a more general sense of ambiguity lies in the importance of varied perspectives, as discussed by J.P. Telotte, ('Narration and Incarnation: I Walked with a Zombie', *Film Criticism*, 6, 3 (1982), 18-31.) and by Aviva Briefel & Sianne Ngai ("How much did you pay for this place?" Fear, Entitlement, and Urban Space in Bernard Rose's *Candyman*,' in *Camera Obscura*, 37 (1996), 70-91.).

38. Dana B. Polan, 'Eros and Syphilization: The Contemporary Horror Film' in *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1984), 202.

39. Robin Wood, 'An Introduction to the American Horror Film' in *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, eds. Robin Wood & Richard Lippe (Toronto Film Festival, 1979), 7-28. The article was reprinted in his book *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) as 'The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s' (63-84) and 'Horror in the 80s' (168-179).