

SMITH, D.S. 2024. Nia DaCosta, Candyman, Universal Pictures, 2021. *Revenant* [online], 11: supernatural cities: placing urban identities, memory and cultural crises, pages 335-338. Available from: <https://www.revenantjournal.com/contents/nia-dacosta-candyman-universal-pictures-2021/>

Nia DaCosta, Candyman, Universal Pictures, 2021.

SMITH, D.S.

2024

Nia DaCosta, *Candyman*, Universal Pictures, 2021.

David Smith, Robert Gordon University

When it was announced that director/co-writer Nia DaCosta was bringing back the Candyman franchise, I expected her to reframe the game of repeating his name five times into a mirror as a viral challenge. Other franchises, like *The Ring* and *Unfriended*, have made their monster into a meme, and the series has always been about cultural transmission. However, rather than situating the story in the digital realm, DaCosta updated the material by returning it to its original setting: Cabrini-Green. An area of Chicago that was subject to long-term neglect since its construction in the 1940s, it has recently been subject to urban renewal. This is a process she depicts as the parasitic encroachment of a formerly deprived neighbourhood by those previously content to ignore it.

In Bernard Rose's 1992 film, based on Clive Barker's short story 'The Forbidden,' a white anthropologist, Helen Lyle, uncovered the long-buried murder of Daniel Robitaille, otherwise known as Candyman. He was a local black painter from the 1800s who fell in love with one of his subjects: a white woman whom Helen may be the reincarnation of. After her father found out, the townspeople hunted him down, hacked his arm off, covered his body in honey, and left him to the bees. By giving him a voice, Helen sowed the seeds of her death and several others at his hook: a subversion of the white saviour trope.

DaCosta focuses upon another outsider looking in, this time through a black lens. Anthony, an artist, learns about the Candyman myth and inadvertently brings him back through his work. At first, he almost gleefully exploits the history of Cabrini-Green. Like Helen, its tragedies represent a means to an end for him. But, as he immerses himself in the legends, his body shows the communal scars suppressed by the fences surrounding the remnants of the housing project.

Anthony's position is all the more interesting because he and his partner Brianna, an art gallery director, are benefactors of gentrification. Their beautiful apartment starkly contrasts with the dilapidated ghetto Helen visited. It is one of the many new builds constructed in its place, towering over its final remnants. Thus, DaCosta adopts an intersectional outlook to focus on how people from marginalised groups may be shielded from some aspects of discrimination if they have money. Like *Candyman*'s victims staring into the mirror, the events force both to confront their complicity in a system that has disenfranchised and displaced generations of black Americans.

DaCosta also asks how authentic even well-meaning artists' voices can be when dealing with intergenerational trauma. In a knowing exchange, Anthony addresses the need for his art to be palatable to a broad, specifically white, audience. Thus, the commodification of black art parallels gentrification. Those with the platform to comment on the history of Cabrini-Green do so with both distance and the financially driven demands of the art world. Either can corrupt, simplify or dilute their intended message. Ironically, reviewers criticised this incarnation of *Candyman* for taking a sledgehammer approach to its subject. For example, Kambole Campbell (2021) criticised "the transformation of subtext into big, bold text", theorising that its "hand-holding" approach reflects a studio demand. This criticism is fair, as much of it is direct to the point of didactic. Yet paralleling the art industry with the studio system adds welcome nuance and positionality, and viewers get a sense of the filmmakers acknowledging their privilege as storytellers rather than subjects. This includes co-writer/co-producer Jordan Peele, who has achieved mainstream success in both horror films and TV comedy by discussing, among other things, the issues of inequality and racism. It is difficult not to see *Candyman* as a reflection of the tensions he and others who have made their names tackling these subjects struggle with.

On a related point, Anthony's research into *Candyman* also allows the film to explore the first's complicated legacy. Rose was clearly sympathetic to the people of Cabrini-Green,

exploring the consequences of deprivation and normalised violence on their lives. However, his film simultaneously replicated harmful tropes, depicting the project as a lawless place where danger is as ubiquitous as “the whisper in the classroom” (Candyman, 1992). While its critique addressed structural barriers to change, such as an absence of social services, the legend manifests a community in moral decay. There is also the problematic and historically loaded narrative of a black man providing a sexual and physical threat to the white woman at its centre. As William, a local laundromat owner and storyteller, observes, “One white woman dies in the hood, and the story lives on forever.”

Where Rose depicted Candyman as an internal danger, killing those on his doorstep, DaCosta’s approach is more ambiguous. He still terrorises his community but is also its protector against external violence from police and further gentrification. “Say their names” is a mantra utilised by social justice movements to commemorate victims of racial injustice, including Dantrell Davis and Girl X, who are referenced in dialogue. For DaCosta, saying his name empowers him to act for them. He is both a victim and a monster. In the words of lead actor Yahya Abdul-Mateen II, he is an “unwilling martyr” (Densborough, 2021), mutually discussed in reverence and fear.

The dichotomy is most pronounced in a cathartic third act. In some ways, this is the film’s weakest section: the storytelling becomes messier and exposition-heavy, arcs are rushed, and a needless epigenetic twist cheapens Anthony’s journey. Yet by showing racial bias in policing, and its ensuing violence, DaCosta infuses her vision with urgency. It may be the story of Cabrini-Green, but Cabrini-Green acts as a microcosm of the United States of America in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. Importantly, while the anger informing the characters’ decision to summon Candyman comes from something timely, she does not invite viewers to side with him per se. His violent acts are presented as horrific to Brianna, who is by then the perspective character. Anthony’s metamorphosis is also presented as too grotesque to

resemble a superhero origin. However, unlike his first incarnation, the new Candyman is a counter to systematic inequalities instead of embodying them. He is not a symbol of suffering but resistance.

He also provides audiences with a new means of thinking about the history of racial inequality in America. Storytelling gives people a glimpse into worlds they would otherwise not see. However, it also represents a means by which affected communities, real and fictional, deal with collective traumas. DaCosta addresses this with greater sensitivity, if less spectacle, than Rose. For instance, the murder of Daniel Robitaille is told through the abstraction of shadow puppets, allowing her to distinguish between more real-world horror and fan service in a genre film. Furthermore, while the soundtrack echoes Philip Glass' haunting score, the multi-layering of pained vocals echoes generations of oppression, uniting those who have been historically wronged in a choir. In DaCosta's version, there have been many iterations of Candyman, including the briefly glimpsed classic Tony Todd incarnation, who have all been victims of racially motivated violence. As William says, "This neighbourhood got caught in a loop." The same patterns play out repeatedly, so Cabrini-Green's folklore acts as an expression of its past and present. Candyman is a concept rather than a person, reflecting a wider conversation that has only recently become part of mainstream discourse. In that respect, do not be surprised if we see him again soon.

References

Campbell, Kambole, 'Candyman (2021) Review'. *Empire*. [Online] Available at <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/candyman-2021/> [Accessed 10 March 2023].

Candyman, Bernard Rose (Director), TriStar Pictures, 1992.

Densborough, Jenny, 'Yahya Abdul-Mateen II On How 'Candyman' Humanizes 'Unwilling Martyrs' of Black Lives Matter'. *Newsweek*. [Online] Available at <https://www.newsweek.com/yahya-abdul-mateen-ii-interview-candyman-black-lives-matter-1622942> [Accessed 10 March 2023].