

A new *Candyman*: Farewell to reality

Luke Galvin
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Directed by Nia Dacosta; co-written by Dacosta, Jordan Peele and Win Rosenfield

Candyman (2021), directed by Nia Dacosta and co-written by Dacosta, Jordan Peele, and Win Rosenfield, was released in theaters on August 27 after several delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the title and marketing present it as a reboot of the 1992 horror film of the same title directed by Bernard Rose, the 2021 film is in fact a sequel.

A short story, “The Forbidden” (1985), by Clive Barker (author of the horror novel *The Hellbound Heart* and director of its film adaptation, *Hellraiser*) inspired the original film. The story provided Rose’s *Candyman* with both its titular villain and whatever artistic strengths it had. The opening scenes of Barker’s story present a harsh picture of life for the residents of British public housing estates:

Doubtless fortunes and reputations had been built upon Spector Street, and at its opening fine words had been spoken of its being a yardstick by which all future developments would be measured. But the planners—tears wept, words spoken—had left the estate to its own devices; the architects occupied restored Georgian houses at the other end of the city, and probably never set foot here.

The hallways of the housing estate were now piled high with refuse bags, several maisonettes stood gutted by past fires and graffiti covered every surface: the colorful scars of poverty and capitalist reality.

While the 1992 film trades the UK setting for the impoverished Cabrini-Green public housing project in Chicago, the conditions faced by residents appear similar. The Barker short story and the film follow

Helen (Virginia Madsen), a university student, through an industrial wasteland as she stumbles upon a horrific legend haunting the projects. In her naïveté, Helen initially doubts the truth of the stories of murder and mutilation.

Eventually, the Candyman, a demonic figure with a hook for a hand and a decaying torso covered in bees, appears to Helen. In both versions, the Candyman embodies the violence and fear dominating the life of the urban poor and workers. He has been made immortal by the frightful legend living on graffiti-covered walls and the lips of every project resident. The Candyman’s calling card “sweets to the sweet”—a reference to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*—is an ironic jab at the miserable conditions in what was supposed to be an urban “promised land.”

Two sequels to the 1992 film were released in the ‘90s (*Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh*, directed by Bill Condon, and *Candyman: Day of the Dead*, directed by Turi Meyer), the second even more impoverished artistically and dramatically than the first. While Dacosta’s film ignores these entries, it nonetheless, in its own way, generally parallels their turn away from social reality and toward the sado-pornographic “slasher genre.”

The new *Candyman* makes only superficial reference to Cabrini-Green, the concrete core of the original film. The overriding social reality, that the American ruling elite only built public housing in the postwar period under duress and has allowed it to decay or set about destroying it over the past several decades, is presumably of no interest to the filmmakers.

The Clinton administration’s Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998, for example, had a sharp impact on the ability of the poor and elderly to obtain housing assistance. The measure removed requirements that authorities grant first choice of public housing to those in urgent need. This soon resulted in

low-income families receiving only about a half of available housing assistance.

Now in place of projects like Cabrini-Green often stand “mixed-income” neighborhoods that are home to expensive condominiums. Working class families have been shunted or priced out of countless neighborhoods, resulting in a financial killing for real estate developers, speculators, financial institutions and others.

In fact, aside from a laundromat supposedly set somewhere near Cabrini-Green and a series of abandoned buildings, Dacosta’s *Candyman* never shows any working class community in Chicago. Tellingly, the focus of the new film has been relocated to the aspiring middle class in their high-priced condominiums. The central characters of this version of *Candyman*, in stark contrast to the struggling residents of Cabrini-Green, are artist Anthony (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) and his partner and gallery director Brianna (Teyonah Parris), whose primary struggle is to climb the rungs of the apparently race-obsessed Chicago arts scene ladder.

Before one even digs into the film’s racialist themes, one has to consider its large (and related) artistic problems. The narrative shifts disjointedly from scene to scene, with characters carrying out actions largely designed to move the plot forward. Certain characters act one way at a given moment only to change behavior at another for no apparent reason. William “Billy” Burke (Colman Domingo), for instance, transforms from an expositor of Candyman lore into a central villain for roughly five minutes, before getting killed off.

Anthony and his unremarkable art fulfill the role of a catalyst for Candyman’s return. As the legend spreads, the killings multiply in full pornographic intensity. No “horror” arises from this horror movie. We are left with a few scenes of computer-generated gore and bees, and a gratuitous body-horror theme involving Anthony’s character. With the element of historical reality removed from this *Candyman*, its flawed execution and sadism—unhappily akin to that of the *Saw* or *Hostel* franchises—stand out.

While flawed writing and direction contribute to these failings, the film’s racialist and careerist perspective undoubtedly also plays a role. Since the characters largely amount to the “fleshing out” of various identities, to paper cut-outs, their actions and

psychology have a formulaic and claustrophobic feel. Brianna most revealingly manifests some of the film’s retrograde tendencies. At a crucial moment, she discovers her motivation when a senior curator explains that her “story” and relationship with Anthony will prove professionally useful. Without meaning to, this *Candyman* lays itself relatively bare here, appearing to argue that one shouldn’t care about the slaughter of flawed but ultimately innocent individuals unless it furthers one’s career.

The same shallowness occurs in Anthony’s case. He isn’t so much a character as a means to an end, slowly transforming into Candyman with negligible emotional alterations en route. His dramatic functions are reduced to carrying out a murder spree and dying at the hands of white police, an episode that borders on the unintentionally humorous due to its contrived and choreographed nature.

Furthermore, the Candyman persona, now no longer an individual with a painful, concrete social history but the embodiment of generic black victimhood at the hands of racist whites, goes through a similar transformation, losing the seductive character that he had in both Todd’s original performance and in Barker’s “The Forbidden.” He has become another African-American superhero (à la *Black Panther*), unceremoniously polishing off the police responsible for Anthony’s death, and inadvertently arousing a certain sympathy for the cops as they are brutally ripped apart.

The perspective here is a banal and bleak (and self-serving) one, of American society as hopelessly divided along racial lines. This is a central aspect of the film’s “farewell to reality.”



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