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A Selection in Horror Studies: Final Master's Portfolio

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A Selection in Horror Studies: Final Master's Portfolio

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A Final Portfolio

Submitted to the English Department of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in the field of English

July 4, 2022

Dr. Chad Duffy, Portfolio Advisor

Contents

Analytical Reflective Narrative.....	3
<i>Research Paper 1 - Revised</i>	
Slashing Genre Lines: Viewing the <i>Candyman</i> Films as Crime Noir.....	7
<i>Research Paper 1 – Original (Professor Comments).....</i>	56
<i>Research Paper 1 – Original</i>	
Viewing <i>Candyman</i> (1992) and <i>Candyman</i> (2021) as Crime Noir	57
<i>Research Paper 2 - Revised</i>	
Slashing Genre Lines: Viewing the <i>A Nightmare on Elm Street</i> Series as Action Films.....	84
<i>Research Paper 2 – Original (Professor Comments)</i>	122
<i>Research Paper 2 – Original</i>	
Slashing Genre Lines: Viewing the <i>A Nightmare on Elm Street</i> Films as Action Movies.....	123

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ENG 6910

1 July 2022

Portfolio Introduction: An Analytical Reflective Narrative

Since childhood, the field of film studies has always been my ultimate passion. Even at a young age, I not only watched films, but analyzed, criticized, and reviewed the different elements that I found interesting and those that I found lacking. I discovered in my teen years, however, that the horror genre was not taken seriously outside of a few dedicated scholars. Whether at awards ceremonies, in film journalism, or amongst academics, the horror genre has been treated as vapid and exploitative. As a fan of the genre, I disagreed, and therefore set myself onto a path to pursue horror studies in an attempt to prove that there is depth and nuance within horror. After receiving my bachelors from Florida State University, I researched potential master's programs, and discovered that Bowling Green State's English program would provide me the best opportunity to continue along this path. Several courses provided me with an opportunity to further explore the horror genre, and as such I found myself firmly planted within the field of genre studies with a future goal of establishing a Horror

Studies program at a university that students would have the opportunity to select a major that was not available to me at their age. With this in mind, I selected two final research papers for my portfolio that reflect my passion for horror and genre studies and that will help define my future career within the field.

The first of these papers is titled *Slashing Genre Lines: Viewing the Candyman Films as Crime Noir*, my final paper from ENG 6800: Victorian Monsters in Film and Literature with Dr. Piya Lapinski. In this paper, I approached the idea that every major slasher franchise co-opts the tropes of another major genre that makes it stand out as a hybrid franchise. For the *Candyman* series, the other genre was that of crime noir. I selected four tropes that I identified as present within the original *Candyman* (Rose 1992) and its sequel *Candyman* (DaCosta 2021) as well as the noir genre: the characters of the detective and the femme fatale, a defeatist outlook that includes themes of pessimism, paranoia, and alienation, the use of social commentary with realistic violence, and the oppressive city. Through the analysis of these four tropes, I argued that the *Candyman* series could be viewed as a slasher/crime noir hybrid, which in turn showcased depth to the slasher franchise. To do this, I utilized the work of horror scholars such as Stacey Abbot, Robin R. Means Coleman, Carol Clover, and Jon Towlson. I also used Ian Brookes' and Mark T. Conard's work within the film noir genre. For the revisions, I expanded the analysis to include the other two *Candyman* films, *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (Condon 1995) and *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead* (Meyer 1999) as this would

further the argument and create a well-rounded discussion of the franchise. I also added a fifth trope, which was narrative techniques such as flashback and narration. These revisions helped make the paper a complete franchise analysis, while the original version was limited due to class restraints.

The second and final paper chosen is titled *Slashing Genre Lines: Viewing the A Nightmare on Elm Street Series as Action Films*, my final paper from POPC 6800: Action Movies with Dr. Jeffrey Brown. In this paper, I took the same approach with the aforementioned *Candyman* paper, but instead analyzed the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series using four tropes from the action genre that I also saw within these films. These four tropes included chase and vehicles sequences, action heroines/heroes/villains, torture scenes, and humor. Through the analysis of these four tropes, I argued that the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series could be viewed as an action/slasher hybrid, and as such showed depth and nuance within the slasher genre. To do this, I utilized the work of horror scholars such as Wickham Clayton, Sotiris Petridis, Adam Rockoff, and Tony Williams. I also utilized Yvonne Tasker's work within the action genre. For the revisions, I added a fifth trope, which was that of the spectacle, specifically referring to the set pieces that defined the series. I reworked the humor section into one specifically about one-liners, as this is more representative of the straight-word action genre. I also elaborated on several characters place within the series, primarily within the hero and torture sections. This was by far the harder of the revisions, as I find the action genre

(while worthwhile) to be harder to define, as it is more about entertainment than meaning. However, these revisions helped create a deeper look at both genres and furthered my knowledge within both genre and horror studies.

Within my course of study, I gained further insight into genre theory and was exposed to prominent scholars within my field, and the two essays chosen for this portfolio are indicative of this. Both of these projects required substantive research, and matter as they help establish my work as being within both genre studies and horror studies while helping address the problem of defining genre. Most importantly, they further my goal of proving that the horror genre is one worth studying and is, contrary to popular belief, not vapid. I've gained more in-depth knowledge of genre over my time in the program and look forward to utilizing it in further academic work as well as my career. I plan on continuing this cross-genre franchise analysis with five more franchises in the near future and have also done a similar project in another class at Bowling Green State. I hope to use these eight projects as the basis for my dissertation, convert them into my first monograph after receiving my doctorate, and use them as the foundation for my search for a tenure-track position that will allow me to pursue my goal of establishing a horror studies major. While a lofty goal, I hope that these two projects are the beginning of a long-term goal that ends with my recognition as a preeminent scholar within the field of horror and genre.

Slashing Genre Lines:
Viewing the *Candyman* Films as Crime Noir

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ENG 6800: Victorian Monsters in Film and Literature

Dr. Piya Lapinski

03/13/2022

Abstract

While the slasher craze of the late seventies and early eighties revolutionized the horror genre, the onslaught of sequels and rip-offs that followed nearly permanently ended it. It wasn't until the early nineties that a groundbreaking film came along and pumped blood back into the dying genre: Bernard Rose's *Candyman*. The story of a young graduate student researching the folk legend of a murdered black man whose ghost haunts the projects of Chicago, the film is still renowned for its handling of class and racial themes. However, the film and its three sequels should also be noted for amalgamating the typical tropes of the slasher film with those of the crime noir genre, creating a slasher noir hybrid. In this analysis, I'll examine five tropes that exist within both crime noirs and the *Candyman* franchise. The first is the bleak tone with themes of paranoia, alienation, and pessimism. Each of these is present in the *Candyman* films, establishing similar tones between both genres. The second are the detective and femme fatale characters that are prominent in both the crime noir genre and the *Candyman* series. The third trope is the utilization of narrative techniques such as narration and flashbacks in order to propel the story forward. The fourth is the social commentary on violence for which crime noir is noted. Finally, I'll discuss the use of oppressive cities in the films that help establish the conflict. After the discussion of all these tropes, I'll discuss how their combination firmly roots the *Candyman* series within crime noir and shows depth and evolution within both the series and the slasher genre.

Introduction

While the slasher subgenre can be traced back to *Peeping Tom* (Powell, 1960) and the Italian *giallo* films of the 1960's and 1970's, it's success can be attributed to John Carpenter's *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978), which kickstarted the slasher craze of the late '70s and early '80s with sequels to films such as *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984) dominating theaters. However, this onslaught of sequels and rip-offs stopped the subgenre dead in its tracks by the end of the 80's. With little hope for the future of the slasher, its resuscitation came in the form of Bernard Rose's *Candyman* (1992). The film tells the story of a young white woman (Helen Lyle) who investigates the urban legend of the "Candyman," the spirit of a black man with a hook for a hand who was killed in 1890 and can be summoned by chanting his name five times in a mirror. Located in the Chicago project of Cabrini-Green, Helen investigates in pursuit of finishing her thesis on folklore but ends up encountering the very real spirit. Called "the most significant race-themed film of the decade" (Muir, 2019, p. 36), the film also tackled themes of class and gender in ways that most conventional slasher films hadn't before, and "created [a] space for the black experience within the mainstream genre film" (West, 2018, p. 153). While some have claimed that the film "retained structural similarities to the slasher but remained firmly within the supernatural" (Clayton, 2020, p. 37), the film's emphasis on a gory body count, the sins of the past, and protagonist villain guarantees its classification as a slasher film.

The success of the film spawned three sequels with varying levels of success. While *Candyman* (Rose, 1992) placed the title character as an intelligent painter who broke miscegenation laws by impregnating the white woman he was hired to paint (resulting in his murder), *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (Condon, 1995) elucidates on the story, naming him Daniel Robitaille and establishing his descendant Annie Tarrant as the new final girl. *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead* (Meyer, 1999) continues exploring Candyman's lineage through Caroline McKeever, the daughter of Annie who is named after Daniel's lost love and becomes his new target. *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021), a stand-alone sequel and the most recent installment, follows Anthony McCoy as he investigates the waning myth and discovers that while Daniel was the original Candyman, he is not the only wronged spirit to take on the moniker. Daniel Robitaille's version of Candyman, a "dignified, regal "monster"" (Muir, 2019, p. 608) portrayed by Tony Todd, became "the first black slasher movie anti-hero" (Kerswell, 2018, p. 165) and is now an icon of the genre alongside villains such as Chucky, Leatherface, and Freddy Krueger.

The *Candyman* franchise, while rigidly a slasher series, is unique in that it is, as Wickham Clayton notes, "a more serious" (that is, less comedic) franchise" compared to some of its predecessor's, as it was part of the "'realistic" horror of the '90s" (Dietrich, 2020, para. 1). What is more unique is that each film in the series contains not only the tropes of the slasher film, but also those of the crime noir. For the purposes of this

analysis, crime noir is used interchangeably with film noir and neo-noir as the differences between them concern time period as opposed to tropes. In support of this claim, Mark Conard notes that “the term neo-noir describes any film coming after the classic noir period that contains noir themes and the noir sensibility” (2009, p. 2), while Ian Brookes notes that noir is “one of the most complicated categories of film” (2017, p. 12) and that

“film noir” has come to denote an exceptionally wide category, one that doesn’t necessarily specify old films at all, nor even ones in black and white (a defining feature for the early French critics). The term has become an increasingly elastic category that now often encompasses a very broad period... (2017, p. 2)

Through the examination of the five tropes that both the crime noir genre and the *Candyman* series has in common, it can be determined that the franchise holds an especial place as a slasher-noir hybrid. The five tropes to be analyzed are the use of narrative techniques such as flashback and narration, the characters of the detective and the femme fatale, a defeatist outlook that includes themes of pessimism, paranoia, and alienation, social commentary with realistic violence, and the oppressive city.

Narrative Techniques: Flashbacks and Narration

Ian Brookes notes that “the narrative themes usually attributed to noir include...narrative structures [that] are often complex with the use of subjective

narration told in voice-over and flashback in a disordered narrative chronology” (2017, p. 35). Narration within the series starts in the first scene of *Candyman* (Rose, 1992) in which the audience hears Candyman himself speak as the camera pans over Chicago: “They will say I have shed innocent blood. What’s blood for if not for shedding?” (Rose, 1992, 2:33). This narration, in the vein of classic noir like *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950) previews future events ahead but also “positions us within the slasher genre, through [Candyman’s] promise of brutal murder and specific reference to the hook” (Abbott, 2018, p. 71). Abbott goes on to note that Candyman’s “narration evokes romanticism and poetics,” which is evidenced through further narrations that connect both Helen Lyle, the lead character, and the audience to the mind of the villain. Candyman continues to narrate to Helen (Virginia Madsen) when she is driven to jail under suspicion of committing murder. Candyman, in reference to her philandering husband and the police, tells Helen that “They will all abandon you. All you have left is my desire for you” (Rose, 1992, 1:17:23). Candyman’s narration ties into the theme of alienation that is present in the films and noir genre. The narration is used again in the final minutes of the film when Helen realizes that she strongly resembles Caroline, the woman that Candyman loved and died for. As she gazes at the painting, he narrates: “It was always you, Helen” (Rose, 1992, 1:25:02). By having the villain as the narrator, he becomes analogous to an omnipresent force of evil, God-like and yet Satan-like. Having a general knowledge of his backstory, combined with the narration’s reveal of his

yearning for companionship in his lost love's doppelganger, creates a "layered, tragic villain who is more than just a derivative slasher antagonist" (Dietrich, 2020, para. 6). The suggestion of Candyman's omnipresence supplies both the horror that audiences come to expect and the "key noir element of inescapability" (Conard, 2009, p. 19), suggesting there is nowhere to hide from the monster.

Narration is featured even more heavily in *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (Condon, 1995) in the form of the "narration by [the] radio D.J. for 96.2 New Orleans, Kingfish" (Shelton, 2020, para. 18). Set amongst the Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans, Kingfish is heard several times throughout the film. First connecting the folk etymology of the word Carnival to the subtitle of the movie, "Farewell to the Flesh," Kingfish goes on to reference the impending floods from the Mississippi and foreshadows the murders from the "hook-man". While "the monologues are meant to add a layer of narrative potency to the scenes" (Shelton, 2020, para. 18), there is a sinister nature to the Kingfish's narration. While he is only seen once, speaking to a crowded Mardi Gras bash on the streets of the city near the end of the film, this scene suggests he is more than just a radio announcer. He makes eye contact with final girl Annie Tarrant and nods at her, suggesting he is aware of her turmoil. The argument can be made that he is in fact a harbinger of the monstrosity taking place in the film, as he acknowledges the "hook-man" before Annie even gets involved (though it should be noted that Candyman has committed his first murder of the film by this point).

However, the Kingfish also claims to have hooves and horns as part of his body. While these may be the claims of a facetious radio D.J., it could also be that the Kingfish is the devil himself, and thus responsible for Daniel Robitaille's transformation into the evil spirit of Candyman. Much in how the crime noir narrator relates the inner reflections of the noir protagonist, the "Kingfish lets the viewers know what the city's residents are thinking" (Shelton, 2020, para. 19).

While not as prominent in *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead* (Meyer, 1999), narration still plays a part through Candyman's continued musings. His signature line, established in the first film, is heard again: "Be my victim" (Meyer, 1999, 48:05). Candyman's narration regarding Caroline, the daughter of Annie, continues the romantic nature of his attempt to seduce the final girl into succumbing to his hook so they can be together in death. In the vein of *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974), an incest theme that began in *Farewell to the Flesh* (Condon, 1995) is recommenced as both Annie and Caroline are descendants of Daniel Robitaille. Jacob Shelton notes that Candyman is "now trying to woo his great-great-granddaughter" (2020, para. 20), furthering this dynamic.

Narration is also not as prominent in *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021), but an interesting scene takes place in which main character Anthony gains access to the voice recordings of Helen Lyle. Virginia Madsen, Helen's actress in the original film, reprises

her role and narrates some of Helen's previously unheard musings, relating her research to Anthony, who takes up the investigatory role:

Some of the things that have happened in Cabrini over the years, violence just so extreme, so bizarre. It's almost as if violence became a ritual. The worst part, the residents are afraid to call the police. A code of honor, perhaps, fear of the police themselves. The easy answer is always, "Candyman did it." The summoning game itself could be connected. I mean, it's clear that no one person makes this up. This grew from the community's subconscious. A survival tool evolved from the need to protect itself and its children from the horrors of the community. Bernadette and I tried the summoning. It's amazing how effective it can be. The suggestion that you're being followed or stalked by something lurking in your own reflection. But I get it... (Rose, 1992, 38:51)

This narration not only propels Anthony's journey forward but connects the new mythology to the old. The film reveals that Daniel Robitaille is not the only wronged black man to become Candyman. As Helen notes, one person couldn't have made this up, and she places the blame on the community. Helen's observation that a myth of this magnitude requires widespread belief, beyond the story of Robitaille, shows how this development in the story doesn't refute the story of the original film. This sets up the inclusion of the other Candyman we are introduced to in the film, such as Sherman Fields, this film's main incarnation of Candyman. Furthermore, Helen's suggestion of

seeing something lurking in your own reflection foreshadows Anthony's journey into becoming the next Candyman.

Candyman (Rose, 1992) employs flashbacks multiple times to both disrupt and add to the narrative. First, we see the story of a young woman named Clara who is babysitting, recalling *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978), which itself takes inspiration from an urban legend. A college student relays the story to Helen while the audience sees Clara summon the Candyman in an attempt to impress her date. When Clara is left alone and turns off the light, she is subsequently murdered as Candyman appears in the mirror and splits her open with his hook. The flashback then ends, and we return to Helen's interview with the student. Later in the film, a flashback is shown to the murder of a young boy that took place shortly before the narrative of the film starts. A young resident of Cabrini-Green, Jake (DeJuan Guy), relays the story to Helen: a mentally ill child entered the public restroom in the projects while his mother shops at the general store across the street. Interspersed through shots of Helen and Jake, we see the boy's mother held back by other residents as screams are heard from the restroom. The flashback shows the young boy screaming on the restroom floor in a puddle of blood, holding his groin area, as his penis had been cut off and placed in a nearby toilet. Ian Brookes notes that "the disrupted narrative structures that often-characterized film noir through the use of flashback and plots of labyrinthine complexity proved particularly attractive" (2017, p. 28). In the case of the slasher/crime noir hybrid, this is thus shown

to be true as well. While this murder is later confirmed to be the work of an imposter taking on the guise of Candyman, this and the aforementioned murder of the young girl establishes the complexity that Brookes refers to by disrupting the narrative and showcasing the sinister nature of Candyman's murders before the audience and Helen meet him. Prior to meeting Jake and hearing his story of the young boy murdered by "Candyman," Helen and her friend Bernadette had entered the apartment building in Cabrini-Green and found a lair in which murals of the Candyman had been painted. Upon Helen's entering the aforementioned public lavatory, she "experiences another flashback to the mural, indicating the Candyman's presence, as though Helen senses that the Candyman is waiting for her in his abject state" (Towlson, 2018, p. 76). Through this flashback, the audience is made privy to the psychological connection made between Candyman and Helen, foreshadowing her ultimate fate.

Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh (Condon, 1995) features "the standard noir plot of a murder investigation with a flashback narrative structure" (Brookes, 2017, p. 218) that serves to tell the backstory of Daniel Robitaille, aka Candyman. The film's plot involves Annie Tarrant, eventually revealed to be a descendant of Robitaille, investigating the murder of Phillip Purcell, a character from the original film who is killed in the intro after summoning Candyman. Annie's brother, Ethan, had an altercation with Purcell prior to his death due to his denial of help to Annie and Ethan's father, who was murdered by Candyman due to his obsession with the legend. Ethan is framed, and

Annie eventually summons and encounters the Candyman, who chooses her as his new target for seduction. After hypnotizing her, we see the truth of what happened to Robitaille. A talented and wealthy painter, as well as the son of a former slave, Robitaille was hired to paint a white woman (Caroline), with whom he fell in love. They conceive a child in secret, and upon the discovery of this, Robitaille is lynched by the townspeople. Robin R. Means Coleman recounts the flashback as seen by Annie:

... they exact the most gruesome of tortures. They saw off his right hand with a rusty saw. Stripped naked, his body is smeared with honey from a nearby honeycomb, and Robitaille is then stung to death by hundreds of angry bees. He is then burned and his ashes scattered over what is the modern location of the Cabrini-Green housing project. (2013, p. 188)

An oft mentioned line from Candyman is said to Annie prior to the flashback: "Be my witness" (Condon, 1995, 1:20:30). Here, the flashbacks function as a way of informing both the audience and the lead character of the injustices done upon Robitaille, whose murder went unpunished at the time. Robitaille hence became Candyman and punishes those who do not believe in him but summon him anyways. John Kenneth Muir also refers to the flashback:

the film focuses several times on murals that depict elements of Daniel's tale in the 1890s, and there's also an amazing, beautifully shot climactic flashback

during which the audience gets to see what was only described in the original film: Candyman's hand sawed off by white oppressors. (2019, p. 364)

Candyman 3: Day of the Dead (Meyer, 1999) expounds on Robitaille's backstory through more flashbacks. Scenes are shown of Robitaille's intimate relationship with Caroline. We see him paint her, and afterwards they show each other physical affection, kissing and caressing with the suggestion that the relationship is consummated afterwards. These scenes provide a clearer picture of what led up to the lynching, which is shown again, though the details differ from those shown in the prior film. The time of day of the lynching and those present has been changed, but this is more likely due to the low budget, straight to DVD film. While discussing a similar slasher film, *Urban Legends: Bloody Mary* (Lambert, 2005), Jon Towlson notes how "Robitaille's lynching is revisited obsessively in the *Candyman* movies" (2018, p. 105). Flashbacks are also utilized to show the murders of three different characters. When main character Caroline goes to visit her friend Mickey the night after he summoned Candyman, the scene of her entering his home is interspersed with his (as well as his lovers) graphic murder the night before. We also see the death of Annie, the heroine of the previous film, through a flashback of Caroline finding her body. While her murder had been ruled a suicide prior to the start of the film, the flashback confirms that it was Candyman who cut her throat. The final flashbacks are used to recap events of the film

that fuel Caroline's final and apparently successful attempt at killing Candyman in the climax of the film.

Candyman (DaCosta, 2021) revolutionizes how the franchise uses flashbacks by employing shadow puppetry. The story of Helen Lyle and her rescue of the infant Anthony, now the adult protagonist of this film, is recapped through this style of imagery. Daniel Robitaille's murder is also revisited this way. While untraditional, shadowy black puppets against white backdrops pay special homage to the black and white crime noirs of the 1940's.

The Detective and the Femme Fatale

Epitomized by characters such as Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) of *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston, 1941) and Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) of *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), "two of the most iconic and emblematic characterizations of film noir [are] crystallized in the figures of the private eye and the femme fatale" (Brookes, 2017, p. 58). In *Candyman* (Rose, 1992), Helen Lyle fits both archetypes. In researching myths for her master's thesis, the story "follow[s] Helen's investigation into Candyman's legend" (Muir, 2019, p. 224) as we see her take on the role of the private investigator. First hearing of the story from an undergraduate student, Helen and her classmate Bernadette take a pilgrimage to the projects of Chicago, where "early shots, aerial pushes towards Cabrini-Green, powerfully convey the idea of a geographically isolated

community in the heart of a modern metropolis" (Muir, 2019, p. 224). Helen, an outsider by both class and race, bravely enters the building despite opposition from some residents, and discovers a lair with murals of Candyman within the crumbling walls. It is here that she takes photographs which mimic crime scene photos, foreshadowing the murders that are to follow. The police crime scene connection is reinforced by a slideshow of the photos later in the film. Although she asserts several times in the film that she is not a cop, the residents still call out to warn the others of her arrival. Hayley Dietrich notes how the hostility from the Cabrini-Green residents "adds to Helen's investigator status" (2020, para. 3). It's established earlier in the film that Helen feels uneasy both in her marriage to philandering husband Trevor and in academia, where she is marginalized as a female scholar. Dietrich takes this connection, as well as Helen's inability to connect with the residents, as further proof of the film's relation to crime noir: "In classic film noir and neo noir, detective protagonists are liminal figures: they work in higher- and lower- class spheres but never truly feel at home in either place" (2020, para. 3). Helen, having summoned Candyman as a joke, is eventually approached by the spirit himself. When Cabrini-Green resident Anne-Marie's infant child Anthony is kidnapped, for which Helen is framed, she seeks to discover his whereabouts in order to save him. Eric Lott, in a lecture at the University of Leeds, relates Helen's story to the "ever-elastic paradigm of the detective story, with its

gumshoe on the prowl, here rooting out the clues contained in [inner-] city lore”

(February 5th, 2007).

Towards the end of the film, Helen’s role switches from investigator to femme fatale. As the aforementioned psychological connection between her and the Candyman develops further, Helen sees visions of Anthony. After Bernadette is murdered by Candyman and Anthony kidnapped, Helen is institutionalized to await trial as the prime suspect. She is able to break out and finds Anthony in the middle of an effigy in Cabrini-Green meant to be set on fire to honor the Candyman. The residents unknowingly set the pyre ablaze with both Helen and Anthony inside. Despite Candyman’s attempts at having them die in the fire to join him in the afterlife, providing him with the family he was denied in life, Helen succeeds in returning Anthony to Anne-Marie, suffering fatal burns in the process. As Trevor mourns her death, he says her name five times in the bathroom mirror, summoning Helen’s spirit and revealing that she has now become a vengeful spirit. Helen subsequently murders Trevor, asking him “What’s the matter, Trevor? Scared of something?” (Rose, 1992, 1:14:51), repeating a question she posited earlier in the film upon discovering his affair. Hayley Dietrich notes that because “Helen dies confronting Candyman,” she “becomes a femme fatale in her state of un-death” (2020, para. 6). In terms of the slasher genre, it was a “bold move, making Helen the new villain. She gets her much-desired revenge against Trevor, affirming her powerful agency – but like the femme fatale of film noir,

she does so through seduction and violence” (Dietrich, 2020, para. 7). Ian Brookes labels the “femme fatale as a transgressive figure, challenging patriarchal structures of power and authority” (2017, p. 4), which falls in line with Helen’s marginalization as an academic due to her gender. Her murder of Trevor takes back the power and respect he denied her in life. Helen’s story ends with her face now painted in the Cabrini-Green building, as she “becomes the new Candyman and passes into Cabrini-Green’s folklore... in neo-noir, the lines between hero and villain are blurred” (Dietrich, 2020, para. 7). Jon Towlson calls this “a fresh perspective on the old story of monster and victim, for the way Helen is able to rewrite the story and make herself the hero” (2018, p. 94). He also raises the possibility that one “might argue at least that *Candyman* is a female-centric horror film, even if the nature and extent of its feminism is up for debate (2018, p. 94). While the film is clearly female-centric due to its heroine, calling Helen the hero is reaching considering she does ultimately lose the battle and becomes the villain.

Another femme fatale exists in *Candyman* (Rose, 1992) in the form of Stacy, Trevor’s mistress and student. Ian Brookes translates the “femme fatale” as “literally, “deadly woman” – the predatory, treacherous, and duplicitous figure of the sexual temptress” (2017, p. 67). Stacy knowingly pursues the married Trevor, using her youth to construct a “dangerously seductive and destructive femininity” (Brookes, 2017, p. 68) that aids in the breakdown of Helen and Trevor’s marriage. After Trevor is murdered,

Stacy discovers the body and will most likely be the prime suspect, a final punishment from Helen for her transgressions.

The *Candyman* franchise is unique in that, due to its hybridization with crime noir, investigator characters feature more prominently than in other slasher films. When Helen is attacked by the Candyman imposter in Cabrini-Green, the detective character Frank is introduced. He aids Helen in identifying her attacker in a police line-up and acts as a friend to Helen, informing her that the neighborhood had been shut down due to her attack. However, when Helen is accused of Anthony's kidnapping and Bernadette's murder, his personality changes. Jon Towlson notes that "Frank, the black detective, makes a re-appearance; his coldness towards Helen is in complete contrast to his friendly, supportive manner earlier" (2018, p. 82). He is also featured heavily in a police interrogation scene. Considering that Candyman is framing Helen in order to make her submit to being his victim, we see the typical noir detective figure in Frank, who is following the seemingly clear clues to the conclusion that Helen is the perpetrator of these crimes.

Keeping up with the example set by Helen, Annie Tarrant of *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (Condon, 1995) also acts as a detective character, investigating both the Candyman myth and Daniel Robitaille's origins in Louisiana following her brother's arrest. Speaking with Ethan in an interrogation room at a police station, she tells him that "[She's] gonna find out what happened" (Condon, 1995, 18:29) in reference to

Phillip Purcell's murder and their father's supposed suicide. Annie and her husband later scope out her childhood home for answers and discover that it is the birthplace of Robitaille. Further investigation leads her to a man named Honore, who tells her the story of Robitaille and how his soul was trapped inside a mirror that he was shown as he died. Annie's father believed that destroying the mirror ended the curse, leading to his murder. Annie also discovers that she is Robitaille/Candyman's descendant. Her investigation ultimately leads to her discovering the mirror, destroying it, and seemingly ending the curse. In his discussion of Annie, Jon Towlson refers to her as "a white female protagonist who functions as a detective" (2018, p. 97).

Other investigator figures include Detectives Ray Levesque and Pam Carver. Mark T. Conard refers to the common "fusion of detective and villain" (2009, p. 19) in neo-noir, and Levesque is a prime example of this. He is shown to be a corrupt cop and functions as the hard-boiled detective stereotype, pressuring Ethan into giving a false confession for the murder of his father and illegally listening in on a conversation between Annie and Ethan. Carver, his partner, reprimands him for this, to which he mocks her. Following Candyman's murder of Annie's husband Paul, Levesque now considers Annie the prime suspect in the murders and, after following her, attempts to get Ethan to pin the murders on Annie. Levesque meets his demise after summoning the Candyman mockingly to Ethan, which also results in Ethan's death as he tries to escape. Carver, however, also functions as a noir detective who breaks the rules out of

moral obligation. She sees the surveillance footage of Candyman killing Levesque and allows Annie the chance to escape as she knows Candyman is real, giving Annie the opportunity to defeat the villain.

Detectives are even more involved in *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead* (Meyer, 1999). White detectives Kraft and Sacco are both corrupt members of the LAPD and feature heavily in the narrative. They are shown harassing Hispanic artist Miguel Velasco at a gallery-event, making racial remarks: “Your kinds always up to something” (Meyer, 1999, 10:58). Kraft continues these remarks throughout the film, referring to a black colleague as “boy,” telling him to go play basketball and calling Caroline’s love interest David a Hispanic slur. It’s also stated that Kraft was investigated five times for police brutality. Kraft grows even more angry after Caroline rejects his romantic advances in favor of David. After being suspended for excessive force, and upon the murder of Sacco by Candyman (for which the blame falls on Caroline), Kraft snaps and attacks David and Caroline. Claiming he is the “Candyman,” he attempts to murder them before being shot down by the black detective he slurred earlier. Jon Towlson discusses how in opposition to the carefully constructed race narrative of the original film, “the ‘problem’ of racism is confined to individuals, in this case, two bad cops on the Los Angeles Police Department” (2018, p. 99). Hayley Dietrich notes how “good neo noir knows that those working for the law aren’t necessarily ‘good guys’ and may often be

corrupt” (2020, para. 3). The film is able to construct a truly villainous detective in Kraft that places him in the same vein as the Candyman.

Caroline follows in Helen and Annie’s footsteps by investigating Candyman’s origins following Miguel’s murder. The film changes previously established lore and claims that the key to destroying the Candyman lies in his paintings, which Caroline has inherited. When they are stolen, Caroline acts as detective in order to recover and destroy them, eventually succeeding in ending the reign of terror. Caroline also publicly blames Kraft for the murders rather than Candyman, ending the myth rather than allowing it to continue.

Anthony functions as the detective-protagonist of *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021), investigating the story of Helen Lyle and subsequently the Candyman. He finds the voice recordings of her findings, which leads him to Cabrini-Green and Billy Burke, a resident with a connection to Candyman. Anthony discovers that Daniel Robitaille, while the original Candyman, was not the only one. There is in fact a “hive,” referring to the swarm of bees that follows Robitaille around due to his death, and Anthony is being stalked by Sherman Fields (rather than Robitaille), an incarnation of Candyman wrongly accused of putting razor blades in children’s candy and murdered by police in the 1970s. The investigation causes Anthony to slip into a fugue state, upon which Burke kidnaps both him and his girlfriend Bri, revealing himself to be a worshipper of Candyman. He cuts off Anthony’s hand, infected earlier by a bee sting, and shoves a

hook into it to resemble Candyman. He then calls the police to alert them to Anthony's whereabouts before being murdered by Bri. Anthony gains consciousness just before being murdered by the police, becoming the newest incarnation of Candyman.

The police who shoot Anthony are shown to be corrupt, as they offer a detained Bri freedom if she lies that Anthony tried to attack them and that they had to shoot in self-defense. Bri then becomes the femme fatale, summoning the Candyman (shown as multiple incarnations including Anthony) who kills all the officers in revenge for his slaying. Bri is able to escape, encountering the Robitaille version who tells her to inform everyone of what happened, continuing the myth. It's suggested that she will do so, allowing the murders to continue and cementing her status as femme fatale.

Defeatist Outlook: Pessimism, Alienation, and Paranoia

In *Film Noir: A Critical Introduction*, Ian Brookes identifies "familiar noir themes – disillusionment, fear, anxiety, alienation, fatalism, angst, [and] paranoia" (2017, p. 51). These themes are rampant within the *Candyman* series, beginning with *Candyman* (Rose, 1992). Helen is subjected to all of these throughout the narrative. In an early scene, Helen attends one of her husband Trevor's lectures and notices Stacy's attentiveness to him, followed by her apprehension when Helen approaches. When Helen asks if there's something going on, Trevor gaslights her into thinking the idea of him having an affair is preposterous, heightening her sense of paranoia and alienating her further within the

marriage. He later lies to her of his whereabouts, strongly hinting that he was with his mistress. His alienation of her continues outside of their relationship and into their careers. Helen mentions having asked him to hold off on giving a lecture on modern folklore, which is exactly the lecture she attends at the start of the film. He then tells her she is unreasonable, suggesting she doesn't know anything of academia despite being an advanced graduate student. This, compounded with fellow scholar Philip Purcell's mocking of her investigation into the Candyman myth, provides evidence to that academia being a male-focused world. "While utilizing a setting focused on academia to disseminate the urban legend phenomena," (West, 2018, p. 93) the film creates a thematic connection between Helen and the residents of Cabrini-Green, a mostly black neighborhood that is itself alienated from the rest of Chicago. Jon Towlson notes of the director and writer:

Rose's conclusion (supported by Barker) is meant to illustrate that no room exists within the current social order for the recognition of women, in the same way that none exists for impoverished blacks. The film takes on a cyclical form, as, in the final scene, Trevor suffers the same guilt over the unjust demise of Helen as whites felt for the plight of the African American. He both fears and desires punishment for his guilt and complicity in Helen's oppression; and Helen appears from beyond the grave to administer retribution. (2018, p. 15)

Towlson further notes this through the film's cinematography. Following an overhead shot of Helen at the university, "Rose establishes a sense of institutionalized misogyny in the scenes that follow. We see Helen from overhead, dwarfed by more architecture: the university's grand amphitheater, a symbol of educational tradition" (2018, p. 65). Helen's alienation by Trevor and Purcell, representatives of the university, contributes to her demise and transformation into the new Candyman by forcing her to act alone in her attempt to defeat Robitaille.

Candyman also alienates Helen by framing her for the murders of Bernadette, her therapist, and the kidnapping of baby Anthony. After hypnotizing her in a parking garage, Helen awakes bloodied and holding a cleaver near the severed head of Anne-Marie's dog while the latter screams about Anthony's disappearance. Whether Candyman murdered the dog and took the baby or had Helen do it under hypnosis is unclear, but the result is the same. Helen is questioned but eventually released on bail. When her friend Bernadette comes to visit her, Candyman appears and kills her as Trevor arrives, again framing Helen for the crime. Paranoia rises within Helen as she begins to question her sanity. The question arises: is "Candyman merely a figment of Helen's imagination [?] This evocation of paranoia is one of the film's most powerful elements" (Towlson, 2018, p. 44). Helen's subsequent institutionalization further alienates her from society, especially in a scene where Candyman taunts her in a hospital room. The replay of the surveillance footage shows her yelling at nothing,

suggesting she really is insane. Hayley Dietrich notes that “where there is isolation, horror tends to follow” (2020, para. 2). This horror is manifested in the final murder for which Helen is framed, that of her psychiatrist who is brutally killed when Helen summons Candyman to prove his existence. Candyman then enables her escape by cutting her restraints, setting up the finale at the burning effigy. The relationship between Helen’s alienation and framing is related to “another noir theme, which constitutes something of a noir subcategory: the “wrong man” narrative, named after Hitchcock’s *The Wrong Man* (1957), in which an innocent man is falsely accused of a crime” (Brookes, 2017, p. 50). Jon Towlson also makes the connection between Helen’s alienation by the men in her life and the crime noirs of the 1940s:

there are elements of the 1940s Paranoid Woman’s picture in which the victim’s claims of persecution are scornfully dismissed as fantasy or delusion. This, of course, evokes not only the Gothic paranoia of *Rebecca*, *Gaslight* (both 1940) and *Suspicion* (1941) but numerous other 1940s Hollywood films with plot elements of female madness, hysteria, and amnesia. (2018, p. 80)

Helen’s ultimate fate also presents an extremely pessimistic and fatalistic view within the movie. Whereas the final girl of the slasher film usually survives (at least until the sequel), Helen does in fact die, becoming the very thing she tried to avoid: the Candyman. Candyman’s final lie, that he would allow Anthony to escape if Helen helped him, results in her death. It’s hinted that his wish of her joining him in the

afterlife depends on her choices before her death: because she chooses to die for Anthony rather than for Candyman, she becomes her own entity separate from him. In this and saving Anthony she succeeds, but she is still resigned to be a spirit from hell for eternity. This conclusion suggests that there is no such thing as a happy ending, even for our heroine, something echoed in films such as *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958) and *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974).

Paranoia exists in abundance amongst the denizens of Cabrini-Green. As previously mentioned, the residents are terrified of the police and frequently accuse Helen of being a cop out of fear. The murder of Ruthie Jean, a resident whose death helped spark Helen's interest in the Candyman myth, was ignored by the police, further alienating the population, especially in relation to Helen's whiteness. The neighborhood, predominantly black, is ignored until Helen is attacked in the lavatory, at which point the neighborhood shut down. Helen thus proves that the disdain Cabrini-Green has towards outsiders is valid. Anne Marie notes that "white people never come 'round here 'cept to cause us a problem" (Rose, 1992, 25:48). Cabrini-Green can thus be considered a manifestation of the crime noir underworld:

framed within the spaces of this stylistically and thematically dark world are noir's archetypal characterizations: figures trapped in inhospitable or hostile environments, marginalized, estranged, and alienated from society at large. They

are often seen to articulate a pessimistic commentary on the uncertainties of contemporary American society. (Brookes, 2017, p. 52)

Several characters are subject to alienation in *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (Condon, 1995). Similar to Helen, two of the film's characters are framed for murders that Candyman committed. Ethan Tarrant is framed for the death of Phillip Purcell after an altercation with him in a bar, followed by the framing of his sister Annie Tarrant for the death of her husband Paul. Paul's murder switches the suspicion from Ethan to her, now for both murders, continuing the *Candyman* legacy of mixing slasher with the "wrong man" noir.

An interesting narrative choice for this film was the inclusion of Daniel Robitaille's descendants. Octavia, Annie's mother, continually chooses to deny his existence as part of their family, resulting in Robitaille's alienation. His retaliation for this is to murder Octavia in front of Annie, having already killed their father for trying to destroy the mirror housing his soul prior to the start of the film. Ian Brookes notes that "noir has been associated with such narrative themes as a haunted past, malign fate, the dark city, and the "absent family"" (2017, p. 4). The film "emphasizes the absence of family" (Brookes, 2017, p. 69), as Candyman/Robitaille fights to not be forgotten by those he died for. John Kenneth Muir notes that for the second film, "Candyman returned, this time seeking, if not reparations for bigotry, then at least an

acknowledgement from his white family in New Orleans that he existed and was part of the “line” (2019, p. 36).

Paranoia comes into play in the final moments of the sequel. In a flashforward, Annie, having given birth to Paul’s daughter Caroline, puts the five-year-old to bed by showing her the family photo album, which acknowledges Daniel Robitaille. While Annie’s actions in destroying the mirror suggests she believes Candyman is defeated once and for all, Caroline begins chanting his name after she leaves the room. After the fourth time she says his name, Annie abruptly returns, putting her hand over her daughter’s mouth to stop her. Annie tells her to go to sleep, establishing that she still lives in fear of his return.

Outside of preventing Caroline from speaking Candyman’s name five times, the film ends on a relatively positive note. This is written away with *Candyman 3: Farewell to the Flesh* (Meyer, 1999), in which Annie is revealed to have been murdered by Candyman in between films. While not confirmed, it is hinted that she began to suffer from Alzheimer’s after Caroline reached adulthood, and in her confused state resummoned Candyman, resulting in her murder. The franchise thus returns to the pessimism of the original’s finale, as another final girl is killed, unable to have a happy ending. Again, the alienation of the “wrong man” theme is utilized, with both main characters David and Caroline framed for the murders of artist Miguel and Caroline’s roommate Tamara, respectively. The paranoid ending of the previous film is repeated

in the ending of this film: while Caroline is able to destroy Candyman through his paintings, she continues to have nightmares, suggesting she is not fully convinced he won't return.

Alienation and a pessimistic ending return in *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021). Main character Anthony is slowly alienated through visions of Candyman/Sherman Fields, which causes him to slowly lose his mind and withdraw from his girlfriend Bri and mother, Anne-Marie. While Anthony is eventually framed as responsible for the film's deaths, this is through Burke's meddling. Upon art critic Finley's death after Anthony leaves the apartment, it is briefly mentioned in a news story that her husband is the prime suspect. While this is an unseen character, the alienation experienced by main characters in other installments is reflected in him. The film ends on an even more pessimistic note than the original film. Anthony ends up murdered by police officers after Burke replaces his hand with a hook to mimic Robitaille, and he becomes the next Candyman as a result, following a long line of black men wronged by society. This is foreshadowed in an early scene where Anthony sees Sherman Fields as his reflection, with his decaying hand in the same place where Sherman's hook is. As Anthony is the child that Helen rescued in the original film, this results in her sacrifice meaning nothing. While Anthony may have had an extra twenty-seven years, he ends up a victim to the Candyman legacy anyways. Burke notes that "it was only a matter of time before the baby came back here in perfect symmetry" (DaCosta, 2021, 1:15:00),

suggesting that his death was inevitable, and Helen just prolonged his life. It also shows that nothing has changed in the world. From Robitaille's death in the 1800's, to Helen's death in 1992, to Anthony's death in 2019, the injustices continue and show no sign of stopping. A future injustice is hinted at in the scene's final moments. Bri, having summoned Candyman to murder the corrupt cops, is left standing amongst several dead bodies as more police arrive, suggesting that she will now take the blame and be alienated from society.

Social Commentary with Realistic Violence

In crime noir, "one of the principal themes is violence or the threat of violence" (Brookes, 2017, p. 48). While the slasher subgenre contains violence by definition, where the *Candyman* films differ is on their use of realistic violence that reflects society. As opposed to the mostly cartoonish violence of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984) and *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980), *Candyman* (Rose, 1992) and its sequels contain a more grounded approach to violence, especially in terms of its depictions of race and gang violence. The gangs in Cabrini-Green are a major subplot in the original film. When Helen and Bernadette approach the apartment building, they are blocked by the gang members that run rampant throughout the neighborhood. Robin R. Means Coleman refers to Cabrini-Green as not just a "a fearsome housing project home to gang violence, filth, and a most violent monster," but a housing project "overrun with gang violence" (2013, p. 188). This is reflected in the imposter Candyman that attacks Helen, who takes

on the persona (along with several fellow gang members) to use the fear associated with it to hold the neighborhood hostage. Following her attack there is a

direct cut to a police line-up of a group of black men, amongst whom Helen identifies her attackers. The male gang leader masquerading as the Candyman is one more in a succession of men, who, in the film, deny Helen power, privilege, and security, here through violent action. (Towlson, 2018, p. 76)

This provides social commentary on the relationship between the realistic violence of the film and the sexism exhibited against Helen. Pedophilic violence is also referenced, as the fake “Candyman” cuts off a boy’s penis to induce fear in the neighborhood. Anne-Marie at one-point claims that the gangs will never get baby Anthony, establishing a fear that the youth will fall into the trap of the gangs due to nothing else being available to them. Stacy Abbott notes that the projects “transforms the reality of urban violence into a Gothic ‘Terrible Place,’ in which hyperbole drives home the horror of social deprivation and racial violence” (2018, p. 75).

Candyman (Rose, 1992), while much more than a treatise on race relations, does have at its heart a story of racial prejudice. Jon Towlson notes that “the origin of the Candyman is based on a public lynching and plays on the fear of retribution for this historical ill treatment of African Americans” (2018, p. 14). Stacy Abbott claims that Helen “crosses the threshold of Cabrini-Green, not to shed light on the social horrors

within but to debunk the urban legend and appropriate it and the lived violence of Cabrini-Green for her own purposes” (2018, p. 75). This criticism is not entirely true, as while Helen first investigates the myth for academic purposes, she becomes entangled in the story due to a genuine desire to help the residents, namely Anne-Marie and Anthony. This does, however, create a white savior narrative, especially considering that she becomes the new incarnation of Candyman, a symbol for racial injustice now co-opted by a white woman.

A common criticism of the film is that most of the Candyman’s targets (Ruthie Jean, Bernadette, Anthony, and presumably other unmentioned residents of Cabrini-Green) are African American. Tai Gooden notes that its “disturbing and baffling that Candyman kills black people...nothing absolves him from hurting his own people...it made more sense for him to take his vengeance out on more people who look like his oppressors” (2021, para. 16-17). This sentiment has been echoed by several other critics and scholars. However, Candyman does not exist to punish white people for the racial injustices of the past. He is an Equalizer, working to level the playing field between victims. Everyone, regardless of race, is fair game as long as they summon him or are near those who do. Candyman punishes Bernadette (a black woman) and Helen’s psychiatrist (a white man) with complete disregard to their race. They are simply victims used to punish Helen, the summoner. It’s established later that Helen was chosen, not because she is white, but because she resembles the woman Robitaille fell in

love with. Saying that Candyman is a “black monster trying hard to seduce a white woman” takes away from the character’s status as a “tragic, wounded monster” (Coleman, 2013, p. 189) and wrongfully places him within the stereotype of a black boogeyman trying to steal a white woman.

All four films in the series feature “innumerable acts of casual violence” (Brookes, 2017, p. 49). In the original, we see graphic, realistic acts more reminiscent of neo-noir films such as *Drive* (Refn, 2011), *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992), and *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* ((Herzog, 2009) than traditional slasher films. These include the decapitation of a Rottweiler (with requisite pool of blood) and the murders of Bernadette, Trevor, and the psychiatrist by hook. John Kenneth Muir notes that the “murder scenes in *Candyman* are splendidly, egregiously gory, with the topper being the excessive sequence in which Candyman guts Helen’s therapist” and that the “films violence... is extreme and unforgettable and just what the audiences seek in a powerful horror film” (2019, p. 224). Helen’s fiery demise is also quite realistic and violent, with the film focusing on her skin burning as she slowly perishes. Her death provides more social commentary in relation to Candyman’s death: “Helen’s final defilement is to be made physically monstrous and deformed by her scarring in the fire; her burning in this way again links Helen to the lynching of the Candyman as a symbol of Black oppression” (Towlson, 2018, p. 89). Other casual but brutal murders by the hook in the

series include Paul in *Farewell to the Flesh* (Condon, 1995), Miguel and his girlfriend in *Day of the Dead* (Meyer, 1999), and Clive and Jerrica in *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021).

“Gang” violence is repeated briefly in *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead* (Meyer, 1999), but in a cultural form rather than racial. Jacob Shelton notes that “the big twist in the final installment is that a cult of goths have been trying to convince Donna D’Errico’s character that the Candyman is real so they can bring him into the real world” (2020, para. 30). They achieve this by stealing Robitaille’s paintings from Caroline (D’Errico), who they later kidnap before summoning the Candyman, who brutally murders them, creating a powerful punishment to gang related violence.

Suicide violence also features in the series in two instances. Annie, the heroine of *Farewell to the Flesh* (Condon, 1995) is said to have committed suicide prior to the start of *Day of the Dead* (Meyer, 1999). While it is revealed that Candyman did in fact kill her, he did so after being summoned by her in a confused state, suggesting some part of her wanted to die to finally step outside the fear from the myth. This is coupled with several images of her daughter finding her body as well as shots of her throat being slit. In *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021), young Bri enters her father’s room to see him sitting on a windowsill. He speaks to her just before jumping to his death. Both of these deaths reflect the horrors of mental illness and their effect in the real world.

The racial violence against Daniel Robitaille is revisited several times throughout the series. His smothering with honey and attack by bees creates a connection between nature and society, suggesting that Daniel's return as the Candyman (a "force of nature") is partly because of his death. As he lives on, the bees play an integral part in the series, appearing in each film and attacking Caroline in *Day of the Dead* (Meyer, 1999). Stacy Abbott notes how "aesthetic excess is utilized to visualize the tale of prejudice and express the history of racial violence upon which the housing estate was built, and which underpins Candyman's monstrous identity as a killer" (2018, p. 76).

School violence is also shown in both *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (Condon, 1995) and *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021). In *Farewell*, we see two young boys fighting in a classroom about the Candyman myth. This violence is graphically heightened in the 2021 film, as we see five teenage girls summon Candyman in a school restroom, where they are brutally murdered. The direction of the scene, along with another young girl hiding in the restroom hearing and watching it happen, making the scene reminiscent of a mass-shooter situation, tragically connecting to real-world events.

Finally, we see police brutality at large in the series. When Candyman frames Ethan Tarrant in *Farewell* (Condon, 1995) for the murder of a corrupt detective, Ethan tries to escape the police station only to be shot in the back by an officer. Further brutality is foreshadowed in the beginning of *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021), in which a young Billy Burke plays pretend and references how blacks have been taught to fear the

police: "You're under arrest. Get on your knees. I didn't do anything! Hands! Hands!" (DaCosta, 1992, 1:21). Later in the film, we see how Sherman Fields, the current incarnation of Candyman, became the spirit. Falsely accused of putting razorblades in children's candy, he is attacked by police and murdered on the spot. This culminates with Anthony's murder at the end of the film. While falsely blamed by Burke for the murders in the film, Anthony lies in Bri's arms on the ground. As the police enter, they enter and open fire on Anthony before giving him a chance to surrender. While he did have a hook shoved into his arm, he didn't raise it nor did he charge at the officers. They kill him in cold blood, reflecting numerous real-life situations with innocent black men and women such as Eric Garner, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor. It should also be addressed that the fight between Burke, Anthony, and Bri is a commentary on black-on-black violence, and the tragic ending shows the effects of such violence. The massacre of the police, as well as the deaths of the corrupt officers in the two prior films, reflects a fantasy world where the corrupt officers are punished for their misdeeds. Sadly, these situations often go unpunished in the real world. The juxtaposition between injustice and the corrupt officers of the series is a direct reflection of the crime noirs preceding the series as well as real life events.

Oppressive Cities

Ian Brookes writes that "film noir is characterized by various urban settings" and that "one of the most iconic images associated with film noir is that of the city,

especially at night” (Brookes, 2017, p. 45). This is highlighted by the opening scenes of films such as *Kiss of Death* (Hathaway, 1947), *Cry of the City* (Siodmak, 1948), and *The Naked City* (Dassin, 1948), all of which feature images of New York City. *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944) features an opening scene highlighting its Los Angeles location. This “macro perspective of the city at large” (Brookes, 2017, p. 46) is echoed in the opening scenes of *Candyman* (Rose, 1992) in which the camera (looking down onto the busy highways of Chicago) pans down the motorways, highlighting the expanse of the city. Often in films such as these, the city functions as its own character, oppressing the humans that inhabit it. Stacey Abbott opines that “the city depicted in this opening is more than a backdrop” (2018, p. 71). The city of Chicago functions as an extension of Candyman himself, “evoking through his melodious narration the sense of a ghostly presence dominating the urban landscape” and “offering a dreamy and nightmarish experience of the urban” (Abbott, 2018, p. 73). This is reinforced by the final shot of the opening sequence, in which a swarm of bees rises from the depths of the streets and overtake the Chicago skyline. Representative of the Candyman, the bees signify the power he has over the metropolis. The music also highlights the connections between the city and the title villain:

the film’s ethereal mood, which counterpoints its gritty setting... is underlined by Phillip Glass’ celebrated score. The minimalism of Glass’ compositions lends *Candyman* both a feeling of modernity (especially combined with shots of the

city's architecture in the film's title sequence) and a sense of the sublime.

(Towlson, 2018, p. 54)

The oppression of the city is most aptly showcased by the film's focus on the plight of the project of Cabrini-Green, "a well-known housing project built between the 1940s and 1950s whose population by the 1960s was almost entirely made up of impoverished African Americans. In subsequent decades, the housing project became famous for police shootings, gang violence, and murder" (Abbott, 2018, p. 74). Here, the project is "infused with an aura of myth and urban legend" (Abbott, 2018, p. 70). Helen discovers that her building was built as a housing project identical to Cabrini-Green but was instead remodeled and sold off as condos. From her window she can see Cabrini-Green, with the highway and L-line demarcating the lines between the affluent neighborhood in which she resides and the ghetto. The closeness of the ghetto to Helen's neighborhood is only eight blocks, showing how thin the lines between wealth and poverty truly are and highlighting how the city determines where these lines are drawn. The "segregation is repeatedly visualized via the overhead shots of the highway that separates the university and high-rise condos from the urban deprivation of the projects" (Abbott, 2018, p. 75).

The poverty of Cabrini-Green is shown through its decaying structures and graffiti covered walls. Robin R. Means Coleman comments that the film "depict[s] such structures as filthy and squalid, hence implicating the surrounding neighborhood as

enabling urban blight” (2013, p. 182). Chicago, having left the project to its own means, perpetuated its oppression which led to the seedy condition it is in. Stacey Abbott notes that “the horror of this urban reality is, literally, painted on the walls in the form of the graffiti and filth that covers the interior of the apartment buildings” (2018, p. 75). The audience sees this through Helen’s multiple visits to the neighborhood, with trash strewn throughout the area, graffiti depicting the Candyman within the walls, and a disgusting public restroom covered in feces and other bodily fluids. The film “equates the Terrible Place with the city through [its] mise-en-scene... dripping with abject urban decay and evoking a tradition of urban Gothic” (Abbott, 2018, p. 69-70). As the film is “atypically based in a deprived inner-city neighborhood” (Kerswell, 2018, p. 165), *Candyman* (Rose, 1992) “reimagine[s] the conventions of the slasher genre to evoke a monstrous history of this urban space” (Abbott, 2018, p. 77). Candyman primarily targets those in this neighborhood in the film, though this is due to the prevalence of the myth within it (the project is where Candyman’s ashes were said to have been scattered). As a result, the oppression of Daniel Robitaille becomes synonymous with the oppression of Cabrini-Green, and Robitaille becomes the courier of its revenge. Jon Towlson notes that “the monster constitutes a return in horrific form of all that society represses and/or oppresses” (2018, p. 12). As the representative of Cabrini-Green, Candyman is hell-bent on making sure that those who summon him knows their plight.

The oppression of the city continues into *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* (Condon, 1995), though the location has shifted from Chicago to New Orleans. While John Kenneth Muir claims that “its setting is not as dangerous, nor as vital and powerful as Cabrini-Green” (2019, p. 364), the city is still a dominating and threatening entity. In a lecture in the opening scene, returning character Phillip Purcell notes that “the myth has travelled from place to place, taking root in the most desperate areas. Even here, in New Orleans, murders have been committed in his name” (Condon, 1995, 1:47). Following his death at the end of the sequence, we see the New Orleans skyline followed by various shots from around the city as jazz plays in the background. The troubles of Cabrini-Green are equated with the slums of New Orleans, thus transferring Candyman’s representation of Chicago to the largest of Louisiana’s cities. The poverty of New Orleans is showcased when main character Annie drives through the poor areas on her way to teach at her low-income school. Jon Towlson notes how

the Candyman myth is a mobile one: the Candyman relocates to troubled places.

One such place is shown to be New Orleans, where *Farewell to the Flesh* is set.

Condon devotes considerable time to semi-documentary footage of the poor black areas of the city. A theme of the film is the flooding that threatens New Orleans, in particular those living in the center. (2018, p. 97)

The decaying of the city is once again reflected through graffiti, this time in Annie’s childhood home. It is also seen through the slave quarters on the outskirts of the

property, where it is said that Annie and her brother Ethan were never allowed to play as children. The slave quarters represent the oppression brought by the city (on a micro-level) onto its residents through the enslavement of its population. We see this come to a head in the climax of the film when the slave quarters are washed away by the flood waters, erasing the remnants of the oppressive past but leaving the memories and nearly taking several lives with it.

The retaliation from the city's residents against its oppression can be seen through the Mardi Gras celebrations taking place throughout the film. John Kenneth Muir notes that

Candyman 2 gets significant mileage from the Mardi Grad celebration in New Orleans, with one scene finding Annie wandering through a bacchanalia on the street, wandering amidst fucking, vomiting, and general debauchery. It portrays rather explicitly what Daniel's history only suggests, of breaking taboos and cultural restrictions, of letting go, of indulging in sin to erase the memory of former sin. (2019, p 366)

The former sin Muir refers to includes the oppression and racism experienced by both Daniel Robitaille and the residents of New Orleans, oppression that is shown to continue into the present. However, in contrast to Chicago, the city is shown to fight back.

In *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead* (Meyer, 1999), the location again changes, this time to Los Angeles. Mark T. Conard notes that “much of the time, classic film noir takes place in Los Angeles – but always in the city, always a detective looking for clues to unravel the mystery of whodunit” (2009, p. 7). The previously discussed Caroline and David are those L.A. detectives, fighting against the oppressive Los Angeles while trying to solve the Candyman mystery. With the Day of the Dead festival as a backdrop, the film features several shots of the Los Angeles skyline and the Hispanic neighborhoods in which the film is set. This is criticized by Jacob Shelton, who claims that

Latinx history provides no direct connection to the Candyman’s origin, and rather than offer subtle commentary on the life of a marginalized group of people, it appears as an excuse to film in Los Angeles rather than Chicago or New Orleans, (2020, para. 23)

However, the use of the festival in conjunction with the previously discussed racism from the LAPD further contributes to the oppressive city dynamic created in the prior two films. John Kenneth Muir highlights this and claims that “the only interesting element of the film is the setting: a post- O.J Simpson, post Rodney King Los Angeles, where corrupt cops reign, and people live in fear and suspicion” (2019, p 608). The oppression is again highlighted by graffiti (in a subway terminal) as well as the return of the gang element in the film, holding Los Angeles hostage. In an homage to classic

noir such as *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974), *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950), and *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944) the poverty and oppression within L.A. reigns supreme.

The narrative returns to Chicago in *Candyman* (DaCosta, 2021), where the focus changes from the slums of Cabrini-Green to a now gentrified Cabrini-Green. Bri connects the change to the following: “white people built the ghetto and then erased it when they realized they built the ghetto” (DaCosta, 2021, 8:22). Anthony also discusses this: “Who do you think makes the hood? The city cuts off a community and waits for it to die” (DaCosta, 2021, 44:52). This can be seen in a scene where Anthony searches for Cabrini-Green “then and now,” showing the changes in the city since 1992. The spotlight is on the earlier discussed oppression by the Chicago police department, but also the institutional nature of Chicago racism as brought on by the white government: “...how white supremacy, it creates these spaces of rampant neglectful communities of color, and in particular black communities” (DaCosta, 2021, 13:26).

Like with the original film, the physical setting of Chicago is highlighted. An opening shot shows a street view looking up towards the Chicago sky with the skyscrapers disappearing into the fog, representing the expanse of the dark city into the clouds as it changes from day to night, as well as showing the oppression of those around it. The graffiti in Cabrini-Green is again spotlighted. An integral scene shows the power of the city and how one can disappear into it and be forgotten. After Candyman is summoned at art critic Finley’s apartment, Anthony hurriedly leaves. As

the camera pans out to show the apartment building, we see Finley attacked by the unseen Candyman, dragged across the window, and killed, leaving just a bloody line where her head was. The sounds of the city drown out any sound of her screams as she is snuffed out within a city that doesn't know she exists. Whether Chicago, New Orleans, or Los Angeles, the *Candyman* series continues the noir legacy of highlighting cities that oppress its residents and create chaos.

Conclusion

Ian Brookes notes that “although some critics have seen film noir as a genre, it has also been described as a cycle, a series, a movement, a visual style, a lighting technique, and a mood or tone” (2017, p 12-13). The fluidity of the crime noir genre lends weight to the idea that it can incorporate more than just black and white films from the 1940s. From the classic era of film noirs such as *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950), *The Naked City* (Dassin, 1948), and *Kiss of Death* (Hathaway, 1947), to the neo-noir of *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974) and *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), to modern noir classics such as *Drive* (Refn, 2011), *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* (Herzog, 2009), and *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992), a wide range of films falls into the category of crime noir. Through the exploration of the tropes previously discussed, it's apparent that the *Candyman* franchise falls into it as well. With well-crafted narratives and timely themes that still resound today, the *Candyman* franchise has established itself as not just an iconic slasher series, but also as a unique slasher-crime noir hybrid that has withstood

the fall from grace that the subgenre took in the late eighties. With the original film still considered “the seminal film on urban legends” (West, 2018, p. 93), the legacy and popularity of the series continues, and as least part of this should be traced to its hybrid status. The complicated nature of the series evinces that through its examination, the slasher genre can contain complex and emotional meanings, and isn’t solely comprised of the vapid slice-and-dice films that many critics and audiences have claimed.

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Research Paper 1 (Original) – Instructor Comments

Dr. Piya Lapinski

A -- a fascinating final paper connecting the discussion of the urban landscape in Candyman to the noir genre. Good luck with your work!

Shane Hesketh

Professor Piya Lapinski

ENG 6800

20 April 2022

Viewing *Candyman* (1992) and *Candyman* (2021) as Crime Noir

Introduction

While the slasher subgenre can be traced back to *Peeping Tom* and the Italian *giallo* films of the 1960's and 1970's, their success can be attributed to John Carpenter's *Halloween*, which kickstarted the slasher craze of the late '70s and 1980s with sequels to films such as *Friday the 13th* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* dominating theaters.

However, this onslaught of sequels and rip-offs stopped the subgenre dead in its tracks by the end of the 80's. With little hope for the future of the slasher, its resuscitation came in the form of Bernard Rose's *Candyman*. The film tells the story of a young white woman (Helen Lyle) who investigates the urban legend of the "Candyman," the spirit of a black man with a hook for a hand who was killed in 1890 and can be summoned by chanting his name five times in a mirror. Located in the Chicago project of Cabrini-Green, Helen investigates in pursuit of finishing her thesis on folklore but ends up

encountering the very real spirit. Called “the most significant race-themed film of the decade” (Muir 36), the film tackled not just race but themes of class and gender in ways that most conventional slasher films hadn’t before, and also “created the space for the black experience within the mainstream genre film” (West 153). While some have claimed that the film “retained structural similarities to the slasher but remained firmly within the supernatural” (Clayton 37), the film’s emphasis on a gory body count, the sins of the past, and villain guarantees its classification as a slasher film.

The success of the film spawned three sequels with varying levels of success. While *Candyman* (1992) placed the title character as an intelligent painter who was murdered after breaking miscegenation laws (and impregnating the white woman he was hired to paint), *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh* elucidates on the story, naming him Daniel Robitaille and establishing his descendant Annie Tarrant as the new final girl. *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead* continues exploring Candyman’s lineage through new target Caroline McKeever, the daughter of Annie who is named after Daniel’s lost love. *Candyman* (2021), a stand-alone sequel and the most recent installment, follows Anthony McCoy as he investigates the waning myth and discovers that while Daniel is the original Candyman, he is not the only wronged spirit to take on the moniker. Daniel Robitaille’s version of Candyman, a “dignified, regal “monster”” (Muir 608) portrayed by Tony Todd, became “the first black slasher movie anti-hero” (Kerswell 165) and is

now an icon of the genre alongside villains such as Michael Myers, Leatherface, and Chucky.

The *Candyman* franchise, while rigidly a slasher series, is unique in that it is, as Wickham Clayton notes, “a more serious” (that is, less comedic) franchise” (37) compared to some of its predecessor’s as it was part of the ““realistic” horror of the ‘90s” (Dietrich para. 1). What is more unique is that each film in the series contains not only the tropes of the slasher film, but also of a crime noir. For the purposes of this analysis, crime noir is used interchangeably with film noir and neo-noir as the differences between them concern time period while the tropes remain the same. In support of this claim, Mark Conard notes that “the term neo-noir describes any film coming after the classic noir period that contains noir themes and the noir sensibility” (2), while Ian Brookes notes that noir is “one of the most complicated categories of film” (12) and that

“film noir” has come to denote an exceptionally wide category, one that doesn’t necessarily specify old films at all, nor even ones in black and white (a defining feature for the early French critics). The term has become an increasingly elastic category that now often encompasses a very broad period... (2)

Through the examination of four tropes that both the crime noir genre and the *Candyman* series has in common, it can be determined that the franchise holds an

especial place as a slasher-noir hybrid. The four tropes to be analyzed are the characters of the detective and the femme fatale, a defeatist outlook that includes themes of pessimism, paranoia, and alienation, the use of social commentary with realistic violence, and the oppressive city. This paper will only be examining the first and fourth film in the series.

The Detective and the Femme Fatale

Epitomized by characters such as Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) of *The Maltese Falcon* and Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) of *Double Indemnity*, “two of the most iconic and emblematic characterizations of film noir [are] crystallized in the figures of the private eye and the femme fatale” (Brookes 58). In *Candyman* (1992), Helen Lyle fits both archetypes. In researching myths for her master’s thesis, the story “follow[s] Helen’s investigation into Candyman’s legend” (Muir 224) as we see her take on the role of the private investigator. First hearing of the story from an undergraduate student, Helen and her classmate Bernadette take a pilgrimage to the projects of Chicago, where “early shots, aerial pushes towards Cabrini-Green, powerfully convey the idea of a geographically isolated community in the heart of a modern metropolis” (Muir 224). Helen, an outsider by both class and race, bravely enters the building despite opposition from some residents, and discovers a lair with murals of Candyman within the crumbling walls. It is here that she takes photographs which mimic crime scene photos, foreshadowing the murders that are to follow. The police crime scene

connection is reinforced by a slideshow of the photos later in the film. Although she asserts several times in the film that she is not a cop, the residents still call out to warn the others of her arrival. Hayley Dietrich notes how the hostility from the Cabrini-Green residents “adds to Helen’s investigator status” (para. 3). It’s established earlier in the film that Helen feels uneasy both in her marriage to philandering husband Trevor and in academia, where she is marginalized as a female scholar. Dietrich takes this connection, as well as Helen’s inability to connect with the residents, as further proof of the film’s relation to crime noir: “In classic film noir and neo noir, detective protagonists are liminal figures: they work in higher- and lower- class spheres but never truly feel at home in either place” (para. 3). Helen, having summoned Candyman as a joke, is eventually approached by the man himself. When Cabrini-Green resident Anne-Marie’s infant child Anthony is kidnapped, for which Helen is framed, she seeks to discover his whereabouts in order to save him. Eric Lott, in a lecture at the University of Leeds, relates Helen’s story to the “ever-elastic paradigm of the detective story, with its gumshoe on the prowl, here rooting out the clues contained in [inner-] city lore” (2007).

Towards the end of the film, Helen’s role switches from investigator to femme fatale. As the aforementioned psychological connection between her and the Candyman develops further, Helen sees visions of Anthony. After Bernadette is murdered by Candyman and Anthony kidnapped, Helen is institutionalized to await trial as the prime suspect. She is able to break out and finds Anthony in the middle of an effigy in

Cabrini-Green meant to be set on fire to honor the Candyman. The residents unknowingly set the pyre ablaze with both Helen and Anthony inside. Despite Candyman's attempts at having them die in the fire to join him in the afterlife (providing him with the family he was denied in life), Helen succeeds in returning Anthony to Anne-Marie, suffering fatal burns in the process. As Trevor mourns her death, he says her name five times in the bathroom mirror, summoning Helen's vengeful spirit. Helen murders Trevor, asking him "What's the matter, Trevor? Scared of something?" (*Candyman* 1:14:51), repeating a question she had posited earlier in the film upon discovering his affair. Hayley Dietrich notes that because "Helen dies confronting Candyman," she "becomes a femme fatale in her state of un-death" (para. 6). In terms of the slasher genre, it was a "bold move, making Helen the new villain. She gets her much-desired revenge against Trevor, affirming her powerful agency – but like the femme fatale of film noir, she does so through seduction and violence" (Dietrich para. 7). Ian Brookes labels the "femme fatale as a transgressive figure, challenging patriarchal structures of power and authority" (4), which falls in line with Helen's marginalization as an academic due to her gender. Her murder of Trevor earns her the power and respect he denied her in life. Helen's story ends with her face now painted in the Cabrini-Green building, as she "becomes the new Candyman and passes into Cabrini-Green's folklore... in neo-noir, the lines between hero and villain are blurred" (Dietrich para. 7). Jon Towlson calls this "a fresh perspective on the old story of monster

and victim, for the way Helen is able to rewrite the story and make herself the hero” (94). He also raises the possibility that one “might argue at least that *Candyman* is a female-centric horror film, even if the nature and extent of its feminism is up for debate (94). While the film is clearly female-centric due to its leading lady, calling Helen the hero is reaching considering she does ultimately lose the battle.

The *Candyman* franchise is unique in that, due to its hybridization with crime noir, investigator characters feature more prominently than in other slasher films. When Helen is attacked by a Candyman imposter in Cabrini-Green, the detective character Frank is introduced. He aids Helen in identifying her attacker in a police line-up and acts as a friend to Helen, informing her that the neighborhood had been shut down due to her attack. However, when Helen is accused of Anthony’s kidnapping and Bernadette’s murder, he changes. Jon Towlson notes that “Frank, the black detective, makes a re-appearance; his coldness towards Helen is in complete contrast to his friendly, supportive manner earlier” (82). He is also featured heavily in a police interrogation scene. Considering that Candyman is framing Helen in order to make her submit to being his victim, we see a typical noir detective figure in Frank, who is following the clues to the conclusion that Helen is the perpetrator of these crimes.

Anthony functions as the detective-protagonist of *Candyman* (2021), investigating the story of Helen Lyle and subsequently the Candyman. He finds the voice recordings of her findings, which leads him to Cabrini-Green and Billy Burke, a resident with a

connection to Candyman. Anthony discovers that Daniel Robitaille, while the original Candyman, was not alone. There is in fact a “hive,” referring to the swarm of bees that surround Robitaille due to his death, and Anthony is being stalked by Sherman Fields (rather than Robitaille), an incarnation of Candyman wrongly accused of putting razor blades in children’s candy and murdered by police in the 1970s. The investigation causes Anthony to slip into a fugue state, upon which Burke kidnaps both him and his girlfriend Bri, revealing himself to be a worshipper of Candyman. He cuts off Anthony’s hand, infected earlier by a bee sting, and shoves a hook into it to resemble Candyman. He then calls the police to alert them to Anthony’s whereabouts before being murdered by Bri. Anthony gains consciousness just before being murdered by the police. Anthony thus becomes the newest incarnation of Candyman.

The police who shoot Anthony are shown to be corrupt, as they attempt to have a detained Bri lie that Anthony tried to attack them and that they had to shoot in self-defense in order to gain her freedom. Bri then becomes the femme fatale, summoning the Candyman (shown as multiple incarnations including Anthony) who kills all the officers in revenge for his slaying. Bri is able to escape, encountering the Robitaille version who tells her to inform everyone of what happened, continuing the myth. It’s suggested that she will do so, allowing the murders to continue and cementing her status as a femme fatale.

Defeatist Outlook: Pessimism, Alienation, and Paranoia

In *Film Noir: A Critical Introduction*, Ian Brookes identifies “familiar noir themes – disillusionment, fear, anxiety, alienation, fatalism, angst, [and] paranoia” (51). These themes are rampant within the *Candyman* series, beginning with *Candyman* (1992). Helen is subjected to all of these throughout the narrative. In an early scene, Helen attends one of husband Trevor’s lectures and notices student Stacy’s attentiveness to him, followed by her apprehension when Helen approaches. When Helen asks if there’s something going on, Trevor gaslights her into thinking the idea of him having an affair is preposterous, both heightening her sense of paranoia and alienating her further within the marriage. He further lies to her of his whereabouts, strongly hinting that he was with his mistress. His alienation of her continues outside of their relationship into their careers. Helen mentions having asked him to hold off on giving a lecture on modern folklore, which is exactly the lecture she attends at the start of the film. He then tells her she is unreasonable, suggesting she doesn’t know anything of academia despite being an advanced graduate student. This, compounded with fellow scholar Philip Purcell’s mocking of her for her investigation into the Candyman myth, provides evidence to the idea that academia is a male-focused world. “While utilizing a setting focused on academia to disseminate the urban legend phenomena,” (West 93) the film creates a thematic connection between Helen and the residents of Cabrini-Green, a mostly black neighborhood that is itself alienated from the rest of Chicago. Jon Towlson notes of the director and writer:

Rose's conclusion (supported by Barker) is meant to illustrate that no room exists within the current social order for the recognition of women, in the same way that none exists for impoverished blacks. The film takes on a cyclical form, as, in the final scene, Trevor suffers the same guilt over the unjust demise of Helen as whites felt for the plight of the African American. He both fears and desires punishment for his guilt and complicity in Helen's oppression; and Helen appears from beyond the grave to administer retribution. (15)

Towlson further notes this through the film's cinematography. Following an overhead shot of Helen at the university, "Rose establishes a sense of institutionalized misogyny in the scenes that follow. We see Helen from overhead, dwarfed by more architecture: the university's grand amphitheater, a symbol of educational tradition" (65). Helen's alienation by Trevor and Purcell, representatives of the university, contributes to her demise and transformation into the new Candyman by forcing her to act alone in her attempt to defeat Robitaille.

Candyman (Daniel Robitaille) also alienates Helen by framing her for the murders of Bernadette, her therapist, and the kidnapping of baby Anthony. After hypnotizing her in a parking garage, Helen awakes bloodied and holding a cleaver near the severed head of Anne-Marie's dog while the latter screams about Anthony's disappearance. Whether Candyman murdered the dog and took the baby or had Helen do it under hypnosis is unclear, but the result is the same. Helen is questioned but

eventually released on bail. When her friend Bernadette comes to visit her, Candyman appears and kills her as Trevor arrives, again framing Helen for the crime. Paranoia rises within Helen as she begins to question her sanity. The question arises: is “Candyman merely a figment of Helen’s imagination [?] This evocation of paranoia is one of the film’s most powerful elements” (Towlson 44). Helen’s subsequent institutionalization further alienates her from society, especially in a scene where Candyman taunts her in a hospital room. The replay of the surveillance footage shows her yelling at nothing, suggesting she really is insane. Hayley Dietrich notes that “where there is isolation, horror tends to follow” (para. 2). This horror is manifested in the final murder for which Helen is framed, that of her psychiatrist, who is brutally killed when Helen summons Candyman to prove his existence. Candyman then enables her escape by cutting her restraints, setting up the finale in the burning effigy. The relationship between Helen’s alienation and framing is related to “another noir theme, which constitutes something of a noir subcategory: the “wrong man” narrative, named after Hitchcock’s *The Wrong Man*, in which an innocent man is falsely accused of a crime” (Brookes 50). Jon Towlson also makes the connection between Helen’s alienation by the men in her life and the crime noirs of the 1940s:

There are elements of the 1940s Paranoid Woman’s picture in which the victim’s claims of persecution are scornfully dismissed as fantasy or delusion. This, of course, evokes not only the Gothic paranoia of *Rebecca*, *Gaslight* (both 1940) and

Suspicion (1941) but numerous other 1940s Hollywood films with plot elements of female madness, hysteria, and amnesia. (2018, p. 80)

Helen's ultimate fate also presents an extremely pessimistic and fatalistic view within the movie. Whereas the final girl of the slasher film usually survives (at least until the sequel), Helen does in fact die, becoming the very thing she tried to avoid: the Candyman. Candyman's final lie, that he would allow Anthony to escape if Helen helped him, results in her death. It's hinted that his wish of her joining him in the afterlife depends on her choices before her death: because she chooses to die for Anthony rather than for Candyman, she becomes her own entity separate from him. In this and saving Anthony she succeeds, but she is still resigned to be a spirit from hell for eternity. This conclusion suggests that there is no such thing as a happy ending, even for our heroine, something echoed in films such as *Vertigo* and *Chinatown*.

Paranoia exists in abundance amongst the denizens of Cabrini-Green. As previously mentioned, the residents are terrified of the police and frequently accuse Helen of being a cop out of fear. The murder of Ruthie Jean, a resident whose death helped spark Helen's interest in the Candyman myth, was ignored by the police, further alienating the population, especially in relation to Helen's whiteness. The neighborhood, predominantly black, is ignored until Helen is attacked in the lavatory, at which point the neighborhood is shut down. Helen thus proves that the disdain Cabrini-Green has towards outsiders is valid. Anne Marie notes that "white people

never come 'round here 'cept to cause us a problem" (*Candyman* 25:48). Cabrini-Green can thus be considered a manifestation of the crime noir underworld:

Framed within the spaces of this stylistically and thematically dark world are noir's archetypal characterizations: figures trapped in inhospitable or hostile environments, marginalized, estranged, and alienated from society at large. They are often seen to articulate a pessimistic commentary on the uncertainties of contemporary American society. (Brookes 52)

Alienation and a pessimistic ending return in *Candyman* (2021). Main character Anthony is slowly alienated through visions of Candyman/Sherman Fields, which causes him to lose his mind and withdraw from his girlfriend Bri and mother, Anne-Marie. While Anthony is eventually framed as responsible for the film's deaths, this is through Burke's meddling. Upon art critic Finley's death (after Anthony leaves the apartment), it is briefly mentioned in a news story that her husband is the prime suspect. While this is an unseen character, the alienation experienced by main characters in other installments is reflected in him. The film ends on an even more pessimistic note than the original film. Anthony ends up murdered by police officers after Burke replaces his hand with a hook to mimic Robitaille, and he becomes the next Candyman as a result, following a long line of black men wronged by society. This is foreshadowed in an early scene where Anthony sees Sherman Fields as his reflection, with his decaying hand in the same place where Sherman's hook is. As Anthony is the

child that Helen rescued in the original film, this results in her sacrifice meaning nothing. While Anthony may have had an extra twenty-seven years, he ends up a victim to the Candyman legacy anyways. Burke notes that “it was only a matter of time before the baby came back here in perfect symmetry” (*Candyman* 1:15:00), suggesting that his death was inevitable, and Helen just prolonged his life. It also shows that nothing has changed in the world. From Robitaille’s death in the 1800’s, to Helen’s death in 1992, to Anthony’s death in 2019, the injustices continue and show no sign of stopping. A future injustice is hinted at in the scene’s final moments. Bri, having summoned Candyman to murder the corrupt cops, is left standing amongst several dead bodies as more police arrive, suggesting that she will now take the blame and be alienated from society.

Social Commentary with Realistic Violence

In crime noir, “one of the principal themes is violence or the threat of violence” (Brookes 48). While the slasher subgenre must contain violence by definition, where the *Candyman* films differ is on their use of realistic violence to reflect society. As opposed to the mostly cartoonish violence of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Friday the 13th*, *Candyman* (1992) and its sequels contain a more grounded approach to violence, especially in terms of its depictions of race and gang violence. The gangs in Cabrini-Green are a major subplot in the original film. When Helen and Bernadette approach the apartment building, they are blocked by the gang members that run rampant throughout the

neighborhood. Robin R. Means Coleman refers to Cabrini-Green as not just a “a fearsome housing project home to gang violence, filth, and a most violent monster,” but a housing project “overrun with gang violence” (188). This is reflected in the imposter Candyman that attacks Helen, who takes on the persona (along with several fellow gang members) to use the fear associated with it to hold the neighborhood hostage. Following her attack, there is a

direct cut to a police line-up of a group of black men, amongst whom Helen identifies her attackers. The male gang leader masquerading as the Candyman is one more in a succession of men, who, in the film, deny Helen power, privilege, and security, here through violent action. (Towlson 76)

This provides social commentary on the relationship between the realistic violence of the film and the sexism exhibited against Helen. Pedophilic violence is also referenced, as the fake “Candyman” cuts off a boy’s penis to induce fear in the neighborhood. Anne-Marie at one-point claims that the gangs will never get baby Anthony, establishing a fear that the youth will fall into the trap of the gangs due to nothing else being available to them. Stacy Abbott notes that the project “transforms the reality of urban violence into a Gothic ‘Terrible Place,’ in which hyperbole drives home the horror of social deprivation and racial violence” (75).

Candyman (1992), while much more than a treatise on race relations, does have at its heart a story of racial prejudice. Jon Towlson notes that “the origin of the Candyman is based on a public lynching and plays on the fear of retribution for this historical ill treatment of African Americans” (14). Stacy Abbott claims that Helen “crosses the threshold of Cabrini-Green, not to shed light on the social horrors within but to debunk the urban legend and appropriate it and the lived violence of Cabrini-Green for her own purposes” (75). This criticism is not entirely true, as while Helen first investigates the myth for academic purposes, she becomes entangled in the story due to a genuine desire to help the residents, namely Anne-Marie and Anthony. This does, however, create a white savior narrative, especially considering that she becomes the new incarnation of the Candyman, a symbol for racial injustice now co-opted by a white woman.

A common criticism of the film is that most of the Candyman’s targets (Ruthie Jean, Bernadette, Anthony, and presumably other unmentioned residents of Cabrini-Green) are African American. Tai Gooden notes that its “disturbing and baffling that Candyman kills black people...nothing absolves him from hurting his own people...it made more sense for him to take his vengeance out on more people who look like his oppressors” (para. 16-17). This sentiment has been echoed by several other critics and scholars. However, Candyman does not exist to punish white people for the racial injustices of the past. He is an Equalizer, working to level the playing field between

victims. Everyone, regardless of race, is fair game as long as they summon him or are near those who do. Candyman punishes Bernadette (a black woman) and Helen's psychiatrist (a white man) with complete disregard to their race. They are simply victims used to punish Helen, the summoner. It's established later that Helen was chosen, not because she is white, but because she resembles the woman Robitaille fell in love with. Saying that Candyman is a "black monster trying hard to seduce a white woman" takes away from the character's status as a "tragic, wounded monster" (Coleman 189) and wrongfully places him within the stereotype of the black boogeyman trying to steal a white woman.

Both films feature "innumerable acts of casual violence" (Brookes 49). In the original, we see graphic, realistic acts more reminiscent of neo-noir films such as *Drive*, *Reservoir Dogs*, and *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* than traditional slasher films. These include the decapitation of a Rottweiler (in a pool of blood) and the murders of Bernadette, Trevor, and the psychiatrist by hook. John Kenneth Muir notes that the "murder scenes in *Candyman* are splendidly, egregiously gory, with the topper being the excessive sequence in which Candyman guts Helen's therapist" and that the "films violence... is extreme and unforgettable and just what the audiences seek in a powerful horror film" (224). Helen's fiery demise is also quite realistic and violent, with the film focusing on her skin burning as she slowly perishes. Her death provides more social commentary in relation to Candyman's death: "Helen's final defilement is to be made

physically monstrous and deformed by her scarring in the fire; her burning in this way again links Helen to the lynching of the Candyman as a symbol of Black oppression” (Towlson 89).

Suicide violence also features in the series in *Candyman* (2021), when young Bri enters her father’s room to see him sitting on a windowsill. He speaks to her just before jumping to his death. This death reflects the horrors of mental illness and its effect in the real world. School violence is also shown in the film, when we see five teenage girls summon Candyman in a school restroom where they are then brutally murdered. The direction of the scene, along with another young girl hiding in the restroom hearing and watching it happen, tragically connects to real-world events such as Sandy Hook and Columbine by invoking mass-shooting imagery.

Finally, we see police brutality at large in the series. The brutality is foreshadowed in the beginning of *Candyman* (2021), in which a young Billy Burke plays pretend and references how blacks have been taught to fear the police: “You’re under arrest. Get on your knees. I didn’t do anything! Hands! Hands!” (*Candyman* 1:21). Later in the film, we see how Sherman Fields, the current incarnation of Candyman, became the spirit. Falsely accused of putting razorblades in children’s candy, he is attacked by police and murdered on the spot. This culminates with Anthony’s murder at the end of the film. While falsely blamed by Burke for the murders in the film, Anthony lies in Bri’s arms on the ground. As the police enter, they open fire on Anthony before giving

him a chance to surrender. While he did have a hook shoved into his arm, he didn't raise it nor charge at the officers. They killed him in cold blood, reflecting numerous real-life situations with innocent black men and women such as Eric Garner, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor. It should also be addressed that the fight between Burke, Anthony, and Bri is a commentary on black-on-black violence, and the tragic ending shows the effects of such violence. The massacre of the police reflects a fantasy world where the corrupt officers are punished for their misdeeds. Sadly, these situations often go unpunished in the real world. The juxtaposition between injustice and the corrupt officers of the series is a direct reflection of the crime noirs preceding the series as well as real life events.

Oppressive Cities

Ian Brookes writes that "film noir is characterized by various urban settings" and that "one of the most iconic images associated with film noir is that of the city, especially at night" (Brookes 45). This is highlighted by the opening scenes of films such as *Kiss of Death*, *Cry of the City*, and *The Naked City*, all of which feature images of New York City. *Double Indemnity* features an opening scene highlighting its Los Angeles location. This "macro perspective of the city at large" (Brookes 46) is echoed in the opening scenes of *Candyman* (1992) in which the camera (looking down onto the busy highways of Chicago) pans down the motorways, highlighting the expanse of the city. Often in films such as these, the city functions as its own character, oppressing the

humans that inhabit it. Stacey Abbott opines that “the city depicted in this opening is more than a backdrop” (71). The city of Chicago functions as an extension of the Candyman himself, “evoking through his melodious narration the sense of a ghostly presence dominating the urban landscape” and “offering a dreamy and nightmarish experience of the urban” (Abbott 73). This is reinforced by the final shot in the opening sequence, in which a swarm of bees rise from the depths of the streets and overtake the Chicago skyline. Representative of the Candyman, the bees signify the power he has over the metropolis. The music also highlights the connections between the city and the title villain:

The film’s ethereal mood, which counterpoints its gritty setting... is underlined by Phillip Glass’ celebrated score. The minimalism of Glass’ compositions lends *Candyman* both a feeling of modernity (especially combined with shots of the city’s architecture in the film’s title sequence) and a sense of the sublime. (Towlson 54)

The oppression of the city is aptly showcased by the film’s focus on the plight of the project of Cabrini-Green, “a well-known housing project built between the 1940s and 1950s whose population by the 1960s was almost entirely made up of impoverished African Americans. In subsequent decades, the housing project became famous for police shootings, gang violence, and murder” (Abbott 74). Here, the project is “infused with an aura of myth and urban legend” (Abbott 70). Helen discovers that her building

was built as a housing project identical to Cabrini-Green but was instead remodeled and sold off as condos. From her window she can see Cabrini-Green, with the highway and L-line demarcating the lines between the affluent neighborhood in which she resides and the ghetto. The closeness of the ghetto to Helen's neighborhood is only eight blocks, showing how thin the lines between wealth and poverty truly are and highlighting how the city determines where these lines are drawn. The "segregation is repeatedly visualized via the overhead shots of the highway that separates the university and high-rise condos from the urban deprivation of the projects" (Abbott 75).

The poverty of Cabrini-Green is shown through its decaying structures and graffiti covered walls. Robin R. Means Coleman comments that the film "depict[s] such structures as filthy and squalid, hence implicating the surrounding neighborhood as enabling urban blight" (182). Chicago, having left the project to its own means, perpetuated its oppression which led to the seedy condition it is in. Stacey Abbott notes that "the horror of this urban reality is, literally, painted on the walls in the form of the graffiti and filth that covers the interior of the apartment buildings" (75). The audience sees this through Helen's multiple visits to the neighborhood, where trash is strewn throughout the area, graffiti depicting the Candyman covers the walls, and a disgusting public restroom is covered in feces and other bodily fluids. The film "equates the Terrible Place with the city through [its] mise-en-scene... dripping with abject urban decay and evoking a tradition of urban Gothic" (Abbott 69-70). As the film is "atypically

based in a deprived inner-city neighborhood” (Kerswell 165), *Candyman* (1992)

“reimagine[s] the conventions of the slasher genre to evoke a monstrous history of this urban space” (Abbott 77). *Candyman* primarily targets those in this neighborhood in the film, though this is due to the prevalence of the myth within it (the project is where *Candyman*’s ashes were said to have been scattered). As a result, the oppression of Daniel Robitaille becomes synonymous with the oppression of Cabrini-Green, and Robitaille becomes the courier of its revenge. Jon Towlson notes that “the monster constitutes a return in horrific form of all that society represses and/or oppresses” (12). As a representative of Cabrini-Green, *Candyman* is hell-bent on making sure that those who summon him know their plight.

The narrative returns to Chicago in *Candyman* (2021), where the focus changes from the slums of Cabrini-Green to a now gentrified Cabrini-Green. Bri connects the change to the following: “white people built the ghetto and then erased it when they realized they built the ghetto” (*Candyman* 8:22). Anthony also discusses this: “Who do you think makes the hood? The city cuts off a community and waits for it to die” (*Candyman* 44:52). This can be seen in a scene where Anthony searches for Cabrini-Green “then and now,” showing the changes in the area since 1992. The spotlight is on the earlier discussed oppression by the Chicago police department, but also the institutional nature of Chicago racism as brought on by the white government: “...how

white supremacy, it creates these spaces of rampant neglectful communities of color, and in particular black communities" (*Candyman* 13:26).

Like with the original film, the physical setting of Chicago is highlighted. An opening shot shows a street view looking up towards the Chicago sky with the skyscrapers disappearing into the fog, representing the expanse of the dark city into the clouds as it changes from day to night, as well as showing the oppression to those around it. The graffiti in Cabrini-Green is again spotlighted. An integral scene shows the power of the city and how one can disappear into it forever. After Candyman is summoned to art critic Finley's apartment, Anthony hurriedly leaves. As the camera pans out to show outside the apartment building, we see Finley attacked by the unseen Candyman, dragged across the window, and killed, leaving just a bloody line where her head was. The sounds of the city drown out any sound of her screams as she is snuffed out in a city that doesn't know she exists. With Chicago highlighted, the *Candyman* films continue the noir legacy of spotlighting cities that oppress its residents and create chaos.

Conclusion

Ian Brookes notes that "although some critics have seen film noir as a genre, it has also been described as a cycle, a series, a movement, a visual style, a lighting technique, and a mood or tone" (12-13). The fluidity of the crime noir genre lends weight to the idea that it can incorporate more than just black and white films from the

1940s. From the classic era of noir with films such as *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Naked City*, and *Kiss of Death*, to the neo-noir era of *Chinatown* and *Blade Runner*, to modern noir classics such as *Drive*, *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans*, and *Reservoir Dogs*, crime noir can cover a large range of films. Through the exploration of the tropes previously discussed, it's apparent that the *Candyman* franchise falls into it as well. With well-crafted narratives and timely themes that still resound today, the *Candyman* franchise has established itself as not just an iconic slasher series, but also as a unique slasher-crime noir hybrid that has withstood the fall from grace that the subgenre took in the late eighties. The continued legacy and popularity of the series can be traced to its hybrid status, as the use of these common tropes are a large part of what makes the series stand out and appeal to its audience. The complicated nature of the series evinces that through its examination, the slasher genre should be considered complex, emotional, and smarter than the average slice-and-dice films that critics and audiences may assume it to consist of.

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Slashing Genre Lines:

Viewing the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* Series as Action Films

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Abstract

In 1984, Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* roared into theaters, altering the slasher formula with an active heroine, wise-cracking villain, and supernatural theme. With its commercial success came five sequels, a crossover event with *Friday the 13th*, and a remake, as well as a television show and countless merchandise, turning its star Freddy Krueger into a household name. While these films are the textbook definition of a slasher film, they can also be viewed as something else: action films. Each film in the series contains the terrifying slasher tropes the genre consists of with tropes from the action genre that make the franchise into something unique. In this paper, I'll examine five tropes that exist between both this series and the action genre. The first is freneticism, highlighting the chase sequences, where I'll establish that Freddy is a more active killer who hunts his victims rather than quickly dispatching them. These coincide with vehicle sequences, which are abundant in both genres. The second is torture scenes, as Freddy takes his time with his victims compared to his predecessors Michael Myers and Jason Voorhees. Third, the "final girl" concept combines with the action heroine/hero to create hybrid heroes for the series. Fourth, I'll highlight the one-liners the series has come to be known for. Finally, I'll discuss the spectacular set pieces that make up the films. After all of these tropes combine, I'll discuss how their unique combination is a first for the slasher genre and shows that not only did the genre

mutate, but it also created a unique franchise within both the slasher genre and cinema in general.

Introduction

Following the success of *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978) and *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980), the slasher genre came fully into its own, dominating movie theaters across the United States through the early part of the eighties. Director Wes Craven, well known within the genre for such classics as *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *Swamp Thing* (1982), debuted *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), the story of a deceased child murderer with burned skin who haunts the dreams of the children of those who murdered him following his escaping of punishment for his crimes. The film, released by New Line Cinema, catapulted the character of Freddy Krueger into the spotlight, spawning a successful franchise that forayed into merchandise, a television show, and most notably, five direct sequels across the rest of the decade and into the start of the next one. In the early 2000's, a highly anticipated crossover event with the *Friday the 13th* franchise came in the form of *Freddy vs. Jason* (Yu, 2003), followed by a remake in 2010.

Yvonne Tasker refers to action films as “associated with a particular kind of scene or spectacle (explosions, chases, combat)” (2015, p. 1-2). Furthermore, she notes the genre’s “diverse history and its complex relationship to other genres” (2015, p. 3). Through the examination of five tropes present in the action genre that also appear in the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series, it can be argued that *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984) and its subsequent sequels and remake can be read as action films. It’s

imperative to distinguish a film with significant scenes of “action” that are simply part of the plot, with a narrative in which the story hinges on these action tropes; otherwise, a majority of films could be read as such. With that being said, the *Nightmare* franchise doesn’t function without these action tropes, and in reading these films through these tropes, the franchise takes on a much more nuanced light that highlights the franchise as unique within the slasher genre.

While each film has its own unique narrative, they follow the same premise (with the exception of *New Nightmare*) of a group of teenagers living on Elm Street being hunted down one by one through their dreams by Krueger. If they die in their dreams, they die in real life. Each film features, as Carol Clover calls them, a “final girl” (with the exception of *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy’s Revenge* (Sholder, 1985) which features a final boy) who faces off against Freddy and is able to defeat him (at least until the following film). Each film plays with the concept of dreams and reality, causing a unique distortion for viewers in which it is not always easy to discern whether something is really happening or if it is in the character’s imagination. Also, each film contains a varying amount of gore, sex, and violence as is requisite for the slasher genre. The action tropes within the series highlights how it “experiments with new elements from other subgenres of horror” (Petridis, 2019, p. 56), creating a unique action-slasher hybrid franchise. For the purposes of this paper, there are five main tropes that the franchise has co-opted that make it viewable as an action/slasher hybrid series.

Freneticism (Chases and Vehicles)

Freddy Krueger is the most active slasher villain of the Big Three (the other two being Michael Myers and Jason Voorhees). While Michael and Jason lumber around in their films as their victims run, Freddy frequently chases his victims in their dreams before materializing next to them, ready to go in for the kill. This is first evidenced in the opening sequence of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984), in which false protagonist Tina is chased through the boiler room of her school in her dream. Freddy's shadow is seen in the background looming near her, before he appears and slashes at her nightgown, which is shown to be affected in real life upon her waking up. Tina is later chased again in her dream before her death, in which Freddy famously "stretches his arms out, but his arms have grown to be several yards long. While his arms may not actually be that long, the film communicates Tina's feeling that his arms are overwhelming and inescapable" (Clayton, 2020, p. 11). Freddy also chases Nancy, the film's final girl, through the school after she falls asleep in class.

Scenes like these continue into later installments in the series. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (Craven, 1987), the opening sequence features the film's final girl Kristen being chased by Freddy through the house at 1428 Elm Street (featured in every film of the series) in her dream. After Kristen picks up a little girl and begins to run, Freddy is shown running behind her, almost catching up to her before she escapes.

Another example includes Krueger's stalking of Carlos in *Freddy's Dead* (Talalay, 1991) through the boiler room in his dream before his death.

The freneticism of the series is further highlighted through several vehicle sequences throughout the series. While sequences such as these aren't as common within the slasher genre as the action genre, several instances do occur in the *Nightmare* franchise. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (Sholder, 1985), the opening dream sequence features final boy Jesse on his school bus heading home. After missing their stop, several students begin to complain to the bus driver, who speeds up and takes the students on an extended sequence into a newly materialized desert while they scream in fear. The bus driver, played by Robert Englund (Freddy's actor out of make-up), turns into Freddy as the bus perilously balances on rock spires. Freddy slowly makes his way down the bus's aisle, menacingly taunting Jesse and two other girls before Jesse wakes up. This sequence is repeated at the end of the film after Jesse and his girlfriend Lisa apparently defeat Freddy, establishing Freddy's longevity and ability to return following his death. The opening sequence as well establishes Jesse as Freddy's target while creating an intense action sequence that reflects Jesse's impending nightmares.

Another integral vehicle sequence occurs in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child* (Hopkins, 1989), in which Dan, final girl Alice's boyfriend and father-to-be, falls asleep while driving his truck to see Alice. Freddy commandeers the vehicle,

tightening chest straps across Dan's body and sending the vehicle careening through traffic. Freddy then appears inside the vehicle, where he begins taunting Dan before sending him through the windshield. As Dan is dreaming this, he materializes by a swimming pool where he commandeers a motorcycle. As he is again racing through traffic, Freddy uses the bike's wiring to enter Dan's body, tying him to the vehicle. As the bike speeds up, Freddy injects the bike's fuel into Dan's veins and effectively electrocutes him. As he wakes up from the dream, Dan crashes head on into a semitruck, killing him. Alice witnesses Dan going to hell through her unborn child's dreams before running outside the diner she is working in to see the fiery wreck. Dan's death (and extensive vehicle sequence tied to it) effectively confirms that Freddy has returned (Alice having been the final girl of the previous film) and provides an emotional catalyst for her final battle against Freddy. Of all the death scenes for characters throughout the franchise, Dan's is one with more emotional heft than most, considering his impending fatherhood and survival of the prior film, hence such an extended sequence leading to his death.

The truck sequence from the aforementioned film is duplicated to a lesser extent in *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994), a meta-film that takes place outside the series' continuity, where Freddy is a demonic entity that had been trapped within the realm of cinema. Upon a lack of *Nightmare* films, Freddy escapes and "chases the people who worked in the first film" (Petridis, 2019, p. 39) such as Wes Craven, Robert Englund,

and Heather Langenkamp, who played original Final Girl Nancy. Heather's husband Chase is returning home to aid Heather, who is worried that their son Dylan is being attacked by Freddy in his dreams. As Chase falls asleep at the wheel, Freddy's glove rips through the driver's seat and plunges into Chase's chest, killing him and sending him hurtling through traffic. As he approaches a concrete barrier, Heather wakes up, depriving the audience of seeing the explosive crash yet establishing that Freddy allowed Heather to dream of her husband's death. Similar to Dan's demise, this death proves emotional as Heather, the actress of the character that the audience's sympathies historically align with, is now a widow and her son Dylan now fatherless. While the sequence is brief, it again establishes an action sequence that drives the film forward.

Later in the same film, a much more high-octane vehicle sequence occurs. Dylan, who has been sedated and is in a dream-walking state, attempts to cross a busy highway in order to return home. Heather chases after him in her car before running up a hillside to get to him. James A. Janisse notes in his YouTube series *Kill Count* that Heather gets her "nice little action hero moment" in this scene as she has to duck under an "out of control semi-truck" (11:47) and avoid other traffic obstacles. Freddy materializes in the sky and lifts Dylan up with his claws, causing several cars to swerve throughout the scene. Several car crashes occur, including one in which Heather is hit by a vehicle. This sequence works in several ways. First, it confirms Heather's suspicions that Freddy has left the movies and is now hunting down the actors who

defeated him in real life. While Heather has already been established earlier in the film as a capable and doting mother, this sequence where she runs through traffic and nearly dies establishes her as a powerful mother figure, a competent final girl, and an action heroine. Finally, it works to show that the series could effectively combine the meta-ness of the neo-slasher cycle with action and slasher tropes.

The kinetic nature of these chase and vehicle sequences may not seem similar to those of the action genre at first glance, but upon closer inspection they serve the same purpose. Each chase or vehicle sequence propels the plot forward and establishes Freddy as a force to be reckoned with while also showing that he is a much more active villain than those that preceded him. While the action hero or heroine must race against time in their chase sequences, the action-slasher heroine is shown that they are on a timer as those around them start to become victims.

Torture Scenes

Whereas the torture scenes in traditional action movies like *Casino Royale* (Campbell, 2006) are employed to test the hero's mettle, the torture scenes in the slasher film exist to slowly remove members of the cast and alert the final girl or boy that the killer is on the way. While other slasher killers may find unique ways to kill their victims, especially in later installments in their franchises, they tend to dispatch of their victims rather quickly and without emotion. Freddy, however, takes pleasure in the kill

and likes to occasionally prolong his victim's death for his (and the audiences) enjoyment. In the press kit for *The Dream Master*, it's noted that "Freddy's exploitation of the different teenager's flaws, whatever they are, results in specific and well thought out punishments for all of the victims" (1988, p. 5). While the existence of torture scenes isn't a new phenomenon within the horror genre, their combination with the other tropes discussed provides the action reading as follows.

The first example of Freddy's torture techniques occurs in the original film with Tina's death. After Tina and her boyfriend Rod engage in sex, Freddy provides "sexual punishments" (Petridis, 2019, p. 19) by attacking Tina in her dream. Tina is raised into the air where four slashes appear across her chest, splashing Rod with blood. Adam Rockoff notes how "the mutilated girl is then dragged up the walls and ceiling until she collapses in a pool of blood" (2012, p. 155). The scene sets the narrative in motion, featuring Freddy's first on-screen kill as well as framing Rod for Tina's murder. It also introduces the audience to Freddy's killing style. The now iconic scene sees Freddy use his famous bladed glove to slash across Tina's nightgown in a callback to the earlier dream sequence where she narrowly escaped his clutches. A brief torture sequence (equally as iconic) in this film involves the near drowning of Nancy in the bathtub after she falls asleep. She is pulled under the water and struggles for several seconds as Freddy's claw is seen and his maniacal laugh is heard. She then surfaces as her mother

rushes into the bathroom, having heard her screams. It's implied that Freddy releases her on purpose, choosing to prolong her suffering and attack her again another day.

An homage to Tina's scene comes in *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (Craven, 1994) in which babysitter Julie is dragged up the walls and ceiling in front of Dylan by Freddy. This scene is presented in a much darker light than the original, mainly because it is said to take place in the real world but also due to Dylan's role as witness. Whereas Rod in the original film played the role of scapegoat, Dylan is simply traumatized due to his youth and innocence. The trauma of the scene is highlighted by the slower nature of Julie's body dragging along the ceiling compared to Tina's and is punctuated by the sound of her neck breaking, something not heard in the original film. This scene directly precedes the previously discussed highway scene and leads Dylan to run from the hospital, initiating that action sequence.

Another homage to this scene exists in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Bayer, 2010) with character Kris, who is again dragged along the walls and ceiling before dying. While the remake "lacks the playful squeamishness the originals and their sequels came to embody" (Wetmore, 2012, p. 13), its execution ultimately produces a comedic effect compared to the two previous iterations of the scene. A more terrifying and explicit reference to torture in this film comes with the death of main character Jesse, Kris' boyfriend. After falling asleep in his jail cell (having been framed for her murder), Jesse finds himself dreaming of Freddy's boiler room, where after briefly running, Jesse is

killed when Freddy's glove bursts through his chest through the back. After showing Jesse's cellmate panicking when Jesse collapses in a pool of blood, we return to the dream where Freddy has Jesse hung upside down. Freddy states, "Did you know that after the heart stops beating the brain can function for well over seven minutes? We got six more minutes to play" (Bayer, 2010, 40:34). Freddy then chuckles as Jesse begins screaming. While we don't see it take place, this darker version of Freddy much more clearly states his affinity for torture.

Freddy's tendency to torture his victims is shown again in *Freddy's Revenge* (Sholder, 1985) with the death of Coach Schneider. Freddy, who has been possessing final boy Jesse and using him to commit murder, attacks the coach in the showers of the gym where the coach had been making Jesse run laps. After bombarding him with basketballs and tennis balls flying all around the room, Schneider is stripped naked, tied up with jump ropes, and whipped with towels on his buttocks multiple times before having his back slashed with Freddy's glove. While the attacker is invisible during this scene, we see Jesse with the glove afterwards, indicating that he unwittingly committed the crime. This torture/murder sets Jesse up as the proxy killer of the story and confirms to Jesse that Freddy is using him as such.

One of the franchise's most iconic moments takes the form of both psychological and physical torture, something Freddy specializes in. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child* (Hopkins, 1989), one of the main characters is Greta, a model who is

constantly hounded by her mother about keeping up appearances and staying away from fattening foods. At a socialite-style dinner, Greta falls asleep at the table and Freddy appears as a waiter, stuffing food into Greta's mouth grotesquely until she balloons up with food falling out of her mouth. He then proceeds to dance with her. In real life, Greta begins choking in her sleep at the dinner table in front of her mother and her guests before dropping dead. Tony Williams notes that Freddy "stuffs her with food emphasizing her mother's earlier injunctions concerning the social proprieties of public dining over private dieting" (2015, p. 236). Freddy specifically targets his victim's fears, playing on both the nightmare aspect and heightening the sense of torture before they die.

This psychological and physical torture was seen earlier in the franchise in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (Russell, 1987) with character Phillip, who specializes in making puppets. After he falls asleep, Freddy rips his tendons out of his body, turning him into a puppet of his own, and walks him to the top of a tower at the asylum where the film is set. Freddy then appears in the sky as if mocking God and severs the tendons, causing Philip to fall from the tower and die. This is the first death of the film and alerts the other children at the asylum that Freddy is coming for them. It also establishes Freddy's modus operandi of targeting weaknesses and desires unique to each of his victims while jumpstarting the action of the movie.

Debbie, a fitness fanatic in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (Harlin, 1988), is attacked in a similar way by Freddie. After falling asleep while working out, Freddy appears above her at the weight station, pushing down on the dumbbell until Debbie's arms break. He then turns her into a roach (her biggest fear), traps her in a roach motel, and crushes her to death. Though final girl Alice and her boyfriend Dan race in a truck to save Debbie, Freddy has put them in a time loop, making them start the sequence multiple times from right before they enter the truck. They ultimately fail to save her, though Alice, who has the power to absorb people's dream powers, gains Debbie's power as a result. This power will be discussed later as it involves her final fight with Freddy.

Carlos, the aforementioned victim from *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (Talalay, 1991) uses a hearing aid due to abuse from his mother as a child, who would aggressively clean out his ears with a cotton swab when he misbehaved. Freddy takes on the guise of his mother in his nightmare, shoving an extra long cotton swab through his left ear and out the right, removing his eardrums and then cutting off Carlo's right ear. After being thrown by Freddy into the boiler room, Carlos begs for his hearing back, and Freddy seemingly obliges when he tosses Carlos his hearing aid. The hearing aid then latches itself onto Carlo's ear, amplifying the quietest of sounds into becoming deafeningly loud to continue his torture. Freddy tosses multiple pins onto the ground

as Carlos begs him not to, then scratches his claws onto a chalkboard, causing Carlo's eyes to bleed before the hearing aid explodes, killing him.

In *Freddy vs. Jason* (Yu, 2003), Freddy's torture victim is Jason Voorhees, his slasher villain rival. Prior to their final battle, Freddy gains the upper hand on Jason, slamming him around the boiler room walls and ceilings, showing him his mother's severed head, shoving a blade into his skull to access his mind, and using Jason's aquaphobia against him by causing the ceiling pipes to pour rain. Finally, Freddy makes Jason relive his childhood drowning in his dream. While Jason typically kills indiscriminately (anyone in his vicinity), his torture at the claws of Freddy sets up a meaningful final battle and allows the audience to view Jason as more sympathetic. These torture scenes effectively establish Freddy as a slasher killer who is always ““playing” with his victims” (Petridis, 2019, p. 57) and thinking of new ways to dispatch them as opposed to his contemporaries.

Action Heroines and Heroes

While the idea of a final girl itself doesn't necessarily connote “action hero,” the *Nightmare* franchise ups the ante regarding its “heroines who do battle with Freddy Krueger” (Nelson, 2018, p. 88). As it's already been established that Freddy is a more active killer, he ends up doing directly fighting with his victims more than Jason or Michael, who end up dispatching their victims prior to any fight being able to take

place majority of the time. This results in many heroines engaging in hand-to-hand combat with Freddy. The most iconic of these heroes is Nancy Thompson, the heroine of the original film. Much effort is made to stress Nancy's tenacity and courage, shown immediately through an early scene in which she grabs a switchblade out of Rod's hands and closes it, symbolizing her coolness under pressure. As the film progresses and Nancy begins to realize what she is up against, she acts by searching for Freddy in her dreams and attempting to bring him out into the real world in order to kill him. As she states, "I'm into survival" (Craven, 1984, 55:35). Sotiris Petridis notes that Nancy is a "more active and sophisticated version of a Final Girl" as she is the "one who goes to find Freddy in his own world, trying to find a solution to how to stop the murders, and finally, she's the one who sets up traps and brings Freddy to the real world, which makes him vulnerable" (2019, p. 63-64). When Nancy does find Freddy in her dream, she tackles him and grapples with him face-to-face. Carol Clover writes of Nancy:

"The grittiest of the final girls is Nancy of *A Nightmare on Elm Street I*. Aware in advance that the killer will be paying her a visit, she plans an elaborate defense. When he enters the house, she dares him to come at her, then charges him in direct attack. As they struggle, he springs the contraptions she has set so that he is stunned by a swinging sledgehammer, jolted and half-incinerated by an electrical charge, and so on. When he rises yet again, she chases him around the house, bashing him with a chair." (p. 38)

Nancy ultimately defeats Freddy (until the sequel), turning her back on him and metaphorically taking away his power. Prior to her death at the hands of a fiery Freddy (set aflame by Nancy), Nancy's mother says to Nancy: "You face things. That's your nature" (Craven, 1984, 1:13:38). These actions, combined with her decision making and solo status as survivor (other than her father, who exists outside the targeted characters) make Nancy notable as the first slasher action hero.

Nancy returns in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (Russell, 1987) as a much wiser action heroine, now a psychology graduate student specializing in nightmares. When it's made apparent that the young residents of Westin Hills Psychiatric Hospital are facing Freddy in their dreams, Nancy comes to the rescue and convinces Dr. Neil Gordon to aid the students. New final girl Kristen Parker has the "ability to draw others into her dreams, allowing her to assemble a group of people together to defeat Freddy" (Clayton, 2020, p. 34) and accidentally pulls Nancy into her dream when Freddy attacks her, allowing Nancy to see that Freddy is back and Freddy to see that his ultimate nemesis has returned. Nancy aids the rest of the kids throughout the film, teaching them how to control their dreams in order to fight Freddy. Nancy is ultimately "dispatched by the monster, making way for a new cast to take over the fight" (West, 2018, p. 124) after falling victim to a trick of Freddy's. However, Nancy is still able to rescue the films versions of the damsel in distress (the teenagers).

In fact, nearly the entire cast of *Dream Warriors* function as action heroes. It's established early on in the film that dream powers exist, powers that reflect their real-life personalities and can be used to do battle against Freddy. This was foreshadowed in the original film when main character Glen discusses the Balinese way of dreaming and references "dream skills." Kristen, with a fear of being alone, has the power to pull others into her dreams, as well as gymnastic abilities. The mute Joey has a sonic scream that he uses to battle Freddy in a hall of mirrors, the Dungeons and Dragons loving Will becomes a wizard master with magical powers (destroying his wheelchair in the process, allowing him to walk), Kincaid has super strength, and Taryn becomes a rebel with switchblades. Each of these characters go toe-to-toe with Freddy, though Taryn and Will don't survive the end of the film as "Freddy uses their fantasies as weapons against them" (Williams, 2015, p. 233). The characters take on the role of superheroes in order to fight Freddy, creating the first superhero/slasher hybrid film. Kristen, Kincaid, and Joey prevail in the end, defeating Freddy until the next film. As Kincaid says, "Let's go kick the motherfucker's ass all over dreamland" (Russell, 1987, 1:09:11). While Dr. Gordon and the returning John Thompson, Nancy's father, don't develop their own superpowers, they do briefly battle the skeleton of Freddy as they attempt to burn his remains.

The following installment, *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (Harlin, 1988) sees the return of Kristen, Kincaid, and Joey (with Kristen now being played by

actress Tuesday Knight rather than Patricia Arquette). They all retain their superpowers, with Kristen pulling Kincaid and Joey into her dream at the start of the film. Upon Freddy's return, Kincaid briefly does battle with Freddy, using his super strength to throw a car on top of him. Alice Johnson, who takes over for Kristen as the final girl of this film, has the power to siphon the dream powers of those who die before her, transforming her into the ultimate action hero. Alice is at first glance a shy and reserved girl with little personality, though as her friends die around her and she "comes to absorb aspects of them into herself" (Shimabukuro, 2018, p. 63), she comes into her own and becomes much more confident. Her brother Rick, a martial arts expert who had earlier battled Freddy using these abilities before dying (even managing to knock Freddy's glove off) passes his power to Alice. In an action montage reminiscent of *Batman Forever* (Schumacher, 1995), Alice gears up with items from those that she has lost (such as belts and karate bands) with the camera focusing on her preparing for battle. Alice slowly removes photos that had been blocking her mirror, acknowledging her role as a confident action heroine and looking at her own reflection for the first time in the film. Alice then fights Freddy and wins hand-to-hand combat against him, freeing all of Freddy's victims from their hellish purgatory, something no other final girl had been able to do. Alice continues her action heroine role in *The Dream Child* (Hopkins, 1989), ultimately defeating Freddy again while pregnant. Alice's survival of both films and lack of reappearance later in the franchise deprives Freddy of a chance to kill her

once and for all, proving that she has transcended Nancy and Kristen as the ultimate final girl/slasher-action heroine.

Another action hero is present in *The Dream Child* (Hopkins, 1989) with Mark, a comic book artist who takes the form of the Phantom Prowler (his comic book creation) in order to fight Freddy. The Phantom Prowler opens fire on Freddy, shooting him multiple times in an action sequence that recalls early gangster films. Freddy ultimately turns into Super Freddy, a villain of “comic book fantasies” (Williams, 2015, p. 215) who even spouts superhero puns: “Faster than a bastard maniac, more powerful than a loco madman!” (Hopkins, 1989, 1:08:16). Mark ultimately dies when Freddy shreds his body into pieces within the dream.

Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare (Talalay, 1991) feature two final girls and a final boy in the form of Tracy, Maggie, and Doc. Both Doc and Tracy fight Freddy in hand-to-hand combat, with Tracy using her kickboxing skills and Doc beating Freddy with a bat. It is Maggie, however, who takes on the role of the action heroine in order to defeat Freddy. Maggie, having been revealed to be Freddy's daughter, battles him hand-to-hand, also using Chinese throwing stars, knives, and arrows to pin him to a wall. Maggie finally uses Freddy's own glove to stab him in the stomach before shoving a homemade explosive device into Freddy's chest, blowing him up and killing him. Maggie therefore holds the title of the one who ultimately destroyed Freddy, though the studio revived him in order to make *Freddy vs. Jason* (Yu, 2003).

Wes Craven's New Nightmare (Craven, 1994) sees the return of Heather Langenkamp (the actress who played Nancy in the original film), though she is playing a fictionalized version of herself as she is "called upon to take the lead and be the final survivor" (Petridis, 2019, p. 80). While not as much of an action hero as her fictional character Nancy, Heather still stands out as an active heroine who risks everything to save her son (namely in the chase sequence previously discussed). In the final sequence of the film, Heather and son Dylan are able to trap Freddy inside the furnace of his underground lair before causing the entire room to explode in a fiery conclusion that allows Heather to take on a different role: that of the "fictionalized" action heroine. As the prior six films are established as movies within this continuity, Heather is the only heroine able to defeat Freddy in "real life," allowing her (and by proxy her character Nancy) to achieve ultimate peace. Heather finishes the film by reading the script of *New Nightmare* to her son, furthering the meta idea behind the film, and allowing the action heroine a much-needed respite. Whereas Nancy had to rely on her own wits in order to save the day, Heather has her son to rely on, allowing a maturation for both characters.

While the Nancy of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Bayer, 2010) doesn't set traps and isn't quite as creative as her original counterpart, Sotiris Petridis notes that "Nancy stands out with her activeness and the influence she exerts on the narrative...her decision not to run and confront [Freddy] puts her in the not so conventional role of an energetic female character... the fearless girl moves the action and the passive boy

follows the girl” (2019, p. 121-122). While the least action centric film of the series, the remake provides Nancy an active role in which she ultimately saves an injured Quentin (rescuing the damsel).

Freddy vs. Jason (Yu, 2003) features Freddy himself taking on the role of action hero, depending on what side the viewer takes. Freddy, impotent in recent years, revives Jason from Hell in order to do his killing for him. As Jason is sent to kill on Elm Street, Freddy assumes that the fear will be that he has returned, allowing Krueger to take credit for Jason’s kills and providing him enough power to return for good. However, “Jason becomes uncontrollable, resulting in a showdown between the two characters” (Clayton, 2020, p. 30). As Jason and Freddy are pushed to the forefront of the narrative, they each take on the role of anti-hero, with the fans deciding which one they want to prevail depending on which franchise they identify with more. The film itself functions as a Freddy-centric film, with his desire to come back into the lives of the Elm Street children at the forefront of the narrative. While it is a “deceptively straightforward story” (Clayton, p. 2020, p. 40), the “evolution of the narrative confronts them in a battle that will judge which franchise will prevail” (Petridis, 2019, p. 106). The battle itself lasts about fifteen minutes, with both Freddy and Jason gaining the upper hand multiple times throughout. Air tanks are tossed, punches are thrown, fires are set, and the two even switch weapons at one point in order to battle each other. Through the intervention of final girl and boy Lori and Will, Jason is given home field advantage,

with the climactic battle taking place at Camp Crystal Lake. However, the fight ultimately ends in a stalemate, with Jason carrying Freddy's decapitated head out of the lake as the film draws to a close. However, Freddy winks at the audience, reinforcing the idea that Freddy can never be killed. With the last image being of Freddy (and his laughter heard as the screen cuts to black), it can be determined that the fight did lean more in Freddy's direction, with Jason portrayed as a weaker opponent both physically and psychologically. This traditional action flick leans more heavily towards the *Nightmare* side story-wise, and as such becomes the most action centric film in the series and promotes Freddy to action "hero".

Lori Campbell, the aforementioned final girl of *Freddy vs. Jason* (Yu, 2003), also briefly acts as an action heroine. In the final moments of Freddy and Jason's battle, Lori lights two torches, using one to set fire to part of the dock and one to blow up a propane tank nearby. After the explosion sends both villains careening into Crystal Lake, Lori and Will recover on the dock before being confronted by Freddy a final time. When Jason stabs Freddy with his own detached arm and claw, Lori picks up Jason's machete and decapitates Freddy, ending the battle.

While the *Nightmare* franchise isn't unique in having final girls and boys leading the narrative, by writing them as action heroes and heroines the franchise carves out a unique slot within the genre, even going so far as to promote its own villain as an anti-

hero against a noteworthy adversary. The combination of action heroes and heroines with action heavy sequences further positions the series as an action-slasher hybrid.

The One-Liner

Cynthia M. King notes that “humor has remained a popular weapon of choice among Hollywood’s greatest heroes. In classic action dramas, stars such as John Wayne and, later, Clint Eastwood and Arnold Schwarzenegger, fire off as many sarcastic one-liners as they do bullets” (2019, p. 140). While “killers in slasher films had tended to be hulking behemoths devoid of any personality” (Rockoff, 2012, p. 154), Freddy is the most comedic of the Big Three, constantly cracking one-liners much like an action hero. While the *Elm Street* series for the most part aren’t directly comedies, they do feature more comedic elements than other franchises such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Candyman*. The level of one-liners and comedy varies from film to film.

The first two films in the series are rather low on comedy, as Freddy Kreuger is a much scarier entity than he is in later entries. The now iconic Freddy quote “I’m your boyfriend now, Nancy” (Craven, 1984, 1:07:17) appears in the original right before Freddy kills Nancy’s boyfriend Glen (Johnny Depp). Making the bottom of the phone Nancy is holding turn into Freddy’s mouth complete with tongue, the line is comedic yet sinister, as it alerts Nancy to her boyfriends impending doom while also hinting at child molestation. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy’s Revenge* (Sholder, 1985), we

get perhaps the darkest version of Freddy, though the one-liners are still present, namely with “Help yourself, fucker!” (Sholder, 1985, 1:10:08) right before he murders a high school student attempting to calm him down. The one-liners in these films exist less to make the audience laugh and more to drive home how intimidating and evil Freddy is, though they still elicit a few chuckles.

Comedic Freddy really comes into his own in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (Russell, 1987), with some of his most iconic one-liners coming from this film. Examples of this include “Welcome to primetime, bitch!” (Russell, 1987, 39:57) before slamming a wannabe TV stars head into a television, asking famous socialite Zsa Zsa Gabor (playing herself in a character’s dream) “Who gives a fuck what you think?” (Russell, 1987, 39:13) before killing her, using tongues to tie main character Joey to a bed frame and asking “What’s wrong? Feeling tongue-tied?” (Russell, 1987, 51:22), shouting “I said, Where’s the fucking bourbon?!” (Russell, 1987, 1:12:06) at Kristen’s mother (in her dream) before cutting her head off, telling drug addict Taryn “Let’s get high” (Russell, 1987, 1:14:28) and then giving her a fatal overdose of heroin, and telling the wheelchair bound Will (who can walk in his dreams) that “It’s back in the saddle again” (Russell, 1987, 1:15:53) before damaging his legs and subsequently killing him. Freddy even delivers a written one-liner, carving “Come and get him, bitch” (Russell, 1987, 59:18) into a comatose Joey’s chest, taunting Nancy. The one-liners present in this film

are where Freddy turns from sinister entity to comedic killer, changing the nature of the character for the next several installments.

It should be noted that the previously discussed Kincaid, one of the Dream Warriors and a lead hero in the film, also has several one-liners similar to those of iconic heroes in the action genre. Examples include “Now it’s my dick that’s killing me” (Russell, 1987, 25:46) when told that the teenagers’ nightmares are due to moral guilt over sexual transgressions, “Let’s go kick the motherfucker’s ass all over dreamland” (Russell, 1987, 1:09:16) before entering his dream to fight Freddy, and taunting Freddy within the dream by shouting out “Krueger, pussy!” (Russell, 1987, 1:17:50). These one-liners mixed with his comedic, yet tough character and fearlessness helped turn Kincaid into a fan-favorite character.

Unfortunately, Kincaid dies rather quickly in the next entry, *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (Harlin, 1988). After getting stabbed in the stomach, Kincaid tells Krueger “I’ll see you in Hell,” to which Freddy responds, “Tell ‘em Freddy sent ya” (Harlin, 1988, 20:01), continuing Freddy’s increasing comedy. Joey, having survived the previous film, is also killed, drowning as Krueger asks, “How’s this for a wet dream?” (Harlin, 1988, 22:35). Alice Johnson, the new final girl, gets her own one-liner, telling Freddy to “Rest in hell” (Harlin, 1988, 1:24:56) after his apparent defeat. Other Freddy one-liners include “Bon appetit, bitch!” in *The Dream Child* (Hopkins, 1989, 39:47) before feeding Greta to herself, telling Lori that he has “always had a thing for

the whores that live in [the Elm Street] house” in *Freddy vs. Jason* (Yu, 2003, 1:15:06), and asking Dylan if he’s ever played “skin the cat” before killing Julie in *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* (Craven, 1994, 1:21:09), amongst numerous others. Even the darker version of Freddy played by Jackie Earle Hayley in the 2010 remake shows his penchant for the one-liner, asking Nancy “How about we hang first?” (Bayer, 2010, 1:21:29) before showing her the dangling bodies of her friends. Whereas the one-liners are done by the hero in the action movie, the slasher villain takes this role in the *Nightmare* slasher/action hybrid series.

The comedic elements of Freddy are taken to new heights in *Freddy’s Dead: The Final Nightmare* (Talalay, 1991), by far the most humor-centered film. Adam Rockoff notes that:

“Among the film’s countless absurdities are a parody of *The Wizard of Oz* with Freddy as the Wicked Witch of the West, a video game in which Freddy has the power to control the film’s characters, and most pointless of all, an unwelcomed cameo by Roseanne Barr and Tom Arnold” (2012, p. 174).

The film is not typically a fan-favorite, as it features Krueger’s descent into what is essentially a Saturday morning cartoon character. The one-liners continue, with memorable ones including “Nice hearing from you, Carlos” (Talalay, 1991, 38:34) after killing Carlos via hearing aid and writing “You’re fucked” (Talalay, 1991, 27:11) on a

map when the main characters get lost. The one-liners that populate these films, combined with the other tropes (especially the final trope), highlight the franchise's meshing with the action genre.

The Spectacle of It All

Yvonne Tasker, in discussing the elements of the action genre, write that “the action movie typically downplays dialogue and complex character development or interaction in favor of spectacular set-pieces” (2015, 12-13). Indeed, spectacle could be considered the primary component of the action film, with this coming in many forms. An emphasis on special effects, set design, and destruction often populate the most popular films of the genre. The *A Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise stands out within the slasher genre in that spectacle is also thrust to the forefront of the narrative. While the first two films are toned down compared to later entries, audiences are still treated to scenes such as Freddy expanding the wall with his claw above Nancy's bed as she sleeps in the original film and setting fire to Nancy's mother in the climax. A spectacular action sequence occurs in *Freddy's Revenge* (Sholder, 1985) that highlights the series' increasingly spectacular nature. Freddy, having obtained the power to affect the real world outside of dreams, escapes through Jesse and appears at a pool party held by lead girl Lisa. Karra Shimabukuro notes “the high body count at Lisa's pool party” (2019, p. 62), establishing a rare occasion in a slasher film where multiple victims die in one fell swoop. While the director “pared down the films violence and gore”

(Rockoff, 2012, p. 159), Freddy kills multiple teenagers while they all frantically run and try to escape after he sets the boiling pool on fire. Though heavily criticized for changing the mythology of the series by letting Freddy influence the real world, the film creates an intense action sequence that sets the movie apart from the rest of the franchise. It also sets up the electrifying finale where Jesse and Lisa are able to defeat Freddy.

The series truly begins to become one centered around special effects with the third entry, *Dream Warriors* (Russell, 1987). From the morphing of a building into the Elm Street house in the opening scene, to Kristen pulling Nancy into her dream (she is seen falling through a chair and then tumbling into the nightmare), to the wizard effects given to main character Will, this film features the turning point from mild action-slasher hybrid to full on action spectacle. *Dream Master* (Harlin, 1988), often called the “MTV Nightmare” (Englund, 2013, p. 175) of the series due to its style resembling that of a music video, continues the trend and heightens the action. The press kit for the film describes how “an unprecedented portion of the money [was] spent to achieve a multitude of daring and high caliber special effects that are sure to keep movie-goers on the edge of their seats” (1988, p. 2). We see this several times, with Kristen pulling Joey and Kincaid into her dream, a sequence involving a tunnel full of murdered souls, Kristen’s death inside a furnace, and a beach sequence involving Freddy exploding through the sand.

Perhaps the most ambitious film of the series in terms of spectacle is *A Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child* (Hopkins, 1989). Several scenes employ special effects, including Freddy's rebirth in a church, an ultrasound scene showing Alice's unborn child being fed the souls of Freddy's victims, and main character Yvonne's attack and her being dragged into her dream. However, one of the biggest scenes of spectacle in the series is in the climax of the film in which Freddy chases Alice and her son Jacob up and down stairs in his lair, which has taken on the guise of an M. C. Escher style labyrinth. Prior to *Freddy vs. Jason* (Yu, 2003), this film may be the best example of the spectacular action-heavy series that *Nightmare* had become.

While less spectacle heavy, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (Craven, 1994) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Bayer, 2010) still feature it. *New Nightmare* (Craven, 1994) features several earthquake scenes that rattle the house Heather Langenkamp lives in, creating a disaster movie effect that reflects Freddy's terror. The film also features Freddy's previously discussed lair which is laden with special effects and ultimately blown up in a fiery explosion. The 2010 remake features special effects often in the dream sequences, especially in lead character's Kris' dream when her classroom shifts into a darker, destroyed version as Freddy confronts her. Another major action sequence occurs in which we see the Elm Street parents attack the boiler room with a "Freddy before his biological death" (Petridis, 2019, p. 121). As final boy Quentin watches on (in his dream), we see his father throw a can of gasoline into the boiler room

window, setting both the room and Krueger aflame before ultimately exploding.

Whereas earlier entries used action spectacle to highlight the fantastical nature of the series, these two films utilize it to bring a grittier, more realistic feeling to the franchise.

Freddy vs. Jason (Yu, 2003) is one big spectacle from start to finish. From Freddy attempting to attack character Blake (shown with special effects as he becomes a large shadow towering over Blake) to a rave scene in which Jason attacks multiple teens (reminiscent of the pool scene from the second film), to the final fight between the title characters, the film functions as a pretty straight-forward action film with slasher elements rather than the other way around. Their fight, complete with rock music score, features Freddy throwing Jason around (with pinball noise effects), gas cannisters being lobbed at Jason in slow motion, Freddy leaping out of the water (also in slow motion) and landing like a superhero, and ends with a gigantic explosion that would seem more at home in a James Bond film than a slasher film. Finally, spectacle comes in the form of 3D with *Freddy's Dead* (Talalay, 1991). Karra Shimabukuro notes that the "climax of the film makes extensive use of the 3D effect with actors stabbing weapons awkwardly at the screen and audience" (2018, p. 60). The spectacle of these two films focuses less on enhancing the terror and more entertaining the audience, a trait more in line with the action genre. Whether using spectacular set pieces and actions scenes to frighten viewers, make them laugh, or simply entertain them, the *A Nightmare on Elm Street*

series stands out as a special effects laden, visually stunning slasher franchise that has carved out its own unique place within the genre.

Conclusion

The term “action” is a broad one that can be used to encompass many things, including explosions, gunplay, and even disaster sequences. The slasher genre on the other hand is typically straightforward: a person with a bladed weapon stalks a group of teenagers and dispatches them one by one in grotesque and horrifying ways. Where *A Nightmare on Elm Street* differs is in how it utilizes action sequences: rather than simply supporting the slasher narrative, the series revolves around these sequences. If these sequences are taken out, the narrative changes rather than staying the same. In this series we have action heroes and heroines battling against their tormentor, rather than simply running. Freddy Krueger is a much more frenetic villain, actively chasing his victims rather than simply materializing in front of them. He also takes his time with them, putting them through the ringer through torture that recalls the tests action heroes are put through. One-liners and spectacular actions scenes abound.

While simply calling these films action movies may not seem to serve a point, it shows that the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series has done something unique within the slasher genre by implementing action heavy sequences and introducing action-centric leading characters. The *Nightmare* series functions as that of a slasher action hybrid,

both entertaining and scaring its audience through its use of slasher conventions combined with those of the action film. This shows that the genre itself is much more nuanced than critics may give it credit for and emphasizes that the *Nightmare* series is about more than bad dreams.

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Research Paper 2 (Original) – Instructor Comments

*After contacting Dr. Jeff Brown, I was unable to obtain any comments from the original essay.

Slashing Genre Lines:

Viewing the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* Films as Action Movies

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POPC 6800: Action Movies

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Abstract

In 1984, Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* roared into theaters, altering the slasher formula with an active heroine, wise-cracking villain, and supernatural theme. With its commercial success came five sequels, a crossover event with *Friday the 13th*, and a remake, as well as a television show and countless merchandise, turning its star Freddy Krueger into a household name. While these films are the textbook definition of a slasher film, they can also be viewed as something else: action films. Each film in the series contains the terrifying slasher tropes the genre consists of with tropes from the action genre that make the franchise into something unique. In this paper, I'll examine four tropes that exist between both this series and the action genre. The first is chase sequences, where I'll establish that Freddy is a more active killer who hunts his victims rather than quickly dispatching them. These coincide with vehicle sequences, which are abundant in both genres. The second is torture scenes, as Freddy takes his time with his victims compared to his predecessors Michael Myers and Jason Voorhees. Thirdly, the Final Girl concept combines with the action heroine to create hybrid heroes for the series. Finally, I'll highlight the humor the series has come to be known for. After all of these tropes combine, I'll discuss how their unique combination is a first for the slasher genre and shows that not only did the genre mutate, but it also created a unique franchise within both the slasher genre and cinema in general.

Introduction

Yvonne Tasker refers to action films as “associated with narratives of quest and discovery, and spectacular scenes of combat, violence and pursuit” (p. 2). Furthermore, she notes the genre’s “diverse history and its complex relationship to other genres” (p. 3). Through the acknowledgement that the action genre delves quite heavily into aspects of other genres, so much so that certain films can be read through the lens of an alternative genre, it can be argued that the film *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven 1984) and its subsequent sequels and remake can be read as action films. It’s imperative to distinguish a film with significant scenes of “action” that are simply part of the plot, with a narrative in which the story hinges on these action tropes, otherwise a majority of films could be read as such. That being said, the *Nightmare* franchise doesn’t function without these action tropes, and in reading these films through an action lens the franchise takes on a much more nuanced light that highlights the franchise as unique within the slasher genre due to its hyperactive nature.

Following the success of *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978) and *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham 1980), the slasher genre came fully into its own, dominating movie theaters across the United States in the early part of the eighties. Director Wes Craven, well known within the genre for such classics as *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *Swamp Thing* (1982), came up with the idea for *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), the story of a deceased child murderer with burned skin who haunts the dreams of the

children of those who murdered him following his escaping of punishment for his crimes. The film, released by New Line Cinema, catapulted the character of Freddy Krueger into the spotlight, spawning a successful franchise that forayed into merchandise, a television show, and most notably, five sequels across the rest of the decade and into the start of the next one. In the early 2000's, a highly anticipated crossover event with the *Friday the 13th* franchise came in the form of *Freddy vs. Jason* (Yu 2003), followed by a remake in 2010.

While each film has its own unique narrative, they follow the same premise (with the exception of *New Nightmare*) of a group of teenagers living on Elm Street being hunted down one by one through their dreams by Krueger. If they die in their dreams, they die in real life. Each film features, as Carol Clover calls them, a “final girl” (with the exception of *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge* (Sholder 1985) which features a final boy) who faces off against Freddy and is able to defeat him (at least until the following film). Each film plays with the concept of dreams and reality, causing a unique distortion for viewers in which it is not always easy to discern whether something is really happening or if it is in the character's imagination. Also, each film contains a varying amount of gore, sex, and violence. Finally, each film contains tropes of action films to some degree, highlighting how the series “experiments with new elements from other subgenres of horror” (Petridis, 2019, p. 56), creating a unique

action-slasher hybrid franchise. For the purposes of this paper, there are four main tropes that the franchise has coopted that make it viewable as an action series.

Chase/Vehicle Scenes

Freddy Krueger is the most active slasher villain of the Big Three (the other two being Michael Myers and Jason Voorhees). While Jason does run in some of his early films and in his remake, the majority of the franchise features him as a quiet stalker who suddenly appears near his victims as they run, negating the concept of a chase sequence. The same is true for Michael Myers, who never runs in any of his films. Freddy, on the other hand, frequently chases his victims in their dreams before materializing next to them, ready to go in for the kill. This is first evidenced in the opening sequence of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven 1984), in which false protagonist Tina is chased through the boiler room of her school in her dream. Freddy's shadow is seen in the background looming near her, before he appears and slashes at her nightgown, which is shown to be affected in real life upon her waking up. Tina is later chased again in her dream before her death, in which Freddy famously "stretches his arms out, but his arms have grown to be several yards long. While his arms may not actually be that long, the film communicates Tina's feeling that his arms are overwhelming and inescapable" (Clayton, 2020, p. 11). Freddy also chases Nancy, the film's final girl, through the school after she falls asleep in her class. These early chase scenes are repeated throughout the series and establish that Freddy is the most

energetic of movie serial killers, and any attempt to elude him will take the form of an extended action sequence in which the potential victim must fight against time, much as in how the action hero of their genre must fight against time in their chase scenes.

While vehicle sequences aren't as common within the slasher genre as the action genre, several instances do occur in the *Nightmare* franchise. In *Freddy's Revenge*, the opening dream sequence features final boy Jesse on his school bus on the way home. After missing their stop, several students begin to complain to the bus driver, who speeds up and takes the students on an extended sequence into a materialized desert while they scream in fear. The bus driver, played by Robert Englund, Freddy's actor out of make-up, turns into Freddy as the bus perilously balances on rock spires. Freddy slowly makes his way down the bus's aisle, menacingly taunting Jesse and two other girls before Jesse wakes up. This sequence is repeated at the end of the film after Jesse and his girlfriend Lisa apparently defeat Freddy, establishing Freddy's longevity and ability to return following his death. The opening sequence as well establishes Jesse as Freddy's target while creating an intense action sequence that reflects Jesse's impending nightmares.

While not a traditional chase sequence, an action sequence occurs later in the same film that highlights the frenzied pace of *Freddy's Revenge*. Freddy, having obtained the power to affect the real world outside of dreams, escapes through Jesse and appears at a pool party held by Final Girl Lisa. Karra Shimabukuro notes "the high body count

at Lisa's pool party" (2019, p. 62), establishing a rare occasion in a slasher film where multiple victims die in one fell swoop. While the director "pared down the films violence and gore" (Rockoff, 2012, p. 159), Freddy kills multiple teenagers while they all frantically run and try to escape after he sets the boiling pool on fire. Though heavily criticized for changing the mythology of the series by letting Freddy influence the real world, the film creates an intense action sequence that sets the movie apart from the rest of the franchise. It also sets up the electrifying finale where Jesse and Lisa are able to defeat Freddy.

Another integral vehicle sequence occurs in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child* (Hopkins 1989), in which Dan, final girl Alice's boyfriend and father-to-be, falls asleep while driving his truck to see Alice. Freddy commandeers the vehicle, tightening chest straps across Dan's body and sending the vehicle careening through traffic. Freddy then appears inside the vehicle, where he begins taunting Dan before sending him through the windshield. As Dan is dreaming this, he materializes by a swimming pool where he commandeers a motorcycle. As he is again racing through traffic, Freddy uses the bike's wiring to enter Dan's body, tying him to the vehicle. As the bike speeds up, Freddy injects the bike's fuel into Dan's veins and effectively electrocutes him. As he wakes up from the dream, Dan crashes head on into a semitruck, killing him. Alice witnesses Dan going to hell through her unborn child's dreams before running outside of the diner she is working in to see the fiery wreck.

Dan's death (and extensive action sequence tied to it) effectively confirms that Freddy has returned (Alice having been the Final Girl of the previous film), as well as providing an emotional catalyst for her final battle against Freddy. Of all the death scenes for characters throughout the franchise, Dan's is one with more emotional heft than most, considering his impending fatherhood and survival of the prior film, hence such an extended action sequence leading to his death.

The truck sequence from the aforementioned film is duplicated to a lesser extent in *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994), a meta-film that takes place outside the series' continuity, where Freddy is a demonic entity that had been trapped within the realm of cinema, but upon a lack of *Nightmare* films, escapes and "chases the people who worked in the first film" (Petridis, 2019, p. 39) such as Wes Craven, Robert Englund, and Heather Langenkamp, who played original Final Girl Nancy. Heather's husband Chase is returning home to aid Heather, who is worried that their son Dylan is being attacked by Freddy in his dreams. As Chase falls asleep at the wheel, Freddy's glove rips through the driver's seat and plunges into Chase's chest, killing him and sending him hurtling through traffic. As he approaches a concrete barrier, Heather wakes up, depriving the audience of seeing a spectacular crash yet establishing that Freddy allowed Heather to dream of her husband's death. Similar to Dan's death, this death proves emotional as Heather, the actress of the character that the audience's sympathies historically align with, is now a widow and her son Dylan is now fatherless. While the

sequence is brief, it again establishes an action sequence that drives the film forward.

Integral also to the narrative are several earthquake sequences that turn the film into a disaster movie of sorts, as the earthquakes form a backdrop that mimics Freddy's terror.

Later in the same film, a much more high-octane vehicle sequence occurs. Dylan, who has been sedated and is in a dream-walking state, attempts to cross a busy highway in order to return home. Heather chases after him in her car before running up a hillside to get to him. James A. Janisse notes in his YouTube series *Kill Count* that Heather gets her "nice little action hero moment" in this scene as she has to duck under an "out of control semi-truck" (11:47) and avoid other traffic obstacles. Freddy materializes in the sky and lifts Dylan up by his claws, causing several cars to swerve throughout the scene. Several car crashes occur, including one in which Heather is hit by a vehicle. This sequence works in several ways. Firstly, it confirms Heather's suspicions that Freddy has left the movies and is now hunting down the actors who defeated him in real life. While Heather has already been established earlier in the film as a capable and doting mother, this sequence where she runs through traffic and nearly dies establishes her as a powerful mother figure, a competent Final Girl, and an action heroine. Finally, it works to show that the series could effectively combine the meta-ness of the neo-slasher cycle with action and slasher tropes.

The kinetic nature of these chase and vehicle sequences may not seem similar to those of the action genre at first glance, but upon closer inspection they serve the same

purpose. Each chase sequences propels the plot forward and establishes Freddy as a force to be reckoned with while also showing that he is a much more active villain than those that preceded him. While the action hero or heroine must race against time in their chase sequences, the action-slasher heroine is shown that they are on a timer as those around them start to become victims.

Torture Sequences

Whereas the torture scenes in traditional action movies like *Casino Royale* (Campbell 2006) are employed to test the hero's mettle, the torture scenes in the slasher film exist to slowly remove members of the cast and alert the Final Girl or Boy that the killer is on the way. While Jason and Michael may find unique ways to kill their victims, especially in later installments in their franchises, they tend to dispatch of their victims rather quickly and without emotion. Freddy, however, takes pleasure in the kill and likes to occasionally prolong his victim's death for his (and the audiences) enjoyment. While the existence of torture scenes isn't a new phenomenon within the horror genre, their combination with the other tropes discussed provide the action reading as follows. The first such example of this occurs in the original film with Tina's death. After Tina and her boyfriend Rod engage in sex, Freddy provides "sexual punishments" (Petridis, 2019, p. 19) by attacking Tina in her dream. Tina is raised into the air where four slashes appear across her chest, splashing Rod with blood. Adam Rockoff (2012) notes how "the mutilated girl is then dragged up the walls and ceiling until she collapses in a pool of

blood” (p. 155). The scene sets the narrative in motion, featuring Freddy’s first on-screen kill as well as framing Rod for Tina’s murder, which takes up about a third of the story’s narrative. It also introduces the audience to Freddy’s killing style. The now iconic scene sees Freddy use his famous bladed glove to slash across Tina’s nightgown in a callback to the earlier dream sequence where she narrowly escaped his clutches.

An homage to the aforementioned scene comes in *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* (1994) in which babysitter Julie is dragged up the walls and ceiling in front of Dylan by Freddy. This scene is presented in a much darker light than the original, mainly because it is said to take place in the real world but also due to Dylan’s role as witness. Whereas Rod in the original film played the role of scapegoat, Dylan is simply traumatized due to his youth and innocence. The trauma of the scene is highlighted by the slower nature of Julie’s body dragging along the ceiling compared to Tina’s and is punctuated by the sound of her neck breaking, something not heard in the original film. This scene directly precedes the previously discussed highway scene and leads Dylan to run from the hospital, initiating that action sequence. It should also be mentioned that another homage to the scene exists in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Bayer 2010) with character Kris. While the remake “lacks the playful squeamishness the originals and their sequels came to embody” (Wetmore, 2012, p. 13), its execution ultimately produces a comedic effect compared to the two previous iterations of the scene.

Freddy's tendency to torture his victims is shown again in *Freddy's Revenge* (Sholder 1985) with the death of Coach Schneider. Freddy, who has been possessing Final Boy Jesse and using him to commit murder, attacks the coach in the showers of the gym where the coach had been making Jesse run laps. After bombarding him with basketballs and tennis balls flying all around the room, Schneider is stripped naked, tied up with jump ropes, and whipped with towels on his buttocks multiple times before having his back slashed with Freddy's glove. While the attacker is invisible during this scene, we see Jesse with the glove afterwards, indicating that he unwittingly committed the crime. This torture/murder sets Jesse up as the proxy killer of the story and confirms to Jesse that Freddy is using him as such.

One of the franchise's most iconic moments takes the form of both psychological and physical torture, something Freddy specializes in. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child*, one of the main characters is Greta, a model who is constantly hounded by her mother about keeping up appearances and staying away from fattening foods. At a socialite-style dinner, Greta falls asleep at the table and Freddy appears as a waiter, stuffing food into Greta's mouth grotesquely until she balloons up with food falling out of her mouth. He then proceeds to dance with her. In real life- Greta begins choking in her sleep at the dinner table in front of her mother and her guests before dropping dead. Tony Williams (2015) notes that Freddy "stuffs her with food emphasizing her mother's earlier injunctions concerning the social proprieties of

public dining over private dieting” (p. 236). Freddy specifically targets his victim’s fears, playing on both the nightmare aspect and heightening the sense of torture before they die.

This psychological and physical torture was seen earlier in the franchise in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (Russell 1987) with character Phillip, who specializes in making puppets. After he falls asleep, Freddy rips his tendons out of his body, turning him into a puppet of his own, and walks him to the top of a tower at the asylum where the film is set. Freddy then appears in the sky as an omnipotent God of sorts, and severs the tendons, causing Philip to fall from the tower and die. This is the first death of the film, and alerts all of the other children at the asylum that Freddy is coming after them. It also establishes Freddy’s modus operandi of targeting weaknesses and desires unique to each of his victims while jumpstarting the action of the movie.

Debbie, a fitness fanatic in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (Harlin 1988), is attacked in a similar way by Freddie. After falling asleep while working out, Freddy appears above her at the weight station, pushing down on the dumbbell until Debbie’s arms break. He then turns her into a roach (her biggest fear), traps her in a roach motel, and crushes her to death. A brief action sequence revolves around this, with Final Girl Alice and boyfriend Dan racing in a truck to save Debbie, though Freddy has put them in a time loop, making them start the sequence multiple times from right outside the truck. They ultimately fail to save her, though Alice, who has the

power to absorb people's dream powers, gains Debbie's power as a result. This power will be discussed later as it involves her final fight with Freddy. These torture scenes effectively establish Freddy as a slasher killer who is always "" playing" with his victims" (Petridis, 2019, p. 57) and thinking of new ways to dispatch them compared to his predecessors.

Action Heroines, Heroes, and Villains

While the idea of a Final Girl itself doesn't necessarily connote "action hero," the *Nightmare* franchise ups the ante concerning its "heroines who do battle with Freddy Krueger" (Nelson, 2018, p. 88). As it's already been established that Freddy is a more active killer, he ends up doing direct battle with his victims more than Jason or Michael, who end up dispatching their victims prior to any fight being able to take place majority of the time. This results in many heroines engaging in hand-to-hand combat with Freddy. The most iconic of these heroes is Nancy Thompson, the heroine of the original film. Much effort is made to stress Nancy's tenacity and courage, shown immediately through an early scene in which she grabs a switchblade out of Rod's hands and closes it, symbolizing her badassery. As the film progresses and Nancy begins to realize what she is up against, she acts by searching for Freddy in her dreams and attempting to bring him out into real life in order to kill him. As she states, "I'm into survival" (55:35). Sotiris Petridis notes that Nancy is a "more active and sophisticated version of a Final Girl" as she is the "one who goes to find Freddy in his own world, trying to find a

solution to how to stop the murders, and finally, she's the one who sets up traps and brings Freddy to the real world, which makes him vulnerable" (2019, p. 63-64). When Nancy does find Freddy in her dream, she tackles him and grapples with him face-to-face. Carol Clover writes of Nancy:

"The grittiest of the final girls is Nancy of *A Nightmare on Elm Street I*. Aware in advance that the killer will be paying her a visit, she plans an elaborate defense. When he enters the house, she dares him to come at her, then charges him in direct attack. As they struggle, he springs the contraptions she has set so that he is stunned by a swinging sledgehammer, jolted and half-incinerated by an electrical charge, and so on. When he rises yet again, she chases him around the house, bashing him with a chair." (p. 38)

Nancy ultimately defeats Freddy (until the sequel), turning her back on him and metaphorically taking away his power. Prior to her death at the hands of a fiery Freddy (set aflame by Nancy), Nancy's mother says to Nancy: "You face things. That's your nature" (1:13:38). These actions, combined with her decision making and solo status as survivor (other than her father, who exists outside the targeted characters) make Nancy notable as the first slasher action hero.

Nancy returns in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (Russell 1987) as an even wiser action heroine, now a psychologist specializing in nightmares. When it's

made apparent that the young residents of Westin Hills Psychiatric Hospital are facing Freddy in their nightmares, Nancy comes to the rescue and convinces Dr. Neil Gordon to aid the students. New Final Girl Kristen Parker has the “ability to draw others into her dreams, allowing her to assemble a group of people together to defeat Freddy” (Clayton, 2020, p. 34) and accidentally pulls Nancy into her dream while Freddy attacks her, allowing Nancy to see that Freddy has returned and Freddy to see that his ultimate nemesis has returned. Nancy aids the rest of the kids throughout the film, teaching them how to control their dreams in order to fight Freddy. Nancy is ultimately “dispatched by the monster, making way for a new cast to take over the fight” (West, 2018, p. 124) after falling victim to a trick of Freddy’s. However, Nancy is still able to rescue the films versions of the damsel in distress (the teenagers).

In fact, nearly the entire cast of *Dream Warriors* function as action heroes. It’s established early on in the film that dream powers exist, powers that reflect their real-life personalities that can be used to do battle against Freddy. Kristen, with a fear of being alone, has the power to pull others into her dreams as well as gymnastic abilities. The mute Joey has a sonic scream that he uses to battle Freddy in a hall of mirrors, the Dungeons and Dragons loving Will becomes a wizard master with magical powers (destroying his wheelchair in the process, allowing him to walk), Kincaid has super strength, and Taryn becomes a badass with switchblades. Each of these characters go toe-to-toe with Freddy, though Taryn and Will don’t survive the end of the film as

“Freddy uses their fantasies as weapons against them” (Williams, 2015, p. 233). The characters take on the role of superheroes in order to fight Freddy, creating the first superhero/slasher hybrid film. Kristen, Kincaid, and Joey prevail in the end, defeating Freddy until the next film. As Kincaid says, “Let’s go kick the mother**kers ass all over dreamland” (1:09:11). While Dr. Gordon and the returning John Thompson, Nancy’s father, don’t develop their own superpowers, they do briefly battle the skeleton of Freddy as they attempt to burn his remains.

The following installment, *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* (Harlin 1988) sees the return of Kristen, Kincaid, and Joey (though Kristen is now being performed by actress Tuesday Knight rather than Patricia Arquette). They all retain their superpowers, with Kristen pulling Kincaid and Joey into her dream at the start of the film. Upon Freddy’s return, Kincaid briefly does battle with Freddy, using his super strength to throw a car on top of him, though he dies rather quickly, as do Joey and Kristen. Alice Johnson, who takes over for Kristen as the Final Girl of this film, has the power to siphon the dream powers of those who die before her, transforming her into the ultimate action hero. Alice at first glance is a shy and reserved girl with little personality, though as her friends die around her and she “comes to absorb aspects of them into herself” (Shimabukuro, 2018, p. 63), she comes into her own and becomes much more confident. Her brother Rick, a martial arts expert who had earlier battled Freddy using these abilities before dying, even managing to knock Freddy’s glove off,

passes his power to Alice. In an action montage reminiscent of *Batman Forever* (Schumacher 1995), Alice gears up with items from those that she has lost (such as belts and karate bands), with the camera focusing on her preparing for battle. Alice slowly removes photos that had been blocking her mirror, acknowledging her role as a confident action heroine and looking at her own reflection for the first time in the film. Alice then fights Freddy in fisticuffs and wins hand-to-hand combat against him, freeing all of Freddy's victims from their hellish purgatory, something no other Final Girl had been able to do. Alice continues her action heroine role in *The Dream Child* (Hopkins 1989), ultimately defeating Freddy again while pregnant. Alice's survival of both films and lack of reappearance later in the franchise deprives Freddy of a chance to kill her once and for all, proving that she has escalated beyond Nancy and Kristen, becoming the ultimate Final Girl/slasher-action heroine.

A sequence that should be noted also occurs in *The Dream Child* and involves Mark, a comic book artist who takes the form of the Phantom Prowler, his comic book creation in order to fight Freddy. The Phantom Prowler opens fire on Freddy, shooting him multiple times in an action sequence that recalls early gangster films. Freddy ultimately turns into Super Freddy, a villain of "comic book fantasies" (Williams, 2015, p. 215) who even spouts superhero puns: "Faster than a bastard maniac, more powerful than a loco-madman!" (1:08:16). Mark ultimately dies at the hands of Freddy.

Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare (Talalay 1991) feature two Final Girls and A Final Boy in the form of Tracy, Maggie, and Doc. Both Doc and Tracy fight Freddy in hand-to-hand combat, though it is Maggie who takes on the role of action heroine in order to defeat Freddy once and for all (so the title would suggest, though this is proven false). Maggie, having been revealed to be Freddy's daughter, battles him in hand-to-hand, also using Chinese throwing stars, knives, and arrows to pin him to a wall. Maggie finally uses Freddy's own glove to stab him in the stomach before shoving a homemade explosive device into Freddy's chest, blowing him up and killing him. Maggie therefore holds the title of the one who ultimately destroyed Freddy, though the studio sought to revive him canonically in order to make *Freddy vs. Jason* (Yu 2003).

Wes Craven's New Nightmare (1994) sees the return of Heather Langenkamp, the actress who played Nancy in the original film, though she is playing a fictionalized version of herself as she is "called upon to take the lead and be the final survivor." (Petridis, 2019, p. 80). While not as much of an action hero as her fictional character Nancy, Heather still stands out as an active heroine who risks everything to save her son (namely in the chase sequence previously discussed). In the final sequence of the film, Heather and son Dylan are able to trap Freddy inside the furnace of his underground lair before causing the entire room to explode in a fiery conclusion that allows Heather to take on a different role: that of the "fictionalized" action heroine. As the prior six films are established as movies within this continuity, Heather is the only

heroine able to defeat Freddy in “real life,” allowing her (and by proxy her character Nancy) to achieve ultimate peace. Heather finishes the film by reading the script of *New Nightmare* to her son, furthering the meta idea behind the film and allowing the action heroine a much-needed respite. Whereas Nancy had to rely on her own wits in order to save the day, Heather has her son to rely on, allowing a maturation for both characters.

While the Nancy of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Bayer 2010) doesn’t set traps and isn’t quite as creative as her original counterpart, Sotiris Petridis notes that “Nancy stands out with her activeness and the influence she exerts on the narrative...her decision not to run and confront him puts her in the not so conventional role of an energetic female character... the fearless girl moves the action and the passive boy follows the girl” (2019, p. 121-122). The film itself contains only one action sequence, in which we see for the first time the Elm Street parents attack the boiler room with a “Freddy before his biological death” (Petridis, 2019, p. 121). As Final Boy Quentin watches on (in his dream), we see his father throw a can of gasoline into the boiler room window, setting both the room and Krueger aflame before ultimately exploding. While the least action centric film of the series, the remake provides Nancy an active role in which she ultimately saves an injured Quentin (rescuing the damsel again) and provides an extra layer to the films mythology by finally showing the death of Krueger which catapulted the series’ narrative.

The most action heavy film of the series is *Freddy vs. Jason* (Yu 2003), which can be viewed as a straight-forward action flick with a minor slasher narrative. Freddy, impotent in recent years, revives Jason from Hell in order to do his killing for him. As Jason is sent to kill on Elm Street, Freddy assumes that the fear will be that he has returned, allowing Krueger to take credit for Jason's kills and providing him enough power to return for good. However, "Jason becomes uncontrollable, resulting in a showdown between the two characters" (Clayton, 2020, p. 30). As Jason and Freddy are pushed to the forefront of the narrative, they each take on the role of anti-hero, with the fans deciding which one they want to prevail depending on which franchise they identify with more. The film itself functions as a Freddy-centric film, with his desire to come back into the lives of the Elm Street children at the forefront of the narrative. While it is a "deceptively straightforward story" (Clayton, p. 2020, p. 40), the "evolution of the narrative confronts them in a battle that will judge which franchise will prevail" (Petridis, 2019, p. 106). The battle itself lasts about fifteen minutes, with both Freddy and Jason gaining the upper hand at multiple times throughout. Air tanks are tossed, punches are thrown, fires are set, and the two even switch weapons at one point in order to battle each other. Through the intervention of Final Girl and Boy Lori and Will, Jason is given home field advantage, with the climactic battle taking place at Camp Crystal Lake. However, the fight ultimately ends in stalemate, with Jason carrying Freddy's decapitated head out of the lake as the film draws to a close. However, Freddy

winks at the audience, reinforcing the idea that Freddy can never be killed. With the last image being of Freddy (and his laughter heard as the screen cuts to black), it can be determined that the fight did lean more in Freddy's direction, with Jason portrayed as a weaker opponent both physically and psychologically. This traditional action flick leans more heavily towards the *Nightmare* side story-wise and as such becomes the most action centric film in the series and promotes Freddy to action anti-hero.

While the *Nightmare* franchise isn't unique in having Final Girls and Boys leading the narrative, by writing them as action heroes and heroines the franchise carves out a unique slot within the genre, even going so far as to promote its own villain as an anti-hero against a noteworthy adversary. The combination of action heroes and heroines with action heavy sequences positions the series further as an action-slasher hybrid subgenre.

Humor

Cynthia M. King notes that "humor has remained a popular weapon of choice among Hollywood's greatest heroes. In classic action dramas, stars such as John Wayne and, later, Clint Eastwood and Arnold Schwarzenegger, fire off as many sarcastic one-liners as they do bullets" (2019, p. 140). While "killers in slasher films had tended to be hulking behemoths devoid of any personality" (Rockoff, 2012, p. 154), Freddy is the most comedic of the Big Three, constantly cracking one-liners much like an action hero

as the series progresses. Examples of this include “How’s this for a wet dream” (*Dream Master*, 22:35) before drowning a victim, “Welcome to primetime, bitch!” (*Dream Warriors*, 39:57) before slamming a wannabe TV stars head into a television, and telling a victim to tell those he meets in hell that Freddy sent him. Whereas the one-liners are done by the hero in the action movie, the slasher villain takes this role in the *Nightmare* slasher/action hybrid series.

The comedic elements of Freddy are taken to new heights in *Freddy’s Dead: The Final Nightmare*, by far the most humor-centered film. Adam Rockoff notes that:

“among the film’s countless absurdities are a parody of *The Wizard of Oz* with Freddy as the Wicked Witch of the West, a video game in which Freddy has the power to control the film’s characters, and most pointless of all, an unwelcomed cameo by Roseanne Barr and Tom Arnold” (2012, p. 174).

The film also makes use of a 3D effect, which inherently connotes action. Karra Shimabukuro notes that the “climax of the film makes extensive use of the 3D effect with actors stabbing weapons awkwardly at the screen and audience” (2018, p. 60).

While the film has been criticized for focusing too much on humor, the film’s combination of comedy with the final action scene earlier discussed do in fact make it stand out amongst the franchise. While humor alone doesn’t make an action movie, the

combination of the aforementioned tropes with the comedic stylings of Freddy Krueger help elevate the franchise's standing as an action centric one.

Conclusion

The term "action" is a broad one that can be used to encompass many things, from explosions, to gunplay, and even disaster sequences. The slasher genre on the other hand is typically straightforward: a man in a mask stalks a group of teenagers and dispatches of them one by one in grotesque and horrifying ways. Where *A Nightmare on Elm Street* differs is in how it utilizes its action sequences: rather than simply supporting the slasher narrative, the series revolves around these sequences. Should these sequences be taken out, the narrative changes rather than staying the same. In this series we have action heroes and heroines battling against their tormentor, rather than simply running. The character development in this series outdoes other franchises by creating well-rounded characters much more intelligent than their counterparts in *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween*. Freddy Krueger is a much more frenetic villain, actively chasing his victims rather than simply materializing in front of them. He also takes his time with them, putting them through the ringer through torture that recalls the tests action heroes are put through. While simply calling these films action films may not seem to serve a point, it shows that the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series has done something unique within the slasher genre through its implementation of action heavy sequences and action-centric leading characters. The *Nightmare* series functions as that

of a slasher action hybrid, both entertaining and scaring its audience through its use of slasher conventions combined with those of the action film. This shows that the genre itself is much more nuanced than critics may give it credit for and emphasizes that the *Nightmare* series is more than just about bad dreams.

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