Black Masculinities and Postmodern Horror: Race, Gender, and Abjection

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Abstract

In this study, I employ Kristeva's (1992) theories of affect and abjection to analyze two postmodern horror films (i.e., *Night of the Living Dead*, 1968, and *Candyman*, 1992). These films were selected for their incorporation of images of abjected Black male bodies, including visual references to lynching. Although feminist film scholars (Clover, 1996; Creed, 1993; Halberstam, 1995) have remarked on the pervasive cultural fears of gendered and sexual difference addressed by Hollywood horror films, genre explorations of historical violence attributed to *racial* difference are relatively less common. I address this gap in the context of the historical over-determination of Black masculinities in U.S. visual culture through a critical textual analysis of two films, and suggest alternate readings that complicate mediated racial tropes of Black male bodies as either abjected victims or hypersexualized monstrous Others. In conclusion, I caution against inscribing abjected bodies with familiar racial and gendered signifiers and raise possibilities for abjection to exceed and disrupt the social and cultural exclusions that reinforce and sustain such significations.

Keywords: *horror films, Black masculinities, abjection, affect, feminist film theory*

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"I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me" (Frantz Fanon, 2008, p. 107).

Michael Brown's corpse lies face down, framed in parallel by neatly groomed lawns and crime scene tape. In some images his face is pixelated; in others it is revealed, pallid and shadowy. A police officer paces behind the corpse. A restless crowd gathers beyond the tape. A thick plume of darkened blood runs out of the corpse's head and down the pavement, extending its deathly aura. This aura is both horrific and familiar, evoking the prone and hanging corpses of other Black boys and men. Apart from its horror, what does this image—and the proliferation of similar images in U.S. visual culture—signify?

A corpse, unable to speak on its own behalf, is inscribed with meaning by its living witnesses. Julia Kristeva (1982) identifies the corpse as the ultimate frontier of abjection: "[C]orpses *show* me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. … There I am, at the border of my condition as a living being. … The border has become an object" (pp. 3–4). Michael Brown's corpse occupies a border zone circumscribed by familiar racial tropes circulating endlessly through U.S. visual media: as a defenseless victim inducted into the brutal history of anti-Black violence or as a frightening "thug," symbolic of an ongoing threat posed by Black men to White middle-class society. Michael Brown's corpse can neither confirm nor deny these interpretations, nor can it speak the meaning of his death.

The visual culture of Black masculinity is haunted by centuries-old horrors.[1] Yet although multiple postmodern films have explored these uniquely U.S. spectacles, from historical dramas (e.g., *Mississippi Burning*; 1988; 12 *Years a Slave*, 2013) to exploitation films (e.g., *Mandingo*, 1975; *Django Unchained*, 2012), the main cinematic barometer of cultural anxiety—the horror film—has for the most part avoided explicitly addressing imagery of historical violence against Black men.

Isabel Cristina Pinedo (1997) has argued that the horrors of racism may strike too close to home to provide catharsis: "If the racial Other is marked as monster in the larger culture, then to do so in the horror film is to tread too closely to prevailing anxiet-

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1. Notable examples include the 19th-century culture of 'lynching photography', in which images of mutilated Black male corpses were publicly circulated as souvenirs (Allen, 2000; Pinar, 2001); images of 14-year-old murder victim Emmett Till published by *Jet* magazine in 1955, which had a significant historical impact on the burgeoning Black civil rights movement (Adams, 2004); and contemporary images of Black male victims of police brutality, including Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, and John Crawford, which have widely circulated throughout news and social media. Contemporary artists who work with and respond to these historical images include Glenn Ligon, Ken Gonzales-Day, Loring Cornish, Whitfield Lovell and others.

ies. A more coded figure is called for" (p. 112). This coding tends to sublimate racial, ethnic, class, and other forms of difference into the more "universal" horrors of sexual difference (Balasopoulos, 1997; Halberstam, 1995). Feminist film theory has extensively employed Lacanian psychoanalysis[2] to explore the gendered Other in horror (Clover, 1996; Creed, 1993; Mulvey, 1999), while a smaller body of recent scholarship has explored the horror monster as racial/ethnic Other using both psychoanalytic and other approaches, including cultural studies and critical race theory (Chanter, 2008; Means Coleman, 2011; Pinedo, 1997).

Drawing from these multiple strands of theory, I will analyze imagery in two mainstream horror films directly addressing Black male abjection: *Night of the Living Dead* (Harden, Streiner, & Romero, 1968) and *Candyman* (Barker & Rose, 1992). Although "the horror film abounds in images of abjection" (Creed, 1993, p. 10), these films are unusual within the genre both for employing Black male leads and for explicitly drawing on the imagery of anti-Black racial violence, including lynching, as their source of visual horror. Both films also offer more ambiguous imagery that troubles familiar racial/gender significations of Black male bodies in visual media. Kristeva's theory of *abjection*, which seeks to explain how not only *affects* and *experiences* but also *bodies* and *identities* are abjected within social orders, can help in understanding how race is constructed and mobilized by these images. With race long debunked as biological fact, how and why does "race" linger in visual culture? How do images of horror interrogate and destabilize racial and gender binaries that position Black male corpses as cultural "border objects" and predetermine their abjection? How do these abjected bodies resist such positioning and draw attention to affective and discursive gaps in racial signification itself? I explore major critical scholarship around each film and analyze visual and textual components of key scenes in order to address these questions and posit abjection as a complex representational space in U.S. visual culture, a space populated by overdetermined corpses no longer able to speak or protect themselves against their multiple significations.

Theoretical and Historical Contexts: "Race," Abjection, and Visual Representation

Abjection is critical to understanding how bodies are assigned particular identities in visual representation. Julia Kristeva's (1982) semiotic theory attempted an extension of Lacan's mirror stage, which described how infants develop primary ego identification through subject/object separation, into the realm of bodily affects. Prior to abjection, the body exists as a constellation of affects and signs not yet organized by

2. Since the 1970s, feminist film theorists have often used Lacan's 'mirror stage' theory, which posits the individual subject not as essential but as constituted by language within a social symbolic order, to explore how cinematic representations of gendered and other identities are socially constructed rather than unmediated reflections of "reality." Other feminist theorists have critiqued the overreliance on Lacanian psychoanalysis for its ahistoricism and paternalism (Kaplan, 2004).

hegemonic binary symbolic language of subject/object. Through affective encounters, "objects and others are seen as having attributes, or certain characteristics, a perception and reading that may give the subject an identity that seems apart from some others" (Ahmed, 2005, p. 104). Abjection marks self/Other, inside/outside, and clean/unclean bodies through the *expulsion* of that which is not "I" and through the demarcation of spaces where such divisions blur and threaten the boundaries of subjective identity. Although abjection is intimately linked to disgust and taboo, it is "not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). This ambiguous space exists between the semiotic realm of affects, which Kristeva associated with the maternal body, and the symbolic realm of language, associated with paternal judgment.

Kristeva (1982) also identified abjection as a site of cultural production, which helps to describe how bodies are raced, classed, and gendered as "insiders" or "outsiders" within communities. Sara Ahmed (2005) suggested that "[t]he black body … may be read as Black insofar as "Blackness" has already accrued meanings, values, and associations over time, which make it readable as Black in the first place" (p. 107). Thus bodies do not inherently possess such characteristics, but accumulate them over time through affective encounters within unequal power relations. Fanon (2008) described the accrual of signifiers around Black male bodies as a process of *epidermalization*, or what Stuart Hall (1996) defined as "literally, the inscription of race on the skin" (p. 16). This inscription happens not via internal bodily affects but through the imposition of *historical-racial schema* upon the body by others—schema which are neither genetic nor biological but cultural and discursive, and yet ultimately come to signify certain bodies as "Other" within social and cultural communities. Thus non-White, non-male bodies are overcoded with signifiers, while White male bodies appear to exist "without properties, unmarked, universal, just human" (Dyer, 1997, p. 38). This results in an entrenched institutional power structure which Judith Butler (1993) identifies as an "exclusionary matrix," creating

> "unliveable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (p. 3)

Although Butler's analysis primarily addresses social abjection related to sexual difference, the cultural production of "Whiteness" as a norm also designates a realm of racially excluded Others (Dyer, 2002). As such, social constructions of *race* and *gender* are mutually constitutive of social identities and "ineluctably intertwined" in a "productively unstable alliance" (Dyer, 1997, p. 30).

Richard Dyer (2002) argues for the *textuality* of representation—"what is represented in representation is not directly reality itself but other representations"—and cautions that the circulation of racial and gendered representations in visual culture also

have direct material consequences on people's lives (p. 2). William Pinar (2001) argued that the social construction of Black men as hypermasculine sexual threats to the White male patriarchal lineage fueled the institution of extralegal lynching (Figure 1) and the circulation of postcards and souvenirs commemorating such ghastly rituals. Such signi-fications of race and gender worked together to abject Black male corpses in U.S. visual culture as cultural border objects. The U.S. historical prevalence of castration and sexualized torture/humiliation of Black male victims, in particular, positions lynching not only as anti-Black terror but also as a form of gendered sexual violence. Kristeva's association of abjection with the feminine positions lynching victims as both racially abjected and symbolically castrated, and thus excludes them as racialized and gendered identities from the White patriarchal symbolic order (Scott, 2010).

Figure 1. Omaha courthouse lynching: the charred corpse of Will Brown after being killed, mutilated and burned. Copyright (1919) by University of Washington. Reprinted from public domain via Wikimedia Commons. (975 × 786)

Cinematic lynching imagery cannot claim political neutrality within the exclusion-ary matrix, as images of lynching are part of a "visual history of the black as cowed, mutilated, dead" (Marriott, 2007, p. 186). Thus the horror images analyzed in this essay should not only be considered in relation to other cinematic representations of Black male abjection, but also to the real images of racial violence that have circulated for centuries within U.S. visual culture.

Abjection and the Construction/Destruction of Identities in Horror Films

Kristeva shared an intellectual background with earlier feminist film theorists who both employed and revised Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to develop their theo-ries of cinema and gender. By the 1980s, Black feminists (hooks, 1992; Bobo, 1993; Wallace, 1993) and others (Gaines, 1986) pointed out the limitations of this framework in its tendency to exclude race and thus fail to account for how race and gender are mutually constitutive of social identities. Judith Butler (1993) also critiqued the ten-dency of Lacanian theory to reinforce a heteronormative binarism that ascribes femi-nine qualities to bodily affects and masculine qualities to symbolic language. Feminist theorizations of difference (Archer, 2004; Zinn & Dill, 1996) and intersectionality (Kaplan, 2004) rejected binary categories of self/Other, man/woman, and Black/White and attempted to address how different bodies accumulated such descriptive signifiers through relational encounters within unequal power structures. These theorists instead worked to uncover how subject/object relations are constructed, sustained, and normal-ized by visual culture.

The horror genre is uniquely positioned to address visual representations of difference through its encounters with disruptive bodily affects: "[I]n defining the horror genre perhaps its most important characteristics are the modes of affect that the horror films are intended to create in their audiences" (Cherry, 2009, p. 52). A primary subject of horror is the corpse and its intimate relation to abjected and monstrous identities; the genre's explorations of the borders between life and death, victim and monster, and fear and pleasure threaten to collapse comfortable identity boundaries and to place viewers within ambiguous affective spaces of abjection.

While many critics have explored the monster as metaphor for marginalized human identities (Cherry, 2009), the underlying threat of horror is the breakdown of the exclusionary matrix itself and the loosening of significations ascribed to various identi-ties. The horror genre promises repulsive yet seductive encounters within the semiotic realm of affects circulating between bodies, and finally to affective encounters with the ultimate figure of abjection: the corpse. The two films analyzed here explicitly reference Black male corpses as border objects within U.S. visual culture, mobilizing and ampli-fying the excess of racialized and gendered significations around such bodies as a potent source of horror. I suggest these films go beyond simplistic representations of familiar historical-racial schema around Black male bodies. Instead the films re-present ambigu-ous, fractured, and seductively monstrous forms to trouble assumptions of binaries of

(White/Black) race and (man/woman) gender, as well as the boundaries between life and death itself.

Night of the Living Dead: "Race" and the Affective Possibilities of Zombie-Life

George A. Romero's independent student film, *Night of the Living Dead* (Harden, Streiner, & Romero, 1968), became a cult classic and "ushered in a new aesthetic and politics of horror" (Phillips, 2012, p. 26). *Night of the Living Dead* was created on a shoestring budget of $114,000 and went on to gross over $30 million worldwide. Renowned for its stark black-and-white naturalism, graphic scenes of carnage (Romero first coined the term splatter cinema), and frank engagement with contemporary social issues, critics have long remarked upon its status as an "anti-establishment parable" that "attacks the nuclear American family, patriarchy, and racism" (McAlister, 2012, p. 473). Although Romero avoided assigning a specific racial politics to his film, "the film is replete with covert race-specific imagery, especially at its conclusion" (Hutchings, 2004, p. 112).

Night is set in rural Pennsylvania, where a small group of people seeks shelter in an abandoned farmhouse after a series of terrifying attacks from what appear to be re-animated corpses. The de facto leaders are Ben (Duane Jones), a pragmatic young Black man who fortifies the farmhouse as the corpses convene on the farmhouse, and Harry (Karl Hardman), a middle-aged White man who is found hiding with his family in the cellar. The group soon discovers through radio and television broadcasts that the dead are returning to life as "flesh eating ghouls" to cannibalize the living. As the characters suffer increasingly gruesome fates at the hands (and mouths) of the invading zombies, Ben alone survives the night only to be mistaken for a zombie by law enforcement and killed the next morning. (See Figure 2.)
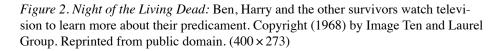
The film was remarkable both for its downbeat ending and for its introduction of a capable Black protagonist, presented without commentary "at a time when most black males in film were peripheral at best, viciously stereotyped at worst" (McAlister, 2012, p. 478). *Night* also re-imagined the zombie, a familiar cinematic monster already burdened with racial signifiers due to its associations with Afro-Caribbean witchcraft, as a more ambiguous figure of postmodern abjection. Although the zombie as metaphor for oppressed racial minorities and identities coded as Other is well-established in film theory (Canavan, 2010; Harper, 2005; McAlister, 2012), my analysis complicates these readings by exploring how *Night* deconstructs the White patriarchal structures conscribing such identities and marks the zombie as a new zone of possibility for affective re-engagements with the corpse as a living and signifying border object.

"The cellar is the strongest place!" / "The cellar is a death trap!"

An early scene establishes Romero's focus away from Ben's specific racial identity as a Black man in the 1960s and on a textual deconstruction of the White patriarchal power that marked such identities as abject within an exclusionary social matrix.

As the survivors congregate within the farmhouse, Harry soon emerges to assume a leadership role and "takes his superiority for granted" (Humphries, 2002, p. 115). Ben challenges Harry, criticizing him for not coming up from the cellar earlier despite hearing a woman's cries for help. Harry dismisses Ben's ethical objections as "insane": "You're telling us we should risk our safe place because someone might need help?" Ben replies, "Yeah, something like that." Harry insists the group hide in the cellar under his leadership, while Ben suggests they work together to defend the farmhouse. A young White man attempts to mediate but ultimately sides with Ben: If the zombies storm the basement door, they will all be trapped with no exit. "The cellar is the strongest place!" Harry maintains. "The cellar is a death trap!" retorts Ben. As the female and younger male characters play passive roles in the conflict, it becomes clear this is a masculine-coded battle for *patriarchal* control over the group (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Night of the Living Dead:* Ben, Harry and the other survivors watch television to learn more about their predicament. Copyright (1968) by Image Ten and Laurel Group. Reprinted from public domain. (400 × 273)

Both men are wrong, as the group is ultimately doomed (along with the rest of the human population) regardless of where they seek shelter. However, the subtext of their conflict reveals a coded critique of White patriarchy. As the conflict escalates, Ben maintains a collectivist stance: if they all work together to secure the farmhouse, they might stand a chance of surviving the night. Harry occupies a more conservative and individualistic position, insisting on forcing everyone down to the cellar with the rationale that it represents a stronghold, the "safest place" for the survivors he naturally assumes dominion over. Ben poses a challenge to Harry's autocracy and insistence on repression as a survival strategy; for a Black man there is no safety in repression, and his historical survival depends not on defending the symbolic patriarchal stronghold, but on collective action and maintaining a covert system of escape routes. As verbalized by Ben, the symbolic space of social repression where the White patriarch finds safety is quite literally a "death trap" for Black men. Harry eventually abandons the group and forces his own family back into the basement, where both he and his wife are consumed by their daughter's reanimated corpse. This challenge to and eventual implosion of White patriarchal power suggests Romero's focus not on maintaining Black/White binaries but on devouring the institutional power structures upholding such binaries from within while exposing their innate monstrosity, a theme that became more explicit in his subsequent films.

"That's another one for the fire."

The film's bleak finale pushes this breakdown further by blurring and collapsing identity boundaries into the ambiguously raced and gendered figure of the zombie. (Click here to see a film clip of the finale, *Night of the Living Dead*, 1968).

Many critics have noted the racially coded imagery of *Night's* final scene, in which Ben is shot in the head and immolated by a local sheriff's posse (Cherry, 2009; Hutchings, 2004; Means Coleman, 2011; Phillips, 2012). In a series of grainy photo stills, his prone body is speared by meat hooks and thrown onto a pyre along with the other corpses as credits roll; the scene famously "recall[s] well-known images of actual lynchings with similar style of dress, stance and physical appearance" (Cherry, 2009, p. 179). But the finale also offers more ambiguous images, visually identifying *both* Ben *and* his murderers with the undead hordes. The armed lynch mob first appears walking slowly in a ragged line across the field, visually indistinguishable from the zombies' chaotic collectivities portrayed throughout the film. The casual savagery with which they finally dispatch Ben ("That's another one for the fire, boys") is presented as no less horrific than the zombies' implacable blood thirst. The bleached, distorted faces of the zombies are also visually superimposed on Ben's blank face as his corpse burns on the pyre. These images complicate and disrupt surface-level readings of the film's volatile racial and gender politics (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Night of the Living Dead: Ben and Harry battle for control over the group of survivors. Copyright (1968) by Image Ten and Laurel Group. Reprinted from public domain. (604 × 393)

Figure 4. Night of the Living Dead: Ben's corpse is thrown on a pyre and burned along with the living dead. Copyright (1968) by Image Ten and Laurel Group. Reprinted from public domain. (500 × 605)

Film theorists have analyzed the zombie's coding as a symbol of abjection (Phillips, 2012; Wells, 2000), while Jason Wallin (2012) extended this critique to deconstruct psychoanalytic constructs of identity. He argued Lacan's mirror stage represents not the identification but the *becoming* of a signifying subject: "[T]he image of the human organism upon which the gestalt *actuality* of the body is mapped[,] functions to cover over an inhuman virtuality teeming with affective potential" (p. 252). The zombie represents a radical disruption in the epidermalization of social identities on bodies. Although equating it with marginalized human identities or repressed desires is a popular and well-worn critical path, Wallin (2012) argued such interpretations miss the potential for zombies to unmake assumptions supporting such constructions and to offer new possibilities of affect and embodiment: "[Z]ombie-life becomes an experiment in affect … insofar as the zombie can be thought as a cinematic sign for remaking the body, it might be said that it has transpired new filmic involutions for thinking affect" (p. 259). The zombie destabilizes our placement of corpses as border objects of abjection within a raced and gendered exclusionary matrix; instead, these corpses lurch uncannily away from those borders into the heart of life itself, disturbing entrenched boundaries of identity by threatening to pull us into horrific spaces of affective ambiguity.

Romero's groundbreaking film can thus be read not as an uncritical retelling of familiar historical narratives around Black masculinity and abjection, but as a radical destabilizing and decaying of the symbolic ground of signification *underlying* such narratives. Rather than merely re-presenting the racialization and gendering of abjected identities within a White patriarchal social framework, Romero's zombies and zombie-like humans ask what *new* forms of life might exist outside and beyond this framework. These corpses walk, talk, and signify new approaches to human difference by literally devouring familiar binary constructions of identity.

Candyman: Smashing the Mirror of Racial and Gendered Otherness

The second film analyzed here was released nearly three decades later, and its political subtexts are more openly articulated. *Candyman* (Barker & Rose, 1992) adapted horror author Clive Barker's novella *The Forbidden* into a screenplay, relocating its narrative from the slums of Liverpool to the projects of urban Chicago; the film located both historical lynching spectacles and Reagan-era race/class anxieties as primary sites of horror, as well as interrogating gender conventions of the 1980s slasher genre. Producer Alan Poul acknowledged the "very loaded imagery" deployed by the film (Means Coleman, 2011, p. 189), while some critics decried its representation of negative racial and gender tropes, including Candyman's ghoulish depiction of abjected Black masculinity (Kaplan, 2012) and his obsessive necromantic pursuit of a middle-class White woman, which evoked White supremacist fears of miscegenation (Lovell, 1992; Means Coleman, 2011). Feminist film critic Judith Halberstam (1995) argued that "[m]onstrosity, in this tired narrative, never becomes mobile; rather, it remains anchored by the weight of racist narratives" (p. 5). However, my analysis suggests alternative readings—equally supported by the film's visual text—that destabilize such tropes through the use of uncanny doubling, mirroring, and the eventual collapsing of its own representations of race and gender to reveal more ambiguous and frightening spaces of difference.

Helen Lyle (Virginia Madsen), a White doctoral student of anthropology at the University of Illinois-Chicago, is researching the local urban legend of the Candyman, a hook-wielding ghoul rumored responsible for a brutal unsolved murder in the Cabrini-Green housing project. Her skeptical approach leads to the appearance of the "real" Candyman (Tony Todd), an elegantly seductive yet supernaturally vengeful ghost of a Black male lynching victim. Mistaking Helen for the White woman he was lynched for marrying and impregnating in the 1890s, he stalks her and frames her for a series of grisly murders and the kidnapping of a baby. Helen is institutionalized, but escapes to confront her tormenter in a weirdly erotic interlude culminating on an enormous pyre created by the Cabrini-Green community to destroy Candyman. Although he exhorts Helen to remain with him and the baby, effectively reconstructing his lost family in the afterlife, she instead rescues the baby, and both she and Candyman burn together. Finally, Helen returns from the dead herself as a hook-wielding ghoul to murder her unfaithful husband.

On its surface *Candyman* depicts a Black male monster seducing and threatening a helpless White woman, evoking both familiar historical equations of Black male sexuality with monstrosity, and slasher conventions equating women with victimhood. But like *Night of the Living Dead*, the film's imagery also disrupts and exceeds binary narratives of race and gender to expose new affective frontiers of horror.

"You were not content with the stories. So I was obliged to come."

Helen is positioned both as a victim of White male institutional sexism (her professor husband, Trevor, and his colleagues mock her research ambitions) *and* as a perpetrator of White colonial aggression. Although several Black women characters advise her against intruding on community spaces and disrespecting sites of death, she pushes forward with her research agenda in hopes of publication: "[T]he film seems to suggest that her academic practice—based as it is on the exploitation of the community as mere 'material' that will boost her career—is neither harmless nor innocent" (Balasopoulos, 1997, p. 37).

Candyman is also a representationally complex figure. Both a terrifying monster and a pitiful victim of anti-Black violence, he is eternally trapped at the site of his metonymic castration (his hand, which he employed as a portrait artist to memorialize his beloved, was severed and replaced by a hook) and his symbolic racial abjection: "Clearly a metaphor about racist culture and the prevailing legacy of slavery, the monster—essentially a brutal avenger—is … morally ambivalent because of the apparent justice that motivates him" (Wells, 2002, p. 107). Helen and Candyman's ambiguous positioning as both victims and monsters within the White patriarchal power structure is

further complicated by the film's extensive use of uncanny visual doubling and mirroring: Helen is the *doppelganger* of Candyman's paramour; Cabrini-Green is the architectural double of Helen's upper-class apartment complex; and Candyman enters the real world through mirrors and the discursive repetition of his name.

The spatial and visual doubling throughout "problematises fixed interpretations of racial relationships, as well as the narrative roles of victim and monster, presenting them as changing and multifaceted, even interchangeable" (Donaldson, 2011, para. 36). Candyman first appears in a parking garage as Helen is leaving the hospital after a territorial attack by a local gang; her head injury implicitly throws into question whether Candyman is a "real" monster or a trauma-induced hallucinatory projection of Helen's own repressed rage. "Helen …" he intones, his booming voice echoing from somewhere far outside the film's aural universe, "You were not content with the stories. So I was obliged to come." Their encounter is punctuated with lingering, ambiguously lit close-ups on her blankly staring face, firmly situating the monster within *her* gaze. (Click here to see a film clip of Helen's first encounters with Candyman, in the film *Candyman,* 1992).

Here the film's temporal and spatial universe begins to break down, flashing between past and present events and foreshadowing Helen's later experiences of blacking out and returning to consciousness at the site of his murders, soaked in blood and holding a weapon. Indeed, it is never made entirely clear whether Candyman possesses independent existence or agency outside of Helen's fantasies (Kuhn, 2000). We encounter the monster through *her* framing; we are forced to rely on the representations of an unreliable (and possibly psychotic) narrator (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Candyman: Exploring a murder scene, Helen steps through a bathroom mirror into Candyman's liminal realm of abjection. Copyright (1992) by TriStar Pictures. Reprinted with permission. (627 × 233)

The film repeatedly sets up familiar spatial, racial, and gendered binaries only to destabilize and eventually merge them in the semiotic realm of horrific and erotic bodily affects that circulate and reproduce endlessly within the ambiguous space of abjection. This collapse and merging of subject/object significations into monstrous new forms, implicit throughout the film's subtext, becomes explicit in its final scene.

"It was always you, Helen."

After the repulsive consummation of their danse macabre on the flaming pyre, Candyman's omnipresent voice intones, "It was always you, Helen," over a portrait of his original lover. Like the film itself, this line of dialogue evokes an ambiguous and uncanny doubling. It may confirm Helen and Candyman's fate as the supernatural reincarnation of a doomed love story, or it may instead confirm Candyman as Helen's violent fantasy and the murders as her own doing. After her death, Helen emerges as a female Candyman from a mirror in the apartment her husband Trevor now occupies with his mistress; burned, scarred, and resplendent in her white burial shroud, she splits his torso open with her hook in a pleasurable and disgusting display of orgiastic violence (Briefel & Ngai, 1996). This scene makes explicit Kristeva's theory of abjection with the filmic collapse of Lacanian self/Other significations of identity and the spilling over of dangerous semiotic affects into the (White, patriarchal) symbolic order:

> Smashing through the mirror, from an unknowable space on its reflective surfaces, [Candyman] is more than the avowable and violent projection of a singular (unconscious) mind. … The mirror of individual wholeness, the locus of social and subjective identity, fragments, opened to the dark tain that constitutes the possibility of reflection and imaginary unification. (Botting, 2008, p. 69)

Candyman suggests the ultimate frontier of abjection is not the existence of Othered identities within the exclusionary social matrix, but a corruption of the boundaries of identity itself by unknowable and unbearable affects of difference. Fred Botting (2008) argues that rather than endorsing the racist and sexist stereotypes that fuel its horror, the film "presents them as representations, as projections to be interrogated, and highlights the role of representation in generating fear and maintaining social tensions" (p. 72). Ultimately *Candyman* calls attention to the inherent instability of representations purporting to signify race and gender, and the multiplicity of affects and subjectivities that circulate within, around, and outside of them. Like race and gender themselves, Candyman has no objective existence or essential properties, but lives on through the discursive repetition of narrative and visual representations and the (always faulty and incomplete) re-inscription of the unknowable and dangerous affects he embodies into symbolic orders of signification (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Candyman: Candyman floats above Helen as her hallucination in a secure psychiatric unit. Copyright (1992) by TriStar Pictures. Reprinted with permission. (475×290)

Conclusion: Ethical Interrogation of Abjected Black Male Bodies

The images analyzed in these films suggest race and gender are not biological-ly innate or socially predetermined, but instead accumulate through the circulation of af-fects, discourses, and images within existing power structures. There is a tendency to in-scribe the endless images of abjected bodies reproduced throughout U.S. visual culture with overly familiar narrative schema rather than asking what else they might represent. This tendency appears not only in analyses of real-life images but also in discussions of cinematic horror. It is too easy, for example, to interpret films such as *Night of the Liv-ing Dead* and *Candyman* as straightforward allegories of White power and Black abjec-tion (or masculine power and feminine abjection) without acknowledging that much of their horror is produced by the destabilization, collapse, and uncanny merging of such binary identities: "[M]onsters not only represent threats to the social order but can also

offer new possibilities within and transformations of that order" (Hutchings, 2004, p. 37). To read the genre's zombies and ghouls as stand-ins for particular abjected identi-ties is to ignore their positioning at the ambiguous boundaries of representation and the possibilities they suggest for re-interpreting how identities and bodies are represented, legitimized and normalized within visual culture.

This reductive tendency is also echoed in the inscription of racially charged narratives of innocence, blame, and victimhood on images of Black male corpses. Viewing lynching imagery (from both a century ago and today) reminds us of the hor-rific barbarities people feel entitled to visit on Others they regard as less than human or unworthy of inclusion within mainstream social life. As cultural border objects exist-ing at the uncanny intersections of life and death, these corpses offer the possibility to ethically interrogate the ways our visual culture confirms or denies particular identities as worthy of attention, empathy, dignity, and even life itself. Judith Butler (1993) notes the significant ethical demands placed upon symbolic orders of representation by the numerous bodies and affects existing in their abjected spaces:

> What challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as "life," lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving? (p. 16)

To continue inscribing overdetermined binary significations of difference on human bodies and to assume these differences to be innate, self-evident, and unim-peachable is to both identify and produce a multiplicity of abjected Others—"outsiders" to the exclusionary matrix who are then left vulnerable to the horrors of stereotyping, oppression, and violence. Instead, we must imagine alternative visual cultures capable of interrogating and troubling the primacy of such significations, acknowledging the way difference is constructed through affective encounters and visual representations, and exploring the openings such encounters and representations provide to ethically re-imagine other ways of constructing identities.

Thus, rather than reinscribing familiar narratives of monstrosity and victim-hood over images of anti-Black violence, we might instead sit in contemplation of these horrifying images and ask what they can teach us about our collective assumptions around who qualifies as "human" and thus worthy of essential life and dignity, and how our visual representations (and the social communities they claim to represent) might be restructured after deconstructing and re-imagining such assumptions. Rather than speaking for and over the numerous corpses that haunt the borders of representation and threaten to draw us into horrific spaces of abjection, we might instead let these corpses finally speak for themselves—and listen to the unbearable meaning(s) they speak within U.S. visual culture.

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