

# *Candyman* can: film and ostension

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As long as this man was known only by his deeds he held untold power over the imagination; but the human truth beneath the terrors would, she knew, be bitterly disappointing.

Clive Barker, "The Forbidden" (1985:24)

If, as Linda Dégh has argued, "ostension [is] . . . presentation as contrasted to representation" (1995:237), then folklorists should also focus their attention on ostension beyond the two sub-forms of the phenomenon, quasi- and pseudo-ostension. Perhaps the reason for the current vogue in ostension studies is the result of an academic cynicism: that only these forms of ostension actually exist. Another problem lies in the subject matter of the quasi- and pseudo-ostension studies, for they do not allow for any potential existence of other forms of ostensive behavior. One place where an alternative ostension can be observed as an active tradition is the cinema: the narrative texts are presented as signifieds, rather than signifiers. Signifiers do play their role in movies, but what is seen is given more emphasis than what is said. Dégh notes that ostension is an ideal type, which is perhaps impossible to exist in any non-mediated form. However, in contrast to quasi- and pseudo-ostension studies, dramatic presentation, the "acting out" of narrative, can likewise be ostensive. Unfortunately, folklorists do not talk to film scholars and consequently seem ill-equipped to deal with narrative feature films. As folklorist Bruce Jackson notes, "folklorists rarely discuss films unless

they are overtly about folkloric subjects” (1989:388). To prove that cinema is ostensive action, I shall use the 1992 Bernard Rose horror film *Candyman* as an example. *Candyman* not only demonstrates that film is ostensive behavior, but also privileges the ostensive debate within its diegesis.<sup>1</sup>

*Candyman* tells the story of Helen, a graduate student at the University of Illinois, who is researching urban legends. Specifically her attention has focused on one particular legend, that of “Candyman,” a hook-handed monster who is supposed to come out of a mirror when his name is said five times. Helen’s disbelief in the legend is challenged when the Candyman comes to her and seduces her away from the land of the living to the land of rumour and legend.

### ***Candyman* and legend materials**

Bruce Jackson, writing in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1989, describes the work of folklorists who approach feature films thus: “it’s usually a matter of folklore in films, the equivalent of *Folklore in Faulkner* or *Folklore in Shakespeare*—things to be plucked out of a context otherwise lacking folkloric moment” (1989:388). It has been suggested that the most direct way for individual fiction films to be considered as “folklore” is to follow some of the theoretical writings that tie folklore studies to literature. Neil Grobman, for example, has proposed that one must assess “how authors use folklore in their writings” (1979:17). To follow this procedure requires the scholar to identify the author in direct contact with folklore and its scholarly debates (1979:18). The problem with this approach when applied to feature length fiction films is that it reifies a debate cinema studies has engaged in since the mid-1950s: who is the author of a film?

*Candyman* is based on a short story by British author and filmmaker Clive Barker. Barker’s story, “The Forbidden,” although it lays the basic narrative framework for *Candyman*, differs from Bernard Rose’s film in many significant ways. Therefore, when we assign roles (or blame) to either Barker or Rose, we need to consider their actual contributions to the filmmaking procedure. For Barker,

the “Candyman” narrative in his short story is a “beauty and the beast” variant, wherein a sociologist studying graffiti on a Liverpool Council Estate is seduced by the hook-handed demon. Rose keeps the barest of bones from the Barker original, specifically the seduction of Helen by Candyman and his offer to her of immortality, but changes the context considerably. Helen is no longer a sociologist, but, if not a folklorist, certainly researching folklore materials (urban legends). This is not to say that Barker’s Helen is not likewise engaging in folkloristic research with her graffiti study, but the difference is between Rose’s blatant folkloristics and Barker’s implicit folkloristics. Although one could develop a study outlining Clive Barker’s use of folklore and folkloristic materials as a writer, this essay will deal only with how Bernard Rose uses Barker’s story and adds the folkloristic materials in the film *Candyman*.

As I said, *Candyman* is a basic “beauty and the beast” story (AT 425) that replaces the monster with the “hook-handed killer” motif from contemporary legendry. Candyman is summoned, diegetically, by reciting his name five times while looking in a mirror (a motif that has its analogue with the ritual of “Mary Worth” in the United States and Northern Europe). Some of the contemporary legends in *Candyman* are demonstrated visually, while others are rhetorically presented—we are told them. We can examine these motifs by thus dividing them. Those demonstrative motifs, which make up the diegesis of the film, are not limited to this fusion of “beauty and the beast” with “the hook-handed killer” and the ritual of “Mary Worth.” Other demonstrated contemporary legends include “Razor Blades Found in Halloween Candy” (Candyman is presumably responsible for that), “Child Emasculated in Public Washroom” (S176), and even the traditional British legend of Gelert (B331.2). Other contemporary legends are presented within the diegesis rhetorically (they are told within the narrative): “The Hippie Babysitter,” who cooks the child instead of the turkey, and “Alligators in the Sewers,” to name but two.

The problem with this analysis is now that one has identified these legends as being in evidence in the film, what does one do with them? To call *Candyman* either an amalgamation or an enactment of

contemporary legend does not do the film a service. Its sum is greater than these constituent parts. However some folklore scholars are content at leaving matters thus.

John Ashton notes that “a series of full and detailed studies of the way in which such materials [folklore] enter into and influence the creative process could tell us much about the workings of the literary creator” (quoted in Grobman 1979:37). True, but this kind of analysis does not begin to approach the meaning of *Candyman*. If we were to leave our analysis at the connection between folklore materials and their representation within a particular text, in this case a major motion picture, then we must ask of ourselves whether we have captured the experience of the text. With regards to *Candyman*, we have not even come close. Analysis of this sort, accurate though it may be, denies the film its overriding power and, therefore, its meaning.

Larry Danielson comments that “popular cinematic art can both promulgate and reflect oral traditional plots and their motifs in contemporary circulation as well as the anxieties that create them” (1979:219). If so, then what relationship does the Candyman/Mary Worth legend have to contemporary anxieties? Robin Wood, in what film studies considers a definitive piece on the horror film, notes: “The Monster is, of course much more protean, changing from period to period as society’s basic fears clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments” (1979:14). Wood and Danielson appear to agree, just with a different emphasis (and I would argue that Wood’s emphasis is more directed). For Danielson, the genre itself is reflective of societal stress (also echoed in Wyckoff 1993). Wood would agree, but refocuses attention not on the genre but on the relationship demonstrated by the genre’s *dramatis personae*: the relationship between Monster and Victim.

The central relationship in *Candyman* is just that, between Candyman and Helen. Although eroticized and voyeuristic, the Helen/Candyman relationship can be reduced to the White Woman/African-American Man sexual relationship.<sup>2</sup> The anxieties expressed by the film (and only the film, for in “The Forbidden” Candyman’s race is never expressed; neither is the race of the

residents of the Liverpool Council Estate, which is the locus of the story) seem to center on male African-American sexuality as directed towards white women. The hard-working, responsible people in the film are all African-American. Helen herself demonstrates a distinct preference for African-American companionship, from her research assistant to her “romance” with Candyman. The “contemporary anxieties” theory, which I do not deny is valid and relevant, points to a fear of white fetishization of African-American culture.<sup>3</sup> In the most pejorative words possible, *Candyman* as cultural discourse argues against “going native.” The problem remains one of academic focus: if we are talking about the cultural discourse of a contemporary legend, or of a horror movie, then this kind of analysis is particularly relevant, but only relevant for other scholars. We still have not engaged with the film as *experience*.

### What is *Candyman*?

Towards the end of 1994, a few years after the film was released in cinemas and a few months after the film’s appearance on home video, a discussion of Candyman-type legends appeared on the Internet’s Folklore Discussion List (Folklore@listserv.tamu.edu). To deal with the responses we need some sort of taxonomic system in order to deal with the postings. I have used the following schema: if the responses make reference to Candyman-type stories the poster has heard about, but not experienced, I have classified them as legend texts; if the poster actually tried the rite him- or herself, then I have classified these stories as game texts.

Although the name Candyman given to the monster in both the film and the short story is unique within this fictional diegesis, Candyman has his analogue in the oft-collected “Mary Worth” narrative (also known as “Mary Whales,” “Blood Mary,” or even the “Virgin Mary”). One example of the Candyman-as-legend type of posting is the following: “My sister swore that if you stood in front of a mirror at night in a dark room, that you could call up a vision of ‘Bloody Mary’” (Alicia 1994, October 19; in other postings: “bloody Virgin Mary” or “Mary Worth”). Taxonomically, what makes this

narrative a legend is the utterance of the belief that by standing in front of a mirror, some entity can be called forth in a narrative form, albeit, in this case, as an abbreviated narrative.

Here is a transcript of the legend as it is presented in the film. The speaker of the following legend text is an unnamed female student at the university. The dialogue within the mirror diegesis is presented here in italics to differentiate it from the storyteller's voice.

This is the scariest story I ever heard. And it's totally true. Happened a few years ago near Moses Lake, in Indiana. Claire was baby-sitting for the Johnsons. And, ah, Billy, pulled up on his motorcycle. Now she wasn't even going out with Billy; she was actually going out with Michael, for about six months, but, ah, she always kinda . . . had the hots for Billy 'cause he was like a bad boy. And Michael was . . . he was just so nice. So anyway, she decides that tonight's the night that she's going to give Billy what she never gave to Michael.

*Claire: Have you ever heard of Candyman?*

*Billy: No.*

*Claire: Well, his right hand is sawn off. He has a hook jammed in the bloody stump. And if you look in the mirror, and you say his name five times, he'll appear behind you breathing down your neck. Wanna try it?*

So Billy began. He looked in the mirror and he said:

*Billy: Candyman. Candyman. Candyman. Candyman.*

*Claire: No one ever got past four. [Billy makes an amorous movement towards Claire.] Not here. Go downstairs. I have a surprise for you.*

She looked in the mirror. And I don't know why, but she said his name the last time.

*Claire: Candyman.*

She turned out the lights. . . . And what he saw turned his hair white from shock. Killed her. Split her open with his hook. And then killed the baby too. And Billy got away. But soon after he went crazy. My roommate's boyfriend knows him. (Rose, *Candyman* 1992)

Bernard Rose, in writing the screenplay for *Candyman*, develops this kernel narrative into a full blown, fully performed contemporary legend. Within the diegesis, “Candyman” exists both as a legend and as a game. The film begins, after a voice-over by Candyman himself, with a dramatized narrative of the “Candyman” story. Within the narrative, we, as the cinema audience, witness the game being played. The sequence also demonstrates a play of narrative within narrative, which I believe to be significant for Rose’s use of cinema as ostension. The sequence begins with a narrative told within the diegesis; we see the listener, but are denied seeing the speaker. When we are brought into the narrative world of the storyteller’s narrative, we are presented with an alternative diegesis, the world being told. This second world, although maintaining verisimilitude with both the *Candyman* diegesis and our own world, negotiates its own plenitude *vis-à-vis* the complete narrative being told within the *Candyman* diegesis. This first narration of a “Candyman” legend, the audiences’ introduction to the tradition according to Rose’s visual rhetoric, is presented as a mini-movie within the larger movie. Furthermore, I believe that Rose creates this mirror diegetic universe, this movie-within-a-movie, because Helen (whom we have already identified as the listener to the story being told) *hears* the narrative as a movie. Rose is hereby creating a theoretical argument: that storytellers’ audiences visualize for themselves the narratives presented in, what for our Western modern culture would be, a “like a movie” analogue. And therefore, for Rose, cinema, as a medium of narration, is linked to traditional oral storytelling.

We can separate the legend from the game quite easily with this narrative, and I believe it is important to do so for the sake of analysis. For the purposes of this paper, the game of Candyman is the activity of staring into a mirror and reciting his name five times. The legends of Candyman are those stories told *about* people who try the game and actually see the monster appear. The storyteller, in the film, is telling a contemporary legend about someone she has heard of playing the “Candyman” game and the horrifying results that occurred. If we draw a rough sequence of events at the narrative and diegetic levels, certain patterns emerge: we begin with a

representation of the narrative (“This is the scariest story I ever heard.”), which is followed by a presentation of the narrative (the movie-within-a movie). Next comes a representation of the game (“Have you ever heard of Candyman?”), which is followed by the game’s presentation (“Candyman. Candyman.”). Especially noteworthy is the mediation between the game’s representation and the game’s presentation by the narrator herself (“So Billy began.”). The territory between legend and play becomes cloudy in the film, reflecting the cloudy nature of the tradition the film is working from (the Mary Worth game/stories).

This brings us to discuss the game itself. In 1978, Janet Langlois published what has been considered the definitive paper on the ritual, and in 1988, Bengt af Klintberg explored the game’s European variants. The ritual is also described in Mary and Herbert Knapp’s *One Potato, Two Potato: The Folklore of American Children* (1976). By way of introduction to the Candyman-type game, the Knapps describe it thus:

A child summons Mary Worth, alias Bloody Mary, alias Mary Jane, by going into the bathroom alone at night, turning out the lights, staring into the mirror, and repeating “Mary Worth,” softly but distinctly, forty-seven times. She comes at you out of the mirror, with a knife in her hand and a wart on her nose. (1976:242)

A slight variation is offered by Harriet Engle:

4 or 5 girls (boys didn’t seem to be interested in this one) would sit in a small circle under cover of someone’s coat. It had to be dark, of course. . . . We’d join hands, and call for someone named “Mary Wolf.” I forget the exact formula of the summons. Usually one of the girls would shriek, and claim that “Mary” had scratched her with one of her claws. The scratch mark was duly admired by the other players, and then the game would continue. (1994, October 18)

We can generalize to some degree about some of the primary characteristics of the phenomenon: the recitation of the name (be it Candyman, Mary Worth, Mary Wolf, etc.) a number of times, darkness, and supernatural manifestation. The mirror motif would be



a secondary characteristic of the experiences, for as Engle noted, the rite could occur within a darkened closet.

The descriptions of Mary's/Candyman's appearance also differ tremendously depending on the spatial and temporal contexts in which the game is collected. Mary has been described as having claws (Engle 1994) or as holding a knife and having a wart on her nose (Knapp and Knapp 1976). But Mary has also been described as appearing in toto: "Mary would then appear in the mirror, behind your reflection, with either good or evil intent, depending on who was calling (or who was telling the story)" (Janice Del Negro, 1994, October 20).<sup>4</sup> It is Barker and Rose who introduce the motif of the hook-handed killer into this tradition.

### **The meaning of play**

Linda Dégh has recently noted that "horror movies [along with other entertainment] are all harmless everyday games" (1994:121). I believe Dégh to be on the verge of a greater truth than perhaps she realizes. If we compare the theoretical writings that have emerged from discussing horror story narration and playing games, such as "Mary Worth," with the involvement one has with a horror movie, distinct analogues emerge.

Mary and Herbert Knapp argue that "flirting with fear is a way of learning to control it, a way of learning to empathize with others who are frightened, and a way of embellishing one's life with a little dramatic fiction" (1976:242). Bengt af Klintberg also agrees, with specific regards to the ritual of Mary Worth:

"Black Madame" [a European variant of Mary Worth] may be seen as a game with the help of which children investigate the unknown and terrifying. It is reminiscent of their ghost stories, where one finds the same greediness to experience fear. (1988:155-156)

Both the Knapps and Klintberg agree that the importance of experiencing fear is learning to control it (Knapp and Knapp 1976:242; Klintberg 1988:165). Bill Ellis has recently explored how adolescents' experiences with a Ouija board are, in many respects, a

more “grown-up” version of playing Mary Worth, and it should be noted that Ellis’s adolescents are the same audience demographic as for horror movies like *Candyman*. Ellis notes that “such mock-ordeals [i.e. role-playing games, Ouija boards, playing Mary Worth] work only when they are set up carefully in terms of predictable narrative structures, so that the youth could predict what was likely to come next” (1994:79).

Ellis’s comment is especially relevant for the study of cinema. Hollywood narrative cinema, as a highly coded and structured narrative form, is predicated upon this type of predictability. Robin Wood notes this principle of predictability: “normality is threatened by the Monster” (1979:14). According to Wood, although the Monster is a figure of horror and revulsion, we root for the Monster in (usually) his destruction of our culture: “Central to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere” (1979:15). The resolution in horror cinema returns society to normality, often as a result of the Monster’s destruction and, at least rhetorically, supports the dominant world view. Ellis notes, with regards to adolescents’ Ouija rituals,

This kind of face-to-face confrontation with evil has much in common with teens’ desire to reach Satan, only to taunt and reject him after confirming traditional religious values. Exorcism subjects supernatural forces to human will, and along the way confirms fundamentalist values. (1994:85)

*Horror* cinema, then, appears to follow the same functional patterns as Ouija boards for adolescents and Mary Worth games for pre-adolescents: we have a predictable outcome in a set, bounded narrative, which, as frightening as the ride may be, will end in approximately ninety minutes or so. A movie, specifically a *horror* movie, conforms to Klintberg’s “secure and handleable framework” (1988:165) in which the individual hopes to experience as much fear as the cinematic storyteller can deliver. If, as Ellis notes, such forms of play enact “teens’ belief and [allow] them to participate directly in myth” (1994:62), then it is not too far a stretch to conclude that engaging in horror cinema, specifically horror movies about

contemporary legend, allows the audience to engage directly with legend. This engagement is, I argue, a form of ostension.

## Ostension

Diegetically, Helen experiences two forms of ostensive behavior, the quasi- and the pseudo-ostension. Each of these I shall deal with at length. Within the context of the university environment that Helen works in, she comes across another potential informant of the Candyman story. It appears that Ruthie-Jean, a resident in the Cabrini Green housing project that is the geographical focus of the Candyman stories, was murdered by Candyman himself a few weeks earlier. The residents of the housing project attributed her murder to Candyman. Helen's informant, a woman in the janitorial department of the university, tells the story thus:

Kitty: Well all I know—it was there was some lady, in her tub, and . . . and she heard a noise.

Helen: Do you remember her name?

Kitty: I think her name was Ruthie-Jean . . . . And she heard this banging and smashing like somebody was trying to make a hole in the wall—so Ruthie call 911 and she said somebody coming through the walls. And they didn't believe her.

Henrietta [friend of Kitty's]: They thought the lady was crazy.  
Right?

Kitty: Mm-hmm. So she called 911 again and they still didn't believe her. But when they finally got there she was dead.

Helen: Was she shot?

Kitty: No. Umm, she was killed with a hook. Sch'tz [—slicing movement with her hand] Yeah.

Henrietta: It's true. Yeah, it is. I read it in the papers. Candyman killed her.

Kitty: Yeah, but . . . ah . . . I [wink at Helen] don't know anything about that [dirty look to Henrietta]. (Rose, *Candyman* 1992)<sup>5</sup>

In researching the story further, Helen discovers that her own condominium was originally built as a housing project, like Cabrini

Green, and her own apartment's layout mirrors that of Ruthie-Jean's apartment. One particular aspect is that the mirrored medicine cabinet in Helen's bathroom is easily removed and leads directly to the apartment next door. If, as Helen proposes, Cabrini Green has the same sort of layout as her own building, then what happened to Ruthie-Jean is fully explainable: the killer (or killers) were in the next apartment and, in coming through the passageway that links the two bathrooms, appeared to be coming right through the mirror. They find Ruthie-Jean, kill her, and the legend continues.

Helen's initial hypothesis about Candyman and by extension who killed Ruthie-Jean is quasi-ostension: "the observer's interpretation of puzzling evidence in terms of narrative tradition" (Ellis 1989:208).<sup>6</sup> The residents of Cabrini Green believe, *a priori*, in the Candyman legend, and the events that lead up to the murder of Ruthie-Jean are then seen as proof of that belief. Discovering folkloristic arguments applied properly in a mainstream fiction movie, although exciting for insiders (in this case folklorists), is still no indication of actual knowledge of folkloristic scholarship. The use of quasi-ostension is easily explained as an accidental fluke. Any number of movies and television shows explore seemingly paranormal phenomenon, but end up giving a rational explanation for the events themselves. It is quite possible that screenwriter and director Rose was following a standard generic cliché and is unaware that quite accidentally he is giving a demonstration of quasi-ostension.

Classical Hollywood narrative is the industrial norm of feature-length, fictional, narrative cinema, and it is a narrative tradition that *Candyman* unsurprisingly uses.

In the classic narrative, events in the story are organised around a basic structure of enigma and resolution. At the beginning of the story, an event may take place which disrupts a pre-existing equilibrium in the fictional world. It is then the task of the narrative to resolve that disruption and set up a new equilibrium. The classic narrative may thus be regarded as a process whereby problems are solved so that order may be restored to the world of the fiction. . . . The "realist" aspects of the classic narrative are overlaid on this basic enigma-resolution structure, and typically

operate on two levels: firstly, through the verisimilitude of the fictional world set up by the narrative and secondly through the inscription of human agency within the process of the narrative. (Kuhn 1992:212)

This interplay of “reality” and quasi-ostension fits neatly into the schema of classical Hollywood narrative: we begin with the enigma that a contemporary legend is walking around the corridors of a Chicago housing project, and it is believed by the local residents that this legend was responsible for the murder of a local resident. Through “the inscription of human agency,” Helen, we are able to resolve the enigma, and Cabrini Green returns to a state of (relative) equilibrium.

The explanation that Helen discovers about who killed Ruthie-Jean, and by extension the mystery surrounding the Cabrini Green residents’ belief in Candyman, while possibly under the follow-through narrative of the quasi-ostension position, actually reveals itself to be *pseudo*-ostension: a local gang lord has taken the name of Candyman, carrying a hook and all, and has been terrorizing the project’s residents. Pseudo-ostension is the “imitating [of] the outlines of a known narrative to perpetuate [*sic*] a hoax. . . .” (Ellis 1989:208); knowing the belief traditions of an area allows one, if so inclined, to terrorize that community by exploiting those very traditions. Just as Rose’s use of quasi-ostension may in fact be accidental and more the result of generic conventions than academic intent, so too can Rose’s use of pseudo-ostension be considered a product of the genre’s conventions. After all, how many episodes of the old cartoon “Scooby Doo” ended with pseudo-ostension? The “rational and scientific” explanation of paranormal events are frequently resolved by demonstrating the operation of a pseudo-ostensive activity.

The pseudo-ostension argument, in the context of contemporary narrative filmmaking, can be seen as the logical result of quasi-ostension. If, as film studies would have us accept, so-called classical Hollywood narration is centered on the resolution of a single enigma, then quasi-ostension is perfectly suited to this narrative form. The audience assumes the existence of an alternative explanation to the

paranormal one proposed by those who experienced the phenomenon (quasi-ostension), and the logical solution to that enigma (as demanded by classical Hollywood narration) would then be of someone exploiting a supernatural belief tradition in order to perpetrate a hoax (pseudo-ostension). Therefore, the assertion that Bernard Rose's *Candyman* intelligently weaves its narrative through a series of contemporary folkloristic arguments (ostension) does not entirely hold water when taken in context of the industrial mode of Hollywood narrative production. What folklorists could identify as ostension in contemporary Hollywood horror movies is in actuality nothing more than the very conventions Hollywood has always used. Or rather that *would* be the case if the pseudo-ostensive argument ended the film. It doesn't; it only brings us halfway through the movie.

Dégh notes that "ostensive action, that is, the showing of an action by showing the action itself or by another action, might be recognised by some people as acting, either in organised (theatrical or other) or casual forms" (Dégh 1995:239). If so, then those same people should recognize cinema as ostension too. In a movie, narrative is not represented (although diegetically it may be, as in the case of the *Candyman* story above); it is presented. We are not told, "John picked up a knife;" we are shown John picking up a knife.

Let me return to the *Candyman* narrative cited earlier and break the film down by shots. Excluding the *Candyman* voice-over and the opening credits of the film, the movie opens in a close-up of Helen's face. She is listening to an unseen woman's voice as the first few words of the above transcribed narrative are spoken. We are presented with a cut<sup>7</sup> into the diegetically presented narrative. With a sudden and visually jarring technique that violates the Hollywood code of continuity editing,<sup>8</sup> we are in a different narrative space, and we can negotiate this space only with the voice-over narrative we hear. What begins as *representation*, the telling of "the scariest story I've ever heard," becomes a *presentation* of the narrative itself, stylistically returning to the continuity of editing previously violated. Here, Rose is negotiating between two forms of legend telling, that of oral storytelling and that of ostension. As we conclude the voice-

over narrative, we have a slow dissolve<sup>9</sup> to a close-up of the young woman telling the story. A cut occurs to a running tape recorder; then a third shot follows showing Helen listening to the storyteller conclude her story. In cinematic terms, we have a violation of the codes of continuity editing; we are not given an establishing shot until the very last line of the woman's narrative. This jarring and self-conscious violation of the codes of classical Hollywood cinema can be seen as further underscoring Rose's understanding of how ostension operates.

However, as Dégh further argues: "The complete system of theatrical signs maintains this specific duplicity in professional theater (film, television) and continually reminds the audience that what takes place on the stage is not the showing of reality, not presentation, but representation, the imitation of a real or imagined reality" (1995:239). Returning to our current argument, Dégh's position would make my own argument invalid: cinema, as a theatrical sign, is *representation*, not *presentation* and, therefore, cannot be considered ostensive action. For Dégh, ostension is the confusion of what Katherine Young calls "taleworlds" (Young quoted in Wyckoff 1993:3-4) and reality, which would appear to be supported by Ellis in his focus almost exclusively on matters of quasi- and pseudo-ostension. If movie audiences confused the represented images with reality and believed all that they saw to be true, they themselves would be operating under a system of quasi-ostension. But as Bordwell and Thompson note, for some film theorists, "cinema's power lies in its ability to present a *recognizable* reality" (1986:147, emphasis added). Cinema is an analogue to reality, not its replacement. And when audiences react to fantasy cinema (horror movies, for example), they react not to a confusion of the represented image with reality, but to the presentation of images as cultural discourse.

Like Ellis's Oujia board players and Langlois's and Klintberg's Mary Worth participants, horror movies function as a means to reproduce contemporary anxieties through a system of presented signs. If, as follows from Dégh, fiction narrative cinema is not the presentation of reality, but the representation of reality (and of course

it is), how does the ostensive argument fit in, other than that horror movies (in this case) would then be pseudo-ostensive action? The answer lies in the ritual aspect of cinema, a dynamic that horror movies particularly exploit.

Walter Evans sees the connection. He noted, back in the mid-1970s, that “the adolescent who squirms and perspires his way through a good monster movie participates in an imaginative experience in many ways incredibly close to the complicated and detailed initiatory practices of premodern peoples around the world” (1982:135). Although Evans’s article is more concerned with analogues between “premodern peoples”’ initiation images and horror movie images, he notes that “a powerful experience of such images [as found in horror movies] alone can cause changes in personality and behavior” (1982:141). Evans continues,

Premodern initiates themselves both participate in and sometimes (like their modern counterparts) merely witness ceremonies which scholars characteristically refer to as “dramas” and “scenarios,” representations whose effect and function, so far as is possible to judge, seem to remarkably parallel those of monster movies. [1982:141]<sup>10</sup>

Evans seems to contradict Dégh; it begins to appear that the representation can have a similar effect on the viewer as if the image were actually presented. If that is so, and I firmly believe it to be, then because of the nature of this strong identification with the screen image, representation *functions* as presentation for the horror film audience. Therefore, this identificatory process, albeit contentiously, brings forth an alternative to the pseudo- and quasi-ostension arguments that I choose to call cinematic ostension.

## Conclusion

*Candyman* is a mainstream, Hollywood horror film, that in addition to the legions of the genre’s fans, has captured the attention of a number of folklorists. The reasons for this attention are fairly obvious: the movie is about contemporary legends; it intelligently engages in many of the current debates contemporary legend scholars



are engaged in; it is a well acted, well produced piece of movie-making; it is actually a “scary” horror movie (itself a rarity); etc. But more importantly, the film engages in the issues surrounding ostension with regards to the film’s diegesis. It also offers up an alternative to the pseudo- and quasi-ostension arguments that dominate our discipline. Images can have an impact on the human mind with the same intensity as participation in similar activities. That being so, certain forms of representation can have the same individual impact as presentation itself. Comparing the horror film to other adolescent rites like playing with a Ouija board or pre-adolescent rites like Mary Worth games creates an analogue between cinema and ritual; the watching becomes as inclusive as the participating. The difference seems to be, although perhaps one of degree, certainly one of permanence: as Donna Wyckoff noted, “participating in the legend process may be a way of doing *something* without doing anything that has overt, permanent consequences” (1993:27). Going to the movies, entertaining though it may be, has larger psycho-social impact with regards to the film’s position within the legend process, and one way that process affects us is ostensive.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Diegesis: In a narrative film, the world of the film’s story. The diegesis includes events that are presumed to have occurred and actions and spaces that are not shown on screen (Bordwell and Thompson 1986:385).

<sup>2</sup> Candyman is black.

<sup>3</sup> Further ethnographic research would be applicable here: documenting how both African-American and Caucasian audiences respond to the film.

<sup>4</sup> A fascinating variation on Mary’s appearance, and that for me indicated the creative genius of children, is related in another posting: “The color she appears will indicate her judgement of you. Blue = you are good and she will protect you from harm; white = she will haunt you; red = she’s very angry! and will murder you” (Nancy Babb 1994, October 20).

<sup>5</sup> Although this passage closely resembles a collected legend, we have to remember that this was written by Rose, consciously trying to mimic

impromptu storytelling. I think the verisimilitude he achieves is impressive.

<sup>6</sup> As Bill Ellis also notes, "In many cases, this act [quasi-ostension] matches what David Hufford terms the 'cultural source hypothesis': only a person who believes in a concept will actually experience it. . . ." (1989:208).

<sup>7</sup> "An instantaneous change from one framing to another" (Bordwell and Thompson 1986:384).

<sup>8</sup> "A system of cutting to maintain continuous and clear narrative action" (Bordwell and Thompson 1986:384).

<sup>9</sup> "A transition between two shots during which the second image gradually appears as a superimposition until the two are evenly blended, and then the first image gradually disappears" (Bordwell and Thompson 1986:385).

<sup>10</sup> If we then compare this with Wood's thesis that horror films are ideologically subversive to the current hegemony, then, regardless of the return to normalcy that classical Hollywood narrative demands, the calling into question of this hegemony is enough to allow a subversive voice (Wood 1979 *passim*).

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