

Movie of the week: *The Town that Dreaded Sundown* (1976)

Last week's movie: *Terror at Tenkiller* (1986)

Synopsis

As we enter the “Natural State,” we find ourselves at the midpoint of our year-long academic journey: 52in52. This week (although the narrator sets the film on Sunday, March 3), we are introduced to the townspeople of Texarkana, a border town on the Red River in Miller County, AR. The people of Texarkana are getting back to normal life following World War 2 when the town becomes paralyzed by a series of murders loosely based on the “Phantom Killer” murders that took place between February 22, 1946 and May 3, 1946.

The Town that Dreaded Sundown is one of the seminal films of the slasher genre, premiering 2 years before Arthur Miller's *Halloween*.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

The Town that Dreaded Sundown depicts murders occurring in lovers' lanes, and therefore shares the moral of such stories as the urban legend, The Hook Man, a cautionary tale about the potential consequences of premarital sex first published in a Dear Abby column in 1960. The fact that the murders take place every 21 days may also have symbolic meaning. Among other things, 21 is the number of destruction (French philosopher, Louis Claude de Saint-Martin). Since the film is narrated, it is reasonable to assume that despite its being loosely based on the non-fictional Phantom murders, the events we see are a story told by “the elders” of Texarkana during a period of transition to ensure their small town values will be preserved.

What's in a Title?

While urban legends aim to teach lessons according to operant conditioning principles, the “dread” in *The Town that Dreaded Sundown* results from learned behavior that is part of a classical conditioning paradigm. In this case, the murders (UCS) result in dread (UCR). When the murders (UCS) are paired with sundown (CS), the townspeople become fearful (CR) of sundown (CS), itself.

A remake of the movie depicts a copycat killer who preys on patrons at the annual showing of the film at Spring Lake Park, TX. Similar themes can be found in films portraying The Hook Man including *Candyman* (1992) and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997).

Key words: *The Town that Dreaded Sundown*, Phantom, Youell Lee Swinney, lovers' lane, slasher, urban legend, Hook Man, classical conditioning, Pavlov, Spring Lake Park, *Candyman*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer*.

Psycho-nicity: Synchronicity“ is a Jungian term depicting the acausal connection of two or more psycho-physic phenomena. For our purposes, it serves as the root for a neologism (newly coined word), psycho-nicity; suggestions that make a movie a transcendental experience. *The Town that Dreaded Sundown* is another movie inspired by real life events, and therefore is best viewed as part of a series that includes movies like the one we visited on December 5. If you are ever in the Dallas-Fort Worth area in October, take a 2-hour trip to Spring Lake Park, TX for “Movies in the Park” where *The Town that Dreaded Sundown* is the annual headliner.

Next week’s movie: The Evil Dead (1981)

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