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March, 25, 2024

Puzzle Box: Queer Collisions and Subjective Finitude in Clive Barker's *Hellraiser*

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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At the core of this thesis lies the queer subject-other positionality of the Cenobites in Clive Barker's *Hellraiser*. The Cenobites' freedom, and their queerness, is found in their continued illegibility. Though they are trapped at one's fingertips, always summonable through the iconic puzzle box, they are ephemeral: specters discernible only in discrete collisions with the mortals who summon them. By illuminating the intertwined relationship between perceived interior (the home) and exterior (the sadistic hellscape of the Cenobites), the thesis rejects the premise of an outside and presents alterity as a disruption within the Foucauldian grid. *Hellraiser*'s Frank Cotton becomes the site of such a disruption through his summoning of the Cenobites, but his refusal to relinquish subjectivity bars him from becoming queered. Frank thus finds himself dragged between forces as the film unfolds—agonized by continued visibility, yet trapped within the grid he sought to transcend. Queerness is thus not a stable and generalizable state, one which can be adopted as identity, nor is it transgressive in the sense that it crosses a boundary of normality into the ecstasy of an outside. Queerness is an ontological paradox: it is other, brought into existence through its definition against the subject; and yet it is an inexorable presence, even when the very flesh is inverted by forces which act upon it, and thus rendered illegible to the gaze which defines it.

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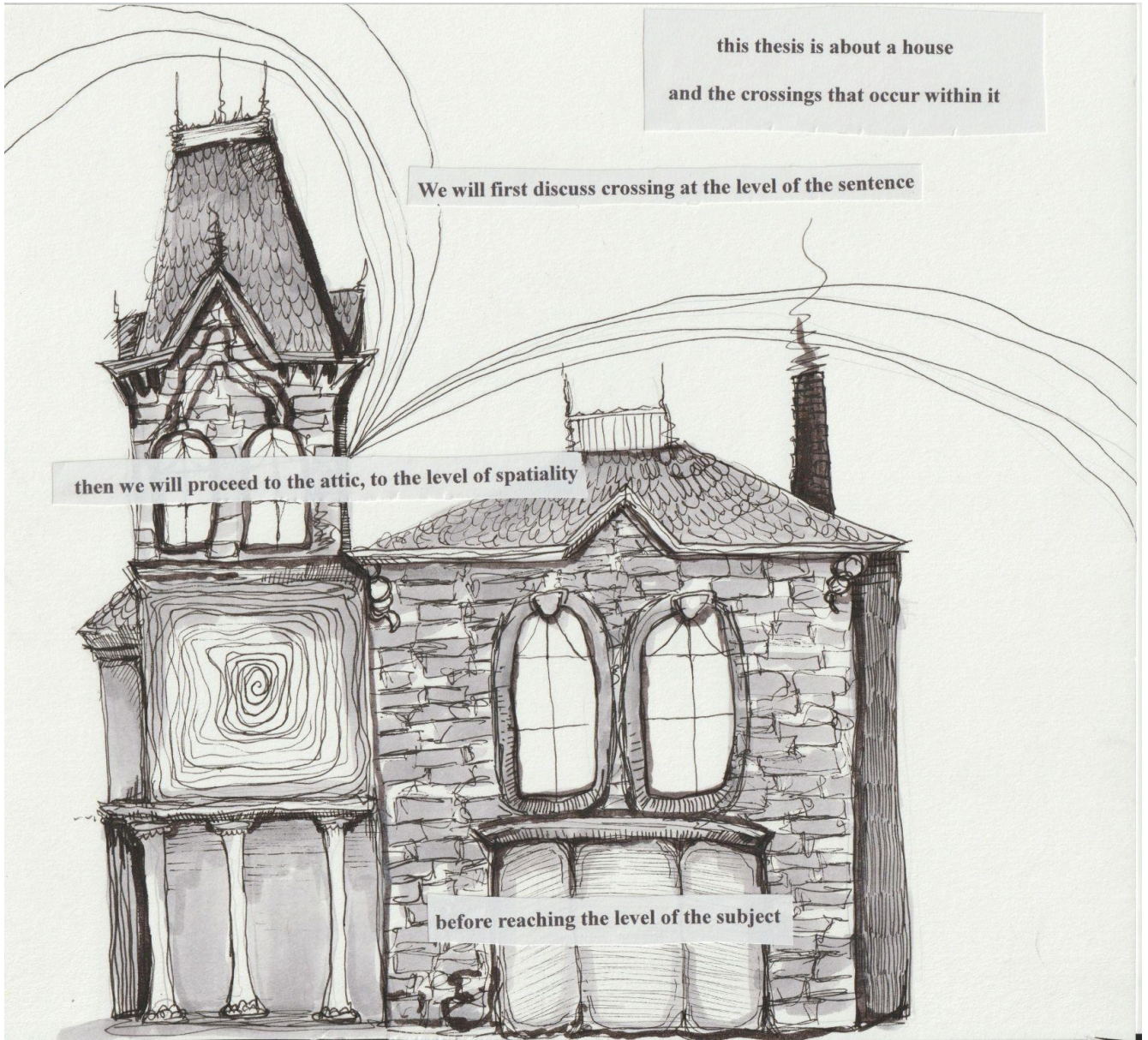


Fig. 1: Preface

These crossings are queer

Illegible

Oblique

Obscuring

Plot Summary

To edify all who have never seen Hellraiser.

And to entertain those who have not.

Hedonistic Frank Cotton, bored of earthly pleasures, purchased a puzzle box while abroad. Upon returning home, he opened the box in hopes of experiencing sadomasochistic joys of an untold proportion. Frank Cotton was very disappointed indeed.

Instead of transporting him to a land beyond humanity's wildest dreams, tampering with the puzzle box unleashed the Cenobites: a collection of semi-humanoid creatures with perforated flesh and visible entrails. Horrified instead of aroused, Frank found himself torn to shreds by what he summoned.

After Frank's disappearance Larry Cotton, the respectable and exceedingly dull brother, moved into Frank's home in an attempt to rekindle his failing marriage with Julia. While moving, Larry inadvertently sliced his hand. The spilled blood upon the attic floor reinvigorated Frank's remains, which had been held in agonized stasis beneath the boards.

When Julia ascended to the attic upon hearing a suspicious noise, she encountered the skinned wretch formerly identifiable as Frank. Frank implored the woman—his former lover—to aid him in regaining his strength and his humanity. The arrangement was simple: Julia seduced men, those apt to be forgotten should they disappear, and lured them to the attic. Once trapped, Frank devoured their blood. With each mouthful he became stronger, but it was not enough...

Chapter Zero: Introduction

*Please try to go
to hell frequently
because you will
find the light there*

—Hannah Emerson, “Center of the Universe”

This thesis explores queer negativity through a Foucauldian lens. Following the work of Leo Bersani, author of the groundbreaking essay “Is The Rectum a Grave?” (1987), queer theorists have turned to psychoanalysis to elaborate upon queer negativity. Queer negativity intellectually positions queer, not as a stable identity, but as an opposition to the social order that is irrecoverable as a subject position. Queer negativity asserts that queering, used as a verb, can obscure and illegitimate the sexual subject. In addition to a reliance on Freud, Bersani’s work drew upon French philosopher Michel Foucault—whose perspective illuminates aspects of queerness that psychoanalysis cannot. Therefore this thesis will utilize the writings of Foucault, alongside Bersani’s seldom attended to Foucauldian uptake, to expand upon theories of queer negativity and assert queerness as an ontological paradox. This project will explore queering, not as the creation of a stable identity of gender or sexuality, but as a site of disruption.

I turn to the horror film as a site of exploration for such claims—analyzing a film contemporaneous with “Is the Rectum a Grave” (1987) and rife with resonant themes: Clive Barker’s *Hellraiser* (1987). Unlike many queer examinations of horror, this project eschews queerness as an identity; it instead develops a phenomenological perspective on the subject-other relations both within and outside of the diegetic frame of film. Horror films can illuminate the process of queering by depicting what occurs when the (former) subject reckons with a limit or

convergence of forces that undoes their subjectivity. *Hellraiser's* (1987) Cenobites, whose bodies are unrecognizable as human due to their torn, sadomasochistic flesh are exemplary of desubjectification within horror; as is young Regan from *The Exorcist* (1973), whose demon possession renders her body a site of illegibility, stripped of status as girl and as human.

The majority of queer negativity draws upon the psychoanalytic concepts of the unconscious and of abjection to shatter subjectivity. This thesis enters into that conversation of undoing subject but utilizes a Foucauldian framework for understanding subjectivity and limits. This framework is expanded by Eve Sedgwick and Susan Sontag's analyses of camp, in order to attend to the experience of the horror viewer. In addition to queer-focused philosophy, I take inspiration from Eugenie Brinkema's book *Life Destroying Diagrams* (2022) in which she employs a formalist approach to reading film. It was Brinkema who made me consider *Hellraiser* (1987) a life destroying diagram—simultaneously mysterious and indiscreet whose devastating form touches audience and character alike. Finally, formalist literary studies shape this thesis through their investigation of the chiasmus: a rhetorical device which makes legible the crossings that queer the subject within horror.

At the core of this thesis lies the complexly queer subject-other positionality of the Cenobites in Clive Barker's *Hellraiser*. The Cenobites' freedom, and their queerness, is found in their continued illegibility. Though they are trapped at one's fingertips, always summonable through the iconic puzzle box, they are ephemeral: specters discernible only in discrete collisions with the mortals who summon them. By illuminating the intertwined relationship between perceived interior (the home) and exterior (the sadistic hellscape of the Cenobites), the thesis rejects the premise of an outside and presents alterity as a disruption within the Foucauldian grid. *Hellraiser's* Frank Cotton becomes the site of such a disruption through his summoning of the

Cenobites, but his refusal to relinquish subjectivity bars him from becoming queered. Frank thus finds himself dragged between forces as the film unfolds—agonized by continued visibility, yet trapped within the grid he sought to transcend.

Queerness is thus not a stable and generalizable state, one which can be adopted as identity, nor is it transgressive in the sense that it crosses a boundary of normality into the ecstasy of an outside. Queerness is an ontological paradox: it is other, brought into existence through its definition against the subject; and yet it is an inexorable presence, even when the very flesh is inverted by forces which act upon it, and thus rendered illegible to the gaze which defines it.

I. On the Psychoanalytic Approach to Horror

When examining the breadth of contemporary horror film scholarship, a trend becomes undeniably evident: the vast majority of thinkers seeking to untangle horror do so with the tool of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalytic scholars argue that horror films allow the viewer a safe reckoning with abject or otherwise repressed objects and motifs in order to explain the wide appeal and high grossings of the genre. So deeply embedded is this approach, even broad introductory texts state that “in reference to horror film, psychoanalysis is as close to essential as any conceptual model can get”¹. Often the only substantiation given for such a claim is past precedent—with scholars arguing that “since horror cinema and psychoanalysis have more or less grown up together, it seems natural to apply them to one another.”²

It is true that horror and psychoanalysis share many themes: parenthood, family dynamics, birth, sex—as well as allegedly repressed themes of ‘deviant’ sex, trauma, blood, viscera, gender, and eventual death. Such aesthetic and topical compatibility makes for easy fusion between the concepts of repression, the abject, and the unconscious and the horror film.

The psychoanalytic model of horror performs three central actions: it defines the fear-inducing figures within the film in terms of the theory of abjection; it argues that the terrified enjoyment felt by audience members stems essentially from a safe encounter with the contents of their unconscious; and it conceptualizes, either explicitly or implicitly, the viewing of horror as a transgressive act, hence the perceived emotion of rebellious enjoyment.

The first aforementioned action of a psychoanalytical model is to define the figures of horror—the perverse killers, the hybrid monsters, the possessed children, the amorphous

¹ Harry M Benshoff, *A Companion to the Horror Film* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

² Harry M Benshoff, *A Companion to the Horror Film* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

oozes—in terms of the abject. In psychoanalytic philosopher Julia Kristeva’s 1980 book *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, she defines the abject as either that “which disturbs identity, system, order; what does not respect borders, positions, [or] rules”³ or as “body fluids, defilement, and shit [which] lie... at the border of our condition as a living being”⁴. The abject can be broadly considered that which disturbs the social order through its disregard for boundaries, through its unacceptable filth, or through its uncategorizable grotesque nature—such as the human corpse. The abject is something that must be repressed from one’s conscious mind lest it elicit horror, instead remaining buried within the murky depths of the subject’s unconscious. The psychoanalytic model utilizes the abject to explain horror characters’ disconcerting effect on audiences—arguing that such films draw abject material from its safely sequestered position outside of consciousness and thrust it before the viewer’s widened eyes, thus eliciting horror.

The queerness found in horror can thus be explained as a niche within this abject ooze. The psychoanalytic horror lens asserts that “abjection works within society as a means of separating out the human from the nonhuman and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject”⁵ and thus, for their disavowment of social order, queer figures of horror are abject. They, like horror’s other vestiges of the unconscious, are evocative for viewers because of their transgressive and repressed natures. Horror studies book *Queering the Gothic* asserts that “the association of queer sexuality with the monstrous is reflected in horror fiction and film”⁶ through queered archetypes and situations. One such archetype is the thrilling, blood-drinking, grinning, queer-coded villain, freed from their typical repression within the human psyche and

³ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

⁵ Barbara Creed, *Phallic Panic : Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny* (Carlton, Vic., Australia: Melbourne University Press, 2005).

⁶ William Hughes and Andrew Smith, *Queering the Gothic* (Manchester ; New York: Manchester University Press, 2011).

splattered across the silver screen. Queered situations refers to horror's penchant for scenes of extreme violence, shot through with sexual tension: sweat pooling, gasping, parted lips, and moans that straddle the line between pain and pleasure. Campy horrors, those films beloved as relatable classics by queer individuals, are also taken up as abject: experiences that "are supposed to allow the subject to confront, in an enlightened yet radical way, the fact of being none other than the abject"⁷.

Psychoanalytic theory also seeks to explain why viewers voluntarily subject themselves to such psychological suffering, claiming that horror provides a safe avenue for reckoning with the repressed: providing, depending on the individual's perspective, either relief at one's safe encounter or catharsis through easing repression before re-repressing the abject material once more. The first premise is perhaps the most commonly voiced within psychoanalytic horror theory, arguing that "that pleasure is gained simply by dealing with fearful matters in what are known to be safe circumstances"⁸. Such a premise suggests that "it is the act of securely dealing with fearful or abject content which attracts us"⁹ to the genre. In an attempt to substantiate its hypothesis, the psychoanalytic horror scholarship draws a line between the act of dreaming, an act rich in ambiguity and affect, and the act of viewing a horror film— "essentially, you relax and they happen to you."¹⁰ Such passive confrontation means that, "since your conscious mind cannot control what you experience when you watch a film, spectatorship also resembles an

⁷ Paulina Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny* (University of Wales Press, 2012).

⁸ Andrew Tudor, "Why Horror? The Peculiar Pleasures of a Popular Genre.," *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (October 1997): 443–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/095023897335691>.

⁹ Andrew Tudor, "Why Horror? The Peculiar Pleasures of a Popular Genre.," *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (October 1997): 443–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/095023897335691>.

¹⁰ Chris Dumas, "Horror and Psychoanalysis: A Primer," in *A Companion to the Horror Film*, ed. Harry Benshoff, 2014.

encounter with the unconscious itself,”¹¹ much in the same way dreams present flickers of unconscious material to the soporific mind.

Differing scholars have argued that in fact “catharsis is a necessary consequence of fictionally evoking repressed material, and the subsequent relief, if temporary, is pleasurable much as masturbation relieves sexual tension”¹². This means that horror provides a brief, deviant respite while still allowing the individual to retain their coherent delineations of the repressed and the acceptable. Though differing in their avenue, both of these explanations rely on two inherent assumptions: first, that horror contains content which is inherently repressed in the human subject, content which can be found within the unconscious; and second, that such content is the cause of both our revulsion and the genre’s magnetism.

Building upon the psychoanalytic model’s conceptualization of horror as possessing inherently repressed content, film scholars assert that viewing such scandalous and frightening material—material which ought not be spoken about within society lest it cause horror and discord—is an act of rebellion. Such an extrapolation is supported within psychoanalytic texts which claim “pleasure [from horror] might be derived from the unconscious ambiguity of our responses to taboo subjects: pleasure in indulging sublimated infantile desires; pain because the context of this indulgence is one of monstrosity and disgust.”¹³ This dichotomy of pleasure-horror, caused by safe, disgusting, and exhilarating reckoning with the taboo, lies at the core of the psychoanalytic approach to horror.

This explanation of the mechanisms of fear, of queerness, and of the audiences’ gnashing for neatly packaged taboo is compelling. Thematically and aesthetically, psychoanalysis and

¹¹ Chris Dumas, “Horror and Psychoanalysis: A Primer,” in *A Companion to the Horror Film*, ed. Harry Benshoff, 2014.

¹² Andrew Tudor, “Why Horror? The Peculiar Pleasures of a Popular Genre.,” *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (October 1997): 443–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/095023897335691>.

¹³ Andrew Tudor, “Why Horror? The Peculiar Pleasures of a Popular Genre.,” *Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (October 1997): 443–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/095023897335691>.

horror appear to be a match made in hell—a pair of twins à la *The Shining*, who illuminate one another in turn.

However, within the psychoanalytic model, queer horror is troublingly inert—a nugget of the abject which an audience member reckons with and then discards once the frightful entertainment is gained. Perhaps revulsion is felt in the interplay of flesh, blood, and viscera, perhaps scintillated desire, perhaps both. Regardless, the queerness of horror is static. Despite the multitude of swirling terrors, erotic images, and bloody wretches on screen, their horror is shackled to the same site: the unconscious. Extending this lens of abjection further, the queer figures of horror can be seen as temporarily freed of the unconscious. The perforated flesh of the Cenobites marks them as unclean, boundary transgressing, and thus abject—something which retreats to the land of the repressed as the credits roll.

Though psychoanalysis's explanations of queer horror have sunk their claws deep, attending to nearly all facets of the genre's appeal, they fail to provide a model of queerness which does not moor it in the unconscious. Psychoanalytic approaches to queer horror render the queerness inert, locatable, and defined through the perception and psyche of the subject. The Cenobites' corrugated flesh provides them no freedom, argues abjection, it merely marks them as horrifying.

By contrast, this thesis departs from the psychoanalytic frame that has dominated studies of queer horror. I seek to bypass, as Foucault did with the repressive hypothesis, the psychoanalytic approach to horror—achieving, via a Foucauldian lens, a more dynamic spatial and ontological analysis of the genre's queerness. I do not mire queerness within the swirling psyche, I observe the effects of its collisions with the subject. My Foucauldian lens repositions the eviscerated Cenobites as entirely evacuated of their subjectivity. Their position is queer—in a

diagonal relation to the grid of intelligibility that attempts to contain them. This oblique relation to the grid is not abject, it is structurally queer.

II. On the History of Hellraiser

This thesis centers the British supernatural horror film, *Hellraiser*, released in 1987; written and directed by Clive Barker, the same author whose novella inspired the on-screen adaptation. The film's working title was *Sadomasochists from Beyond the Grave*¹⁴, but the moniker was dropped in favor of a play on the novella's title (*The Hellbound Heart*). Though devoid of its original title, the franchise is nonetheless best known for its leather-clad seekers of pain and pleasure: the Cenobites. Throughout the film's 93 minutes, the viewer is treated to a deluge of viscera as the Cotton family first summon, then reckon with the Cenobites—an engagement which produces nauseatingly gruesome results.

As aforementioned, the film was based upon a short written work by Clive Barker—a man infamous among horror adorers for carving out the splatterpunk genre¹⁵ with his visceral prose. Such works deviated from their gothic legacy, abandoning the subtle slow-burn of a potentially haunted residence in favor of a slap in the face born of blood, guts, chains, knives, and sweaty brows. Other horror might make you shiver, but Barker's would make you sick. This is the legacy of *Hellraiser*, a film whose dedication to hooks and slime threatened the stomachs of even the most avid horror aficionados at the time.

Despite its accolades awarded for intensity, *Hellraiser* was met with a mixed reception upon release due to the social and political climate it was set loose within. Barker's work, on the page or on the screen, sought to push boundaries of what was allowed within quasi-mainstream media. A gay man himself, Barker's work was unashamedly queer¹⁶—both entrancing and

¹⁴ Paul Kane, *The Hellraiser Films and Their Legacy* (McFarland, 2012).

¹⁵ Riley Wade, "Hellbound Hearts: What Makes Hellraiser Queer," *Horror Obsessive*, November 29, 2021, <https://horrorobsessive.com/2021/11/29/hellbound-hearts-what-makes-hellraiser-queer/>.

¹⁶ Riley Wade, "Hellbound Hearts: What Makes Hellraiser Queer," *Horror Obsessive*, November 29, 2021, <https://horrorobsessive.com/2021/11/29/hellbound-hearts-what-makes-hellraiser-queer/>.

nauseating, hyper-sexual and yet unsettling. *Hellraiser* was released into a 1980s environment colored by the conservative political reigns of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and ravaged by the HIV/AIDS crisis¹⁷.

The years surrounding *Hellraiser*'s release saw both the decimation of queer communities and violently intolerant attitudes towards queer people, specifically towards gay men who were considered more likely to carry and spread the virus¹⁸. Studies into the social effects of HIV/AIDS during the mid-to-late 80s discovered increasing “moral intolerance towards homosexuals and homosexual sex acts”¹⁹ which had catastrophic results with regards to medical and social treatments of queer people and education regarding the virus²⁰. This social atmosphere was also the context for Bersani's 1987 essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” —whose title was inspired by the declaration of AIDS activist Simon Watney that AIDS, and the accompanying public health response, produced “a new machinery of repression, [by] making the rectum a grave”²¹

Conservative anxieties regarding the supposed erosion of family values buzzed over the active health crisis ripping through the nation. Political rhetoric from the period argued “that ‘family values’ have collapsed, bringing down the nation with it”²² — championing heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family as the sole valid form of sexual and familial intimacy while condemning queer forms of sexual and social arrangement. Reagan declared in his second term

¹⁷ “1980s: Fashion, Movies & Politics - HISTORY,” History.com, April 20, 2023, <https://www.history.com/topics/1980s/1980s#the-new-right>.

¹⁸ HIV.gov, “HIV & AIDS Trends and U.S. Statistics Overview,” HIV.gov, October 27, 2022.

¹⁹ Erin Ruel and Richard T. Campbell, “Homophobia and HIV/AIDS: Attitude Change in the Face of an Epidemic,” *Social Forces* 84, no. 4 (2006): 2167–78,

²⁰ Due to limited space, the extensive ramifications of homophobia, and homophobia as it interacted with racism, at the time cannot be properly addressed in text. I recommend this text for further reading: Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT up New York, 1987-1993* (New York: Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 2021).

²¹ Jeffrey Escoffier, “Sex, Safety, and the Trauma of AIDS,” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 1/2 (2011): 129–38, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41290283>.

²² Elaine Tyler May, “‘Family Values’: The Uses and Abuses of American Family History,” *Revue Francaise Detudes Americaines* 97, no. 3 (2003),

campaign speech that “today more than ever, it is essential to instruct our children in right and wrong... and maintain the spiritual strength of religious commitment among our people,²³” implying a negative correlation between the presence of queerness and the strength of the nation’s morality.

Such was the climate *Hellraiser* was released into and the film, which thematically reflects the anxieties seething within Western society, was ridiculed by people of all ideologies. Some accused the film of demeaning so-called deviant sex, while conservatives found it too queer and too sexual for their liking. A 2015 essay called “The Horror Film in Neoconservative Culture” possesses the first perspective, positing that *Hellraiser* “associates erotic transgression with self-destruction, making the film very central to AIDS cinema, or rather, that branch of commercial cinema advancing the scapegoating politics of the age of AIDS”²⁴. It is true that the film was “released in a society that positioned sexuality, especially queer sexuality, as the road to suffering due to AIDS”²⁵, in keeping with *Hellraiser*’s violent hyper-sexuality and deep investment in examining the family. However, *Hellraiser*’s unflinching introduction of debauchery into the domestic sphere compounded with a host of morally ambiguous characters proved most unsettling to viewers at the time, causing the film to be despised rather than applauded by conservative audiences.

From its conception, the film has endured a barrage of censorship. Film creator Clive Barker later reported that the very filming of sexual content was a constant struggle, and he lamented not being permitted to include anal sex, spanking, or sexual knife use.²⁶ Despite being tamer than Barker’s intent, the film was banned in Canada because “it contravene[d] community

²³ Ronald Reagan, “Presidential Campaign Speech.”

²⁴ Christopher Sharrett, “The Horror Film in Neoconservative Culture,” in *The Dread of Difference* (University of Texas Press, 2015).

²⁵ Riley Wade, “Hellbound Hearts: What Makes Hellraiser Queer,” Horror Obsessive, November 29, 2021, <https://horrorobsessive.com/2021/11/29/hellbound-hearts-what-makes-hellraiser-queer/>.

²⁶ Paul Kane, *The Hellraiser Films and Their Legacy* (McFarland, 2012).

standards,”²⁷ and in countries where its presence was permitted, the film’s most sexual, violent, and sadomasochist tidbits were censored for live broadcast.

Despite attempts to scrub its blood-soaked legacy from screens, *Hellraiser* has enjoyed cultic appreciation among queer horror aficionados for the past 40 years. Among mainstream audiences the film has been ridiculed for oddly damp practical effects and widely written off as a wincing laugh—effectively gross but in no way differentiated from the broad bargain bin of campy 80s horror. Regardless of critical disregard, scholars of sexuality studies and queer history have taken up *Hellraiser* as both an embodiment of the anxieties plaguing heterosexual “family values” touting Americans and an exploration of BDSM. Such evaluations are echoed off the page by individuals citing *Hellraiser* as a beloved endorsement of their “nontraditional” lifestyle,²⁸ or else a bloody fun queer romp. Evidence of *Hellraiser*’s niche but enduring appeal is the presence of a Cenobite cutout in the bathroom of Atlanta’s oldest independent theater, The Plaza²⁹.

²⁷ “Hellraiser (1987) - Alternate Versions - IMDb,” [www.imdb.com](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093177/alternateversions/), accessed December 27, 2023, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093177/alternateversions/>.

²⁸ Will Stroude, “Why Clive Barker’s ‘Hellraiser’ Is an Unlikely Queer Classic,” *Attitude*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.attitude.co.uk/culture/sexuality/why-clive-barkers-hellraiser-is-an-unlikely-queer-classic-298468/>.

²⁹ Plaza Theater, “History,” www.plazaatlanta.com, accessed December 27, 2023, <https://www.plazaatlanta.com/history>.

III. On Queer Negativity

It is important to recall that Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" was published the same year *Hellraiser* was released. Bersani's non-utopian view of sexuality and examination of self-dissolution places it in intimate conversation with *Hellraiser*. Later taken up by Lee Edelman and others, Bersani's essay instigated a strand of queer theory that has come to be known as queer negativity. Queer negativity opposes the potential recuperation of a 'queer subject', such as is found in homonormativity, in favor of associating queerness with masochism, unintelligibility, anti futurity, and the destruction of the subject. Interestingly, both Freud and Foucault feature within Bersani's essay. In that sense the essay walks a razor-thin tightrope as it degrades coherent subjectivity from two disparate perspectives. If queer negativity has almost exclusively followed the Freudian path laid out by Bersani, I will follow the Foucauldian path not taken to explore queer negativity as an ontological paradox.

Bersani's work is anti-identity because it is invested in examining the fragility of subjectivity, as opposed to recuperating a coherent queer subject. He is not interested in same-sex marriage, gay natality, or assimilation into the light of subjectivity. Bersani does not champion an embodiment of queerness, but rather asserts that "masochistic self shattering is constitutive of us as sexual beings, [and] that it is present, always, not primarily in our orgasms but rather in the terrifying but also exhilarating instability of human subjectivity"³⁰. Therefore 'queer' is not a moniker to be donned as an identity, but a verb—something which tears at unstable subjectivity with the potential to temporarily shatter the subject entirely.

Though much of his work is rooted in psychoanalysis, Bersani writes that "Foucault interests [him] for what [he] takes to be his fundamental project of rethinking relations"³¹.

³⁰Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," *October* 43 (1987): 197–222, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574>.

³¹Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," *October* 43 (1987): 197–222, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574>.

Though most scholarship in the field of queer negativity is exceedingly psychoanalytic, thinking instead with Foucault allows me to explore discursive 'identity' construction through a philosophical, ontological lens. As a thinker of unresolved contradictions, Foucault opens a space for thinking about queerness as a destabilizing force within the grid of intelligibility; an ontological paradox.

Chapter One: A Domestic Hellscape

This chapter begins with a scene of horror.

The horror is an answer.

An answer to the question that opens Clive Barker's *Hellraiser*:

“What's your pleasure, Mr. Cotton?”

This question is posed within the film, but it is also posed extra-diegetically. The viewer wants the same thing as Frank Cotton: a reckoning with the limits of experience. Frank finds his answer in the shaded anonymity of a mysterious market, a puzzle box capable of bringing the possessor unparalleled pleasure. The viewer finds their answer in the play button, pressed with a trembling hand. The viewer, however, is to remain pinned until the next chapter. Let them agonize a little longer.

The scene of horror must now unfold.

So it begins. Seated shirtless on the floor within his attic, bare skin gleaming within the light of a square of candles, Frank watches as the box morphs—folding into countless prismatic shapes as it reveals its promises. His eyes widen as the boarded walls thrum, blue light beginning to seep through the cracks. Strange steam swirling within the room, hitherto unseen, becomes illuminated by this intruding light—forming linear shapes in the air around Frank’s reverie. Then the walls themselves recede, tangible plaster rising to the heavens to allow greater presence of that brilliant blue light.

When the box completes its transformations, electricity, as vivid as the light subsuming Frank’s room, arcs into his flesh. Hooks of ambiguous origin bury themselves in his skin, rending it, his blood beginning to slide in rivulets. The camera work is close, capturing the tortured flesh in shocking relief—a stark contrast to the foggy inscrutability displayed by the rest of his surroundings.

Frank screams, his face distorted by the wicked sensation of promised agony, and the film cuts abruptly: an elegant family home filling the screen where the tortured hedonist had been.

The series of vignettes presented are domestic and yet unsettling: a family dining table, heaped with rotting food; an empty hallway adorned with portraits; a poorly illuminated statue of Christ keeping watch over unseen household members; a bed with filthy sheets upon which a cockroach scuttles. Then comes the nondescript attic door, swinging slowly inwards to reveal a sliver of light.

Finally the viewer is privy to what lies beyond. It no longer resembles Frank's attic. The physical structure revealed is ambiguous—the walls, ceiling, and floors are obscured by inky haze, as though filthy. Windows, identical to those in the earthly home, are discernible among the filthy and nondescript panels. First concealed by a myriad of chains and hooks descending from the concealed ceiling, the realization of their identical nature is discordant to the viewer.

Within the room stand pillars adorned with human flesh: chunks of viscera, iridescent with blood, attached with hooks and chains. The pillars reject stagnation in favor of rotating constantly, presenting a never-ending morphology of shapes. With each revolution, the tangible space is torn apart and reconstructed. The result is an ephemeral simulacrum of the attic room, identical and yet illegible, wet with blood.

Through this uncanny scape drifts the Cenobite—illuminated by a single swaying bulb amidst the chains. The glow of the bulb is warm and familiar compared to the blue seeping through the fragmented walls where boards have given way to light.

A human face lies disassembled upon the floor, the pieces placed like a macabre puzzle. The attempt at reassembly is farcical, for the face is torn so significantly it no longer coherently resembles a face at all. The Cenobite looms above it, its own face similarly ravaged by a grid of

pins emerging from deep within the flesh. With a deft caress, it slides the puzzle box into the original configuration and all traces of the Cenobites are expunged in an instant. The attic is tightly walled once more, illuminated with the earthly glow of a curtain-covered window.

I. The Chiasmus

When Frank summoned the Cenobites, he carved a crossing into the fabric of his world. The spatial and ontological relationships occurring between human and cenobite, between home and exterior, were chiastic in nature. It was a cataclysmic collision of forces which tore poor Frank Cotton beyond repair.

The term ‘chiasmus’ is a literary one, referring to an inverted relationship between the syntactic elements of parallel phrases³². ABBA—pleasure’s a sin, and sin’s a pleasure. Within the reversal of two antithetical statements lies the power of the chiastic sentence. Through such intimate juxtaposition, the irreconcilability of conflicting sentiment is both emphasized and forced into discordant unity.

This is because, despite containing only two overt terms (A and B), a chiasmus actually produces an invisible third term: C. In order for A and B to work in linguistic tandem, they must somehow generate a bridge between their contradictions. The bridging concept (C), acts as a figurative stage upon which antithetical A and B can operate in conversation with one another. In short, the “chiasmus works not simply through a logic of crossing or exchange between two terms, but also through the generation of a third term”³³. Thus chiasmus is not powerful merely for its ability to juxtapose, but also for its ability to generate something new—something akin to the collision between Frank’s attic and Cenobite, something born from dissonant forces amalgamating.

An example to illuminate this point: the aforementioned pleasure and sin. In this case, the third term that emerges, which acts as a site of interaction between sentiments, comes from a

³² “Definition of CHIASMUS,” Merriam-webster.com, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chiasmus>.

³³ Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul, *Chiasmus and Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), pg 52.

religious matrix of pleasure versus sin. That is because, through the employed language of sin, a greater religious world is invoked. Pleasure's a sin, proclaims Puritan morality; but sin's a pleasure, retorts the dissenter. Though their perspectives are dissident, these antithetical statements are both legible upon a moral stage of religiosity. This cultural context is both present and absent within the chiasmic sentence: its contextual contingency is not verbally established and yet the implicit context is necessary for both the declaration and the refutation to be uttered.

As seen in this simultaneous presence and absence of context, the chiasmus implies a larger world, or a subject who utters it, without those forces being visible within the confines of the sentence. As argued in *Chiasmus + Culture* “there is, within the third element, an implication of the larger ground the claim occurs in—or the ‘I’ that speaks it...and yet it is not present within the moment”³⁴. This implied world context is how the unnamed site C, or crossing, is able to briefly unite the disagreeing clamor of unnamed voices.

The third site is intangible and, were it to be overtly written, the chiasmic sentence would be destroyed. Its absence within the chiasmus is not due to any neglect of its written inclusion, rather its absence stems from its status as the unsaid. In that sense site C is apophatic: speech that says by unsaying. Site C is a place of transformation, obscurity, and possibility where reconciliations occur that are impossible in verbal logic. Were the aforementioned example expanded to read: “pleasure's a sin on the religious stage, and sin's a pleasure”, it would be nonsensical. It would be a mere contradiction. By defining site C, the chiasmic powers of juxtaposition are murdered in favor of irreconcilability. The sentence has been rendered incoherent because the confines of coherence, either of subject or location, cannot support the antithetical A and B.

³⁴ Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul, *Chiasmus and Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), pg 52

As such, C is not specific or tangible, and often lacks verbal comprehensibility; this means that it often signals as an affective state. The third “term often registers entirely as laughter, delight, awe, or other emotional response,”³⁵ all of which arise from the inability to express conflicting states. C is not a logic proof which solves for A and B’s commonality. It is an expression of something nebulous— awe,

confusion,

tension,

overwhelming sadness.

??????

Chiastic reversal has a ludic quality. Further, the fact that C “is often expressed as laughter is a welcome mystification of social relations”³⁶ which require coherence or legibility as a requirement for existence. C insists on its own existence despite its inscrutability! Its presence is demonstrated through effects both absent and tangible in the sentence.

The expansive abyss of this third site occurs only within the confines of the crossing between A and B and is thus paradoxical in form—implying something limitless and yet utterly confined to a moment. There is no permanence to be found within this new site of formal innovation. Rather “the basis for resolution is always signified only by the crossing, which itself supplies no principle of resolution but rather perpetual oscillation”³⁷. This is because the space between A and B is contingent and ephemeral, born of the elements which imply it and consisting of nothing but the space upon which they engage one another. Were it altered or applied broadly, it would dissipate forever.

³⁵ Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul, *Chiasmus and Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), pg 59.

³⁶ Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul, *Chiasmus and Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), pg 59.

³⁷ Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul, *Chiasmus and Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), pg 59.

While its roots are mired in the poetic, the chiasmic structure is also useful in conceptualizing matters of philosophy. The philosophical appeal of the chiasmus “stems from its capacity to imply an additional dimension of thought, experience, or social organization in which incommensurables can be joined harmoniously or productively”³⁸. Similarly to how the prior example of pleasure and sin generated an unspoken battleground of morality upon which to reconcile itself, philosophically chiasmic crossings are ripe with generative collisions that resist verbal categorization.

Another philosophical appeal of the chiasmus is that it can generate an ontological paradox as well as a linguistic one. This occurs because the speaker, the subjective “I” within the chiasmus, is highly unstable. The two sides of the chiasmus imply either divergent perspectives, each referring back to the other, or that both sides are the product of a single shattered subject with no consistent self-orientation. In either event, there is no coherent “I” who speaks: the speaking, knowing subject is either absent or so fragmented that it contradicts itself. And though Site C generates vital context, it does not reconcile this befuddling ontological condition by attributing subjectivity to the phrases.

Drawing on its complexity as a rhetorical and philosophical figure, chiasmus can be utilized to conceptualize spatial relationships of crossing and inversion within *Hellraiser*. Its operation at the level of physical space within the film, as opposed to at the level of the sentence, still produces the elusive site C—and the crossing produced comes with even higher ontological stakes. The simulacrum attic room in which Frank’s body is tormented is a physical representation of site C.

³⁸ Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul, *Chiasmus and Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), pg 59.



Fig. 2: the Attic

The attic, a representation of the abyss at the heart of chiasmus, is a meeting ground upon which both cenobites and family are legible, a clutter born of both worlds, gore and civility shockingly juxtaposed. It is as exquisitely ephemeral as it is dangerous. It is a site with no identity of its own, whose blood slicked floors allow the forces to converge. It is an attic that is not an attic, lit from within and without, whose pillars of flesh spin with endless possibilities.

As Frank's actions initiate this crossing of worlds, he himself becomes the broken subject that is implicated in the ontological paradox of the chiasmus. His body is rendered void as the hooks tear into his skin and yet he is not destroyed; he becomes the very point of crossing. The Cenobites do not storm the attic walls, or manifest in some other earthly fashion. Their presence bursts forth as the crossing occurs at the site of Frank—an inversion which turns him, literally, inside out.

II. The Crossing

A leap outside of the limits of pleasure, achieved through a finite reckoning with the Cenobites—that is what Frank dreamed of when the puzzle box was first placed into the palm of his curious hand. Frank wanted to pursue a limit experience. He wanted to access that figurative ambrosia which lies outside of the conventions that hem him in. Limit experiences³⁹ vary in method, they are attempted through sex, mind-altering drugs, or enduring deliberate pain, but their purpose is always the same: allowing the subject to experience the most triumphant and cataclysmic sensations possible, so dazzling that it shatters the light of their subjectivity.

Ego death

catharsis

horror

ecstasy

Frank summoned the Cenobites with the intent of stepping into their world to pursue such an experience, leaving his own world untouched for his inevitable return. The stark divide he conceptualized between interior (his home waiting, untouched) and exterior (the twisted world of ultimate experience) purports that one can exist within the confines of subjectivity or one can transcend, breaking free into the dazzling Elysian nights of unbridled sexual ecstasy. That is the neat duality of space which Frank so confidently bet his flesh on—one that would have allowed him safe passage into the Cenobites' outside and back again, resituated in the seat of subjectivity with memory enough to pacify monotonous days.

³⁹ A notion that Michel Foucault borrowed from George Bataile.

But that was never to be. Frank's lust for a mere glimpse of the outside was unable to be resolved, for such resolution would require division between the Cenobite world and the home. He wanted the box open for his pleasures and closed whenever agony was inconvenient, but that tidy theoretical division crumbled into a gruesome paradoxical reality.

Why? Because the box is not a ticket out from the confines of the repressive hypothesis famously critiqued by Foucault. Were the box a portal, as was assumed by Frank, then it would possess a tidy relationship to exteriority and interiority. When in the tightly-sealed starting position, the box would contain the latent power to access the Cenobite realm: the "outside" according to the world of the family. Then, when the box's structure is interfered with and the "portal" is activated, as occurred during Frank's seance, the fabric between Cenobite and human would be diminished—allowing the subject to step, or be dragged, into that exterior space. Once within the Cenobite world, the return would consist of inverse operations. This conception of the box is, at its core, a metaphysical doorknob.

But that model of the human world and Cenobite world does not capture the true spatial intricacy of their relationship—one that is chiasmic in nature. The portal framework relies on the assumption that the action occurring is the passage of a subject who is only partly undone through a departure and subsequent return facilitated by the box. However, the true mechanism of interaction is a veritable collision of Cenobite and mortal within the confines of the summoning space. Therefore, when Frank intends to move from the figurative A to B, the box creates C. As such there is no departure, he is never free of the attic; for the family home and the Cenobite realm become the integral forces whose irreconcilable interplay rips the liminal C into existence.

C is therefore neither attic nor Cenobite, it is not even a corrupted attic or a failed site of departure, it is a **crossing**. Frank's initiation caused elements of the intertwined realms to bleed into one another, creating an unsettled space that eludes direct categorization. It is an ephemeral space which is contingent on the chiasmic powers the box contains—it is an empty space, an unnamed void. With each revolution of the flesh-pillars, the simulacrum room is remade anew, demonstrating endless spatial adaptation. The chains that sway from the ceiling lend a Cenobite air to the borrowed attic facade, providing a stage upon which both realities can carve their meanings into Frank's flesh. Though fleeting, the carnal impact it allows is viscerally real.

It is a space of high ontological stakes, and within it Frank is dragged between paradoxical hooks. He is a subject. He is within his home. He belongs to the family. He is a man. He is legible. And: he is other. He is in a place beyond conception. He belongs to no one. He is an object, illegibility is written across his ruined flesh. Spatially and subjectively, Frank has been quartered much like Damians in the infamous opening of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Though Frank's intended limit experience failed, he reckoned with a limit nonetheless, and it was a collision after which he will never be the same.

This confrontation which produces a crossing at the site of the former subject is queer. Queer here does not designate an identity, like a species of flower within a greenhouse of variants, for there is nothing queer about such a legible position on a normal curve of sexuality. Nor is queerness transgressive in the sense that it crosses or transcends norms, as was Frank's intent. That cannot not be the case because there is nothing "outside" of the limit. The crossing occurs at the site of Frank; Frank himself crosses nothing. The queering action *Hellraiser* performs is a hollowing out in which Frank's very flesh is inverted by the forces which act upon him. Therefore this queering is a disruption—Frank's body is shattered, turned inside out, as are

the divisions between worlds, as are the delineations of Cenobite and human, as is subjectivity itself.

III. “The Leap”

It is only after the refuse of Frank is expunged that the viewer is made privy to the collision’s location: the bastion of domesticity that is the attic of a family home. The unmoored viewer drifts backwards down the stairs, gaze hesitant to leave the attic door which is now tightly closed. How tidy it looks, how utterly incapable of concealing torment.

The fact that the crossing occurred between Cenobite and a domestic space is intimately implicated with the film’s queerness. The scene’s location illuminates how Frank’s debauchery was a deviation from within as opposed to an invasion from some outside space where Cenobites proliferate freely. The origin of deviance, then, is from within the family home. Frank was born within it, lived within it, and was ripped apart within its simulacrum’s walls. This view of deviation is a Foucauldian one; a perspective oriented not around the escape of repression, but around the production of queerness within the confines of a grid of *quadrillage*⁴⁰.

The opposing, and more commonly employed, conceptual model of queerness and its assumed opposite is that of diametrically opposed spaces. On one side lies all which is sanctioned by the heterosexual, utilitarian mechanism of repression; on the other side lies queerness. They are divided and yet the queer side is accessible with the correct method of self-liberation. This conceptual model allows a subject the “opportunity to speak out about the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures”⁴¹ with the intent of transcending the repressive powers of confinement. The leap is not easy, for the barrier, though permeable, is iron-fisted in its constraint, but the outside

⁴⁰ Used to refer to partitioning as a form of control.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (New York Vintage Books, 1978).

is distinct and vivid in nature. Rebellion, blasphemous speech in the face of repression, kinky sex, gay sex, non-procreative sex, sadomasochism, such are the mechanisms of the leap.

Through figurative freedom of movement, from one side of the metaphorical divide to the other, a sexualized self might access unfettered, unrepressed pleasure as well as freedom from the effects power places on sex. The sex club is a place where such a departure might occur: a two-way train ticket to and from the realm of queerness. In this enclave of rebellion, the subject is able to experience pleasure beyond the edict of taboos governing their daily life, thus temporarily shedding the effects repressive power exerts on them. On one side lies the power of repression and its products: dismal heterosexuals in procreative missionary positioned within the sterile home of the married couple. On the opposing side lies the queer, kinky, salacious “garden of earthly delights”⁴² outside of power’s reach: the place Frank so eagerly sought to step inside of, salivating for its forbidden fruit.

Conceptualizing queerness as wholly removed from repression is enticing because it promises an outside to the effects of power. Were such a schematic true, then it would inherently allow for the possibility of fruitful transgression, a space the subject might escape to. The subject need only resist, and they would “place [themselves] to a certain extent outside the reach of power”⁴³ because it would be a power whose only weapon is repression. Each act and word of defiance hence would appeal to a future where sex would be free, where sex would be fantastic. Queer joy, queer lust, freedom—these would be the boons of sexual revolution.

⁴² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (New York Vintage Books, 1978).

⁴³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (New York Vintage Books, 1978).

Wouldn't that be nice?

IV. Deviance

But queerness is not an autonomous haven outside of the grid's reach, it is produced within the very structure it appears to resist. Freedom of movement, a leap from one side to the other, is thus impossible. The subject cannot hope to resist the repressive effects of power, not because methods of rebellion are rendered inaccessible, but because the mechanism of power was not primarily repressive to begin with. Queerness is not rebellion, nor is it the sweet and dripping promise within the core of a forbidden fruit. Queerness is a deviance produced by the very lines of grid, slashed into the flesh of the subject. Queerness was born from the "setting apart of the 'unnatural' as a specific dimension in the field of sexuality,"⁴⁴ a process of categorization whose goal was not to remove the deviant, but to churn further power from the prescription of its features.

Power does not stifle sexuality with the intent of exterminating it, instead power incites its constant proliferation—splintering sexuality into a myriad of options to be observed and categorized. The power that forged queerness from the quagmire of sexual potential "gave it an analytical, visible, and permanent reality"⁴⁵ which demanded constant pursuit. Examination and definition were the knives that excised queerness from obscurity and bottled it up for constant observation. The homosexual, the sadist, the sexoesthetic invert—each cut gridded deviance further along the definitional lines inscribed. The result was a sexual mosaic so precise, whose lines had proliferated with such intensity, that its object of deviance could be found in exponentially increasing sites.

⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (New York Vintage Books, 1978).

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (New York Vintage Books, 1978).

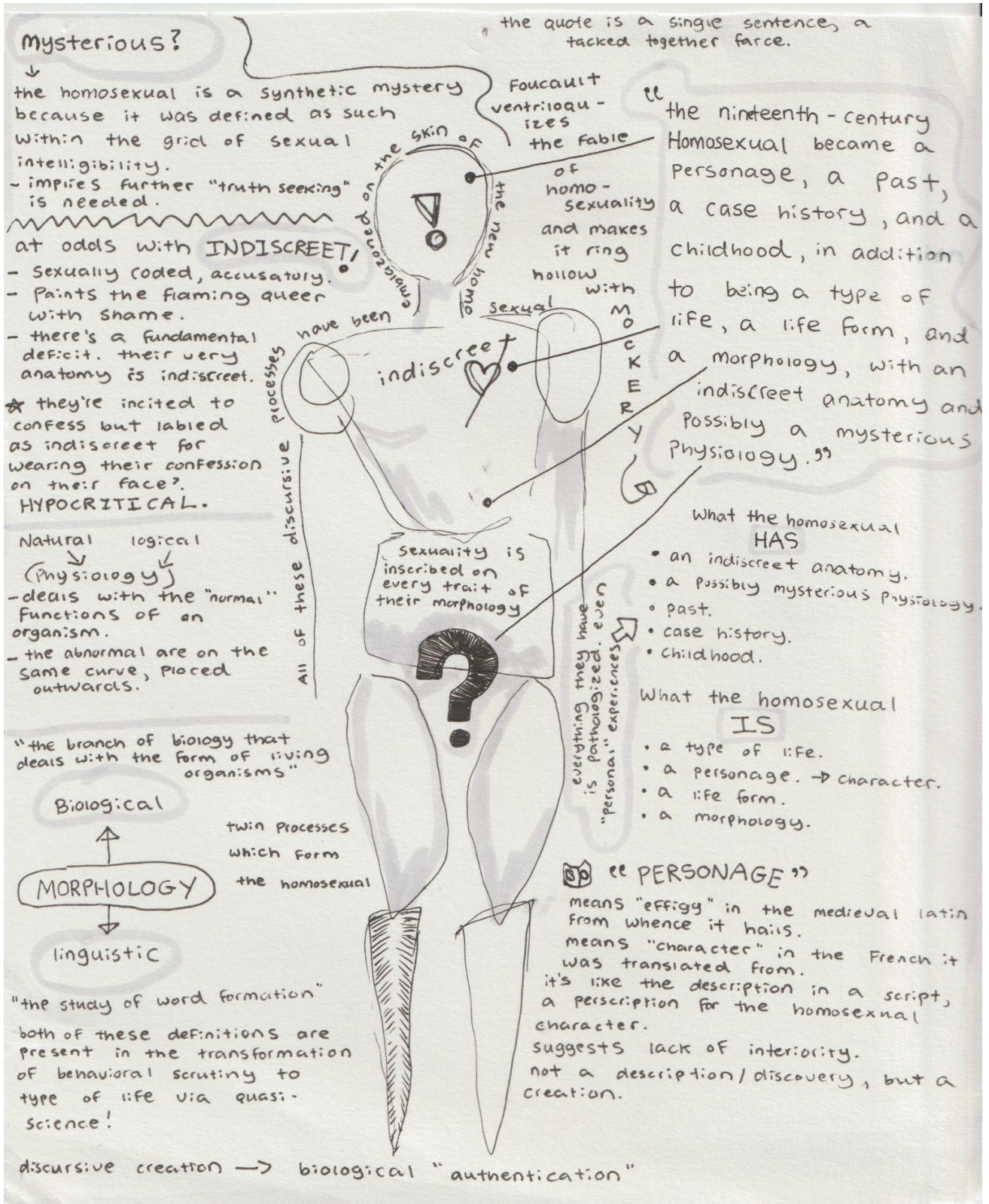


Fig 3: the Homosexual

In the same way that collision site C does not exist with autonomy from the mortal realm, queerness is not outside of normativity. There are striking parallels to these two existences: both are aberrant and yet both are born within a productive power mechanism. In the words of Foucault, “the machinery of power that focuses on [the] whole alien strain [of queerness does] not aim to suppress it, but rather to give it an analytical, visible, and permanent reality: it was implanted in bodies...made a principle of classification and intelligibility”⁴⁶. Queerness was not born of natural origin, deemed aberrant, and then excluded. Nor does it possess an outside existence wholly untouched, inaccessible except via transcendent measures. Queerness is not about the crossing of a line in the same way the box is not a portal.

Queering occurs when the former subject becomes a site upon which forces produce a crossing that, in turn, undoes the subject. The legible sexual subject is undone at the site of queerness, and in that sense it can be considered a verb: a queering. Queerness thus cannot be conceptualized as a stable and generalizable state, one which can be adopted as identity. But that is not to say it is not powerful in its effects, or that it cannot be embodied. For the Cenobites, it is their continued illegibility that queers them. They are a figure only visible at the crossing, illuminated in the blue light of worlds collapsing upon one another.

Therefore queerness is an ontological paradox: it is brought into violent existence as a product of the power that names it; and yet it is an inexorable presence, even when gnashed like paper through the teeth of a shredder and thus rendered illegible within the very mechanism that created it. This ontological paradox is a chiasmic implosion of meaning at site C, as opposed to psychoanalytic queer negativity’s masochistic self-negation achieved by sexually “shattering the psychic structures themselves.”⁴⁷ Here Bersani’s rectum-as-grave is not a manifestation of the

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (New York Vintage Books, 1978).

⁴⁷ Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” *October* 43 (1987): 197–222, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574>.

death drive, it is the chiastic site C—a site of irreconcilable forces that can only emerge through a Foucauldian analysis of the grid of intelligibility. It is a diagonal emergence within a Brinkemian diagram. It is a rhetorical and ontological collision that bypasses psychoanalytic repression and its ensuing liberation to sketch a different kind of freedom-as-horror.

This is the paradoxical ontological experience that affords the Cenobites freedom, not despite the inversion of their flesh, but because of it. Imagine, for a moment, that the cenobite was once a human. First the delineation of gay is drawn upon them, a vertical cut through the center of their body. Then come the slashes, each one a specifier, each one endeavoring to process this subject into intelligible, ever more fine-grained, attributes. Bottom, masochist, dacryphile, exhibitionist...until every aspect is pinned to the metaphorical dissection tray. Now there is a subject, their interiority rendered visible and located precisely within the catalog of the grid, but there is also an object—the viscera left behind, the illegible body bared for parts.

Therefore the Cenobites' queerness is not due to some phantasmic external origin. Nor is it due to a rebellion against repressive forces seeking to confine them. Nor is it due to their ability to step outside of a grid of legibility which seeks to define them. Their queerness is born from the ecstasy of nebulous viscera left behind as subjectivity was torn beyond recognition.

Chapter Two: The Body of the Condemned

*When the four limbs had been pulled away,
The confessors came to speak to him;
But his executioner told them that he was dead,
Though the truth was that I saw the man move,
His lower jaw moving from side to side as if he were talking.*

—Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

I. Frank

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) begins with a scene of horror akin in viscera to Frank's chiasmic collision within the attic: an execution in which the convicted Damiens is expunged from the earth by power's fist. Frank is *Hellraiser's* Damiens in the sense that his body is similarly destroyed: the former inverted by chiasmus, the latter torn between horses straining in different directions. Corporeal violence is where their stories deviate, for while poor Damiens was eliminated wholly by sovereign might, Frank is kept alive and agonized—in biopolitically flayed stasis, displayed and dissected, for further viewing.

Discipline and Punish ostensibly describes the birth of the prison. But more importantly from a philosophical perspective, *Discipline and Punish* tells a story about the birth of subjectivity⁴⁸. The punishment that produces subjectivity is diffuse. It is not punishment as understood in a sovereign sense: the will of the king brought down via the blade of an executioner. It is punishment without a clear source and is ever more insidious as a result—epitomized by the infamous panopticon's system of surveillance in which prisoners

⁴⁸ By placing this text, not conventionally taken up as a queer one, in conversation with Clive Barker, *Hellraiser*, and queer negativity, I hope to reveal a muted queerness present within it. Such a queerness can be glimpsed in the unyielding viscera juxtaposed with depictions of the body, in cries escaping his lips, and in Damiens' gasped request: "kiss me, gentlemen".

might, at any moment, be perceived by unseen eyes. Initiated by a shift from public physical punishments to the concealed, everyday disciplining of the subject, “each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, thus exercising this surveillance over and against himself.”⁴⁹ If Damiens represents the former, a gruesome yet finite punishment in a public square, Frank’s inversion and entrapment within the home epitomizes the latter.

At the heart of *Discipline and Punish* lies a chiastic inversion. While the body is conventionally regarded to be the meaty prison of the soul, *Discipline and Punish* inverts the formula: the soul is the prison of the body. This chiastic reversal epitomizes how we find poor Frank after the events of chapter one. As Frank clings to his former legibility, defining himself through it and fighting to regain it, his body remains agonized.

BODY

IS

THE

PRISON

THE

IS

SOUL

BODY

THE

OF

PRISON

OF

THE

SOUL

⁴⁹Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (New York Vintage Books, 1978), 155.

Now, what exactly has befallen the poor Cotton family in your absence?

Certainly nothing good.

While you indulged in “the leap” and deviance,

1. what remained of Frank melted into the attic floor.
2. Frank’s brother Larry transplanted his family into the old house—an attempt to craft a suburban utopia with his second wife, Julia. (She used to fuck Frank. Larry doesn’t know).
3. While moving furniture, the stalwart homesteader cut his hand.

And that, dear reader, is where we rejoin the Cottons:

Larry’s blood, its scarlet violent against the aged wood floor, pools as it falls from his newly injured hand. These motes seep through the boards, devoured into nothingness. The camera itself slips beneath the surface as well, revealing the tormented organs which beat, disembodied, below the attic floor. They cling there like deranged cobwebs, held in place by stretched, glistening tendrils of viscera. The blood, accidentally shed, invigorates them—they pump harder, desperate and unseen.

As Larry, accompanied by his daughter and wife, descends in search of medical assistance, the camera begins to pan towards the attic once more. Music, twinkling and yet foreboding, provides companionship to the slow ascent. A preternatural sight greets the viewer:

floorboards writhing of their own volition, steam unfurling from the newfound gaps born of their movement. Where Larry's blood had fallen, the very house now revolts.

First a single nail works itself free of the boards, then another, then a slick grease begins to bubble from the inflamed wood. It sputters and oozes like pus from a buboe recently lanced. From this wretched mess, two indeterminate limbs thrust free of their confines—extending towards the attic ceiling, indiscernible as arms until they bend, find purchase, and begin to raise the rest of Frank from the muck. With agonizing labor, slow and wet in its progression, what remains of Frank Cotton is reassembled like a macabre jigsaw.

Far below Frank's agony, Larry holds court around a dinner table. Each subject, seated within their allotted position, engages in polite chatter as Larry entertains his guests with the story of his injured hand. The lifeblood which spurred Frank's veins reduced to a mere anecdote.

As Julia, Larry's wife and Frank's former lover, drifts from the party to the attic door, the sound which greets her is reminiscent of the chatter below. Voices, overlapping as they speak, emanate from behind the closed door. In stark contrast to the family's conversation below, these voices are illegible—their whisperings nonsensical and frenzied, conveying no coherent meaning.

Julia's lip curls with disgust as she beholds the refuse beyond the door frame, slicking the floors and coagulating in heaps. Accompanied by a sharp climax of the musical score, something desperate seizes her ankle. For a moment their bodies are joined: Julia, tidy, clothed, upright, and Frank, ravaged beyond recognition, naked, and laid prone upon the attic floor.

*Julia... help me.*⁵⁰

⁵⁰ *Hellraiser* (New World Pictures, 1987), 26:40.

She compels the wretched creature to tell her what it is⁵¹.

Though his flesh no longer resembles the man she once took as her lover, his voice is uncanny in its familiarity.

I am Frank.

Julia screams.

*It's me, it's really me. His blood on the floor, it brought me back.*⁵²

*Back? Back from where?*⁵³

This brief appeal to someone he used to attract but now repels epitomizes Frank's current subject position.

He is caught between subject and other, trying with great desperation to convince the woman of his identity: Frank, the man she once recognized as such. He is broken and distorted, no longer awarded the position of subject. He is instead a thing which repulses the onscreen subject and offscreen viewer. And yet, he is no cenobite. No inscrutability has replaced the

⁵¹*Hellraiser* (New World Pictures, 1987), 27:01.

⁵²*Hellraiser* (New World Pictures, 1987), 27:08.

⁵³*Hellraiser* (New World Pictures, 1987), 27:15.

wound his subjectivity was torn from, it merely bleeds and burns—endless, disgusting agony that he prays will cease through the re-affirmation of his manhood and subjecthood.

The spilled blood had indeed brought him “back” in that it renewed his flesh enough to speak. Now credited within the film as Frank the Monster, he has regained the ability to speak, to stand, and to beg for recognition—but has not regained his subjectivity. Hence his plea for Julia’s help. She remains a coherent subject of the family, no matter how dissatisfied with it she might be, and thus embodies what Frank wishes to reclaim.

When Julia questions his rhetoric of return, there is no answer to be given. Frank Cotton has not gone anywhere, at least not in the way she conceptualizes space. Unable to explain the chiasmic forces discussed in Chapter One, the ones that inverted his flesh, Frank neglects explanation and appeals only for her assistance.

*Just help me, will you? Please, god, help me.*⁵⁴

The film cuts downstairs once more, familiar laughter and candlelight replacing a close-up of Frank’s torn and slimy skin. The glee with which they converse now feels mocking due to its juxtaposition against his tragedy. They have everything Frank wishes to don once more: a life and subjective positionality he once shunned as trite, but now begs for.

Frank, his very flesh inverted by the experience he thought he desired, that he thought he understood, has been skinned of his subjectivity. He has not escaped, he has not transcended, he has not gone anywhere, as Julia’s geographical query suggests—Frank remains in the same location as before, but now he is laid bare. Having been forced to the limit, his hope of a

⁵⁴*Hellraiser* (New World Pictures, 1987), 27:20.

transcendent outside shattered, the flayed man's only hope is to somehow regain the skin of his subjectivity.

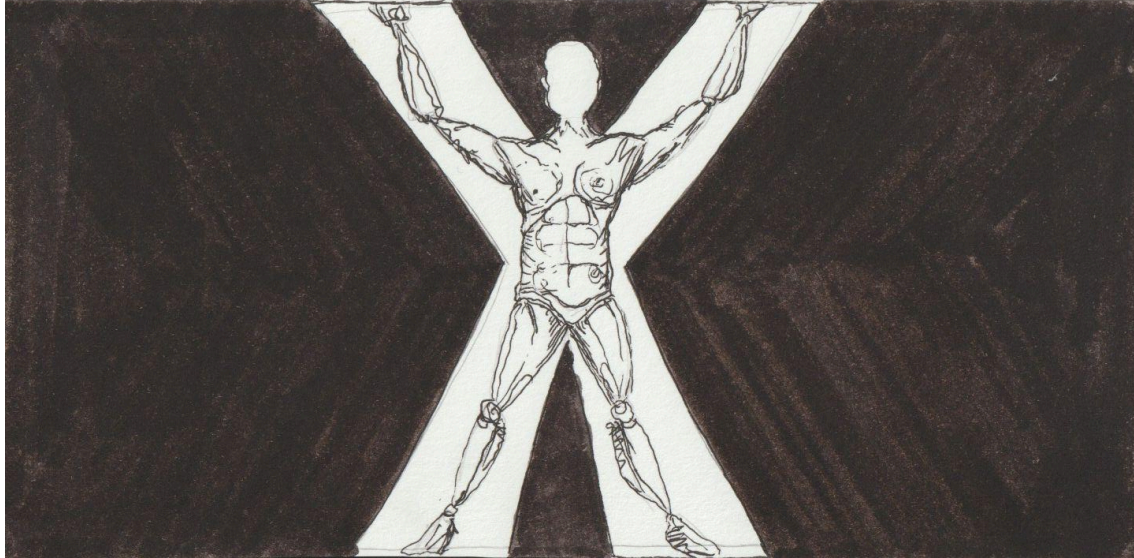


Fig. 4: the Flayed Man

Despite the disruption of his subjectivity which occurred in the crossing, Frank has not been queered. That is because what remains of Frank clings to the hope of regaining legible subjectivity, thus defining himself in relation to the grid of intelligibility to negate the agony he feels. His deviant flesh is laid bare beneath the violent light, torn apart, but for him there is no escape. Frank occupies a peculiar place, nearly queered by his collision but instead devastated by it—retreating into the steel trap embrace of his former legibility.

The first phase of his quest to regain subjectivity is a quest for blood—blood spilled from the veins of Julia's would-be lovers. Having agreed to help the agonized Frank, Julia lures men to the house with the promise of a carnal night and, once the door is closed, murders them. Frank, lurking at the periphery of the home, reaps the sanguine⁵⁵ reward of these unions. He is a leech, a deviant creature existing within the framework as these proposed heterosexual

⁵⁵ Referring here to both the color and mood of the affair, at least for Frank. Not so much for the ex-lovers.

couplings. He drinks the men dry, slurping and sipping their ebbing humanity to regain his own, growing stronger with each drop that slides down his desiccated throat.

Frank's consumption of blood holds two forms of distinct symbolic significance for his character. From the perspective of bodily significance, Frank's consumption of the blood of other men signifies a vampiric gathering of his strength, virility, and power. He is no longer merely acted upon, as he was when the forces of home and Cenobite inverted his flesh; he is deliberately forging his flesh anew. That reclamation of his body is Frank's intention, and it is the way he perceives his consumption of blood to be operating.

The word blood can be defined as "the fluid which sustains life"⁵⁶ or "that which is or has been shed; (hence) the shedding of blood; violence, murder, killing; (also occasionally) the fact of being killed"⁵⁷, both of which refer to a corporeal necessity. Drawing upon these definitions, Frank's consumption of blood is thus a symbolic feast of hedonic violence which allows him to regain a sense of life. This thirst is a similar carnal lust to what he displayed prior to the Cenobitic collision, but exchanging typical sexual gratification for the blood of lustful men. However, there is a second level of significance to the matter—one which pertains to the level of sociality instead of carnality.

In contrast to the prior definitions of blood, other usages define it as referring to "a living being; a person; (in later use) *esp.* a young man"⁵⁸ and it can more specifically be defined as "persons of a specified aristocratic birth; 'good' family or parentage"⁵⁹. This is what Foucault calls the "symbolics of blood"⁶⁰ in his book *History of Sexuality. Vol 1*. That auxiliary definition illuminates how Frank regains warped sexual legibility through his interactions with Julia. Again

⁵⁶"Blood, N. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary," *Oed.com*, 2023.

⁵⁷"Blood, N. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary," *Oed.com*, 2023.

⁵⁸"Blood, N. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary," *Oed.com*, 2023.

⁵⁹"Blood, N. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary," *Oed.com*, 2023.

⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York Vintage Books, 1978)

and again, Frank violently inserts himself into the role opposite her—a role claimed through the murder of her would-be sexual partners. With each gulp of blood, Frank asserts himself into his former sexual role: agentive, masculine, entangled with Julia herself. With each swallow his appearance grows more and more human, increasingly legible, though still raw with agony. It is not enough...

Before examining the final morbid stage of Frank's effort to regain his legibility, the grid he clings to must be more clearly defined through Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality Vol 1*. Within the volume, Foucault writes that "the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology."⁶¹ This quote refers to the invention of the term "homosexual"—which was coined in the late 19th century within the field of psychology. Though the quote pertains merely to "homosexuals", the concepts within are generalizable for an understanding of the grid of intelligibility.

This quote reflects a shift with regards to sex: from a concern with sexual behaviors, and whether they be licit or illicit, with little regard for the agent beyond a criminalizing concern, to a focus on types of people as delineated by their desires and behaviors. The result is an ordering of all individuals upon a metaphorical normal curve—a very different procedure than punishing individual actions or demanding a confession of sin before it can be expunged from one's moral conscience.

Foucault's analysis shows that discourse regarding sex has proliferated, focusing its gaze increasingly on "perverse"⁶² behaviors in the name of quasi-scientific exploration. Allegedly scientific focus melded with the history of confession to create a drive for both the "truth" of sex

⁶¹Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (New York Vintage Books, 1978).

⁶² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (New York Vintage Books, 1978)

and for an increasing delineation of different kinds of people—a process which draws the individual further into the sight of power, placing them within a grid of intelligibility using the term they adopt with pride to take on as an identity.

The sexual subject has thus been delineated as a category of scrutiny, it has been granted a past to interpret through the lens of sexuality, and now the clues tucked within its case history and its indiscreet form must be understood through further investigation. Such investigation is insinuated to occur at the medical level, hence the scientific jargon applied to the homosexual within this passage, and at the level of psychological entreaty, where the individual is compelled to speak about their childhood and past in order to compile a case history. All of this works in the pursuit of comprising linear, categorical sexuality from a breadth of abstract information. In particular, the word mysterious, which possibly affects the homosexual's physiology, is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: “difficult or impossible to understand, explain, or identify.” This definition further implies there is something off, disconcerting, suspicious or incongruent about this type of life which requires investigation—a problem to be solved, a site for truth. And yet such mystery possesses no inscrutable exterior origin as might be implied, for it was defined as such within the grid of intelligibility that created it in the first place as a sexual subject, pinned fast.

The grid of intelligibility is built through a power of production: inciting discourse, producing knowledge, incentivising and necessitating the disclosure of deviance in the name of a “science” of sex. Methods such as medical examinations, psychotherapy, state-mandated reporting such as the census and demographic studies, and the Catholic church's practice of confession, served as cogs in the wheel of sexual knowledge production. From that basis of

knowledge churned a mosaic of sexuality, myriad forms of such deviant types—a never ending cycle of incitement that drew the lines of the grid ever closer together.

Additionally, the resulting compulsion to self-surveil allowed for no obscurity within the self, for rendering oneself a site of knowledge was now a prescribed duty. Foucault writes that the newly established edicts of sexual knowledge stated “not only will you confess to acts contravening the law [as one might in a system of sovereign law], but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse”⁶³. Thus, through both external inquiry and self-evaluation, rendering the flesh and mind a legible sexual subject holds highest importance.

Such legibility was tantamount to the anguished mind of Frank Cotton, whose consumption of blood alone was unsuccessful. Though Frank’s strength had mounted, his flesh remained raw and exposed; an object of inquiry and revulsion without coherency. Though now clothed and upright, no longer hunched upon the floor like a sick dog, he still eluded recognition and thus subjectivity. Despite Frank’s best efforts, he remained torn between positions:

skinned beast

Man

Frank has most notably not regained his sexual legibility. Throughout the film, the viewer is privy to Julia’s flights of erotic fantasy—hazy and sweat-clouded images of her former dalliances with Frank. But now, when his current visage appears in Julia’s mind as she and Larry caress one another, the hideous apparition causes her to recoil. Though he has donned his brother’s fine suits, the viscosity seeping from beneath the starched cotton marks Frank as something undesirable and monstrous.

⁶³Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction* (New York Vintage Books, 1978), page 21.

Finally, in a last bid for subjective recognition, Frank dons much more than his brother's clothes. Descending from the attic to the bedroom, the new Frank Cotton is slowly revealed to the viewer. His hands are no longer raw and repulsive, for now they are whole and covered with skin. The camera lingers on a wedding band adorning these new hands as Frank stretches them, knuckles cracking audibly in the heavy silence. He enters a candlelit room where Julia sits upon a padded stool, contemplating her own reflection in the vanity mirror. The new Frank approaches from behind, sensually stroking her face. Julia closes her eyes, enraptured, ignorant of the trail of blood his caress leaves upon her skin. As they fall upon the bed, the viewer realizes with horror that Frank Cotton has donned the skin of his brother.

II. Them

The danger of the queer is that it can undo the human. Queer theorist Leo Bersani writes that “what disturbs people about homosexuality is not the sexual act itself but rather the homosexual mode of life, which Foucault associated with the ‘formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force’”⁶⁴. Foucault elaborates in an interview, suggesting that queering might “reopen affective and relational virtualities not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual but because of the slantwise position, as it were, the diagonal lines [it] can lay out in the social fabric allow these virtualities to come to light”⁶⁵. Present in both quotations is a vital affirmation of queering as destabilization, something which runs contrary to the grid’s quest for specific delineation and yet exists within it; described spatially by Foucault as a diagonal line amidst an implied grid—a quadrillage—of horizontal and vertical lines.

Found within this spatial description is what I want to reclaim as a crucial difference between queer and gay. Queer means the nonself-identical undoing of subjectivity celebrated by queer negativity. As opposed to the identification with a sexual category, be it gay, lesbian, sadomasochistic, or any such shade of delineated “perversity”⁶⁶. Such designations, no matter how transgressive their attributes may appear, exist within a square of the grid. Their perverse particularity might mean the confines draw closer, more finely grained, designating them within a niche upon the periphery of the normal curve, but they exist legibly within the grid and upon the curve nonetheless. Because attempts to clearly define queerness will, in fact, destroy the queerness of the moment or relation, queer cannot become nearly as specific as ‘sexual identities’. Foucault thus does not define his aforementioned new modes of relations, which

⁶⁴Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” *October* 43 (1987): 197–222, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574>.

⁶⁵Michel Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life, Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Vol 1.*, 1997.

⁶⁶Used in reference to Michel Foucault’s discussion of the proliferation of perversities in *History of Sexuality, Vol 1.*

Bersani finds to be a “beneficial limitation, since more specific suggestions about how we might “become [queer]⁶⁷ could operate as a constraint on our very effort to do so, while his under-conceptualizing of that notion can serve as a generous inspiration”⁶⁸.

The non-self-identical conception of queerness extends to this reading of *Hellraiser*, making the Cenobites a mere example of queer relations, not one that is stable or constant. In my exploration of their ontology I am not arguing that they are subjects with a certain identity (somasochistic, or even queer), nor that their interactions are a blueprint for queering—Frank’s reckoning proved as much. Their origin is unclear and that is precisely why it is illustrative.

In *How to Live Together*, Roland Barthes attends to a community of Cenobites, describing their lives as idiorhythmic—in which they are “both isolated from and in contact with one another within a particular type of structure...where each lives according to his own rhythm”⁶⁹. The word “cenobite” is derived from Latin and was coined in the 1600s to describe an individual living within a religious community⁷⁰. These historical cenobites are still somewhat veiled in mystery among religious scholars. They are known mainly for their ardent faith and close-knit social bonds which existed far from the eyes of the church. Practitioners of cenobitic monasticism sought an egalitarian community in which to live by their faith, complete with daily worship, sharing of all resources, and a strong commitment to one another. Cenobitic monks notably engaged in ritual dance, performed by Jewish monks on the Sabbath and by Christian monks following prayers⁷¹. Cenobitic life typically occurred in the mountains, in a rapturous world of their own. So distinct from the lives of other religious practitioners was this form of

⁶⁷ Changed from “gay” to be consistent in language.

⁶⁸ Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” *October* 43 (1987): 197–222, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574>.

⁶⁹ Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together : Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). Page 6.

⁷⁰ “Coenobite | Cenobite, N. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary,” *Oed.com*, 2023.

⁷¹ Marilyn Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

faith, that one text notes an individual must “transform from monk into cenobite”⁷². Even monks felt that “in the form of cenobitism, [their faith] was truly unknown”⁷³. Despite existing within a structured religion, the cenobitic monks afforded themselves secrecy and freedom through their compliant avoidance—so enraptured in their faith and semi-exile that they were more or less untouched by laws and edicts.

Clive Barker’s Cenobites share similarities with their historical namesakes: their existence contingent on transformation of the human subject, their life in a sequestered yet unguarded community, and their subsequent existence in disregard of their confines. As alluded to in Barker’s novella, and confirmed in the second film, the Cenobites were once human. Their origin from, and consistent location within, the grid of intelligibility affirms two Foucauldian assertions: that queering is a deviation from within and that “there is no outside”⁷⁴. The seemingly demonic entities are not native to an outside sphere, nor are they seekers of pleasure who successfully escaped to frolic beyond the confines of earthly morality. The Cenobites’ bodies were twisted beyond repair, beyond recognition, but they remained within the grid nonetheless.

Their community, which exists in a liminal relationality to the mortal world (contained and elusive), is both inscrutable and scrutinized—its egalitarian nature inherently queer. The bonds between Cenobites lack visible structure, each as close as the next. Lacking in gender markers or apparent hierarchy, they exist as fragments of a baffling entity; they flicker into view alongside one another, disappearing just as fast. Their communication is formed by clicks, gestures, and glances; oblique forms of speech which betray nothing to Frank nor the viewer. Nor is the viewer ever privy to their home, merely glimpsing it as it collides with Frank’s attic

⁷²“Coenobite | Cenobite, N. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary,” *Oed.com*, 2023.

⁷³“Coenobite | Cenobite, N. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary,” *Oed.com*, 2023.

⁷⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Pantheon Books, 1975). Page 301.

during the chiasmic event. Such secrecy does not protect the Cenobites from earthly scrutiny or intervention however, for their lives are accessible through the activation of the infamous puzzle box. They may exist, like their monastic predecessors, at the unseen periphery of experience; but they are simultaneously rendered hyper-visible by their entrapment. The cenobitic monks of history, having sworn their vows, remained held by the church despite their complete removal from the institution's daily workings. *Hellraiser's* Cenobites have been afforded a similar form of freedom—the ability to exist unseen, tethered to the grid of intelligibility nonetheless.

The Cenobites thus epitomize the undoing of the sexual grid, by way of queering, which occurs within the very grid itself. Like Frank, the space of their bodies is flayed, opened, held apart with hooks and yet they are uncaring. They have been destroyed, both corporeally and in terms of their legibility as subjects. They submitted completely to the grid, the pins of which protrude, criss-crossing their monstrous flesh. The Cenobites have been broken, blinded, degenerated, and dehumanized—yet it is irrelevant to them. They continue to move, feel, see, and exist without negating the power inscribed upon them. It is as though they have been extruded by the machinery of power, rendered illegible to the system that rendered them thus.

When Frank first observes the Cenobites, he finds them most unfavorable; repulsive even, due to their mangled, inhuman bodies. He expected their presence to be otherworldly and novel, so “why then was he so distressed to set eyes upon them? Was it the scars that covered every inch of their bodies, the flesh cosmetically punctured and sliced and infibulated, then dusted down with ash? ... No women, no sighs. Only these sexless *things*, with their corrugated flesh”⁷⁵. It is notable that Frank considers them to be things, as opposed to people. The Cenobite therefore does not represent a damaged subject, a subject actively torn apart and cast beneath violent light—they represent an absence of subjectivity. It is a loud absence that, like the

⁷⁵Clive Barker, *The Hellbound Heart* (Harper Collins, 2009).

attic-shrouding fog upon their arrival, makes salient what it conceals. It is a false absence that screams its lack like a banshee.

The Cenobites' relation to the Foucauldian grid of intelligibility can thus be conceptualized as a diagonal; eschewing the lines of the grid, despite being located within it, and discernible only at its chiastic points of collision. The Cenobites possess a freedom which eludes Frank due to this continued illegibility, due to the fact that their position on the grid is only ever estimated by the inscription of a diagonal line. They only truly appear within site C of the chiasmus, in each of the metaphorical dots upon the grid. Though a line may be drawn through these discrete interactions, a rough estimation of their reckoning with the legible, the delineation of legibility cannot touch the Cenobites. The cavernous space between points, a void both “empty and peopled”⁷⁶, is an idea without place—lacking subject, reason, imagery, or coherence. The Cenobites' home, a theoretical existence which collided with Frank attic, is wholly inscrutable to Frank, viewer, and grid alike.

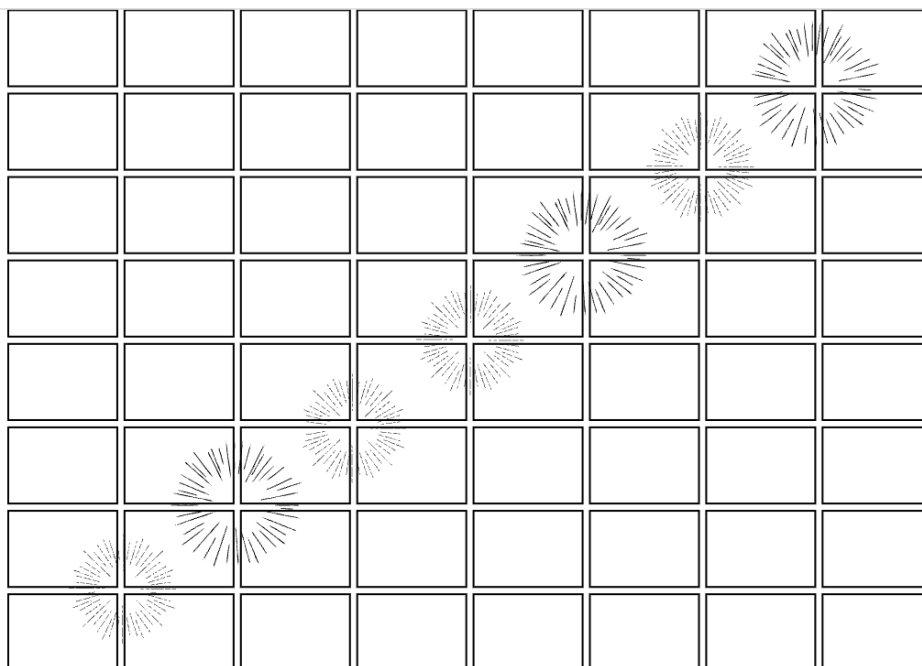


Fig. Five: Oblique

⁷⁶ Michel Foucault, *History of Madness* (London: Routledge, 2009).

Building upon this example of the Cenobites' diagonal relationality within the grid of intelligibility, the very concept of queering can be seen as oblique—both in the spatial and discursive senses of the word. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines oblique geometrically as “having a slanting direction or position; not vertical or horizontal; diverging from a straight line or course,”⁷⁷ thus concurring with the notion of queer as a diagonal amidst gridded lines. Providing further evidence for the diagonal nature of queering, the etymology of “queer” traces it to the word “quer” of middle high German, meaning “oblique, transverse, and crosswise.”⁷⁸ The word oblique also refers to verbiage which is not straightforward, but rather “obscure or confusing; indirectly stated or revealed.”⁷⁹ Less frequent utilizations of oblique, dated around the mid 1500s, synonymize the word with “aberrant,”⁸⁰ and use it to refer to instances of exception or deviation. When something, or someone, is queered, they become oblique in each of these senses: their positionality altered and their subjectivity obscured.

The importance of conceptualizing queerness as oblique comes from its bypass, rather than negation, of the grid of intelligibility. This is the bypass of repression because such a conception of queerness “seeks to escape transgressive relationality itself and might contest given categories and values by failing to relate to them either adaptively *or* transgressively,”⁸¹ it does not propose ‘queer’ as a radical, stable, and rebellious identity to be embodied. To be oblique is to disregard and to obscure, erasing definitional boundaries of what can be considered a queer relationality. Queer is thus not a sexuality, a personality, or an identity to be defined discursively and set against heterosexuality, homonormativity, or sexual repression—queer is a relational to a grid, a movement from within the grid.

⁷⁷“Oblique, Adj., N., & Adv. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary,” *Oed.com*, 2023.

⁷⁸“Queer, Adj. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary,” *Oed.com*, 2023,

⁷⁹“Oblique, Adj., N., & Adv. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary,” *Oed.com*, 2023.

⁸⁰“Oblique, Adj., N., & Adv. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary,” *Oed.com*, 2023.

⁸¹Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” *October* 43 (1987): 197–222, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3397574>.

Queer is a disruption.

Queer is the subject's finitude.

III. You

Yes, it's finally your turn.

It is not just the horror characters who undergo chiastic crossings—the experience of the horror viewer is chiastic as well. It is due to chiasmus, specifically to the queered affects of site C, that this genre laced with terror is also infamous for eliciting laughter.

Camp is a motif integral to the queer horror film, used as a tool of both recognition and disidentification—cheeky familiarity juxtaposed against shocking viscera. At this crossing, the horror viewer finds themselves within a moat of terrified wonder. Instead of basking in it, there is a common tendency to rebuff it through laughter. “It wasn’t scary, I laughed”. In this instance, the discomfort of what one witnessed is soothed by retreating into one’s own “I” and laughing at the sight before them.

Watching a horror film like *Hellraiser* produces an intersection of alienation from and recognition of queerness—an affirmation and disidentification experienced from the subject position. There lies something undeniably queer within the visuals of such a film. There is a campiness to the sexualization which is not sexy. There is a queer juxtaposition between hypersex without scintillation and extreme gore which churns the stomach. Through this experience cuts a knife of disidentification: a derision of the queer expressed in laughter, coupled with a curious draw to the limit they wish to witness. The object of horror, be it the Cenobites or the film itself, commands both revulsion and fascination.

The tonal and emotive relations produced by camp are resonant with the previously discussed chiastic relations because camp “involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious’. One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious,”⁸² both of which

⁸²Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 1964, 10.

produce a queer affect. It is odd to laugh at something you're in awe of, or to weep at a farce, but both reactions indicate the way camp operates as a site C. The aesthetic of camp serves as a meeting ground upon which such queer affects can actualize, made of emotions and motifs conventionally incompatible with one another.

A further chiasmic quality is found in the way camp “turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment. Camp doesn't reverse things, it doesn't argue that good is bad, or that bad is good. What it does is to offer art (and life) a different—a supplementary—set of standards”⁸³ which are operational only in their specific context. Just as the rhetorical chiasmus's site C is contingent on its ABBA clauses, existing only within their tension, camp's tender and excruciating juxtaposition is confined to the moment. Because “camp sees everything in quotation marks,”⁸⁴ the aesthetic subject is briefly transformed into a “subject” —built of clichés but containing elusive truth, difficult to grasp in more serious mediums. Through the ridicule, hyperbole, and adoration, it is viewed anew.

The result of these temporary supplementary standards for viewing is that the content, or meaning, is simultaneously blocked out and accentuated—resulting in a viewer experience of deep resonance and pure disidentification. Sontag writes that camp is “alive to a double sense...but this is not the familiar split level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing meaning something and the thing as pure artifice.”⁸⁵ It is due to this convergence of irreconcilable truths, experienced as one, that camp produces what we call queer affect in the viewer. From the chaos of the nonsensical emerges a knife of stunning, agonizing verity. The viewer becomes befuddled

⁸³Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 1964, 9.

⁸⁴Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 1964, 4.

⁸⁵ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 1964, 5.

as they themselves—through emotional resonance, cognitive disidentification, and methods of integration such as tearful laughter—are implicated in camp’s site C.

For the viewer of camp horror, in particular, this cocktail is laced with fear. The viewer is forced to the edge, confronting the terrors before them. Their own tender flesh may not be drawn and quartered, but they watch that fate befall their onscreen proxy. The strange emotional resonance of camp horror begs them to emphasize, to feel the agony in their own body. It is an experience that cries “I am not I,” for I am both safe and harmed, here and there; it is existentially uncomfortable. Therefore the discomfort of this ontological paradox, wishing to experience the ‘limit’ through horror while clinging to the comfort of one’s bloodless living room, is soothed by retreating into the “I” and rebuffing the sight before you. The viewer defends against dread induced by onscreen identification through desperate differentiation of viewer and film. This process can be found in laughter after an effective jumpscare, wiping one’s sweating palms while dragging the special effects (god, they’re so dated. How could anyone be scared of this, it’s so 80s).

However, disidentification—be it through laughter, degradation, or intellectualization—cannot entirely dispel the ontological discomfort gnawing at the camp horror viewer because vicariousness, imaginative experience through another person or agency⁸⁶, is integral to camp itself. Eve Sedgwick asserts in *Epistemology of the Closet* that “it would be hard to overestimate the importance of vicariousness in defining the sentimental,”⁸⁷ a claim applicable to camp aesthetics because of her prior statement that the sentimental exists under various names, “including that of camp.”⁸⁸ Since vicariousness is integral to camp’s definition,

⁸⁶ “Vicarious, Adj. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary,” *Oed.com*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED//4094483864>.

⁸⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Calif. ; London: University Of California Press, 1990).

⁸⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Calif. ; London: University Of California Press, 1990).

the aforementioned affective swirl that subjects experience when viewing camp horror is not just elicited by campiness, it is actually vital to constituting it!

It is the vicariously intimate nature of camp that creates generative collision with the viewer—that makes camp chiasitic. Camp's site C is born of the collision which occurs when "the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of attention that [the viewer] is able to bring to this spectacle are uncannily responsive to the resistant, oblique, tangential investments" of the camp horror before them. The product of that uncanny response is an amalgamation of living room and screen, intact body and bloodshed, subject and object—tangled up with one another through the cinematic apparatus. Camp is chiasitic because "its perceptions are necessarily also creations, and therefore it's little wonder that camp encompasses effects of great delicacy and power" akin to the site C interactions previously explored in this thesis: spatial, bodily, and ontological collisions with effects both finite and cataclysmic.

The cinematic apparatus is thus our own Cenobite box and the subject position of the viewer is akin to poor Frank's own ontological paradox. Through curious longing, longing for something outside of what they will ever experience, the viewer initiates a chiasitic occurrence: their room collides with the film, twin experiences intertwining in the wide eyes of the horror viewer. Like *Hellraiser's* box, the film's ontological effects are not tidy. The cinematic apparatus does not allow the viewer to remain safely subjectified as one pole of the subject-object dyad. Instead, subject-object relations become triangulated and dispersed. There are three poles now, snarled and muddled in their interactions: the viewer, the film, and the cinematic site C which conjoins the lustful terror on screen, the viewer's own fear and longing and repulsion, the domestic world, and the unattainable world. The viewer is not a safe observer, they are acted upon by this site C—just like Frank Cotton was by his own collision.

~~They~~ you are the viewer, you are within your home, you are watching it on your television, you are legible; you are other, you are within a world which affords no subjectivity or control, you are not even truly a part of it, yet you are an object of the collision which is occurring and you are illegible within it.

You want to look away.

Don't you?

You want to close the box.

You cannot.

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