

(Il)legible Flesh: Queering and Subjective Obscurity in Clive Barker's *Hellraiser*

By Marley Goldman

This essay 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. 1987 also saw the publication of Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" — whose 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. Bersani does not champion an embodiment of queerness-as-identity, but rather asserts that "masochistic self shattering is constitutive of us as sexual beings, [and] that it is present, al ways, not primarily in our orgasms but rather in the terrifying but also exhilarating instability of human subjectivity".¹ *Hellraiser*'s Frank Cotton exemplifies such ontological instability through his encounter with the otherworldly Cenobites, one which drags him between forces as the film unfolds—agonized by continued visibility, yet trapped within the grid he sought to transcend. Thinking both with Bersani and with Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, this essay juxtaposes Frank's adhesion to sexual legibility against the sadomasochistic Cenobites' embrace of inscrutability, presenting 'queer' not as a moniker to be donned as identity, but a verb—something which tears at unstable subjectivity

with the potential to temporarily shatter the subject entirely.

This is an essay in three parts. The first part concerns Frank Cotton, and the tragedies that befall him. Though Frank is rendered monstrous through queering, he remains self-defined through manhood and sexual legibility which leads him to a strikingly different narrative conclusion than the Cenobites. The second part concerns the Cenobites themselves; who, like Frank, have the space of their bodies flayed, opened, and held apart with hooks. But, unlike Frank, they are uncaring. They have been destroyed, both corporeally and in terms of their legibility as subjects, but do not attempt to shed their monstrosity/regain subjectivity. Instead, they forge relational bonds between one another; an alternative structure that affords no escape—for they remain prisoners of the puzzle box throughout—but that is unknowable to the audience and human characters alike. Finally, I leave you with a brief conclusion.

Hellraiser begins with a vignette of horror: seated shirtless on the floor within his attic, bare skin gleaming within the light of a square of candles, Frank Cotton watches as the box in his hand 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 filmcuts 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. Frank

*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*

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) begins with a scene of horror akin in viscera to Frank's destruction within the attic: an execution in which the convicted Damians is expunged from the earth by power's fist. Frank is *Hellraiser's* Damians in the sense that his body is similarly destroyed: the former inverted by otherworldly forces, the latter torn between horses straining in different directions. The aftermath of corporeal violence is where their

stories deviate, for while poor Damiens was eliminated wholly by sovereign might, Frank is kept alive and agonized—in a 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 subjectivity.² 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 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.”³ 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 chiasmic 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 chiasmic reversal epitomizes how we find poor Frank after the events within the attic. As Frank clings to his former legibility, defining himself through it and fighting to regain it, his body remains agonized.

BODY IS THE PRISON PRISON OF THE SOUL

THE OF THE

SOUL IS THE SOUL

In order to continue this analysis it is now necessary to provide a bit of plot, whose events are numbered for the sake of brevity:

1. What remained of Frank has 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.

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 bubo 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.4

She compels the wretched creature to tell her what it is.5

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.6

Back? Back from where?7

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 embrace of inscrutability has soothed the 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. It is this appeal to re-affirmation that I wish to underscore as the difference between Frank and a Cenobite. He, too, has been queered, in that he has been rendered illegible to Julia and, presumably, the rest of the human world. But that process does not grant him a different relation to the concept of subjectivity. For him, it remains critical. It is his only amelioration of fear, pain, or distress. The Cenobites, as will be demonstrated in part two, feel differently.

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.8

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

Despite the disruption of his subjectivity which occurred in the crossing, Frank's queering has afforded him nothing. 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 in

order 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, queered by his collision and 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 sanguine reward of these unions. He is a leech, a deviant creature existing within the framework as these proposed heterosexual 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"¹⁰ or "that which is or has been shed; (hence) the shedding of blood; violence, murder, killing; (also occasionally) the fact of being killed,"¹¹ 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 before 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”¹² and it can more specifically be defined as “persons of a specified aristocratic birth; ‘good’ family or parentage.”¹³ This is what Foucault calls the “symbolics of blood”¹⁴ in his book *History of Sexuality. Vol 1*. That auxiliary definition illuminates how Frank regains warped sexual legibility through his interactions with Julia. Again 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 with the help of 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.”¹⁵ 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”¹⁶ 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 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, incentivizing 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.”¹⁷ 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 has mounted, his flesh remains 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 eludes recognition and thus subjectivity. Despite Frank’s best efforts, he remains 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.

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.’”¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ 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.”²⁰ 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 Bersani finds to be a “beneficial limitation, since more specific suggestions about how we might “become [queer]”²¹ 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.”²²

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 (sadomasochistic, 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.”²³ The word “cenobite” is derived from Latin and was coined in the 1600s to describe an individual living within a religious community.²⁴ 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 prayers.²⁵ 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 faith, that one text notes an individual must “transform from monk into cenobite.”²⁶ Even monks felt that “in the form of cenobitism, [their faith] was truly unknown.”²⁷ 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."²⁸ 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 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 a failure 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, degendered, 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. Insight on his internal experience can be gathered from an excerpt of the *Hellbound Heart*, the novella on which *Hellraiser* was based. The narrative arc of Frank Cotton is nearly identical between works—though in the novel he remains trapped in a wall following his reanimation, as opposed to the film where he rises from the floorboards—making the novella an appropriate aid for this analysis. In the *Hellbound Heart*, as in *Hellraiser*, Frank 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.”²⁹ 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 obscuring of subjectivity. It is a loud obscurity that, like the attic-shrouding fog upon their arrival, makes salient what it conceals. It 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 chiasmic 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,”³⁰ 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.

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,”³¹ 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.”³² The word oblique also refers to verbiage which is not straightforward, but rather “obscure or confusing; indirectly stated or revealed.”³³ Less frequent utilizations of oblique, dated around the mid 1500s, synonymize the word with “aberrant,”³⁴ 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,”³⁵ 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.

III. In Conclusion.

This essay presents queerness as a disruption, an oblique relation, within a Foucauldian grid. *Hellraiser’s* Frank Cotton becomes the site of such a disruption through his summoning of the Cenobites, but his continued pursuit of legibility bars him from accessing (paradoxical, since they remain both trapped and illegible) resistance in the way that they

Cenobites do. To be monstrous is unacceptable to Frank, leaving him no avenue but to appeal endlessly, and unsuccessfully to a system of recognition which, in turn, wounds him. Frank thus finds himself dragged between forces as the film unfolds—agonized by his relegation to the category of monster, determined to don the subjectivity afforded to his brother, and all the while trapped within the grid he sought to transcend.

In concluding this essay, I eschew real-world prescription—for my intention is not to present the Cenobites as a model of queer resistance that can be neatly donned. Rather, this juxtaposition of Frank’s resistance to the loss of his sexual legibility with the sadomasochistic Cenobites’ embrace of inscrutability is a moment of contemplation that might, as it is extinguished by this conclusion, invite curiosity about a different relationship between the monstrous and the legible.

Bibliography

Barker, Clive. *The Hellbound Heart*. Harper Collins, 2009.

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

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

“Blood, N. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary.” *Oed.com*, 2023.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED//4196790062>.

“Coenobite | Cenobite, N. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary.” *Oed.com*, 2023.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED//4875171775>.

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

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. Pantheon Books, 1975.

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

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

Foucault, Michel. *Friendship as a Way of Life. Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Vol 1.*, 1997. *Hellraiser*. New World Pictures, 1987.

“Oblique, Adj., N., & Adv. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary.”

Oed.com, 2023.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED//1275922823>.

“Queer, Adj.1 Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary.” *Oed.com*, 2023.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED//9610104456>.