

Puzzle Box: Chiasmus, Queering, and Subjective Finitude in Clive Barker's *Hellraiser*

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Abstract: This essay, an analysis of Clive Barker's *Hellraiser*, enters into the conversation of queer negativity by utilizing a Foucauldian framework for understanding queerness and subjectivity. This framework is expanded by Eve Sedgwick and Susan Sontag's analyses of queerness and camp, alongside Leo Bersani's groundbreaking essays of queer negativity. In addition to queer-focused philosophy, the chapter takes inspiration from Eugenie Brinkema's book *Life Destroying Diagrams* (2022) in which she employs a formalist approach to reading film. At the core of this essay 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 sadomasochistic 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 essay rejects the premise of an outside and presents queerness as a disruption within a 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 in the way that they are. Frank thus finds himself dragged between forces as the film unfolds—agonized by continued visibility, yet trapped within the grid he sought to transcend. The chapter will juxtapose Frank's adherence to sexual legibility against the sadomasochistic Cenobites' embrace of inscrutability.

This essay 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.

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 chiasmic 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 phrases (*Merriam Webster Dictionary Definition of "Chiasmus,"* 2024). ABBA—pleasure's a sin, and sin's a pleasure. Within the reversal of two antithetical statements lies the power of the chiasmic 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" (Wiseman & Paul, 2014). 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 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" (Wiseman & Paul, 2014). 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 chiastic 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.

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,” (Wiseman & Paul, 2014) 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” (Wiseman & Paul, 2014) 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” (Wiseman & Paul, 2014). 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.

While its roots are mired in the poetic, the chiastic 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” (Wiseman & Paul, 2014). Similarly to how the prior example of pleasure and sin generated an unspoken battleground of morality upon which to reconcile itself, philosophically chiastic 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, Figure 1, in which Frank's body is tormented is a physical representation of site C.

Figure 1

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.

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 experiences¹ 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.

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

¹ A notion that Michel Foucault borrowed from George Bataile.

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.

“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*².

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” (Foucault, 1976) 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 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” (Foucault, 1976) 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” (Foucault, 1976) because it would be a power whose only weapon is repression. Each act and

² Used to refer to partitioning as a form of control.

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.

Wouldn't that be nice?

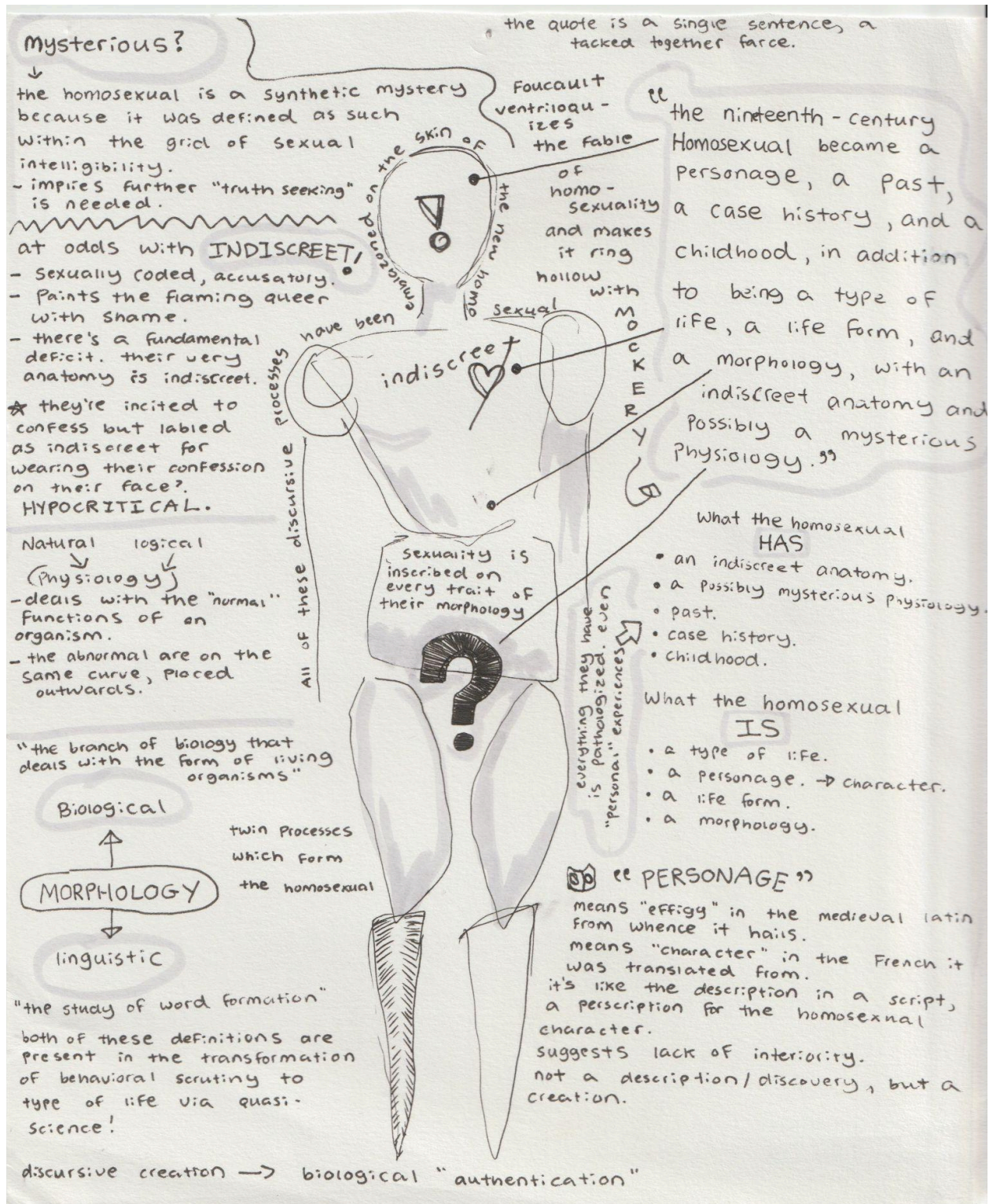
Deviance

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," (Foucault, 1976) 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" (Foucault, 1976) which demanded constant pursuit. Examination and definition were the knives that excised queerness from obscurity and bottled it up for constant observation. The homosexual (Figure 2), 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.

Figure 2

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” (Foucault, 1976). 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 chiastic implosion of meaning at site C, as opposed to psychoanalytic queer negativity’s masochistic self-negation achieved by sexually “shattering the psychic structures themselves.” (Bersani, 1987). Here Bersani’s rectum-as-grave is not a manifestation of the 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.

“Them”

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, dactyphile, 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.

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’” (Bersani, 1987). 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” (Foucault & Rabinow, 1997). 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”³. 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]”⁴ 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” (Bersani, 1987).

³ Used in reference to Michel Foucault’s discussion of the proliferation of perversities in *History of Sexuality, Vol 1*.

⁴ Changed from “gay” to be consistent in language.

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” (Barthes, 2013). The word “cenobite” is derived from Latin and was coined in the 1600s to describe an individual living within a religious community (“Cenobite, N. Meanings, Etymology and More, Oxford English Dictionary,” 2023). 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 (Dunn, 2003). 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” (“Cenobite, N. Meanings, Etymology and More, Oxford English Dictionary,” 2023). Even monks felt that “in the form of cenobitism, [their faith] was truly unknown” (“Cenobite, N. Meanings, Etymology and More, Oxford English Dictionary,” 2023). 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” (Foucault, 1975). 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 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, 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. 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” (Barker, 1991). 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 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 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” (Foucault, 1961/2009), is an idea without place—lacking subject, reason, imagery, or coherence. The Cenobites' home, a theoretical existence which collided with Frank's 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,” (“Oblique, Adj., N., & Adv. Meanings, Etymology and More, Oxford English Dictionary,” 2023) 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.” (“Queer, Adj. Meanings, Etymology and More, Oxford English Dictionary,” 2023) The word oblique also refers to verbiage which is not straightforward, but rather “obscure or confusing; indirectly stated or revealed.” (“Oblique, Adj., N., & Adv. Meanings, Etymology and More, Oxford English Dictionary,” 2023). Less frequent utilizations of oblique, dated around the mid 1500s, synonymize the word with “aberrant,” (“Oblique, Adj., N., & Adv. Meanings, Etymology and More, Oxford English Dictionary,” 2023) 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,” (Bersani, 1987) 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.

Queer is a disruption.

Queer is the subject's finitude.

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