

**“...to know your flesh”: The Destruction of Mind/Body Dualism in Barker’s
Hellraiser and *Hellbound***

“Explorers in the further regions of experience”—such are the men and women who inhabit the world of writer and filmmaker Clive Barker. They seek pleasures beyond the realm of normal human sense and perception. And their reward, more often than not, is bodily transformation, disintegration, and destruction. Is Barker claiming, in reactionary fashion, that there are some things man was not meant to know? Far from it—he is making a case for a new type of knowledge altogether. In much the same way that Steven Shaviro ascribed to David Cronenberg, Barker collapses the spheres of mind and body until they are as indivisible as the pleasure and pain they experience. Nowhere is this more apparent in Barker’s work than in his two masterpieces of horror filmmaking, *Hellraiser* and *Hellbound: Hellraiser II*. This essay will examine these films and the destruction of mind/body divisions contained therein.

The horrific potential of a new conception of mental-physical relations was noted in Steven Shaviro’s essay “Bodies of Fear: David Cronenberg.”¹ Astutely pointing out Western culture’s frantic struggle “to keep thought separate from the exigencies of the flesh,” he claims that the horror in Cronenberg’s work lies in its systematic thwarting of such separation (127-128). By lingering in sheer viscerality—exploding heads, talking anuses, scars

used as sexual orifices—Cronenberg makes it impossible for us to seek refuge in the realm of thought. His images are overpoweringly “intimate,” making apparent physical processes (e.g. Brundlefly’s eating habits) and vulnerabilities (e.g. the headaches and nosebleeds of the scanners) that we would just as soon ignore; they are all the more revolting and “alienating” because of it (144).

But it is not simply the strength and “intimacy” of the imagery that breaks down the split between body and mind in Cronenberg’s films, according to Shaviro—it is the inherent link between that imagery and the narrative events which give rise to them (130). In all his films, Cronenberg attaches physical change and trauma to what would normally be considered purely mental phenomena: physical illness and mutilation are linked to mental telepathy in *Scanners*, cancer and mutation are linked to watching television in *Videodrome*, physical murder is linked to the writing process in *Naked Lunch*. We find this kind of linkage incredibly disturbing, as it reminds us in a vivid and violent fashion that our “Cartesian myth of an autonomous thinking substance” is a fallacy (128). The mind and the flesh are joined together in such a fashion as to make it impossible to determine where one ends and where one begins. Changes in one mirror changes in the other.

Like his friend and occasional collaborator (Cronenberg starred in Barker’s film *Nightbreed*), Clive Barker is fascinated by this inextricable

¹ Shaviro, Steven. “Bodies of Fear: David Cronenberg,” in *Theory Out Of Bounds*. Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1993. Further references to this edition are in parentheses in the text.

interplay between body and brain. In his *Hellraiser* films, he explores the consequences this interplay has on people who are searching for the ultimate in both physical and mental experience. *Hellraiser*² centers on Frank Cotton, a hedonistic drifter on a search for “the pleasures of heaven or hell—[he] didn’t care which.” *Hellbound*³ focuses on Dr. Channard, a psychologist and neurosurgeon who, believing that “the mind is a labyrinth,” has become obsessed with “going further...tread[ing] the unexplored corridors in the hope of finding, ultimately, the final solution.”

Both men place overemphasize a particular aspect of experience. For Frank, life is to be lived from one sensation to the next. A habitual and sometimes violent womanizer, Frank pays no mind to the consequences his actions have had in the past. He casually seduces his brother’s bride-to-be, then disappears from her life for years, making “one of his famous getaways” whenever mental attachments threaten his pursuit of pleasure. For Dr. Channard, on the other hand, the mind is everything. He sees the body as little more than a vehicle in which he can explore the outer limits of mental and spiritual life. Indeed, when his search for these outer limits requires that he kill a patient or risk his own life, he has others do the dirty work for him, unwilling to bridge the gap between the desires of his mind and the physical necessities required to make them manifest. Neither man’s lifestyle would be tenable

² *Hellraiser*. Writ. & dir. Clive Barker, prod. Christopher Figg, exec. prod. David Saunders, Christopher Webster, Mark Armstrong. New World Pictures, 1986, 118 min, videocassette, widescreen edition.

³ *Hellbound*. Dir. Tony Randel, writ. Peter Atkins, prod. Christopher Figg, exec. prod. Christopher Webster & Clive Barker, story by Clive Barker. New World Pictures, 1988, 108 min, videocassette, widescreen edition, unrated version.

were they forced to confront the necessity of mind/body integration. This is what causes their undoing.

Both Frank and Dr. Channard fall victim to the machinations of the Cenobites, sadomasochistic demons unleashed by the solving of a mysterious puzzle box. Servants of Leviathan, “the god of flesh, hunger, and desire,” the Cenobites neatly embody the collapse of body and mind into a new form of sensory experience. Their disfigurements call to mind basic physical human functions: the portly Cenobite reminds of our own physical hunger, the chattering Cenobite brings to mind involuntary processes like shivering and laughing, the female Cenobite has a large vaginal gash in her throat (which gave rise to her on-set nickname of Cuntthroat), and the lead Cenobite is studded with pins in a grotesquely literal pastiche of sexual penetration. But however rooted in physicality they may appear, their scars and piercings are nonetheless brilliantly methodical and orderly (cf. the diagrams in Channard’s office for a detailed drawing of the layout of Pinhead’s pins). This is not simple maiming—there is a true method to the madness of the Cenobite’s mutilation. Moreover, their ability to wreak havoc upon human flesh is predicated on the solving of a puzzle, a task requiring a great deal of mental, but almost no physical, dexterity. The Cenobites can even be bargained with, should they find the physical result of the bargain satisfying. In other words, theirs is a supremely intellectual violence, a melding of cold logic and visceral brutality.

This mix makes for “an experience beyond the limits—pleasure and pain, indivisible,” as Frank describes it. Accustomed to quickly mentally disassociating himself from physical intimacy, Frank cannot handle the endless mental energy required by his new experience. It gives his mind no refuge from his body, and consequently the situation becomes his hell. Channard, on the other hand, is overwhelmed by the sheer physicality of Leviathan and his milieu. The size of the god, the visceral nature of his own crimes, the stunningly violent and horrific mutilation he is made to undergo—all prevent Channard from retreating into the safe haven of the mind. He cannot handle such overwhelming physical sensation. Indeed, even after he becomes a Cenobite, he is still unable to integrate the physical with the mental. He allows sexual desires to prevent him from obeying the wishes of Leviathan and thereby ensures his own demise. Unable to fully accept the “experience beyond the limits” of the mere body-experience or mind-experience, he, like Frank, perishes.

However, there is hope for those in Barker’s world strong enough to overcome the mind/body schism. Shaviro said of Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*, “[it] destroys traditional forms of physical presence in order to incarnate a “new flesh”” (129). So too do the physical mutilations and transformations in *Hellraiser* and *Hellbound* allow characters to reach new and unexplored truths within their mental makeup. As we see in the two “Cenobite making” sequences in *Hellbound*, the destruction and transformation of the flesh appears to unleash the true nature of the mind contained within. Both Pinhead

(the lead Cenobite) and Channard (his usurper) come to revel in their own physical torment, relishing the power afforded them by their transcendence of Cartesian duality (though in Channard's case, this transcendence is short-lived). Pinhead can now directly apply the order and discipline of the British Army to the violent rending of wayward souls; Channard can apply the tools he once used to unravel the mysteries of the brain to unravel the brain, period. The newfound freedom of their flesh to mutate and be altered manifests itself in a freedom of the mind to act in a new, purer way.

In addition, Julia (who Barker intended to be the "franchise" character in the series, instead of Pinhead) evinces similar linkage of physical and mental affects. Killed by Frank and the Cenobites in *Hellraiser*, she returns to the Earth as a skinless monstrosity, just as Frank did. However, rather than constantly plotting of escape as Frank does, she instead embraces her situation and her newfound role as Leviathan's servant. She confidently commands Channard and dubs herself "the Evil Queen." The sudden convergence of her underlying mental and spiritual monstrosity with actual physical monstrosity has enabled her to become what she was always meant to be: a being of pure power and malevolence. In fact, her return from the dead seems to be the only time she is happy in the course of both films. As screenwriter Peter Atkins says, "The most striking thing obviously is that she spends the first portion of the movie...without her skin. But what is also happening in terms of her character, is that she's very much embracing her altered state. Not as somebody who has been merely a victim of this stuff, but as somebody who has, in a very real

way, been fulfilled by it..”⁴ This encapsulates perfectly the rewards Barker posits for those who welcome the abandonment of body/mind conceptions for a new integration of physical form and mental function.

As Shaviro said of Cronenberg, his “[films insist...that everything be made body, everything be materially and visibly enacted” (131). By making us privy to the inherently, incredibly private needs, functions, and vulnerabilities of the flesh, and by linking them to mental processes once thought to be sacrosanct, Cronenberg creates films of unrivaled power and horror. Unrivaled, that is, except by the work of Clive Barker. He presents us with characters who discover the limits of western society’s Cartesian conception of experience, and their fate serves to highlight these limits. Frank Cotton, unable to withstand the toll his overwhelming physicality has on his mind, is doomed to eternal suffering. Dr. Channard, unable to integrate his unfathomable mental perversity with his physical needs, betrays Leviathan and is destroyed for it. Julia Cotton embraces her master’s dovetailing preoccupations with “flesh, hunger, and desire,” and becomes truly fulfilled even as she is physically transformed. And the Cenobites, of course, have mastered “the further regions of experience.” The physical *extremis* of their bodies and brutal perversity of their minds are in perfect symbiosis. They are truly, as Pinhead describes them, “demons to some, angels to others.” They are demons to those trapped in limiting, idealistic ideals of what mind and body can be. And

⁴ In Clive Barker and Stephen Jones, compiler, *Clive Barker’s A-Z of Horror*. New York: HarperPrism, 1998, 200-201.

they are angels to those who have the courage, the amorality, or both, to go beyond.