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S/M, Splatter, and Body Modification in the early Clive Barker
Birth of a Political Aesthetics[1]

ABSTRACT: This paper deals with three components of the aesthetic framework elaborated by author, artist, and filmmaker Clive Barker in his first works during the first half of the 1980s, with a particular focus on the fictional creatures known as Cenobites featured in the novella *The Hellbound Heart* (1986): the references to S/M visuals and culture, the taste for gore/splatter and the aspect related to (self)induced body modifications. In the first part, these three elements will be discussed, and their origins tracked down in Barker's biographical background and artistic career. In the final part I will try to contextualize this composite aesthetics in its historical setting to show how its elements combined to outline a coherent worldview, different and subversive with respect to the one imposed by the then hegemonic and heteronormative narrative, and how they became one of the main grounds for political criticism and contestation in the ultraconservative United Kingdom during the Thatcher era.

KEYWORDS: Clive Barker; S/M; Horror, splatter; Hellraiser, Cenobites.

1. REFINED SUPERBUTCHERS

Clive Barker's (b. 1952, Liverpool) revolutionary literary debut dates back to the publishing of the *Books of Blood*, six volumes of short stories collected in two books in 1984-85 and greeted with great enthusiasm by many well-known personalities in the horror field.[2] This groundbreaking accomplishment was quickly followed by his first novel, *The Damnation Game* (1985), which blended the postmodern and splatter hues of the very first works with a deeper interest in the gothic literature tropes. After that came the novella *The Hellbound Heart* (1986, *THBH* from now on), which featured

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[1]   These pages are affectionately dedicated to the Rabbit, my Redeemer and friend. This work surely wouldn't have seen the light of day without his heartfelt support and encouragement.

[2]   See e.g. the heartfelt appreciations made by Ramsey Campbell: "The first true voice of the next generation of horror writers" and Stephen King: "The future name in horror fiction", pronounced at the 1984 10th World Fantasy Convention in Ottawa, CA (NUTMAN *et al.* 1991: 185).

the first ever appearance of the Cenobites.[3] The plot revolves around Frank, a young man, a disillusioned hedonist and a nihilist, dragging himself in a deep existential crisis. During one of his trips around the world, he hears rumors about a rare artifact called LeMarchand (or Lament) Configuration, a wooden puzzle-box that, if solved and opened, can introduce to a parallel dimension and disclose extreme pleasures otherwise completely unreachable; Frank seeks the Configuration and manages to find it and open it. In so doing, he evokes the Cenobites, arcane entities coming from the parallel world; after making a pact with him, they drag him in their dimension amidst atrocious tortures, trapping him in an incorporeal state beyond the physical world. After a few months, Frank's younger brother Rory (named Larry in the movie) and his wife Julia (seduced by Frank just before their marriage) move into the house at 55 Lodovico Street in suburban London, where Frank had been kidnapped by the Cenobites. Regretting his decision and his fate, Frank finds a way to escape his condition when a spurt of his brother's blood falls onto the floorboards, coming into contact with his own dried semen. Recovering a slight principle of physicality, Frank is now able to interact with Julia, who helps him to gradually regain his body by providing him with human victims as food. After various accidents, Kirsty, a friend of Rory's (Larry's daughter in *Hellraiser*) gets hold of the Configuration and unintentionally evokes the Cenobites. They accept the woman's bargain proposal: in exchange for her freedom, Kirsty would lead them to Frank, now completely "escaped" and disguised under the skin stolen from his brother's body after killing him. In the last confrontation between Frank and the Cenobites, the latter finally prevail, dragging both Frank and Julia back into their dimension and leaving Kirsty as the new guardian of the Configuration.

Despite their quick appearance both in the novella and in the movie (Kane 2006: 135) the Cenobites drew the greatest attention overall both from audience and critics and had the greatest impact on collective imagination, so much so that they gained (Pinhead most of all) the status of horror icons (Kane 2006: 29; Reis-Filho 2017: 114-116). These mysterious

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[3]   The novella appeared for the first time in the third volume of the horror anthology *Night Visions*, published by Dark Harvest in 1986 and edited by George R.R. Martin. It was shortly published again by HarperCollins (both in Fontana and HarperPaperbacks) in 1991 as a stand-alone title, following the greatly successful reception of its movie adaptation, the better known *Hellraiser* (1987), on which see recently Adams 2020. It was first published in Italy in 1991 by Sonzogno as *Schiavi dell'inferno* (It. tr. Tullio Dobner).

and weirdly fascinating otherworldly beings are brutal torturers, "super-butchers" (KANE 2006: 141) with heavily scarified skins and horribly defiled bodies adorned with nails, hooks and chains penetrating their flesh. Their appearance expresses and sublimates a violent, bloody, and gory aesthetics, which could be at home in the most extreme exploitation movies; on the other hand, they seem surrounded by an aura of ancient and sophisticated elegance rooted in Barker's taste for Renaissance anatomy treatises, which featured "very beautiful etchings in which you get flayed men and women standing in classical poses or leaning against pillars. The whole atmosphere of these pictures is cool and elegant and beautiful" (KANE 2006: 33; BADLEY 1996: 96).[4] The Cenobites "blur the boundaries between the horrific and the divine" (REIS-FILHO 2017: 116), appearing at the same time hieratic and demonic, glamorous and repulsive,[5] in "a postmodern mixture of Christian theology, deviant sadomasochistic sexuality, mystical asceticism and entrepreneurial spirit" (SPARKS n.d.). Such a layered, complex, and faceted depiction[6] could not appear out of the blue but must have been the product of a long and reasoned settling. In the Cenobites' appearance, three features stand prominently out and will be discussed in the following: the bodily alterations on their skin and flesh, their connection with S/M visuals and practices, and a taste for graphic violence, which results in splatter and gory hues. Barker's imaginative efforts did not develop in a vacuum, but rather they were deeply rooted in the UK current sociocultural context and in particular in his London experience from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s.

2. New primitives

In an interview released in 1998 for the American magazine *Carpe Noctem* #13 (DERY 1998), Barker traced back the most influential elements and conditionings which proved decisive for the creation of the Cenobites,

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[4]   In particular, as a child Barker had the opportunity to see Andrea Vesalius' treatise on anatomy entitled *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543), by which he claims to have been particularly influenced (KANE 2006: 33).

[5]   The exact terms used by Barker to describe them are "repulsive glamour" (KANE 2006: 141).

[6]   Barker's works, without exception, are dense with references ranging from art to literature to religion to occultism. All this obviously cannot be treated exhaustively here. I gave a talk about several other facets of Barker's Cenobites during a seminar dedicated to "fictional religions", hosted by Museo delle Religioni "Raffaele Pettazzoni" and held in Genzano di Roma on July 23rd-25th 2020: "Tra la luce e le tenebre. Angeli e Demoni nell'Horror, nella Fantascienza e nel Fantasy. I Seminario sulle 'Religioni Fantastiche'". The publication of the seminar proceedings is currently a work in progress.

identifying the main cultural *milieux* that nurtured and inspired his design. First of all, a pivotal role was played by punk counterculture; after the very sprouts around the middle of the 1970s on the New York scene (revolving especially around the clubs CBGB's and Max's Kansas City), the punk ethos found its massive and most significant expression in London, especially in the years 1974-1976. This two-year span saw the debut of bands such as *Sex Pistols*, *The Clash*, *The Flowers of Romance*, *The Damned*, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, *Generation X* and many others, and the activity of SEX, a fashion *boutique* located in the Chelsea District and run by Malcolm McLaren (first manager of *Sex Pistols*) and Vivienne Westwood. SEX rapidly became a real reference point for visual culture and punk fashion in the London scene (SAVAGE 1992: 181-196). Despite the untimely end of this collective artistic experience with the Anarchy Tour in December 1976 and the superseding of ideological and stylistic ramifications in the second wave from 1977 on (575), its backlashes were still lasting in the British capital in the years to come. Punk presented itself visually (and politically) as a non-systematic polysemy made up by different contributions (230), tied up by rebellious, subversive, and anti-establishment impulses, so that it can be said that it promoted an anti-aesthetics:

> the punk aesthetic is […] flagrantly anti-aesthetic in the narrow meaning of the term. Punk is an assault on prevailing canons of beauty. […] Punk is a celebration of ugliness and discord. Punk rockers regard these features as good precisely because others regard them as bad (PRINZ 2014: 587-588).

This attitude emerged even in some fashion trends such as tattoos or the use of piercings on the body and face. This was the social and cultural backdrop faced by the then 24-years-old Clive Barker, newly moved to London in 1976 (WINTER 2002: 88-112); his fascination with this kind of appearance has been significantly highlighted by Barker:

> Pinhead was created at a time when London […] was awash with people who had piercings, usually of a fairly crude variety, long before piercing had become the art form that it is now. It was a crude aesthetic and perhaps more interesting because of that (DERY 1998: 23).

Pinhead, the main Cenobite in *Hellraiser*, has been labeled by Barker as "the patron saint of piercing" (WINTER 2002: 271) and his literary counterpart is described as having his face entirely covered by an "intricate grid" of tattoos and "at every intersection of horizontal and vertical axes

a jeweled pin driven through the bone" (BARKER 2007: 8; cf. KANE 2006: 59-60). The author's deep bond with this kind of aesthetics predates the publication of *THBH* (1986) by about ten years, thus testifying for a very long development of the idea behind the design for the Cenobites, before they could finally see the light.

However, the phases of this long-lasting incubation can be traced back even further in early Barker's works, starting from his theatrical debut with the *Hydra Theatre Company* in Liverpool and the arthouse short films produced in the 1970s.[7] In *The Forbidden* (1975-1978), for example, appear the first experiments with lights and shadows playing on negative and spatiality. The camera movements linger on the "nail board" (a wooden board built by Barker himself, subdivided into squares with long nails driven at each intersection of the lines), which closely resembles the surface of Pinhead's face. Some footage for the film *Underworld* (1985) – discarded in the final editing – featured a sequence in which the character of Dr. Savary was torn apart by long needles that went through the flesh of his face. Another direct precursor of the Cenobites' disfigured anatomies seems to be the character named Anthony Breer, the "Razor-Eater", a zombie-like servant of Mamoulian in *The Damnation Game* (1985): his body, pierced and infibulated in several places (genitals included),[8] and his "cosmeticized" and make-up-covered appearance which exuded a "mingled stench of sandalwood and putrefaction" (BARKER 2002: 409), are reminiscent of the hooks and chains that pierce the flesh and mucous membranes of the Cenobites and their heavy body alterations (BARKER 2007: 7-8; 134; 136), but they also remind the scent of vanilla, "the sweetness of which did little to disguise the stench beneath" (7).

The imagery of body modification, adopted in several ways by the punk aesthetics, has a key-role, in that it intersects with other contributions to the final shape of the Cenobites, coming from queer culture,[9] S/M

7   Barker's very first theatre activity dates back to 1967, with the early short plays *Voodoo* and *Inferno* (KANE 2006: 54).

8   See e.g. BARKER 2002: 292-293: "There were skewers threaded through the fat of his chest, transfixing his nipples, crossways".

9   The presence of a queer subtext in Barker's *Hellraiser* has been at the center of a recent positive rediscovery. ADAMS 2017 delves especially in the representation of queerness and its relation to S/M practices, gender identity, and body alterations. Harry Benshoff (1997: 262) wrote instead that for the juxtaposition of queerness and monstrosity "the representation of Barker's monster queers seems similar to those produced by right-wing ideologues"; MARTÍN-PÁRRAGA 2013 seemingly still agrees with such a stance; cf. ALLMER 2008: 14. In this regard, it is worth not-

and Modern Primitives movements. Such movements often partially over-lapped with each other and were not seldom at the center of extremely significant sociocultural counter-narratives during the second half of the 20th century. The first explicit articulation of a self-defined movement of Modern Primitives took place between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, when it experienced a quick evolution "from a small subset of SM culture [...] to a counter-cultural aesthetic embraced by many" (Pitts 2003: 127). This happened especially thanks to the widening circulation of dedicated books and magazines which endorsed the spread of the practice of piercing; just to name a few examples[10] one could think about the magazines *In the Flesh, Body Play and Modern Primitives Quarterly* or *Piercing Fans International Quarterly*. The latter depicted images of hardcore piercing and is also mentioned explicitly as one of the magazines that caught Barker's attention during his friendly visits to musician and *Coil* member Sleazy (Keenan 2003: 163; Pitts 2003: 93; 127; Kane 2006: 137).[11] At the bottom of the Modern Primitives' stance was the operation of transferring or – more precisely – the "mimesis" of body modification practices originally hailing from various tribal societies in non-Western countries:

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ing that the cast for the shortly upcoming (2022, release date yet unannounced) *Hellraiser* reboot will feature a significant gender swap that will contribute to the foreseen "evolving reimagining" of the original movie (Moore 2021). In fact, the role of Pinhead – formerly held exclusively by men (Doug Bradley, Stephan S. Collins, Paul T. Taylor, Fred Tatasciore) – will be taken up by American actress Jamie Clayton, mostly known for her role in the sci-fi series *Sense8* (2015-2018), who also stars as a recurring character in the ongoing TV drama series *The L World: Generation Q* (2019-present), revolving around a group of young LGBTQ+ characters and their life experiences in the city of Los Angeles (Kyt 2021). I wish to thank one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for pointing out to me the relevance of such an issue. Along the same lines, it must be mentioned that back in 2021 the transgender man and drag performer Kade Gottlieb (Gottmik) has been auditioned for the same role of Pinhead after the *Hellraiser* production crew witnessed his Pinhead-inspired runway look during the 13th edition final of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (April 23rd, 2021), which he himself labeled "Shenobite" in a tweet in his Twitter account (Gottlieb 2021) and earned him the third place in the competition (Nolfi 2021; Shatto 2021).

    [10]   Not to mention the renowned *Modern Primitives* (RE/Search, 1989).

    [11]   Sleazy was the stage name of Peter Christopherson, a friend of Barker's, member of the (post)industrial bands *Throbbing Gristle* and *Coil* and a major collector of genre magazines and homosexual pornography. According to the original plan for *Hellraiser, Coil* were supposed to compose the movie OST, but Barker eventually accepted the imposition of US distributor New World to replace them with Christopher Young's more conventional symphonic compositions, in exchange for more funds for the creation of special effects. *Coil* later in 1987 released an EP containing their unused tracks, titled *The Unreleased Themes for Hellraiser. The Consequences of Raising Hell* (Winter 2002: 159-160; 534-535 fn2; Keenan 2003: 163-165; Kane 2006: 85-86).

> They paint, puncture, tattoo, scarify, cicatricize, circumcise, subincise themselves. […] All that excites some dark dregs of lechery and cruelty in us, holding our eyes fixed with repugnance and lust (LINGIS 1983: 22; cf. KANE 2006: 137).

This operation had an inherent subversive connotation: embracing and experimenting the combination of pleasure and repugnance that is at the base of the Western fascination for the "exotic" alterity that shows itself (also) in the physical differences stemming from induced alterations of the physical body, it consciously rejected every Western-biased ethnocentric approach to cultural alterity and aimed to overturn every discriminating norm that informed ethnic, cultural, and moral hierarchies by means of an appreciation of the "primitive" (PITTS 2003: 119-124).[12] Thus, more abstractly, body modification acted as a tool to undermine every self-legitimating claim about ontological superiority based on physical, bodily, or cultural differences.

Since their very beginnings, both the anti-normative impetus inherent in Modern Primitivism and punk's ethos, characterized by a "postmodern cultural rebellion against authority" (HOPPENSTAND 2001: 408; PRINZ 2014: 589-591), collected the legacy of radical expressions of S/M, queer, and LGBT+ underground cultures that since the 1960s had used body art – piercings, tattoos and other practices such as scarification, fire-branding and corsetry – as their own distinctive feature (PITTS 2003: 92-93).[13] Such practices were pivotal tools in the attempt made by these groups to aesthetically define their own identity: they were linked to the self-claim of the body and its empowerment; moreover, the conscious and provocative use of these practices promoted an alternative eroticization of the body, turning it into an instrument of sexual emancipation and criticism of the sociocultural heteronormative and hetero-hegemonic order (91-92). Punk and Modern Primitivism intercepted in no small measure the cultural trajectories coming from S/M aesthetics and even from radical feminism: graffiti with excerpts from Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto* (1967) stood out in the renowned SEX *boutique*; in this same place could also be found clothes

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[12]   Curiously enough, another source of inspiration for the Cenobites mentioned by Barker are some pictures of African fetishes he found by chance, which portrayed "sculptures of human heads crudely carved from wood and then pierced with dozens, sometimes hundreds, of nails and spikes" (Anchor Bay Hellraiser DVD Box Set Liner Notes, introduction by Clive Barker, Los Angeles, July 2004).

[13]   The same decade (1960s) saw an increasing popularization of S/M fashion, which eventually endorsed the birth of huge S/M communities in the early 1970s (SISSON 2013: 24).

for fetish and BDSM sexual practices by specialized brands such as *London Leatherman*, *Atomage* or *She-And-Me* (Savage 1992: 66; 230). Finally, the publication of the aforementioned *Modern Primitives* (RE/Search, 1989) highlighted the self-claim of the body in a new feminist-oriented framework, linking it to the idea of redemption of the female body from abuse and victimization (Pitts 2003: 56-57).

3. Sadomasochists from beyond the grave

S/M is the second element mentioned by Barker in the interview on *Carpe Noctem* magazine (Dery 1998). Barker's interest for this topic appears explicitly as soon as the beginning of his London period in 1976, when he began to work as an illustrator for the central pages of magazines dealing with gay culture and S/M practices; unfortunately, none of these works survived Scotland Yard's painstaking censorship (Winter 2002: 92; Kane 2006: 137). Over the following years, Barker also frequented S/M, cross-dressing, and fetish clubs in cities such as Amsterdam, New York – where The Eulenspiegal Society (TES) was founded in 1971 (Sisson 2013: 24)[14] – and especially San Francisco, "cradle of [...] sexual and aesthetic radical movements" (Martín-Párraga 2013: 41), seat of the Society of Janus (JOS) and home to a substantial S/M community (Sisson 2013: 24-25). Another relevant factor was certainly Barker's intimacy with the British industrial and post-industrial music scene, in particular his friendship with the *Coil* members dating to the mid-1980s, which introduced him again to S/M environments. S/M-flavored portrayals in fact also surface in *The Damnation Game* (1985), not just in the character of the "Razor-Eater" Breer – as we have already seen – but also in the card deck with pornographic illustrations used by Mamoulian to play his solitaire: "Diamonds [...] were sadomasochistic [...]. On these cards men and women suffered all manner of humiliation, their wracked bodies bearing diamond-shaped wounds to designate each card" (Barker 2002: 95). The author's affinity for such scenarios is further reenforced if one considers the interest shown in Barker and *Hellraiser* by genre magazines such as *Skin Two*, whose #10 (1988) featured one of Barker's first interviews after the movie UK theatrical release on September 10th, 1987. The influence of S/M fashion taste and aesthetics

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[14]   The most prominent example is the Mineshaft (Tattelman 1997; 2005). In an interview for *The Guardian* (Hoad 2017), Barker specifically mentions a New York club called Cell Block 28 (Blotcher 1996: 27).

had a pivotal role in defining the Cenobites' look, especially in their more "sexualized" movie adaptation (MARTÍN-PÁRRAGA 2013: 39-41) rather than the almost "sexless" version of the novella (BARKER 2007: 7-9). Their costumes, created by costume designer Jane Wildgoose, featured long, shiny black leather and PVC tunics or aprons adhering to the muscles, and were probably inspired by the appearance of some characters from the then recent movie *Dune* (1984), such as the members of the Spacing Guild and the Bene Gesserit Sisters (KANE 2006: 136),[15] but they also clearly reflected contemporary S/M fashion trends (MARTÍN-PÁRRAGA 2013: 40-42).

Thus, S/M had a central importance in determining the look of the Cenobites: with their appearance and clothing, they perfectly incarnate an aestheticization of pain and excess; yet, the presence of S/M allusions is not confined to a superficial level in the characterization of these entities, but it is rather a consistent subtext, a systematic element in the unfolding of the narrative and indeed it looks like it is its very backbone, so much so that the working title used for *Hellraiser*, albeit ironically, was *Sadomasochists from Beyond the Grave* (KEENAN 2003: 163; KANE 2006: 78; cf. BRIEFEL 2005). The plot makes explicit references to historical figures renowned for their unbridled and cruel sexual practices, such as Gilles de Rais (1405ca.-1440) or the Marquis De Sade (1740-1814).[16] Relational dynamics are represented in a mixture of sex and violence, brutality and eros, pain and sexual delight, which obviously reminds of the eroticization of pain which is often prominent in S/M practices (BADLEY 1996: 101; LANGDRIDGE 2013; MOSER-KLEINPLATZ 2013: 51-53). Moreover, the Cenobites act within a frontier, an "experimental" area of experience, on a threshold where pleasure and pain (or what is conventionally perceived as such) blur and mingle, and where it is possible to examine "the limits of

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[15]   The costumes of the Cenobites and *Hellraiser* production design in general did not go unnoticed, and over the years have provided inspiration for various other movies and television series, such as *Event Horizon* (1997), *Cube* (1997), the *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003), *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) and others (KANE 2006: 25-26).

[16]   In Gilles de Rais' diaries Frank found clues related to the organization of the Cenobites, the Order of the Gash; Donatien Alphonse François de Sade had owned an origami that could summon the Cenobites (BARKER 2007: 8;60). Another character named alongside Gilles de Rais is Bolingbroke (8): this is more likely to be Henry Saint-John, first Viscount of Bolingbroke (1678-1751) than Henry IV (1367-1413), King of England, also known as Henry Bolingbroke. In fact, the Viscount is also remembered for his excessive alcohol consumption and his libertine sexual conduct. Moreover, in English libertine circles of the early 18th century it was not uncommon to gather in lascivious rituals, sometimes even with a satanic background (TRUMBACH 1998: 81-83).

what you find sexual and maybe expand those limits" (Dery 1998: 21-22) far from the restraints of social orthodoxy:

> They had brought incalculable suffering. They had overdosed him [Frank, author's note] on sensuality [...] They had called it pleasure, and perhaps they'd meant it (Barker 2007: 62).

Another point of convergence is represented by the principle of contract, which is prominent among S/M themes and practices:

> SM participants often sign a contract to seal their relationship formally. Some of these contracts are quite brief; others are very detailed, spelling out the rights and obligations of both parties. Some of these contracts form part of a ritual, signed in front of friends and resembling a wedding ceremony (Moser-Kleinplatz 2013: 50).

In fact, Langdridge locates in the contractual mechanism one of the basic differences between S/M and torture, in that a contract defines and guarantees consent[17] and shapes the meanings attributed to the sensory experiences perceived by those who take part in that contract:

> People within S/M scenes enter into such contracts for the pleasure (however broadly conceived) that they may experience. That is, the participants themselves mutually define the meanings of the acts that are perpetrated. Of course that is not to say that different parties may not experience events differently but, regardless, the meaning is their own (2013: 95-96).

According to Deleuze, S/M relationships are defined by contracts that present themselves as paradoxical variations of regular social contracts between two parties, in that they are "initiated, and the power conferred, by the victim himself", but at the same time they produce a "master-slave relationship" (1991: 92-94); to achieve such a thing, it is a necessary condition that the contracts, after generating an agreement shared and accepted by both parties, are violated, since the presence of contractual conditions and rules (free acceptance of both parties, recognition of rights, limited duration) would distort the uneven relationship between a master and a slave. In *THBH* we find such a scenario in the ritual bargain – the "mistaken marriage" (Barker 2007: 63) – between Frank and the Cenobites stipulated when Frank opens the LeMarchand Configuration (Powell 2005: 83-87).

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[17]   The topics of S/M contract and consent are obviously closely interrelated (Scott 2015: 85-100).

Stipulating the contract, Frank is freely agreeing to entrust himself to the Cenobites' treatments: this is particularly clear when he answers the Cenobites' request for confirmation: "'Show me', he said. 'There's no going back. You do understand that?' '*Show me*'" (Barker 2007: 12; original emphasis). Not much later, however, the Cenobites act as masters – and indeed they look like masters, since their very appearance signals power and control over pain (Reis-Filho 2017: 117; Sparks n.d.)[18] – and they forcefully impose their rules which disenchant Frank from his expectations of unlimited sexual satisfaction, making him experience instead "pleasures that would redefine the parameters of sensation" (Barker 2007: 5).

4. A conscious gore-fest

Barker's early literary production, along with other works by – mostly American – authors such as Robert R. McCammon (*They Thirst*, 1981), Richard Laymon (*The Woods are Dark*, 1981), John Skipp (*Fright Night*, 1985), Jack Ketchum (*The Girl Next Door*, 1989) and those collected in the anthologies *Cutting Edge* (1985, edited by Dennis Etchison) and *Splatterpunks: Extreme Horror* (1990, edited by Paul M. Sammon)[19] has been referred to with the label-term Splatterpunk, coined by author and screenwriter David J. Schow in 1986, during the 12th edition of the World Fantasy Convention in Providence RI (Tucker 1991; Kern 1996: 57 fn1). This literary trend, which saw its zenith in the 1980s,[20] narratively explored new forms of alienation in bleak and decadent late-capitalistic settings, postmodern conceptions of the body in its transformative and subversive potential through uncensored showings and celebrations of repulsive features and gore:

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[18]   The clothes that resemble – among other things – those worn by the Inquisitors (Kane 2006: 137-138; Sparks n.d.), the fact that they are members of an Order, the observance of strict rules, and the fact that they come from an atypical "infernal" dimension that despite its labyrinthine structure "is not the epitome of chaos, but of order" (Kane 2006: 320); all these things suggest strong images of power.

[19]   This is one of the very few Splatterpunk works also published in Italy by Mondadori, although five years later (Sammon 1995).

[20]   The term "trend" seems more fitting because of its lesser specificity: Splatterpunk has been envisioned more as a tendency or a shared hazy aesthetical horizon rather than a well-established and outlined literary movement or stylistic signature (Carroll 1995; Sammon 1995: 727-743). On his part, Schow has always been reluctant to use the term as a label for a specific literary (sub)genre (Aldana Reyes 2014: 177-178, fn 1). Unlike its roughly contemporaneous sci-fi counterpart, cyberpunk, the scholarly debate took no interest in Splatterpunk, and it lost its prominence since the early 1990s.

> "Splatter" is the transitive element that lends the term "splatterpunk" its gerundive quality. It serves notice as to intent and technique-brutal sexual violation, the casual rending of human flesh, dismemberment, the dripping, spilling, and spewing of bodily fluids and internal organs, and coloring the whole, hogsheads of dark, hot blood – the "wet work" of contemporary horror fiction (Kern 1996: 48).

Splatterpunk, as an "aggressively grubby underground movement" (Tucker 1991), and an "aggressively confrontational literature" (Kern 1996: 47) became a powerful endorser of a shift in the literary paradigm from classic and modern horror, promoting innovative and graphic instances in the representation of physical violence which bordered on pornographic standards, and encouraging the display of horror and the monstrous, as opposed to the "traditional, meekly suggestive horror story" of conventional fiction, which remained stuck in its concern for "the scariness of the unseen" (Tucker 1991).[21] This friction, however, did not deploy itself exclusively on a literary level and did not leave the pivot of the debate just on the ground of the representational medium, but also involved the purpose of intellectual activity, thus flowing seamlessly into political ground. As the suffix -punk in the name also suggests, Splatterpunk had its foremost *raison d'être* in an antithesis (Badley 1996: 3; Kern 1996: 47): the backbone supporting the ideological outline was a polemical reaction and a subversive impulse towards forms of artistic and literary representations produced by or stemming from sociopolitical structures heavily operational at that time,[22] namely the grievous and uncaring conformism of the Nixon/Reagan years in the US and the Thatcherite regime in the United Kingdom, which balanced economic liberalism and extreme reactionary social policies (Sammon 1995: 737;772). The visceral, provocative and un-mediated gaze on horror ("new vistas", Skipp *et al.* 1989: 12), came to be at the same time a means for emancipation from potentially alienating forms of social and existential oppression, resuscitating "the feeling of the masses that have been anesthetized into deadness so that the body politic and the body economic can be the more readily manipulated" (Kern 1996: 56) and, indulging but never falling in an angry and exasperated nihilism, a challenging and empowering awareness: "too see things as they really are [...] it is painful, it is real, it requires response,

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[21] Cf. Floyd 1991a: 311-312; Winter 1991: 31: "[...] the joy of horror [...] is the joy of *revelation*" (original emphasis).

[22] This is easily the "bourgeois horror" also mentioned by Barker (Floyd 1991a: 314).

it's an incredible commitment" (SKIPP *et al.* 1989: 11; KERN 1996: 47). For this reason, Splatterpunk focuses on the results of marginalization, on peripheral contexts and characters, attempting to recontextualize and valorize the deviance in relation to an established norm; this focus turns out to be the main ground for criticism against the structural paradigms that inform and preserve the late-capitalistic Western narratives about social class, power, gender, citizenship, ethnicity, and humanity.

However, Barker's relationship to Splatterpunk was not entirely unambiguous (ALDANA REYES 2014: 28-51; 2017): rather than simply narratively exploiting the body in its full physicality to elicit a reaction in the audience and to convey a message unrelated to it, Barker puts the physical body and corporeality at the very center of his thought (LUPOFF *et al.* 1992: 84; DERY 1998: 23). In so doing, he approaches the linguistic codes of body-horror (REIS-FILHO 2017: 116-117), testing their expressive potential. This horror subgenre[23] is the result of a versatile hybridization of horror, sci-fi and suspense (CRUZ 2012). Its foremost feature is the graphic depiction of anatomo-physiological bodily parts or functions which do not conform to any biological norm, often involving metamorphosis processes, physical deterioration, and spontaneous or induced body alterations. These representations give body-horror the tones of a liminal narrative; indeed, it engages the very notion of boundary, under which lies hidden every social construct or cultural hypostatization, including those camouflaged as natural principles: in this sense, the horrific comes to "dismantle biological norms and the larger natural order" (BADLEY 1996: 98-99). Placing the boundary in the narrative by representing an ab-normal, "deviant" body coming from an unknown dimension, Barker problematizes the very principles of reality as it is normally conceived; such body fully incarnates Baudrillard's notion of *alterité radical*, exposing, destabilizing, and menacing the normal-normative world with its mere existence (1990: 133; SANTILLI 2007: 175). The divergent and the horrific body, unlike the familiar-shaped ones to which we can get accustomed to, is a fluid and flowing entity, meta-morphic and perpetually transformable. When it is depicted brutally enough "to break everything that stifles" and everything that is quashed (BATAILLE 1994: 19), it becomes

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[23] The label body- (or biological) horror is used across the board especially in relation to cinema, but the boundaries of the nomenclature are blurry to say the least (see CRUZ 2012; ALDANA-REYES 2020; cf. WILLIAMS 1991).

a door opening to and revealing a new uncomfortable awareness about the self and the world. Yet, this does not happen on a metaphorical level, because the body never ceases to be an immanent space and a ground for exploration that can reveal the potential for imagining new possibilities and new economies of identity (Badley 1996: 75; 97-98; McRoy 2008: 49-50; Jenkins n.d.). This is made clear in the first exchange between Frank and the Cenobites:

> 'Men like yourself, hungry for new possibilities, who've heard that we have skills unknown in your region'. 'I'd expected-' Frank began. 'We know what you expected', the Cenobite replied. 'We understand to its breadth and depth the nature of your frenzy. It is utterly familiar to us'. Frank grunted. 'So,' he said, 'you know what I've dreamed about. You can supply the pleasure'. The thing's face broke open, its lips curling back: a baboon's smile. 'Not as you understand it', came the reply. Frank made to interrupt, but the creature raised a silencing hand. 'There are conditions of the nerve endings,' it said, 'the like of which your imagination, however fevered, could not hope to evoke' (Barker 2007: 11).

Borrowing an expression coined by American film theorist and philosopher Steven Shaviro, we could say that Barker is a "literalist of the body" (1993: 128).[24] His bodies are "literal" because in their fluidity and physicality they are free from any cultural matrix, and from any allegorical or metaphorical superstructure. They are irreducible and escape any attempt to be represented through abstraction, categories, normative or symbolic thought: celebrating the mere "rearrangement of the flesh" (Morrison 1991a: 157; Badley 1996: 97-98; cf. Adams 2020: 442) and its agency as a flowing and uncontrollable entity, Barker outlines a new semantics of the body: it cannot be transcended in experience because it is transcendental, allowing and shaping every experience; or, as Deleuze puts it when writing about – not surprisingly – the masochistic experience: "the senses become 'theoreticians'" (1991: 69). Furthermore, as literal bodies, they are also textual bodies in that they are being narrated and can be read: "Every body is a book of blood; wherever we're opened, we're

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[24]   The same definition can also be applied to filmmakers such as Hisayasu Satō (McRoy 2008: 49-74) and David P. Cronenberg. Both Barker and Cronenberg – author of several movies regarded among the highest peaks of sci-fi body-horror, such as *The Brood* (1979), *Videodrome* (1983), *The Fly* (1986), and others – have often found substantial points of convergence in their poetics and aesthetic-artistic conceptions (Barker 1991: 269; Floyd 1991b: 344; Barker *et al.* 1991: 351). This synergy soon led to a professional collaboration on the set of the film *Nightbreed* (1990), Barker's sophomore work, in which Cronenberg stars as the serial killer psychoanalyst Philip K. Decker.

red" (Barker 1984: iii).[25] However, as texts they do not attempt (after all, how could they?) to convey any manufactured meaning and justify it or account for it, but they merely enunciate the reality of experience as part of the tale, unfolding differentiation and complexity, and testifying for them (Badley 1996: 103).

5.   A political aesthetics

Each and every one of these slowly piling up tiles – body modification, S/M aesthetics, gore enthusiasm – contributed to shape the Cenobites' definitive appearance in the three years included between the first draft of *THBH* and the theatrical release of *Hellraiser* (1985-87). During this period the United Kingdom was in the exact middle of the Thatcher era (she was reelected for the third consecutive time as Prime Minister in 1987; Allmer 2008: 14) and was facing the aftermath of the third industrialization, marked by an increasing unemployment rate and a crippling economic uncertainty (Coutts *et al.* 1981; Albertson *et al.* 2020). Moreover, Thatcher's cultural and social policies were dominated by a determined conservatism and an attempt at moral restoration which almost looked at Victorian values as a *desideratum* (Samuel 1992; Tuttleton 1995; Evans 1997; Berlinski 2008: 115; Masala 2011: 257-265). The Thatcherite vision was, in fact, balanced between economic liberalism and extremely reactionary social policies, which "reiterated aspects of new racism discourse in their attack against the dangerous queer" and "set into motion a whole set of powerful demonization tactics" (Smith 1994: 59; Waters 1996) going as far as to promote both implicitly and explicitly forms of repression of sexual freedom. This is the case, for example, of Section 29JA of the Public Order Act 1986, which tended to decriminalize forms of sexual discrimination, and especially the infamous Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, which banned the promotion of homosexuality (Smith 1994: 60; Waters 1996: 214-217): this article triggered fierce protests coming from British LGBT+ communities and many voices in the intellectual and artistic scene. Conflict between governmental stances and the LGBT+ community also extended to other areas: some activist and environmentalist groups, e.g. LGSM (Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners) and LAPC (Lesbians Against Pit Closures) sided

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[25]   This is the well-known epigraph at the beginning of each volume of the aforementioned *Books of Blood*. Note the double pun between "every body"-"everybody" and "red"-"read".

with NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) during the 1984-85 miners' strike against the government's decision to dismantle several mining sites (TATE 2017).

Thus, the path of Thatcherism was not without opposition; in fact, it brooded within itself subversive stances towards the oppressive climate it generated, manifesting not only in actions of political and ideological protest, but also in intellectual activity and artistic production. Curiously enough, as noted by journalist David Barnett (2012) the popularity of horror-related products and art in UK seems to mirror the Tory Party election successes: indeed, the 1980s saw the most significant publishing peak of horror novels in British history. The deep historical reason behind this mechanism is to be found in the essence of horror; as Santilli puts it (2007: 174-176), horror can be the most effective countercultural tool: through horror, a culture shapes a representation of the alterity that threatens and erodes its established norms and categories; horror can transgress – and indeed it does – the ontological and axiological categories of a culture, "the metaphysics underlying symbolic boundaries" (GIBSON 1996: 237). Horrific and monstrous is considered everything that does not fit within these boundaries, everything that it is not assimilated, and neither could be. What stands out in the postmodern approach to horror is the fact that – unlike modernity – it not only openly recognizes the impossibility of assimilation, and thus it gives up the attempt to reduce, discipline and control the horrific, but it is also prone to thematizing and even celebrating it (SANTILLI 2007: 187). In this sense Barker celebrates marginality, he sings a "hymn to diversity" (BADLEY 1996: 99), using the tools of the horror genre to comment and intervene in controversial topical events.

Barker's horror imagery, declined in postmodern literary and cinematographic grammars (Splatterpunk/Body-horror), opened the possibility to reflect on contemporary circumstances. The Cenobites appeared, both on an aesthetic level and from a narrative point of view, as representative figures of an alternative both to the dominant Thatcherite historical trajectory[26] and to the reactionary "bourgeois horror" which reflected and reaf-

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[26]   The Cenobites are not alone in their role of counterbalancing elements over and against the Thatcherite moralist patina. Despite its exotic appearance (BARKER 2007: 2), the LeMarchand Configuration, the wooden puzzle-box used to evoke the Cenobites and thus the first tool allowing the exploration of one's own individual and social identity, closely resembles tridimensional

firmed orthodox social codes (BENSHOFF 1997: 262; WELLS 2005: 177-178).[27] The Cenobites came (quite literally) from a dimension far beyond moral austerity and *pruderie,* deep in the repressed collective consciousness of Thatcherite Britain. In their being "so hopelessly, flawlessly ambiguous" (BARKER 2007: 62) they incarnated the greatest possible display of ab-normality and irreducibility in that specific historical contingency, much like a

> disturbance of the contemporary world brought on by past events, the consequences of which have not been worked through by that world. This historical weight upon the present manifests itself in a cracking of the surface of reality – with […] walls opening up to reveal previously unseen spaces, spaces which carry a historical charge and from which the monsters themselves emerge (HUTCHINGS 1996: 101).

Underneath Barker's aesthetical inquiry for the Cenobites' "repulsive glamour" lies the paradoxical mixture of pain and delight, pleasure and repugnance, which is reflected in the bodily anatomy of these entities. Barker's reflection on body, corporeality, and agency of the flesh represents indeed the common ground where the discourses on gender, queerness, S/M and Modern Primitives subcultures interconnect and intersect.[28] The imagery

puzzles popular as pastimes in the Victorian era (HOFFMANN 1893: 74-144; cf. ALLMER 2008: 15-16). The suburban house at 55 Lodovico Street in London, where almost all the plot takes place, is described in the *Hellraiser* screenplay as "an old, three storey late Victorian house" (BARKER 1986: 1; cf. ALLMER 2008; ADAMS 2020: 436). Below the visible surface of the respectable, unsuspected, everyday life of the (neo)Victorian middle-class, lies the deviation from the norm, the monstrous, the new potentialities of existence.

²⁷ Cf. also Patricia Allmer's reading (2008) of *Hellraiser* as a critical evaluation of the Thatcherite stances towards capitalistic narratives about consumerism and the principles of entrepreneurship and property/ownership.

²⁸ The ambiguity and fluidity in the Cenobites' sensory experiences might also bear similarities to the proximity of pain and pleasure (most of all ecstasy) and the aestheticization of pain retraceable in hagiographic narratives relating to martyrdom, which indeed emphasize "both the agency of the body and the pain it suffers" (DE SOUCEY *et al.* 2008: 114); the similarities are self-evident. However, there are also deeply diverging points: the act of martyrdom finds its political dimension not in itself, as is the case for the destabilizing and deconstructionist traits inherent in Barker's bodies and their modifications, but in a social perspective, since "to be effective, martyrdom must be a public act, and if it is not, it must be publicized after" (FIRESTONE 2004: 289). Moreover, the principle of martyrdom is teleological: the dying body is transcended to become a symbolic object in its function of faith testimony. The martyr's body is thus a cultural body, not a "literal" one. The subversive potential that could be used as a power tool for otherwise unempowered groups operates within the normative logics and symbolic codes that Barker's perspective on corporeality tends to dilute (DE SOUCEY *et al.* 2008: 114). Admittedly, however, the physical presence of the martyr's bodily remains plays an additional role in confirming the martyr's status as such (108-110).

of body modification and the exploration of new frontiers of sensation through S/M practices (although exaggerated and hyperbolic for the sake of narration) takes on new meanings when it is such contextualized: it becomes, in fact, "one of the ways we choose to reinvest our flesh with significance" (Dery 1998: 23). Barker's semantics of the body envisions it as the very first ground for experiencing reality and shows its liberating potential, but not in the sense of a cowardly escapism or a blind self-satisfaction: the mere body, the "literal" body, completely exposes and bypasses every construct and allows us – thus even requires us – to reimagine the world, i.e., to radically and continually dismantle and reshape the categories of intelligibility through which we interact with it and with each other. Becoming a "monster" – so to say – acting on the body, altering it, using it to experience previously unreachable sensations, means also to embrace that "part of the texture of our internal workings" (Floyd 1991a: 312) which, if accepted and explored, opens new possibilities of existence and identity. The exploration of these potentialities is carried out as a self-transformative and self-deconstructionist path which ultimately leads to emancipation from every normative constraint, and "whether or not that potential is fulfilled, the journey to a 'new kind of life' […] ends in post-human beings" (Morrison 1991b: 184; Jenkins n.d.).

The Cenobites' aesthetics and the further horizons opened by the rediscovery of the body and by the "limit experiences" (Dery 1998: 21)[29] turn into spaces newly claimed and made accessible, new grounds for political action and confrontation, where politics is understood with Rancière as a form of experience which deals with "*ce qu'on voit et ce qu'on peut en dire, sur qui a la compétence pour voir et la qualité pour dire, sur les propriétés des espaces et les possibles du temps*" (2000: 14). Therefore, the body, its modifications and its vistas can invert dominant ideological assumptions and can be envisioned as the fundamental tool for political contestation against a hegemonic order (Jenkins n.d.) which is not capable of either experience or conceive them. This is true in general, but in this specific case the references to Modern Primitivism, Punk and S/M culture contextualize this assumption and propose an aesthetics deeply rooted in the current affairs of Great Britain in the first half of the 1980s and the repressive social policies of the Thatcher era. Ultimately, the Cenobites are one of the clearest and

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29   In the interview, it is made here explicit reference to Foucault's idea of *expérience limite*.

most indicative representatives of that peripheral, marginal, underground *milieu* aptly defined by music critic and author David Keenan (2003) as "England's Hidden Reverse". From this point of view, *THBH* and *Hellraiser* are indeed topical products, since they stemmed from a precise geo-historical and sociopolitical context, but they were also able to critically recount crucial cultural junctures and delve into their workings and implications.

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