

“Demons to some. Angels to others”: BDSM and how Vanilla Sex Regulates Sexuality in *Hell-raiser* and *Strangeland*

by

Alexandrea Fiorante

Bachelor of Arts (Honours) English, Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, 2019

A Major Research Paper  
presented to Ryerson University  
in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in the English MA Program  
in Literatures of Modernity

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2020

©Alexandrea Fiorante, 2020

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION FOR  
ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION OF A MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this MRP. This is a true copy of the MRP, including any required final revisions.

I authorize Ryerson University to lend this MRP to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research. I further authorize Ryerson University to reproduce this MRP by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I understand that my MRP may be made electronically available to the public.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Setting the Mood	1
Meet your Master	2
Devil in Disguise	3
Where there is a Whip, there is a Way	12
Undisclosed Desires	18
To BDS-End	20
Works Cited	1

“Demons to some. Angels to others”: BDSM and how Vanilla Sex Regulates Sexuality in *Hellraiser* and *Strangeland*

## Setting the Mood

Sex is typically seen as special, thrilling and transcendent — or, alternatively, as a menacing force with the power to upset social order and diminish us to beasts. In the horror genre, representations of sex are often expressed through the imagery of BDSM (Bondage, Domination, Sadomasochism), and are aligned with monsters, torture and scary settings. The reality of the BDSM subculture is disfigured by mainstream horror films, which demonize BDSM and use it as a portable method of garnering screams.

Horror as a genre allows audiences to flirt with danger, while reinforcing boundaries between pathological non-normal sexuality and protected and privileged normal sexuality. BDSM has gained considerable scholarly attention in the last two decades within and beyond sociology, particularly in the areas of sexual deviance, identity disclosure and development, stigma management (Bezreh, Pitagora, Simula), and more recently, BDSM’s diffusion into the mainstream culture (Weiss, Scott). Further, research has examined how popular culture perpetuates misconceptions about BDSM, and frames practitioners as victims of trauma, abuse, and rape (Brock, Bezreh, Rubin). This pathologization of BDSM, in part, stems from the assumption that BDSM is a mental illness, a consequence of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*’s (DSM) historical conflation of psychological disorder and sadomasochism. Additionally, Western horror cinema has had a pivotal influence on popular discourses about BDSM. Less scholarship, however, has examined the relationship between horror and BDSM. This paper contributes to the scholarship on BDSM portrayals in popular culture by examining BDSM representations in two Hollywood horror films: *Strangeland* (1998) and *Hellraiser* (1987).

My argument is twofold: first, the “bondage is bad” stigma Hollywood horror film propagates about BDSM is socially constructed to frame heteronormative “vanilla sex” as privileged, natural, and proper. Thus, I show how *Strangeland* constructs and upholds “truths” about natural sexuality by demonizing BDSM. Second, I use *Hellraiser* as a representative case to argue how “kink positive” horror films reveal a rising understanding of BDSM and a push on the part of its partitioners and allies to challenge the notion of “deviant” sexual interests. As the horror genre targets youth as its core audience, it is critical that films portray BDSM in an informative way (Mehls iii).

### **Meet your Master**

Nature does not categorize, human beings do. This is certainly the case as far as sexuality is concerned. Theories of social constructionism developed in the 1980s found that notions of human sexual “normality” were constructed according to social norms that upheld the *status quo* (Simula 5). Social systems frame certain sexualities as normal and others as deviant, but theories of social constructivism question how these boundaries are drawn. Gayle Rubin’s pyramid model of how sexual practices and identities are socially constructed provides a useful means to understand this concept. Topping the erotic pyramid is “normal” sexuality as defined by heterosexuality, marriage, monogamy, and sexual reproduction; Rubin calls this category “vanilla” (154). Sexual behaviours that include BDSM, fetish toys, and kink, especially as practiced by unmarried, promiscuous and non-procreative partners outside of the female/male binary and which take place in unconventional locations transgress the *status quo* and are deemed “abnormal.” According to Rubin, BDSM is constructed within this binary opposition as an inferior sexuality that needs to be “fixed” (151).

The compulsory status of heterosexuality is maintained by representations of “deviant sexual hedonists” as the polluted “other” in comparison to the virtuous heterosexual, and these representations of ‘deviants’ are integrated with stigmatizing psychological dispositions, personality traits, and social behaviours (Seidman 246). As a form of sexual control, the successful categorization of BDSM realities as inauthentic, pathological or deviant reinforces the dominant heterosexual view of reality, and is largely propagated in horror films.

The most striking BDSM depictions in the media tend to be controversial if not reductive, and therefore not actually BDSM. Horror movies distort BDSM by using the imagery of power, submission and the pleasure-pain threshold in a context of torture and psychological abuse while leaving out key BDSM components like mutual consent and pre-negotiated boundaries. By and large, horror films propagate an image of BDSM that suggests the following: BDSM is inherently abusive and therefore something that no one can truly consent to; people only practice BDSM because of psychological illness; BDSM gives abusers and predators an easy place in which to mask their real intents and find victims (Scott).

### **Devil in Disguise**

*Strangeland* is a 1998 horror thriller written by Dee Snider and directed by John Pieplow. The film centres around a pierced and tattooed schizophrenic sadist, Captain Howdy (Dee Snider), who uses the internet to lure teens to his home where he tortures and defiles them with body modifications. He is pursued by police detective Mike Gage (Kevin Gage) after he captures his daughter Genevieve (Linda Cardellini) and her friend Tiana Moore (Amal Rhoe). Deemed insane, he is sent to an asylum. Four years later he is considered rehabilitated and then released

against the will of the local population. The townspeople cannot accept the “reformed” Capt. Howdy and attack him, prompting his “relapse” and the second abduction of Genevieve.

BDSM practitioners may reframe how they compare themselves to vanilla sexuality so that they may bolster their status. Germinating in the BDSM community, the term has become a byword for “sexually pedestrian” and is often used as a stick with which to beat non-kinky people (Scott 51). Albeit stigmatizing, at heart *Strangeland* is an earnest exploration and celebration of body-modification fetishists, BDSM enthusiasts, and the “secret freak society of perverted pleasures that lurk underneath the veneer of respectable society” (Arf). *Strangeland* sought to unearth the underground BDSM subculture to evince the sublimity of the mysterious practices and rituals. When Capt. Howdy’s septum ring is found at Mike’s crime scene, a tattooed and pierced tow driver shares his insight on the community to help their hot pursuit: “We have power over our own bodies [...] the modern primitives...body art, tattoo, piercing, branding, these are all forms of personal expression dating back to the fucking caveman...we remain grounded in tradition in body modification and tradition” (17:31). Mike’s privileged heterosexuality crumbles under the *gravitas* of his claim; he asserts himself as an “authority” (17:26) and explains the power bestowed on sexual traditions that are not all white or conventional (17:26). In doing so, he subverts the heterosexual pyramid to appear at its top.

Popular culture often uses BDSM imagery as a shorthand for pain and punishment (Scott 168). Want to know someone is a masochist? Pull out the whips and rope. “Body horror” and “torture porn” refer to the horror subgenre that use imagery of kink culture — including role-playing, restraints, hierarchal positions, and pain-infliction— typically to depict the villain. *Strangeland* represents Capt. Howdy’s torture dungeon as distinctly BDSM-inspired: shibari

ropes, a Saint Andrew's cross, and other erotic restraining devices for sexual and psychological domination clutter the space. The film's genuine attempt to be an enlightening exposure to the transcendental potential of body modification is tarnished by its stigmatizing execution. Capt. Howdy believes that pleasure derived from experiencing bodily pain can result in spiritual orgasm — a “right of passage” to higher sense of being (12:45). While his sentiment is shared amongst the body modification fetishism community, *Strangeland's* imagery of rape, abuse and psychological illness as a motive for torture misrepresents that truth about BDSM. By circulating damaging misinformation about BDSM, the film's viewers are being dissuaded from participating in BDSM activities, by fear of being sexually abused or through the fallacious association of BDSM with torture and mental illness.

Placing rough sex in a context with murder and abuse only serves to further differentiate it from normal, healthy sexuality (Scott 174). In *Strangeland*, Tiana's dead body is discovered after being kidnapped by Capt. Howdy. “Symmetrically placed puncture wounds through the layers of skin on her face, breasts and genitalia” were made with an absurdly large eight gage needle, and while none of the scars were life-threatening, she died from “cardiac arrest...the trauma caused...she was tortured” (23:28). Representing the body in pain cuts through comfortable modes of viewing. With these images, the film demands the viewer suffer the pleasure-pain threshold by experiencing it by proxy through the victims. Inducing anxiety, shock and nausea through unwarranted bodily mutilations and dramatization of physical pain only tethers BDSM to associations of traumatic death (Botting 234). Capt. Howdy alerts the FBI to his whereabouts, only when they arrive they find two seniors having vanilla sex instead of the culprit. Initially the juxtaposition was meant to frame vanilla sex as banal and “old-fashioned,” however it inadver-

tently emerges as superior in *Strangeland* through a relationship of contrast: BDSM, represented by corporeal mutilation, is invasive and life-threatening in comparison to the sheltered intimacy of non-kinky heterosexual intercourse.

Presenting BDSM as a pathological identity rather than a valid practice works to shore up boundaries between normal and abnormal, healthy and sick. There is a history of BDSM being stigmatized by the institution of medicine. The medicalization of deviant sexuality occurs when medical professionals frame various deviant behaviours as illnesses requiring treatment. While some studies show that BDSM practitioners experience lower rates of depression, anxiety, and psychological sadism than non-BDSM practitioners, the current definition in the *DSM-V* hinges on the notion of “disorder”: the presence of distress or non-consensual behaviours (Bezreh et al. 39). So long as it is not pathological or harming anyone, it is not considered a disorder. Yet, fetishism and sadism are quite firmly entrenched as psychological malfunctions in the popular mind. Mass media, and horror specifically, nourishes these attitudes. In some contexts, even consensual play is treated as pathological, as seen *Strangeland*'s Capt. Howdy, who suffers from schizophrenia (Weiss 117).

In *Strangeland*, sickness conflated with sadomasochism becomes Capt. Howdy's driving identity. A number counter would clock the eighteen times he was referred to as a “sick fuck” by Mike (42:20), or a “fucking monster” by the community (55:00). Drawing on Sander Gilman's (1985) work, Ania Loomba suggests that stereotyping involves a reduction of images and ideas to deceptively simple and agreeable forms and labels that do not fully represent the expansive lives and practices of BDSM practitioners (Newman 68). The function of stereotypes such as “monster,” “psycho,” or “sick” used relentlessly in horror perpetuates an artificial sense of dif-

ference between “healthy self” and “damaged other” through identifiable warning signs for the readers’s self-reflection. Capt. Howdy exposes and confronts the use of labels by Mike, who represents compulsory heterosexuality: “using the concept of “sick” to disparage draws a veil across a reality which you are in no position to interpret” (35:46). Unfortunately, *Strangeland* feeds the negative psychiatric stereotypes of ‘depraved’ sexual behaviour that invokes concepts of mental disease and symptoms of defective personality integration to secure the gold-star standard of heteronormative sexuality (Rubin 152).

In an attempt to critique the pathologization of “deviant” sexual behaviours, *Strangeland* inadvertently supports a harmful understanding of BDSM propelled by notions of “sickness” and “recovery.” Dr. James Prichard (1833) was a proponent of the growing medical fixation on immoral or disrespectful conduct. It would come to be codified by the “psy” disciplines as “defects of character” and “mental and emotional disturbances” (Brock & Rimke 191). *Strangeland* relies on diagnosis as a dividing practice between “healthy” heteronormative sexuality and “unhealthy” BDSM behaviour. After being called a sadist by Mike, Capt. Howdy draws parallels between body-modification fetishism and madness in an unconvincing way that supports his perceived sickness. “The term sadism is so maligned that if a doctor performs a hair transplant or a nose job, it’s ok. But try to help another human being achieve a higher level of spiritual or sensual awareness, by, say, piercing his genitals, and everyone says you’re sick” (31:00). His claim is absurd; that he does not understand kidnapping and abusing people to the point of death is wrong revitalizes the fallacious notion that BDSM practitioners are mentally ill and sexual abusers who commit sex crimes. With a list of psychopathic disorders in tow, modern human science sought to regulate Capt. Howdy’s “bad” sexual behaviours because of the ways he resisted the norma-

tive expectations of civility (Brock & Rimke 191). Quarantined away from American culture at large, given care and compassion, Capt. Howdy seems to have genuinely “recovered” from what ailed him. As Capt. Howdy, he was unmistakably evil; as Carlton Hendricks (his legal name), representing his reformation, he is unmistakably full of regret and empathy. Medicine, as a form of social control, is used to treat those whose behaviours do not conform to the societal expectations for better social integration (Karp 315). *Strangeland* frames BDSM as the symptoms of an ailment, and agrees with the potential to rehabilitate ‘deviant’ sexuality. This narrative saturates horror cinema and creates distance between “healthy” and “sick” — between vanilla and kink communities.

To borrow Brock and Rimke’s term, “spaces for exclusion” — jails and psychiatric institutions — were both a cause and effect of the growth of a disciplinary society (188). The process of diagnosing and locking up allowed the medical establishment to observe and render into sideshow performers people deemed “mad.” *Strangeland* captures the reality of the condemned who live in a no-win situation with their identities. Capt. Howdy is taken into psychiatric care after Mike arrests him. With the former taken away strapped on a gurney, Mike and his police force converse about his insanity plead: “Monster turns man? Treatment makes the difference, says the psychiatrist,” garnering the response that the “cops should have killed him” (44:06). This response feeds into the belief of the medicalization of deviance as a means of rehabilitation, but also suggests that a “sexual deviant” is incapable of reformation and should be physically removed to neutralize their threat to hegemonic society.

Fashion is also what marks Howdy as disreputable and “deviant” in *Strangeland*. Only when he runs after an escaped victim do we fully see Capt. Howdy almost wish we did not: high

platform leather boots, thick tribal tattoos scaling this towering body, bright red hair teased into a mohawk, teeth sharpened to fangs and sporting a plethora of surgical steel bars self-pierced over his face and body (17:06). The septum ring he accidentally left at the crime scene was the “biggest septum spike” another body-modification enthusiast “had ever seen,” leaving a hole “big enough to stick your finger through” (16:30). His visible “differences” from the heterosexual norm are enough to stereotype and categorize him. In the context of nonconsensual abuse and psychosis, his appearance is both scary and terrifying. Even when he is “reformed” to look “vanilla” — his hair dyed brunette and tied in a neat ponytail, beige slacks and a cardigan, and a stack of books for quiet reading — his tattoo is still visible under his makeup, suggesting that his deviance, too, is permanent. This is a dangerous example of how the vanilla mainstream dehumanizes kinky people, reducing them to nothing but their outfits and sexual practices to determine their personalities and psychology.

In *Strangeland*, Capt. Howdy is contrasted with Mike, a “good cop” who “works all night” and has a beautiful home with a wife and daughter (15:56). Cleanly shaved and undecorated, his outfits are limited to a collection of grey tweed suits typical — the template for a mundane businessman. The dominant sexual discourse obtains its meaning in a relationship of contrast, not by representing existing vanilla sex but by producing the idea of a threatening deviant. This makes it easier to demonize and discriminate against such people as they are not viewed as full members of society with lives, jobs, relationships and finances, just perverts (Scott 58). The political goal of heterosexual assimilation that relied on public enlightenment through displays of

model citizenship is inadvertently present in *Strangeland* that supports a productive heterosexual culture rather than a subculture seemingly of mental issues and sexual abuse.

Even after Capt. Howdy was rehabilitated, his malicious acts remained at the forefront of the community's memory. The evil comes when Capt. Howdy's danger to the community has been neutralized but his blood is still demanded regardless. The critique of heterosexuality sought to expose the structural constraints obscured by a hypocritical culture that celebrates sexual freedom. Neighbour Jackson Roth (Robert Englund) is out for Capt. Howdy's blood after he learns of his release from the psychiatric ward. His motive? To keep his neighbourhood and its children safe. It is with intent that Jackson is portrayed as a drunk, an adulterer, and an abuser, being shown watching pornography that simulates sexual assault on a minor — but he is still tolerated in the community in ways Capt. Howdy is not (53:00). Jackson bares no distinguishing features. Similarly to Mike, he is a white male in his mid 40s with a closet of neutral slacks and flannel shirts. Since Capt. Howdy's "freakishness" is visible (his face tattoo is easily seen despite a new subdued look), he is marked as an agent of moral decay that should not exist in white heterosexual suburbia, lest he harm others. Capt. Howdy is lynched by Jackson and their neighbours under the false assumption that he killed his daughter because his sexual deviancy is easily located (57:00). What *Strangeland* does effectively is tell a story about the way America is fine plastering over "evils," here represented by BDSM, so long as it creates obvious sores and is symbolically marked. Hypocritical heterosexual culture is epitomized by Jackson who murders Capt. Howdy for his sexual misconduct despite his own immoral sexual behaviours.

*Strangeland* also shows the social reality and implications of stereotyping and labelling natural sexuality. Becoming and being deviant are conceived as an interactional process, an out-

come of labeling where the person could begin to see themselves as their label regardless of the truth (Karp 284). When lightning strikes the tree Capt. Howdy hung from, the branch breaks and he is saved — only to revert back into a sadomasochistic killer. The reformed Capt. Howdy was not welcomed in heteronormative society, so why change? His resurrection from Hell, assuming his typical “evil” fashion, conflates psychosis and BDSM as permanent, undying threats.

Dangerous play is one of the consequences of not being taught about BDSM in a comprehensive way, but another is the risk of learning about BDSM in a negative frame. *Strangeland*'s representations of sexual behaviour are far from consensual. BDSM distinguishes their pretend play from actual violence or domination; this frame hinges on the BDSM credo “safe, sane, and consensual” (Bezreh, et al 38). Mutual consent makes a clear legal and ethical distinction between BDSM and such crimes as sexual assault/domestic violence. BDSM is structured for the consenting partner to withdraw his or her consent at any point, failure to honour that is serious misconduct. Capt. Howdy is first seen in action chasing an escaped victim down the driveway. Consent is absent: running away and screaming in fear is explicitly saying “no thanks.” She is dragged inside, battered and bleeding, her fingers loosely clawing the ground until she goes unconscious and the door swallowed them both (7:00). It is pertinent to note that Capt. Howdy also stitches their mouths closed to silence them — now he cannot hear her safe word, even if she had one. As demonstrated, mainstream media and popular prejudice presents the marginal sexual worlds as bleak and dangerous. They are misrepresented as torturous and suffering from mental illness, penning BDSM as a dark and dangerous other to dissuade sexual exploration and identity association.

Horror allows the mainstream audience to flirt with danger and excitement while reinforcing boundaries between protected and privileged normal sexuality and pathological non-normal sexuality. *Strangeland* ends with Capt. Howdy dead on his own suspension hooks after being attacked by Mike (1:18:34). The culmination propagandizes a heterosexual way of life. Had Capt. Howdy continued to practice successfully, and without repercussions, the film would be supporting BDSM behaviours as a “healthy” and “good” way of life, counter to heteronormative agendas. Like representations of the native other, the dark other, or the dangerous other, the sexual other is tied to a long practice of “distance consumption” (Weiss 109). This mode of viewership enables privileged use of the “other” in a way that gives the normative audience familiarity, knowledge and intimacy of the “other,” while shoring up basic power differentials that maintain one’s power and the other’s essential alterity (Weiss 144). Distanced consumption provides a safe location for the viewer away from “perverts” especially as BDSM remains policed, feared and deviant, buttressing privileged authority and essential normalcy of the heteronormative self.

### **Where there is a Whip, there is a Way**

*Hellraiser*, released in 1987, was a wide-release film produced by Clive Barker, based on his own novella *The Hellbound Heart*. The film relates the story of husband and wife Larry (Andrew Robinson) and Julia Cotton (Claire Higgins) who move into Larry’s childhood home with his daughter Kirsty (Ashley Laurence). Unfortunately for all involved, Larry’s house is already occupied: before the family’s arrival, his disreputable brother Frank (Sean Chapman) used a supernatural puzzle box, the Lament Configuration, to summon a trio of other-dimensional BDSM-practicing demons, the Cenobites, who tear his body apart in the ultimate pursuit of pain and

pleasure. When Larry cut his hand while moving furniture, he bled onto the floor in the room Frank solved the box. The blood was soaked up by the floorboards, only for liquified flesh to bubble to the surface in its place. After finding new strength, Frank's skeleton emerged. Now, Frank requires a series of blood sacrifices to escape their sadomasochistic underworld. He enlists the help of his ex-mistress Julia (now his brother Larry's wife) to bring the necessary human sacrifices to complete his body.

At its release, *Hellraiser* (1987) was one of the most earnest and progressive horror films produced about BDSM behaviours. The film focused on humans who deceived loves one, with a special focus on BDSM relationships and ethics. Barker would have gone even further with his gritty BDSM images had the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) not given the film an X rating (Stewart). The film initially contained more explicit sexual encounters including sodomy, but the censors forced Barker to remove it, a case in point of how cultural gatekeeping imposes, manages, organizes, propagandizes and maintains a heterosexual "vanilla" agenda for viewer consumption.

Concepts such as sadomasochism, bondage, and even polyamory are creatively explored in *Hellraiser* in new and thrilling ways. As a gay man who frequented BDSM clubs and the sex industry, Barker was aware of the heteronormative insecurities of mainstream horror filmgoers. In response, his film depicts a broad spectrum of sexuality, from vanilla to BDSM extremists. Barker subverts the notion of BDSM as an unmodulated horror incapable of involving affection, love, free choice or erotic transcendence. Julia reminisced about her kinky escapade with Frank: his edgy flick knife cut her nightgown's silk straps, her moaning in embrace (17:27); he groped her breast — an action that pleurably jolts her during a cut scene in real-time (17:32); passion-

ate kisses weaved into aggressive missionary sex accompanied by the intimate sound of violins (17:50). The aptly rose-coloured scene goes on to show passionate and kinky behaviour that is relished in by both parties, even dreamt about. The two toasted to the “wedded bliss” of Julia and Larry, the opposite of her reality (15:39). Frank is anything but vanilla, and that is everything that Julia wants — counter to safe, compliant and sexually pedestrian Larry. The layers of affection, consent and transcendence during “play” (kinky activities) refuses regurgitated notions of BDSM as abuse, and simultaneously frames kink as romantic and even desirable. That the raunchy duo have intercourse atop her wedding dress — on her wedding day nonetheless — challenges monogamy and compulsory heterosexuality by suggesting that, like all sexualities, vanilla relationships are capable of being personally unfulfilling (18:00). In doing so, Barker inverts Rubin’s hierarchical pyramid of sexuality where BDSM is valued above the vanilla standard.

*Hellraiser* is much a meditation on the destructive dangers of desire and obsession, hinging on nonconsensual sexual behaviour. The Cenobites are not even the true monsters of the film. The story’s actual villain is the deeply human pursuit of excess enjoyment, as personified by hedonist Frank. Frank deliberately sought an intensified BDSM experience: when the salesman asks him what his “pleasure” is, he responds “the box” (02:22). In his attic space he performs a ritual to open the a portal to the Cenobites dimension, candles and meditation included. He is ripped to pieces when he solves The Lament Configuration. As the final piece clicks into place, hooks fly from the cube and pull his flesh apart: his introduction to an alternate dimension. By its very nature, abduction by the Cenobites flows only from a voluntary, uncontrollable, thirst for transcendent human experience—as the film phrases it, to seek a state of “pain and pleasure indi-

visible” (Arf). Pinhead, the leader of the Cenobites, is quoted saying that “it is not the hands that call us, but desire,” in reference to the puzzle box (Arf). This is deliberate and consensual engagement, unlike Kirsty’s hands that find the box and solve the puzzle in the spirit of inquiry, and in ignorance of what is it. Kirsty is chased out of the BDSM dimension by a phallic alien that she accidentally summons (1:04:44). Pinhead saves Kirsty, agreeing with her that “[BDSM] isn’t for [Kirsty’s] eyes” (1:14:49). It proved too scary and she, unready. The Cenobites enforce the rules of consensual BDSM practice, and punish those who “play” unsafely. Barker uses the two scenarios to subvert the narrative of BDSM as abusive.

It is the Cenobites that punish Frank for abusing his power and his love. Pinhead explicitly outlines when happens when rules are disregarded: “if you cheat us, we’ll tear your soul apart” (1:05:00). A BDSM relationship is contingent on transparency, communication and consent. Consent is an issue that attracts much attention within BDSM, resulting in models of consent such as “safe, sane and consensual.” The fundamental principles for practicing BDSM require that it be performed with the informed consent of all parties, and that it can be terminated at any time. There can be no lies, no false faces — and Frank is nothing but a series of false faces. He manipulated his romance with Julia from the beginning, using her love for him as leverage to escape, and for meaningless sex. When Julia decided she no longer felt comfortable luring men back to Frank so that he could feed, he exploited her devotion to secure his own safety: “You won’t cheat me will you? [...] then we can be together the way we were before” (35:26). He even tried to force his niece Kirsty into an erotic and unconsensual relationship: “come to daddy,” he says, groping her despite her refusal (1:12:15). Later, he is the reason for Julia’s death, mutilating her body. *Hellraiser* finishes with Frank dead at the hands of the

Cenobites for going against the subculture's "safe, sane, consensual" credo: his face and body once against pulled apart by meat hooks (1:33:00). Pinhead reflects BDSM sentiment with the strict procedures that should be abided by. Frank is held accountable for his actions, and by members of the BDSM community. Educating viewers on the rules and importance of consent shows the care and responsibility the BDSM community prides itself on, contrary to recycled stigmatizing representations of BDSM as rape and abuse.

Landmark sociological studies by Alfred Kinsey reveal that 50% of vanilla couples were aroused by being bitten (Bezreh et al. 41), and Renaud and Byers' (1999) data found that over 60% of heterosexuals both have fantasies of being tied up and tying up a partner (Bezreh et al. 38). The evidence emphasizes the diversity of sexual practices and argues that much of what is seen as abnormal human sexuality is actually common and therefore cannot be seen as deviant (Jackson & Scott 10). This suggests that heterosexuality is located on a continuum rather than being binary opposites, wedding the claim that sexuality is natural. *Hellraiser* normalizes kink in heterosexual relationships by exposing its everyday existence in "vanilla" affairs: teenage Kirsty kisses her boyfriend with tongue (1:00:00) as well as in more unconventional relations: Julia takes pleasure in passionate sex with kink elements (17:27). Frank is decidedly a veteran BDSM practitioner considering the heap of pornographic polaroids Julia finds featuring Frank sexually dominating a different mistress (10:23). Barker represented this continuum through the above examples, beginning with "vanilla" Larry and ending with the sadomasochistic Cenobites, to prove that BDSM is nothing more than than one end of a spectrum of common sexual behaviour. *Hellraiser* ends with Derelict, a skeletal dragon and The Puzzle Guardian, flying away with the The Lament Configuration only for it to materialize in the hands of another BDSM enthusiast.

Barker highlights the ever-growing interest in BDSM in this scene by suggesting an unceasing queue of sexually curious individuals.

BDSM, like any subculture, must be simplified and reduced to obvious symbols to function in a visual medium. One way is through fashions like body-hugging fetish gear (Scott 55). BDSM fashion is an example of a labelling device. Punk was guided by the store Sex, run by Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren — the latter going on to manage The Sex Pistols (Scott 159). Consisting of clothing slashed to pieces and then reconstructed with safety pins, bondage trousers with chains, belts, studs, leather, and tartan, punk style challenged the staid uniform of the 1970s: blue jeans and plain tees (Scott 159).

Clive Barker drew inspiration for *Hellraiser's* Cenobite design from punk fashion, catholicism, and by the visits he took to S&M clubs in New York and Amsterdam. The Cenobites, a quartet of sadomasochists who skip from dimension to dimension practicing fatal S&M, wear shiny black leather outfits. The Female Cenobite has an open, vertical slit in her throat that she plays with; a cenobite called Chatterer is covered in scarification; the coven's leader Pinhead is the poster boy for masochists. The film presents the images of sadomasochistic characters as swaggering and glamorous and illuminated by a British punk spirit that rallies against the *status quo*. Latex functions in the same way as heels: it accentuates the body's curves and implies a sexual context. Wearing latex is meant to remove social roles because one cannot "see" the person. That the Cenobites are sexless and adorned in latex suits furthers the notion of BDSM fashion as a labelling device, one that overtly refuses the vanilla rule of procreative sex between men and woman without apology. Frank and Julia did not wear any stereotyping symbols that signified they were involved in the BDSM subculture, or that they engage in negative practices. *Hell-*

*raiser* suggests that kink is prevalent in many “vanilla” relationships, and implodes the validity of stereotypes as a legitimate means for processing information about others.

### **Undisclosed Desires**

People have agency to make strategic choices about when and how to conform, often for survival. Posner’s “rational choice” theory posits sexuality is regulated based on whether aggregate behaviours are harmful or not and are contingent on social, cultural, and economic factors (116). The model of sexual rational behaviour emphasizes the costs of disclosing or concealing a BDSM-identifying behaviour is a calculated and rational choice. The “freedom” to disclose sexual interest is often met with anxiety because of the negative framework circulating in horror films.

In addition to social and physical risks associated with sexual nonconformity, there are also rewards for shaping ourselves to fit the image of the dominant culture. In this sense, many involved in the BDSM lifestyle, with behaviours that are discreditable by the standards of many outsiders, choose to manage their public persona to appear like everyone else — Goffman referred to this as *passing*— to aid coping with a deviant identity (Stiles & Clark 178). Secrecy is sometimes necessary as a protective measure against a potentially hostile environment of heteronormativity. They often play the part of someone not involved in BDSM through the use of non-BDSM clothing and other markers to signify their status as “just like everyone else.” Capt. Howdy’s post-rehabilitation outfit resurfaces again as an example of masking “deviancy” with heteronormative indicators. In order to show he has reformed, he has to shed any red flags for vanilla folk who see it as hiding something suspicious and dark that already needs concealment:

clean, brunette hair and muted grey and beige clothes, similar to Mike, to allow him to blend into Western heterosexual mainstream society (Stiles & Clark 175).

However, hiding-in-plain-sight is even scarier when psychological assumption is involved. In *Strangeland*, Capt. Howdy falsifies his persona to trick others for his own sadistic gain. He lures teenagers into his torture under the false pretence of a high school party, and through a fake profile. Mike asks his teenage niece to analyze his online identity: “This is why people like him, he’s a cool guy,” she says, observing his snowboarding interests and affinity for college parties (29:00). His own dungeon is actually in his home’s basement. His house is a large, all-American home with a white picket fence, sitting on a street where little girls ride by on bicycles (6:03). In *Strangeland*, Capt. Howdy deliberately conceals a threatening part of his identity to trick others into danger. The film is fuelled by stigma and relies on the fear of BDSM practitioners and their perceived impending menace to uphold a normal/abnormal binary.

On a positive note, mutual secrecy within a marginalized group can build cohesion and fortify stonier bonds — creating an *in* and *out* crowd — that increases the importance of community (Stiles & Clark 177). As a means of compartmentalization, those in the BDSM lifestyle socialize with other like-minded people in places separate from mainstream “vanilla” folks (Stiles & Clark 180). This is a means of engaging in their specialized BDSM activities in a place where they can avoid prejudice and discrimination if their activities are observed — it is a sanctuary. Mike finds Capt. Howdy at a BDSM club aptly named “The Xibalba... the entrance to hell” (16:30). *Strangeland* takes viewers on a pseudo-trip through a loud, chaotic alternative club booming with industrial music and people in punk outfits with dyed hair and body modifications. Fire breathers, fetishists, Goths and other atypical sexual and social behaviours convene here,

dancing and touching in complete euphoria. Interactions in dungeons serve the purpose of confirming their identity and that there are others who are like-minded, providing a space to construct positive identities. Those who see themselves as marginal, different, or deviant are likely to understand the importance of associating with others who share their alternative values, beliefs, and activities: this is what makes *Strangeland* a rewarding film for audience members and those seeking visibility.

### **To BDS-End**

It is fundamentally unimportant whether one can change their sexual desires. What is important is whether or not encounters are practiced consensually, and that individuals are comfortable with their identities. As culture grows more tolerant, generally so do the experiencers. However, learning about BDSM in a stigmatizing environment, like popular culture that thrives on shock value for entertainment, is shallow and puts audiences at risk of absorbing misinformation and internalizing stigma. Importantly, it offers BDSM practitioners no reassurance or support. With help from media encouragement disrupting sexual binaries, society can get over the fallacious construction of “deviant” sexualities. This is the fight to pull sexuality out of the realm of nature and biology, and into the realm of the social and the historical.

As the horror genre targets youth as its core audience, it is critical that films portray BDSM in an educative and not propagandizing way (Mehls iii). Positive BDSM film representations can expose heterosexual oppression and bring into consciousness larger debates around sexual subcultures to make the world more comfortable with atypical sexual practices. As long as there are those who believe BDSM is a disguise for non-consensual beatings, sexual assault, rape

and violent acts, there will be a reluctance to accept BDSM's values as a pleasurable opportunity to express the complexities of human sexuality.

## Works Cited

- Arf, Isabelle. "Only In America: Revenge in Strangeland and The Devil's Rejects." *Dim the House Lights*, 26 May. 2016, <http://dimthehouselights.com/2016/05/only-in-america-revenge-in-strangeland-and-the-devils-rejects/>.
- Beckmann, Andrea. *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion: Deconstructing Sado-masochism*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Bezreh, Tanya, et al. "BDSM Disclosure and Stigma Management: Identifying Opportunities for Sex Education." *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2012, p. 37-61. *Scholars Portal*, [https://journals-scholarsportal-info.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/pdf/15546128/v07i0001/37\\_bdasmiofse.xml](https://journals-scholarsportal-info.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/pdf/15546128/v07i0001/37_bdasmiofse.xml). Accessed 24 April. 2020.
- Botting, Fred. "Dark Bodies." *Limits of Horror: Technology, Bodies, Gothic*. Manchester University Press, 2008, p. 138-180. *ProQuest*, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/lib/ryerson/reader.action?docID=1069700>. Accessed 1 Jun. 2010.
- Brock, Deborah, and Heidi Rimke. "The Culture of Therapy: Psychocentrism in Everyday Life." *Power and Everyday Practices*, edited by Deborah Brock et al., Nelson Education, 2012, p. 182-199.
- Cardin, Matt. *Horror Literature through History: An Encyclopedia of the Stories That Speak to our Deepest Fears*, Greenwood, 2017.
- Creed, Barbara. "The Film Castratrice." *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, 1993.
- Jackson, Stevi, and Sue Scott. "Conceptualizing Sexuality." *Sexualities: Identities, Behaviours, and Society*, edited by Michael Kimmel and The Stony Book Sexualities Research Group, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 9-21.
- Karp, David A., et al. "Deviance." *Sociology in Every Day Life*, Waveland Press, Inc., 3rd ed., 2004, p. 283-312.
- Katz, Jonathan Ned. "The Invention of Heterosexuality." *Sexualities: Identities, Behaviours, and Society*, edited by Michael Kimmel and The Stony Book Sexualities Research Group, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 267-268.
- Mehls, Robert. *In History No One Can Hear You Scream: Feminism and the Horror Film 1974-1996*, University of Colorado at Boulder, Ann Arbor, 2015. *ProQuest*, <http://ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/docview/1760171666?accountid=13631>. Accessed 1 June, 2020.

- Newman, Zoë. "Bodies, Genders, Sexualities: Counting Past Two." *Power and Everyday Practices*, edited by Deborah Brock, et al., Nelson Education, 2012, p. 61-85.
- Pitagora, Dulcinea A. "Pleasure, Power, Or both? Heteronormativity, Stigma, and the Intersections of BDSM and Anoreceptive Heterosexual Males." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 2019, p. 1-23. *Sage Journals*, <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/doi/10.1177/0022167819882148>. Accessed 15 April. 2020.
- Posner, Richard A. "Sex and Rationality." *Sex and Reason*, Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 111-145.
- Power, Ed. "Hellraiser: How the Horror Film was Born." *China Daily*, 2017.
- Rubin, Gale S. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* edited by C. Vane. Routledge, 1984, p. 143-171.
- Scott, Catherine. *Thinking Kink: The Collision of BDSM, Feminism and Popular Culture*, McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers, 2015. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebook-central-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/lib/ryerson/detail.action?docID=2033732>. Accessed 12 April, 2020.
- Seidman, Steven. "Critique of Compulsory Heterosexuality." *Sexualities: Identities, Behaviours, and Society*, edited by Michael Kimmel and The Stony Book Sexualities Research Group, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 240-252.
- Simula, Brandy L. "Pleasure, Power, and Pain: A Review of the Literature on the Experiences of BDSM Participants." *Sociology Compass*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2019, p. 1-24. *Wiley Online Library*, <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/doi/full/10.1111/soc4.12668>. Accessed 12 April. 2020
- Sisson, K. "The Cultural Formation of S/M: History and Analysis." *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, edited by Darren Langdrige and Meg J. Barker, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 10-34.
- Stewart, Laura. "The Cenobites: Fetish Made Flesh." *25YearsLater*, 9 Aug. 2019, [25yearslater-site.com/2019/08/07/the-cenobites-fetish-made-flesh/](https://25yearslater-site.com/2019/08/07/the-cenobites-fetish-made-flesh/).
- Stiles, Beverly L., and Robert E. Clark. "BDSM: A Subcultural Analysis of Sacrifices and Delights." *Deviant Behavior*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2011, pp. 158-189. *Scholars Portal*, [https://journals-scholarsportal-info.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/pdf/01639625/v32i0002/158\\_basaosad.xml](https://journals-scholarsportal-info.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca/pdf/01639625/v32i0002/158_basaosad.xml). Accessed 3 May. 2020.

Weiss, Margot. "Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 118, no. 3, 2011, pp. 844-846. *Wes Scholar*, <https://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1046&context=div2facpubs>. Accessed 14 April. 2020.

#### Films Cited

Barker, Clive, director. *Hellraiser*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1987.

Pipelow, John, director. *Strangeland*. Shooting Gallery, 1998.