

## **No Pain, No Gain: Strategic Repulsion and *The Human Centipede***

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Tom Six's *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)* (2009) and *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* (2011) epitomise how pervasive "gross-out" spectacle has become in contemporary popular culture. That prevalence is one reason why *The Human Centipede* has 'burrowed its way into the American cultural consciousness'.<sup>1</sup> However, Six's films have been divorced from other "mainstream" renditions of bodily excess, such as reality TV series *I'm a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here's* (2002-present) insect-eating challenges and the explosive "food poisoning" sequence that interrupts *Bridesmaids'* (2011) otherwise innocuous romantic comedy, for example. *The Human Centipede's* premise is as devastatingly simple as it is effective: people are abducted and stitched together mouth-to-anus. Due to the emphasis placed on imprisonment and suffering, Six's films have been dubbed 'torture porn'.<sup>2</sup> The label has facilitated press critics' vilification of the *Human Centipede* films, connoting that the series is constituted by exploitative, gratuitous portrayals of destructive sexual perversion. That assessment was concretized when several countries – including the UK and Australia – officially banned the sequel in its uncut form.

The will to suppress these movies via pejorative critical reviews or censorial prohibition amounts to unwillingness to engage with their themes. This article argues that the relationships between corporeal disgust, contemporary horror films, and critical/censorial rejection require dissection. Six's films provide a case study that demonstrates how controversy can be strategically generated to create meanings that are overlooked by those who disavow such content. In order to expound that strategy, I will first outline how and why the series has been represented as controversial and harmful. I will then discuss aspects of the *Human Centipede* films that are typically disregarded in such discourses. Specifically, I focus on the ways in which the series brings conventional horror motifs, themes and inter-textual references into a continuum with contemporary cultural anxieties surrounding the body. Six's persona is largely ignored in pejorative reactions to his work, but it too shapes his films' conceptual meanings and cultural significance, presenting a context against which to interpret his representations of corporeality. Finally, I argue the *Human Centipede* series' significance is contingent on its detractors' inability to vilify the films without adding to their notoriety.

### **Disdain: Controversy and Other Negative Ass[er]ptions**

*The Human Centipede II* was officially branded as offensive when the BBFC rejected it for classification. The critical press have predominantly supported the BBFC's assessment, proposing that the series only and flagrantly aims to disgust audiences. Carey contends that *The Human Centipede's* 'plot is threadbare',<sup>3</sup> for instance, while Webster claims that *The Human Centipede II* 'is merely a lurid, splattery wallow in grime, gore and excrement' (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> Other critics such as Collin argue that 'what little [merit the sequel offers] is drowned out by its blaring vileness...lost in the spurting gore and effluent'. The result, in Collin's view, is 'a smirking and fairly pointless ordeal of a film'.<sup>5</sup>

These strains of "obviousness" and "pointlessness" culminate in the contention that Six's films are ill-conceived or badly made. One critic refers to *The Human Centipede* as 'amateurish',<sup>6</sup> for example. Another associated line of argument is to dismiss the potential pleasures derived from such films.

For instance, Film Ireland's Gordon Gaffney refers to *The Human Centipede II* as characteristic of films that 'are generally aimed at teenagers' and which are 'just there to shock'.<sup>7</sup> Such objections imply that the films and their audiences are immature, connoting that both filmmaker and target demographic are culturally ignorant or undiscerning.

These reactions fail to account for why bodily functions and sexual violence are themselves upsetting. Instead, it is presumed that the need for prohibition is "obvious". The BBFC's contention that *The Human Centipede II* might be 'obscene' is equally incomplete,<sup>8</sup> since the Obscene Publications Act itself fails to define precisely why some images are inherently objectionable. Similarly, the Australian Classification Review Board's descriptions of *The Human Centipede II*'s 'depictions of violence' as 'gratuitous' and 'offensive' do not specify exactly how those values are attributed. The desire to suppress images rather than engage with their significations indicates an unwillingness to consider affront itself in any depth. Rejecting *The Human Centipede II* negates the need to probe why its subject matter is upsetting, since the *film* is deemed to epitomise concepts such as disgust or obscenity. Two implications follow. First, specific films come to *constitute* offensiveness. Second, those concepts have no concrete meaning and remain mutable in such discourse.

In order to justify *The Human Centipede II*'s suppression, the film has been characterised as "harmful". For instance, Tookey has sought to demonstrate that *The Human Centipede II* is socially damaging. In his attempts to avoid making direct "media effects" statements, Tookey relies on spurious coincidental juxtapositions to establish "harm". His observation that '[o]n the same day as Mr Tabak was found guilty of Jo Yeates's murder, I was exposed to the latest work by another Dutchman[: *The Human Centipede II*]' implies causal connection, as do the linked questions that close Tookey's article:

Do films like this help to brutalise some of those who see them? Of course...  
Do we all have to live with the social and criminal consequences of these films? Yes.  
And will there be more innocent victims like Joanna Yeates?  
It seems to me that the answer is dismayingly obvious.<sup>9</sup>

More 'dismayingly obvious' than the implied linkages made between 'these films' and 'criminal consequences' is the fact that Yeates' murder cannot be directly connected to *The Human Centipede II*, because *The Human Centipede II* was released after Yeates' death.

Despite these weaknesses, the idea that *The Human Centipede II* could somehow cause harm is inherent to its banning, and therefore its reputation. The BBFC expressed concern that *The Human Centipede II* 'poses a real, as opposed to a fanciful, risk' to its viewers.<sup>10</sup> Detriment is assumed rather than evidenced. This simplistic equation fails to account for the complex relations between text and audience, or the filmmaker's ability to comment on such assumptions. Such an account is provided in *The Human Centipede II*. The film's antagonist (Martin) is obsessed with the first *Human Centipede* film, copying its modus operandi. Ironically, Six reports that this plot was inspired by the death threats he received from outraged *The Human Centipede* viewers.<sup>11</sup> Contrary to the prevailing discourse, these censoriously minded viewers were stirred to respond aggressively not because they enjoyed *The Human Centipede*'s imagery, but because they felt its content should have been suppressed. *The Human Centipede II* is thus founded on the idea that the will to censor is a more pertinent source of harm than fictional fantasy contained in violent movies.

Another way of formulating "harm" is to frame *The Human Centipede* as doing damage to *culture* rather than to people. Such arguments present the series as illustrative of declining standards, both

in the horror genre, and in cinema more broadly. Thus, Bodey interprets *The Human Centipede II* as indicating that 'the [horror] genre continues to...stoop to lower extremes', moving towards '[t]he pure visceral appeal of...repulsion'.<sup>12</sup> Haynes too situates *The Human Centipede* as a benchmark of generic decline: '[i]t's surely time horror became horrifying again, and not just gross'.<sup>13</sup>

Changes between the original film and its sequel are commonly utilised to evince such degeneration. Although some critics refer to *The Human Centipede* as '[d]isgustingly scatological' in premise,<sup>14</sup> most critics observe that *The Human Centipede* is 'actually less explicit than many [contemporary horror films] in its violence'.<sup>15</sup> Aside from imprisoned protagonist Katsuro's suicide, the film's most bloody violence is justified by narrative context, being aimed at the antagonist, Dr Heiter. The protagonists' torture remains relatively gore-free. In comparison, the sequel contains a greater quantity of graphic violence, which is mainly aimed at abducted protagonists. As Dwyer summates, '[t]here was...intense human anguish [in *The Human Centipede*]...[b]ut there wasn't so much of the blood, faeces and staple gun tomfoolery' that is displayed in the sequel.<sup>16</sup> Dwyer's comment is characteristic of the prevailing response to that escalation: that the series is an exercise in exponentially increasing excess. Yet violence is clearly calculated rather than uncontrolled, escalating not just between the two films, but within *The Human Centipede II* itself. For example, the antagonist (Martin) hits his abductees over the head with a crowbar throughout the film, but the first blows occur off-screen. In the next incident, the crowbar's impact is displayed. When Martin kills his mother later in the film, he staves in her face with the crowbar, and the result is rendered explicitly.

The reactionary desire to dismiss *The Human Centipede II* as 'a cruel cartoon of [a horror director's] infantile excesses'<sup>17</sup> overlooks how carefully the series has been constructed. Disparaging the films by characterising them as harmful leaves numerous questions unanswered. As the remainder of this article will argue, Six exploits such gaps in various ways. Consequently, critical condemnation contributes to the authoring process.

### **Chain: Genre and Lineage**

Critics have sought to censure the *Human Centipede* films on the grounds that they are designed only to induce immediate, short-term, physical responses (such as nausea). Several linked ideas follow, which substantiate the case for dismissing the series. The *Human Centipede* films are implied to be: (a) insubstantial; (b) of fleeting appeal; and (c) only of the moment (a nadir in cinematic history). One implication is that previous – presumably more stringently censorious – periods of cinema were entirely different to ("better than") the present.

Yet, such dissociation fails to account for the explicit connections Six forges between his films and its generic antecedents. Those linkages debunk the notion that films such as *The Human Centipede* have apparently 'sprung up' from nowhere.<sup>18</sup> Vera is among the critics that have noted that *The Human Centipede* combines horror motifs such as *Hansel and Gretel's* dark German woodland, Takashi Miike's dark humour, and David Cronenberg's graphic body horror, with the scientific experimentation of H. G. Wells's *Dr Moreau*, for example.<sup>19</sup> Although Vera's comparisons pertinently highlight how steeped in genre history *The Human Centipede* is, his account is not exhaustive. For example, Heiter's three-dog creation is reminiscent of the mythological three-headed canine guardian of the Underworld, Cerberus.

*The Human Centipede II* is equally replete with references to more recent horror touchstones. Coupling an industrial-warehouse setting with a soundscape haunted by disembodied baby cries is redolent of Lynch's *Eraserhead*. The sequence in which Martin's mother tries to stab him carries overtones of *Psycho*'s brutal mother-son pairing, not least since her pre-attack advance echoes the framing that leads to Hitchcock's infamous shower sequence. When Martin claws at a car window as pregnant captive Rachel tries to escape, the shot mirrors Barbara seeking to evade Bill Hinzman's zombie-attack in the opening of *Night of the Living Dead*. Those touchstones are intertwined with *The Human Centipede II*'s form, being inseparable from Six's aesthetic choices. For example, the classic horror films referred to – like *The Human Centipede II* itself – were intentionally shot in monochrome. Adopting a different aesthetic approach formally differentiates the sequel from the original *Human Centipede*, befitting the second film's revised attitude towards visceral display. Monochrome allowed Six to balance his manifesto – that 'the audience wanted to have more [blood and faeces, so] I really shoved it in' – with the knowledge that 'if I did it in color, all the attention would go to the gore'.<sup>20</sup> Simultaneously, shooting in monochrome may have been a strategy to minimise censorial interference. In this sense, dialogic references to Quentin Tarantino throughout *The Human Centipede II* resonate with Tarantino's decision to greyscale *Kill Bill*'s "Crazy 88" sequence to evade the MPAA's NC-17 classification.

Cumulatively, these reference points position *The Human Centipede II* within a continuum of well-regarded violent films. Its banning equally positions the film alongside other infamous rejected horror movies, ranging from re-appropriated "classics" *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) to recent "extreme" horror films such as *Murder-Set-Pieces* (2004), *Grotesque* (2009), and *The Bunny Game* (2010). Insofar as *The Human Centipede II* creates a level of meta-awareness – the sequel featuring the original film as a fictional work within its diegesis – the series also bridges the temporal gap between 1970s and new millennium popular horror by encompassing the mid-1990s trend for self-reflexive irony, led by *Scream* (1996).

Given its amalgam of genre tropes, it is little wonder that critics have expressed some confusion over where the *Human Centipede* films fit into the horror genre. For example, Billson refers to *The Human Centipede* as 'a genuine curio', being '[t]oo revolting for the mainstream [and] too peculiar to be dismissed as torture porn'.<sup>21</sup> Bodey similarly dismisses *The Human Centipede* as a 'base fringe' film,<sup>22</sup> although IFC's president Jonathan Sehring makes a case for its relative commerciality, estimating that it is among IFC's '10 most profitable films'.<sup>23</sup>

This dualistic "central yet peripheral" status is integral to the series' power. The series both belongs to and is distant enough from mainstream horror to comment upon horror's relationship with the cultural moment more broadly. For instance, although numerous critics have referred to *The Human Centipede* as 'torture porn' in an attempt to belittle the film, the script itself suggests that Six anticipated such categorisation. 'Torture porn' implies that the porn and horror genres are related,<sup>24</sup> and the *Human Centipede* movies certainly probe that relationship, as well as cultural attitudes towards sexual violence more broadly. Much of *The Human Centipede*'s dark comedy arises from the disparity between its non-graphic torture sequences, and its sexual connotations. Heiter literally refers to Katsuro's placement at the front of the centipede when he pats Katsuro's arm and mumbles 'my lead, my lead', for example, yet the fact that Heiter pats Katsuro on his Playboy bunny tattoo connotes that *pornography* is Heiter's inspiration (that which "leads" Heiter). That sexual undertone is concretised by Heiter's demeanour and dialogue during the torture sequences. His exaggerated expressions while injecting Lindsay – who kneels between Heiter's legs, with her head at his crotch level – implies that he attains orgasmic satisfaction from the deed. His cries of 'swallow it, bitch!' during the defecation sequence resounds with the misogynistic language of extreme porn, again evoking connotations of fellatio and orgasm in the context of non-sexual torture. These

implications are echoed in the sequel when a protagonist (Ms. Yennie) has tubing forced down her throat, and cream of chicken soup poured into her gullet. The sequence presents a horrific parallel to the commonplace practice of cock-gagging (forcible fellatio that triggers the recipient's gag reflex) in extreme porn, not least since the liquid involved is reminiscent of semen. Furthermore, the series' central premise evokes the extreme porn practice A2M (ass-to-mouth): switching directly between anal penetration and fellatio to degrade the recipient.

Again, the differences between *The Human Centipede* and its sequel draw out these implications. *The Human Centipede II's* sex-violence combinations are much more overt than its predecessor's. Martin is sexually motivated: he masturbates after watching *The Human Centipede*, and rapes Kim, the centipede's "tail". Rather than displaying 'a clear association between pain, perversity and sexual pleasure' as the BBFC suggested,<sup>25</sup> the rape is unavoidably horrific in the uncut version of the film. Martin wraps his penis in barbed wire before the rape, highlighting the violence done to Kim rather than Martin's sexual pleasure. The masturbation sequence equally associates sexual activity with pain rather than pleasure since Martin wraps his member in sandpaper. In the BBFC classified, cut version of *The Human Centipede II*, the barbed wire sequence is removed entirely, and the sandpaper is only hinted at. These excisions tone down the violence, but consequently place greater emphasis on Martin's sexual pleasure. Censorship thus exacerbates the very tonal problems those excisions were designed to quell.

The film's hyperbolic sex-violence combinations have a purpose other than to shock. The *Human Centipede* series employs the conventionalised lexes of both horror and porn to question the supposed relationships between those genres. Yet the films are not simply concerned with the crossover points that allow representations categorised as "horror", "pornography", "extreme porn", "torture porn" or "obscene" to be treated interchangeably by those who wish to suppress such materials. Those censorious discourses are underpinned by anxieties regarding the body's socio-cultural status. Six's sex-violence combinations draw on those very apprehensions his detractors seek to negate by suppressing his films.

### **Vein/Vain: Bodies and Sickness**

Accordingly, the *Human Centipede* films are interested in the body's cultural significance more broadly, and the series' genre heritage impacts on those meanings. For instance, *The Human Centipede's* Dr Heiter is a contemporary version of the 'mad scientist', which has been a stock character in horror-fiction since Shelly's *Frankenstein*. In gothic horror-fiction, the mad scientist represented an attack on enlightenment rationality. Dr Frankenstein's quest to conquer mortality is a prototypical case, warning against the notion that science's progress can enable humans to conquer nature. The mad scientist's legacy is his or her consumption by a singular passion: to overcome the human condition.

The same themes are raised in *The Human Centipede* when abductee Katsuro asks Heiter '[a]re you God?' His question encapsulates both the mad scientist's underlying flaw – equating artificial creation to omnipotence – and how irrational such self-conception is. Katsuro's question is uttered in a language (Japanese) that his captor does not understand, implying that Heiter also fails to grasp what his actions mean. Lindsay's contrasting proclamation – that Heiter is a 'sick man' – highlights Heiter's madness. The comment also underscores the irony that as a 'top-class surgeon' Heiter is supposed to heal others. Instead, he is 'sick'.

While Heiter is a conventional mad scientist, *The Human Centipede II* plays with the archetype. Although Martin dresses in a lab coat in the film's climax, his costume is clearly marked as a façade. His uniform remains unbuttoned, revealing that Martin only wears his underwear underneath. His adoption of the 'doctor' role is as inappropriate as his attire. Martin's inaptness as a surgeon is also overtly flagged via his brutal methods – using a crowbar as anaesthetic, for example – and his inability to follow basic medical instructions; he injects the captives with laxative marked 'for oral consumption only'. Martin's rendition is all madness, and no science. That disparity is flagged in *The Human Centipede II*'s tagline, which proclaims (in a reversal of *The Human Centipede*'s tagline) that the sequel is '100% medically inaccurate'.

Although Martin is no surgeon, like Heiter Martin is also "unwell". Not only is Martin portrayed as 'somebody with a mental health problem',<sup>26</sup> but his persistent asthma attacks also evince his physical "sickness". The 'out of order' sign hanging above Martin's head in his office is a less tactful indicator that Martin is unstable. Since he is entirely untrained and butchers his captives, Martin's graphic replication of Heiter's experiments exposes Heiter's madness *as* madness.

The contemporary context also impacts on the archetype's meanings. Inasmuch as Heiter's surgery is motivated by aesthetics rather than curative need, *The Human Centipede* is among many recent horror films such as *Kirei: Terror of Beauty* (2004), *Time* (2006), *The Skin I Live In* (2011), and *American Mary* (2012), which feature mad *cosmetic* surgeons. Depicting surgery as violence done to unwilling participants, these films critically comment on cosmetic surgery's seemingly limitless propensity to transform the body. The centipede experiment is the pinnacle of such horrific mutation. In Six's movies, bodily modification transforms humans into another species (a bastardised anthropoid form).

In *The Human Centipede*, the parallel to cosmetic surgery is anchored by Heiter's response once the surgery is complete: he photographs the abductees and shows them their new form in a mirror. Although they cry in terror and pain, he weeps with joy and kisses his own reflection, suggesting that he finds his creation beautiful, and underscoring his narcissism. Heiter's experiment is explicitly associated with his captives' outward appearance and his vanity. Yet, this form of body-modification surgery destroys those operated on. *The Human Centipede*'s closing scene depicts Lindsay stitched between Katsuro and Jenny's corpses, doomed to die. The film's penultimate shot reveals that Lindsay will be tormented in her final moments by a full-length mirror that displays her horrific reflection.

The series contextualises body-modification surgery as coercive suffering, implying that the desire for cosmetic enhancement is a violent, damaging apparatus. Moreover, radical bodily transformation is purposeless in the narrative context, being ultimately associated with Heiter's misanthropy ('I don't like human beings'). Thus, the surgery motif casts the mirror back on a society popularly conceived as being "obsessed" with outward perfection. Such a critique proposes that it is not only gothic mad scientists who are misguided architects destined to be destroyed by their monstrous creations.

In sum, the *Human Centipede* series combines a string of past and present horror motifs with contemporary concerns about the body, violence and sex. These various themes and touchstones are stitched seamlessly together into one horrific centipede-like entity. The same kind of surgical imbrication infects the series' form. The two films are most blatantly marked as separate entities by the sequel's monochrome aesthetic. However, the two are also inseparable, not only because *The Human Centipede* is featured within *The Human Centipede II*'s diegesis, but also because the second

film begins where the first one ends. Like the human centipedes contained in each film, the movies are stitched together “ass-to-mouth”.

### **Strain: Tensions and Constructions**

The series’ clashing elements enhance how disquieting the films are as a pairing. Six revels in rather than shying from that discomfort, constructing the sequel as a commentary on the series’ established cultural status. That commentary simultaneously refers to what the films are and what the series is *perceived* to be. For instance, the idea that these films are “extreme” is part of *The Human Centipede*’s *raison d’être*. As Itzkoff observes, Six ‘capitalize[s] on anything that burnishes [the series’] reputation for over-the-top grotesquery’, responding with ‘glee’ to the ban, since it ‘would enhance [the film’s] outrageous standing’.<sup>27</sup>

That reputation feeds back onto Six, who has overtly branded himself as a “controversial” figure. In parallel to descriptions of *The Human Centipede* as ‘totally deranged’, Six dubs himself ‘crazy’.<sup>28</sup> Given the generic conventions *The Human Centipede* draws upon, such statements are more meaningful than they might first appear to be. Heiter and Martin are conduits for Six’s reputation, since all three are “mad scientists”: designers whose obsessions are decried by those around them.

Like their monstrous hybrid-creations, these three seemingly diverse characters are linked into a continuum. Heiter, Martin and Six are melded in ways that break down the binaries – doctor/patient, creation/creator, victim/victimiser, fictional/real – that apparently distinguish them from each other. *The Human Centipede II*’s form analogises this relationship: monochrome appears to be dichotomous (“black and white”), but is more accurately a palette of relative, intertwined grey tones. Although Martin’s short, rotund body and goggle-eyes render him closer to the classic deformed assistant Igor than they do Dr Frankenstein, Martin is Heiter’s counterpart. Additionally, both Martin and Heiter are monsters as well as creators. The lines between mad scientist, assistant and creation are blurry at best. As the creator of *The Human Centipede*, Six has also been characterised as “monstrous” or “sick”. Indeed, the parity between “Six” and “sicks” may be fabricated rather than incidental, since the “Tom Six” persona is also a construction.

For instance, Six’s website [paintfartsbytomsix.com](http://paintfartsbytomsix.com) features artworks that are as crudely painted as they are themed. Six’s gallery includes the unsubtly titled pieces “Foreskin Handbag”, “Dog Sperm on Ass”, “Miscarriage”, and “Earwax Sandwich”.<sup>29</sup> These paintings – apparently priced at \$10,000 each<sup>30</sup> – are as outlandish as they are superficial. Yet, the paintings are so clumsy in their attempt to offend, they are hard to take seriously. Indeed, the price-tags are more shocking than the content. The paintings could be construed as the product of an attention seeking, infantile filmmaker. However, there is little to suggest that Six is earnest. Rather than revealing anything about Six himself, the paintings more pertinently capture the vacuity of Six’s persona, mocking the very idea that representations of bodily functions can be commercially lucrative.

Six’s self-depreciative persona may be a defensive strategy, anticipating and countering his detractor’s attacks. Any criticism aimed at Six feeds his self-devalued persona. Disparagement also increases his bankability as a “controversial” filmmaker, as the outrageous asking price for his artworks highlights. Thus, Six’s persona lays bare the processes by which: (a) controversy sells; (b) profitability is supported by the very systems that seek to suppress controversial material; (c) the body is reiterated as a site of controversy in critical discourses; and (d) controversy replaces nuanced

responses both to films such as *The Human Centipede*, and to broader understandings of their ability to comment on concepts such as “controversy” itself.

Six’s persona-games are not just self-reflexive, then: they also point outwards towards expected critical responses. Indeed, Six’s persona is reliant on his detractors’ replication of established critical paradigms to attain meaning. National research officer for the Christian organisation FamilyVoice Australia Roslyn Phillips’ response to *The Human Centipede II* epitomises the “ideal” reaction to Six’s ploy. Phillips’ fears regarding the representation of ‘dark obsessions, which are linked with acting out sexual violence in real life’,<sup>31</sup> reproduces the same media effects rhetoric Mary Whitehouse employed to vilify the “video nasties”. Phillips’ statement ‘[w]e don’t have to view films ourselves to decide’ whether they should be banned uncannily echoes Whitehouse’s assertion that ‘I have never seen a video nasty...I actually don’t need to see visually what I know is in that film’.<sup>32</sup> Tookey’s attempt to vilify *The Human Centipede II* is similarly replicative. His dismissal of anti-censorship arguments as epitomising ‘unthinking liberalism’<sup>33</sup> is reminiscent of MP Jerry Hayes rejection of ‘cosy intellectual argument’ against censorship in the video nasty era.<sup>34</sup>

Such argumentation presumes that films like *The Human Centipede* negatively impact on their viewership, celebrating rather than questioning their antagonists’ motives. Although *The Human Centipede II* superficially agrees with such response by depicting Martin as a copycat killer, its theme also implies that critics’ cyclic duplication of established critical models is a form of “copycatting”, one that is as dangerous as Martin’s imitation of Heiter. While the sequel demonstrates that Six is abundantly aware of what his products are and mean culturally, his most vehement critics seem less self-aware about the ways in which their creations (reviews) contribute to the *Human Centipede*’s cultural meaning.

Other critics acknowledge how tenuous their position is relative to Six’s. Bradshaw is particularly wary that disparaging the series means propagating its notoriety. Bradshaw’s flawed solution is to negate the suppressive urge entirely. He states that ultimately ‘no one cares that much...[c]ensorship is not taken seriously’, even by ‘conservative papers’.<sup>35</sup> Although some critics similarly deny that *The Human Centipede* films are genuinely shocking,<sup>36</sup> Phillips’s and Tookey’s responses demonstrate how unconvincing Bradshaw’s proposal is. Neil Foley of Monster Pictures (*The Human Centipede II*’s Australian distributor) has also expressed alarm over ‘the increasing influence of the Christian right’ in film classification,<sup>37</sup> underscoring that censorship is still very much ‘taken seriously’.

If Six’s films were as puerile and transient as his detractors have suggested, they would be easily dismissed. However, they not only refuse to be tamed, but also are bolstered by the mechanisms designed to suppress them. Bradshaw is correct in observing that censorship is ineffective insofar as forbidden texts remain available and are rendered more appealing because they are prohibited.<sup>38</sup> Yet Bradshaw fails to acknowledge that obscenity and offense – the values underpinning suppression – are imprecise, subjective criteria. For censorship to be effective, its advocates must find ways to articulate their position without principally replicating insubstantial discursive paradigms. The *Human Centipede* series’ infamy flags precisely that inadequacy.

### **Stain: 'I Want to Believe That I'm Still a Human Being'<sup>39</sup>**

*The Human Centipede II* is hyperbolic, yet any shock it inspires is contingent on how unacceptable it is to publically discuss or represent numerous bodily functions and desires, particularly those associated with sex, violence and wastes. If the sequel is 'obscene' as BBFC have suggested, it is so only inasmuch as our *bodies themselves* are obscene. Six's sequel discloses that bodies contain blood and produce faeces, facts with which we are already acquainted. More precisely, these films reveal how obsessively disgusted we are by our own bodies, and by those – such as Heiter, Martin, and Six – who expose those truths. To suppress these films via censorship or critical remonstrance is to deny that humans are fundamentally animalistic. The human-centipede amalgam underlines that parity. The original film systematically renders any division between human and animal irrelevant. Heiter makes no distinction between the three-human centipede and his '3-hund': Heiter feeds Katsuro from a dog bowl, tries to train the captives to fetch a newspaper, and keeps them locked in a cage. Six's proclamation that his 'life's motto' is 'try to live as a dog...the other things are quite exaggerated'<sup>40</sup> suggests that the film's human-dog comparison strips away the façade of civility that distinguishes between human and animal behaviours. The framed picture of his canine-centipede Heiter keeps on his bedside table is telling in this sense. The photograph displays what appears to be a regimented version of a normal canine behaviour: smelling another dog's posterior. By coercing humans into engaging in the same behaviour, the film foregrounds how disgusting faeces is to most humans, contextualising that discomfort as a difference between human and animal. That is, "reducing" captives to an animal level underscores the constructedness of such distinctions, which are reified as a human-animal hybrid: the "human centipede".

*The Human Centipede II* also de-normalises markers of civility, rendering them at odds with the horrors that ensue. For example, the air-freshener hanging in Martin's van is innocuous enough on its own, but its everyday function is made strange by its inaptness in this context. Martin traps and transports his injured captives in the van. The air-freshener becomes comic because it is unlikely to mask the stench of blood and bodily matter emanating from the van's rear. The air-freshener's banal ineffectiveness contrasts with the exaggerated horror it is meant to mask. The air-freshener symbolises civility qua the denial of unpleasant bodily realities, and its failure underscores how superficial civility is as an artificially imposed construct.

These films propose that messy corporeal truths cannot finally be suppressed by air-fresheners, conceptual constructs such as civility, or censorship. Choosing to ignore or obscure what is already present amounts to failing to deal with the source of discomfort. In *The Human Centipede*, that process is epitomised by Lindsay and Jenny rolling up their windows, locking their car doors, and refusing to look at the 'Dirty Man' (as he is credited) who barks obscene suggestions at them. Lindsay and Jenny passively wait for the man to drive away, and Lindsay's 'ewww' encapsulates how redundant expressions of distaste are to the person causing disturbance. The same dynamic is echoed in Heiter's joy while the captives sob, and also in the series' relative commercial success despite its detractors' negative reactions.

Six's reference to censorship as 'something from a dinosaur era'<sup>41</sup> carries multiple connotations, then. Six views censorship as unnecessary or misaligned with contemporary values. He also envisages the urge to censor as "age old": an instinctual, reactive response. Accordingly, the push-pull waged between creators and suppressors is equally 'something from a dinosaur era', a repeated cycle. As a response, *The Human Centipede II* baits censors and uses critical disdain to gain notoriety, thereby defying suppression.

This ploy does not just entail producing representations that contravene censorial edicts. The point is not simply to illustrate that which is deemed unacceptable, but to take stock of unacceptability itself by de-naturalising the constructedness of normative attitudes towards bodily wastes, and also the discursive systems that propagate those normative attitudes. *The Human Centipede II* manifests that discursive deconstruction firstly by opening (deconstructing) bodies in various ways onscreen, and secondly by re-contextualising *The Human Centipede* as Martin's impetus (deconstructing *The Human Centipede's* status as a film). Martin's bastardisation of Heiter's experiment is a pantomime performance of a fiction, which is acknowledged as being a fiction within the sequel's diegesis. As Martin's captive Greg declares, '*The Human Centipede's* a fucking film'. Martin's replication of Heiter's project is as mundane as the cycle of defecation and flushing, and as inevitable as its parallel: the creation of provocative material and the attempts to censor that inexorably follow.

Just as no explanation is offered by Heiter or Martin for their desire to create such a hideous beast, Six's films defy attempts to "fix" their meaning via discourses of repulsion. Such an attempt is doomed to fail because critical vilification *constitutes* the series' meaning. Six's attempts to provoke his detractors are akin to Martin injecting his captives with laxatives, then. It is only appropriate if the results leave us feeling overwhelmed, if a little nauseated.

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- <sup>1</sup> Itzkoff, D. (2011) "Your Worst Nightmare? Not Anymore", *The New York Times*, October 2.
- <sup>2</sup> For example, see Brooke, M. (2010) "The Human Centipede (First Sequence)", *Sight & Sound*, 20 (10), 58; Clark, N. (2012) "Black Swan Sex Scenes Ruffled Feathers, Says Watchdog", *The Independent*, July 12; Landesman, C. (2012) "Horror Has the Upper Hand", *The Sunday Times*, April 15.
- <sup>3</sup> Carey, A. (2011) "Political Parable or Perversion?" *The Age*, July 2.
- <sup>4</sup> Webster, A. (2011) "The Listings", *The New York Times*, October 21.
- <sup>5</sup> Collin, R. (2011) "Back to the Backwoods", *The Daily Telegraph* November 4.
- <sup>6</sup> N.a. (2010) "A Creepy-Crawly to Run Away From", *Daily Mail*, August 20.
- <sup>7</sup> In Shortall, E. (2011) "'Torture Porn' Horror Film Sequel Seeks Irish Release", *The Sunday Times*, October 16.
- <sup>8</sup> BBFC (2011) "BBFC Rejects the Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)", <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/newsreleases/2011/06/bbfc-rejects-the-human-centipede-ii-full-sequence/>. Accessed 12/11/2011.
- <sup>9</sup> Tookey, C. (2011) "It's Not Just the Internet That's Full of Violent Porn - So Are the Cinemas", *Daily Mail*, November 1.
- <sup>10</sup> BBFC (2011).
- <sup>11</sup> In Zimmerman, S. (2011) "Tom Six and Laurence Harvey on 'Human Centipede 2', Part One", *Fangoria* [http://fangoria.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=5794:exclusive-interview-tom-six-and-laurence-harvey-on-qthe-human-centipede-2q-part-one&catid=36:demo-articles&itemid=56](http://fangoria.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5794:exclusive-interview-tom-six-and-laurence-harvey-on-qthe-human-centipede-2q-part-one&catid=36:demo-articles&itemid=56). Accessed 06/01/2012.
- <sup>12</sup> Bodey, M. (2011) "Fresh Take on Horror Genre", *The Australian*, April 13.
- <sup>13</sup> Haynes, N. (2011) "It's Not a Horror Film If It Isn't Actually Scary", *The Independent*, June 8.
- <sup>14</sup> N.a. (2010).
- <sup>15</sup> Bradshaw (2011).
- <sup>16</sup> Dwyer, M. (2011) "Savage Draws a Long Bow between Horror and Romance", *The Age*, December 20.
- <sup>17</sup> Newman, K. (2012) "The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)", *Sight & Sound*, 22 (1), 66.
- <sup>18</sup> Tookey (2011).
- <sup>19</sup> Vera, N. (2011) "Toilet Humour", *BusinessWorld*, February 25.
- <sup>20</sup> In Zimmerman (2011)
- <sup>21</sup> Billson, A. (2011) "Film Choice", *The Sunday Telegraph*, March 20.
- <sup>22</sup> Bodey (2011)

<sup>23</sup> In Itzkoff (2011).

<sup>24</sup> On this, see Jones, S. (2013) *Torture Porn: Popular Horror Film after Saw*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

<sup>25</sup> BBFC (2011).

<sup>26</sup> Harvey in Zimmerman (2011).

<sup>27</sup> Itzkoff (2011).

<sup>28</sup> Itzkoff (2011).

<sup>29</sup> Six, T. (2011) "Gallery: Paintfarts By Tom Six" <http://www.paintfartsbytomsix.com/gallery-1>. Accessed 19/11/2011.

<sup>30</sup> Dickson, E (2011) "'Human Centipede' Director Tom Six Wants To Sell You His Stupid Paintings! For \$10,000!!!" <http://www.bloody-disgusting.com/news/27314>. Accessed 22/11/2011.

<sup>31</sup> Phillips, R. (2011) "Some Films Should Not Be Seen", *The Courier Mail (Australia)*, December 6.

<sup>32</sup> Whitehouse on *TV-AM*, included in the documentary *Video Nasties: The Definitive Guide* (2010).

<sup>33</sup> Tookey (2011).

<sup>34</sup> Hayes on *You, The Jury*, cited in Barker, M. (1984) "Nasty politics or video nasties?", In: Barker, M. (ed), *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media*. London: Pluto, 1984. 7 – 38.

<sup>35</sup> Bradshaw, P. (2011) "Don't Ban This Filth", *The Guardian*, June 9.

<sup>36</sup> See Brooke (2010) and Newman (2012).

<sup>37</sup> In Sobolewski, H. (2011) "Depraved Horror Movie Banned", *The Advertiser*, December 2.

<sup>38</sup> Bradshaw (2011).

<sup>39</sup> Katsuro in *The Human Centipede*.

<sup>40</sup> Six, (2011) "Director Interview" featurette, R2 Bounty Films DVD release of *The Human Centipede II*.

<sup>41</sup> In Itzkoff (2011).