

Grotesque Realism and the Carnavalesque in Tom Six's
The Human Centipede (First Sequence) and The Human Centipede II
(Full Sequence)

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“Feed her! Feed her!” screams Dr. Heiter, mad surgeon and villain of Tom Six’s 2009 film *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)*. Three captured and tortured subjects have been conjoined anus-to-mouth to share a single gastrointestinal tract, creating Dr. Heiter’s magnum opus of surgical ability: his fantastical ‘Human Centipede’. The ‘mouth’ and leading vassal of Dr. Heiter’s ‘Human Centipede’ swears in Japanese while his natural bodily functions defy him for the first time since becoming conjoined in this twisted and abject carnival tale, and he involuntarily defecates into the mouth of the subject behind him. This is the scene for which many audience members wait in expectation: the pooping, the suffocation, the gagging; this becomes a source of imminent gratification in *The Human Centipede* franchise. The gruesome act of defecating into a subject’s mouth is hardly Tom Six’s creation, however. This paper will explore similar intimations in François Rabelais’ novel series *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1564), as discussed by philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin in his book *Rabelais and his World* (1965), to highlight the ways in which crude, scatological horror and humour have been censored and celebrated for centuries. In her foreword to the 1984 version of Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*, Krystyna Pomorska writes: “Bakhtin claims that life itself (traditionally considered ‘content’) is organized by human acts of behaviour and cognition [...] and is therefore already charged with a system of values at the moment it enters into an artistic structure” (1984: viii). At the core, Bakhtin claims that the human condition, and thus the *art created by* humanity, is considerably solidified by common behavioural patterns and

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cognitive archetypes. The idea that observation is linked both to the creator(s) of the film and to its audience figure into the ways that Danish film director Tom Six's *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)* (2009; see Figure 1 below) and its sequel, *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* (2012), can be conceived as a cinematic practice of Bakhtin's semiotic study of cognition, behaviour, and mischief, as well as his theories on the tradition of carnival culture, and the carnivalesque embrace of the grotesque.



Figure 1: *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)*

The Human Centipede films (*THC* and *THC II* from here, onward) operate within a satirical narrative that showcases elements of grotesque realism and are meant to be enjoyed in their evocation of carnivalesque excess. Nevertheless, among the visual and auditory—and perhaps phenomenologically olfactory, or gustatory—senses, Tom Six's first two *Human Centipede* films—although more so regarding *THC II*—develop characters whose actions, situations, and reactions create affect. *THC* and *THC II* have been actively censored by film censorship boards across the world because of their “violent and pornographic” visual representations, yet Six's portrayal of his characters—an emotionally and intellectually disabled man, a pedophilic psychiatrist, an abusive mother, and a megalomaniacal, obsessed, mad-scientist surgeon—is equally disregarded as petty and insensitive (BBFC, 2011). *THC* and *THC II* highlight the notion that graphic

entertainment intended to be *amoral*—that is, to hold our culture up to its often misguided, constrictive values by means of satire—is still heavily censored as *immoral* by reactionary tastemakers in popular culture, part of a history of moral superiority (and panic) that seems destined forever to repeat itself. This essay thus explores how ‘abhorrent’ entertainment can be fulfilling, comedic, participatory, and critical of paradoxical morals and mores—and why, after centuries, this form of participation in the overturning of the so-called respectable continues to be alluring. For all their ostensibly base and exploitative content, Six’s first two *Human Centipede* films rub their spectators’ noses in the contradictions of sanctioned morality.¹

The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel

Mikhail Bakhtin’s classic of Renaissance studies *Rabelais and His World*, finished in 1940 but published in 1965 due to decades-long opposition and informal censorship by the Soviet authorities, explores the immediate reception of the stigmatized novel series by French renaissance writer Francois Rabelais’ *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, written and published from 1532-1564. The ethos of *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* is found in the author’s prologue. Rabelais states: “Most illustrious Drinkers and you, most precious Syphilitics, for it is to you, not to others, that my writings are dedicated” (1946: 47, original capitalization). It is clear that Rabelais had no intentions of winning over high-class readers with his stories, and instead wrote these tales specifically for the hedonistic, rude, and boisterous.

The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel is a series of five novels that tell of the adventures of two giants, Gargantua and his son Pantagruel. Written in an amusing tone, the stories of Gargantua and Pantagruel are extravagant and satirical and feature an abundance of crude, scatological humour and violence, which was quite controversial for 16th Century literature. In the socio-political conditions of increased religious oppression in the period leading up to The French Wars between Roman Catholics and Calvinist Protestants, the Collège de la Sorbonne censored these ‘obscene’ novels; thus, *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, fully equipped with wordplay and risqué humor, were treated with varying levels of reluctance and suspicion as “‘too excessive and too eccentric’” (Putnam, 1946: 3). In fact, François Rabelais’ “‘gross robust humour, extravagance of caricature, and bold naturalism’” is now marked by the literary term *Rabelaisian* (Merriam-Webster). The philosophy and spirit of these novels, according to Rabelais, focuses on what we can refer

to as ‘Pantagruelism’, deeply entrenched in “‘a moral doctrine that implies a constant elevation and breadth of soul,’ or, in the Maître’s own words: ‘a certain cheerfulness of disposition preserved in spite of fortuitous circumstances’” (Putnam, 1946: 37). To be good ‘Pantagruelists’ folks must “live in peace, happiness, and good health, enjoying yourselves always, [and to] never put any faith in such folks as that, who look out upon the world through a peephole” (Putnam, 1946, 365). Although most chapters of *Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* are wildly fantastic and absurd, a few relatively serious passages have become famous for expressing humanistic ideals of the time, and for mocking and challenging bureaucratic behaviour. For instance, one passage states,

DO WHAT THOU WOULDST for the reason that those who are free born and well born, well brought up, and used to decent society possess, by nature, a certain instinct and spur, which always impels them to virtuous deeds and restraints [sic] them from vice, an instinct which is the thing called honor. These same ones, when, through vile subjection and constraint, they are repressed and held down, proceed to employ that same noble inclination to virtue in throwing off and breaking the yoke of servitude, for we always want to come to forbidden things; and we always desire that which is denied us. (Rabelais, [1534], Putnam, 1946: 214, original capitalization).

Rabelais describes Gargantua, Pantagruel, and their community as free from societal restraints—and virtuous in their fun, and honest lifestyles, their celebration of ‘that which is denied us’—as a commentary on the opposing religious oppressions and censors that rule art and ideology during this period. Bakhtin argues that, for centuries, *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* had been misunderstood, and wrongly censored. In his *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin attempts to ease this misunderstanding by studying two important subtexts: *carnival* (the carnivalesque) and *grotesque realism*, both discussed in more detail below.

Rabelais’ Pantagruelism aligns with the aesthetic intentions of *THC* director Tom Six. In two different interviews, Six explains his intentions for the films. The first, he calls “a dark, dark comedy. It’s very over the top and silly, but also explores a darkness in humanity” (Hanley, 2015: n.p.). In regards to the entire franchise, he says, “I really took it to extremes the second time for the audience. [...] I can’t imagine anyone will see part two [or three] and take it seriously anymore. It’s such an extreme attraction that it becomes really

over-the-top” (Barone, 2011: n.p.). Like Bakhtin, Tom Six has often spoken out about the absurdities of art censorship. In an interview with Charlie Nash, Six declares: “I believe in movies that bite, burn, shock, hurt, and are unconventional. Where a filmmaker is still a warrior fighting the mediocrity. I want audience to smell the dirty laundry. Nobody is forced to see a movie. Give audiences their own choice to watch it or not” (2017, n.p.).

Tom Six, it seems, wrote these films to parody not only horror fans and the genre’s ostensibly over-simplified and over-produced conventions, but to poke fun at those offended by the humour that lingers beneath the filth. He confesses that his need to create a second, and third film—both of which, arguably, are aggressively more ‘shocking’ than the first—was for the satisfaction of an audience that, he suggests, ‘desires that which is denied them’.

Behaviour and the Senses

The term “behaviour,” as discussed by Raymond Williams, has been developed under the study of semiotics and cognitive thought, ranging from neutral positions to moral definitions contingent to one’s worldview (1983: 43). The term “behaviour” signifies a *reaction* to a specific circumstance. Williams also understands the term in relation to ethics (morality), as a way in which subjects *behave* according to social law—that is, the marking of one’s “dignified sense of public conduct” (1983: 43). Williams’ definition sheds light on the evolution of the term within psychology as, collectively, “mimicry,” the “science of *ethics*”, and the “science of character” (1983: 44). In a reading of the *Human Centipede* films, however, his use of the term “experimental” in discussion of controlled and measured conditions of behavioural observation can be situated nicely to the film’s narrative, which details the medical experiments and post-experiment observations of German Dr. Josef Heiter (Dieter Laser) upon a group of three tourists (two American, another Japanese). The film’s premise begins when the two American tourists become stranded in the dark forests of Germany after their car breaks down. They find a house amongst the trees and are invited in by homeowner Dr. Heiter, who offers them water, food, and a telephone to call a mechanic. His décor is uniquely carnivalesque; he has wall-to-wall photos of Siamese twin babies and dogs plastered on his wall in an artistic fashion, signifying the doctor’s pride in his previous work of *separating* subjects who appear impossible to separate (See Figure 2 below).



Figure 2: Dr. Heiter (Dieter Laser) and his thematically suggestive décor in *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)*

The American women trust Heiter to call the mechanic, but when they realize their drinks have been drugged with powerful sedatives, the doctor's newest medical obsession is revealed: he will attempt to conjoin those who are not meant to be conjoined. Dr. Heiter, having respectfully earned the title of “doctor” from what we assume is years in the medical field, proposes to his subjects and the film's audience a “100% medically accurate” bodily experiment that aspires to attach three subjects mouth-to-anus in order to create one digestive system—a “Siamese Triplet”, or rather, a “human centipede.”

Dr. Heiter observes his subjects' behaviour within a “controlled” system, or what Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris call “systems behaviour” (2013: 11). This behaviour of observing ‘systems’ is linked more directly to machines, or biological systems – a controlled science, as medical procedures often are (Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris, 2013: ch. B). Thus, it is clear that, as a scientist, Dr. Heiter is interested in studying the “manner in which a thing acts under specified circumstances or in relation to other things” (Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris, 2013: 11-12).

Similar to passages found in *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, as discussed by Bakhtin, *THC* depicts death and birth as both ultimately humiliating. “Birth” in this instance refers to the creation of Dr. Heiter's centipede, but also as stemming from his enthrallment with Siamese twin

babies and their survival. “Death,” of course, is the impending demise of his creature creation (and possibly, the demise of our characters’ former selves); if you thought this movie ended happily, think again. On the generation of amusement from such abject (and in the case of death, dire) bodily circumstances, Bakhtin writes:

The images of feces and urine are ambivalent, as are all the images of the material bodily lower stratum; they debase, destroy, regenerate, and renew simultaneously. When death and birth are shown in their comic aspect, scatological images in various forms nearly always accompany the gay monsters [me, you, horror audiences] created by laughter in order to replace the terror that has been defeated. (Bakhtin, 1984: 151).

While the idea of laughter ‘replacing’ terror applies to Heiter and his absurdly awful experiments, Bakhtin’s intentions in the above statement are more situated in the study of audience engagement, or cognitive and behavioural reaction to, a film or piece of literature. As I mentioned above, *THC* concerns the bodily experiments and post-experimental observation of the mental and physical “systematic behaviour” of three involuntary subjects. Likewise, *THC* and *THC II* depend on the behavioural reactions and cognitive responses from their audience. This intention is made obvious in a scene in *THC* where Heiter takes a moment to demonstrate his surgical intentions to his medical victims using a (hilariously unsophisticated) overhead projector, whiteboard, and pointer (See Figure 3).

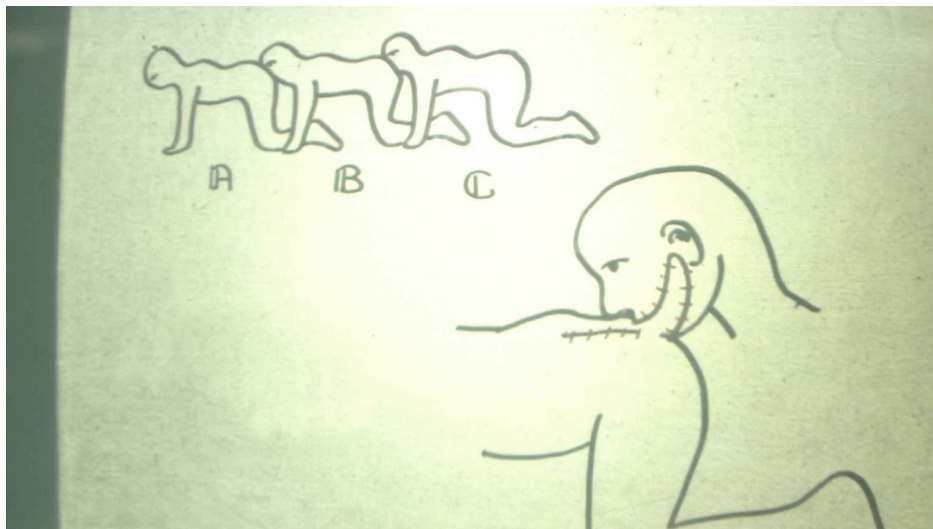


Figure 3: The demonstration by overhead projector in *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)*

There are two audiences implicated in this direct-address telegraphing of the dreadful experiment to come: the victims, and the audience, both of whom are left to feel the tension of knowing what they will eventually feel (the victims) or be forced to witness and *sense* (the audience). “Tactile, kinetic, redolent, resonant, and sometimes even taste-full” is how Vivian Sobchack defines the phenomenological, “cinesthetic”—and in this case, carnival, participatory—experience of cinema (2004: 54). In her essay “What my Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh,” Sobchack attempts to understand the meaningful relation between cinema and our sensate bodies in relation to contemporary film theory (2004: 54-55). Tom Six, like Rabelais, is working towards the same goals of “unmasking” the presumed behavioural acts of “public conduct,” and forcing an audience to indulge open-mindedly with the discomfort of their entertainment, and with healthy observation. Sobchack would agree; she writes that

scholarly interest has been focused less on the capacity of films to physically around us to meaning than on what such sensory cinematic appeal reveals about the rise and fall of classical narrative, or the contemporary transmedia structure of the entertainment industry, or the desires of our culture for the distractions of immediate sensory immersion in an age of pervasive mediation” (2004: 57).

In sum, both Sobchack and Six would acknowledge that we must regard horror cinema and *THC* films as welcoming the cooperation of our senses, and of unruly, sensory responses. Audiences have *behaved* in a reflexive and phenomenological way to the content of the *THC*, which serves to “confront and discomfort the audience,” a behavioural reaction that was anticipated and welcomed by director Tom Six (Och and Strayer, 2013: 171). In keeping with the definitions of Raymond Williams, a study of audience behaviour towards the film would be linked to the interaction with their environment, “specialized to ‘stimulus’ and ‘response’” (1983: 44), a type of interaction with a text that allows for bodily engagement, rather than immediate dismissal. This bodily, or embodied engagement is like the experience of attractions—the sensation of a rollercoaster ride rather than absorption in the narrative. The linked bodies in the films might be understood as mimicking how the audience is bodily linked to the materiality of the medium. The audience is thrust into the lower stratum of the films, sensually mimicking the bodies there.

Carnivals of the Lower Stratum

While the central premise of these films may be linked to genres that have deprecatingly been called “torture porn”² or “goreno” they are also situated, depending largely on the theoretical lens, within carnival expressions of humour and satire, linking the trilogy as a whole with Bakhtin’s behavioural and cognitive understanding of the principals of carnivalesque within Rabelaisian writings. “Carnival,” “a rowdy [European] tradition” is derivative of festivals and theater that has a counter-cultural reputation for misbehaviour, where “lampooning liberty is allowed, and scandal so highly exalted [... as to] upend conventional social decorum” (Stam, Goldsmith, and Porton, 2015: 69). Linked to the concept of behavioural studies, Bakhtin uses Rabelais and his definition of carnivalesque to depict “utopian jouissance, the celebration of the bodily lower stratum, and free and familiar contact [...] that rejects formal harmony and unity in favour of the asymmetrical, the heterogeneous, and the miscegenated” (Stam, Goldsmith, and Porton, 2015: 69). My use of this definition here is not meant to suggest that the participants in Dr. Heiter’s experiments are filled with “utopian jouissance” at their transformation, but that the *Human Centipede* films’ audiences, (while most appear to be uncomfortable or offended), are entertained by way of a ‘carnival’ experience (at least part of which involves delighting in seeing others offended).

Mikhail Bakhtin’s book is considerably interested in Russian folk culture and its place amongst the satirical literature of Rabelais; more specifically, Bakhtin positions folk culture as a binary of “high culture” (Pomorska, 1984: xi). Bakhtin has linked behavioural studies with his theories of laughter and carnivalesque, which he describes to have a purposeful sense of “heterglossia” (Pomorska, 1984: x). Krystyna Pomorska notes in her Foreword to *Rabelais and His World* that Bakhtin’s theories observe carnivalization as “the conditions for the ultimate ‘structure of life’, that is formed by ‘behaviour and cognition’” (x). Bakhtin makes an important shift to sound as a dominant sense, emphasizing auditory exaggeration and enunciation over the sense of sight. Rabelais frequently lists the dynamic characteristics of the body’s elimination during birth and death, and writes “a man could belch, fart, poop, piddle, shit, sneeze, sob, cough, throw up, yawn, puff, inhale, exhale, snore, snort, sweat, and wangle the ferrule to his heart's content” (Bakhtin, 1984: 358). In this instance, the spirit of carnival penetrates the sound and language of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, yet it is “laughter [that] penetrates the highest forms of religious cult and thought” (Bakhtin, 1984: 13), and “laughter was seen as man’s highest spiritual privilege, inaccessible to other creatures” (Bakhtin, 1984: 68). In this

context, embodied enunciation and production is as transgressive, if not more so than, articulate speech.

According to Bakhtin, “carnival,” or “folk” culture—oftentimes referred to in contemporary cinema and popular culture studies as “cult”—are “comic cults which laughed and scoffed at the deity; coupled with serious myths were comic and abusive ones; coupled with heroes were their parodies and doublets” (Pomorska, 1984: 6). Films like *THC* are filled with “sacred/profane time-out[s] for imaginative play and alternative cosmovisions” that give expression to “the people’s second life,” and are used to transgress rationalism and ethical behaviour patterns (Stam, Goldsmith, and Porton: 2015, 69). Those who have a *perverse* sense of humour like Rabelais will undoubtedly see Six’s attempt to compose satirical and carnivalesque subject matter alongside the scatological plot. The sinister, yet comical parody of the “mad scientist” caricature is hard to miss. Any number of examples come to mind, for example in *THC*, the image of Heiter’s three post-surgical patients getting an airing on the lawn as they crawl around in a mouth-to-anus chain at Heiter’s direction, or in *THC II*, the wannabe mad scientist / crazy fan, Martin Lomax’s, administering a laxative to produce a more extreme effect out of his experiment. The implication of such moments in both films seems to be that the experiment is not enough; what the scientist really wants is abject spectacle.

Mouth-to-Film: Grotesque Attractions

If carnivalesque is enjoyed through a transformation of behaviour and liberation from the “prevailing order,” then the “grotesque” body, a term used in relation to Bakhtin’s study of carnival, deals with bodily transformation. The film, and Rabelais’ novels, undoubtedly relate to Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (1818), and its titular “mad” scientist’s “secret toil” with “profane fingers” in a “workshop of filthy creation” (1996: 32)—“filthy” here referring to both the scientist’s gore-soaked laboratory as well as his suspect (“secret,” “profane”) ethical choices. Stam, Goldsmith, and Porton define “grotesque realism” as “turning conventional aesthetics on its head in order to locate a new kind of convulsive, rebellious beauty, one that reveals the grotesque of the noble and the latent beauty of the ‘vulgar’” (2015: 69). Like Dr. Victor Frankenstein’s monster, referred to by the monster himself as “the Adam of your labors,” Dr. Heiter’s Human Centipede patients detest their maker for violating their bodies and, by extension, the laws of

nature. Shelley's novel and Six's films "confront some of the most feared innovations of evolutionism: mankind's status as a species of animal" (Butler, 1993, from the book's back matter), while also stripping the human animal of its so-called superiority over nonhuman animals. If we laugh at the situation created by Shelley's Victor Frankenstein, it is more over the idiosyncrasies manifested by his obsessive, often oblivious behaviour. But Six's films are built on the prospect that audiences will find amusement in the absurdly vulgar scenarios he offers.

The ability to laugh and be entertained by the 'vulgar' allows the audience to grasp a more 'utopic' existence, according to Bakhtin. Linking the concept of the "grotesque" body to carnival, Stam, Goldsmith, and Porton believe that it is not, above-all, the subject matter that makes a text satirical, but the emphasis of *who* is the "*butt* of the joke" (2015: 70). The example he uses is the 'Purim Spiel'³ who make fun of Haman the tyrant, not the Jewish Esther, who is inferior to Haman's tyranny (2015: 70). In *THC* an audience likely laughs less at the subjects being tortured, and more at the circumstances of the subject's torture. It is not so much the pain and discomfort of the subject that is funny, in other words, but rather Dr. Heiter himself—it is in his mannerisms and his dialogue that an audience cannot help but see the humour. For example, the first time Dr. Heiter's Human Centipede "walks"—that is, the first time we see his victims in the designated hands-and-knees position as seen in his picture-book example (Fig. 4)—he is so over-the-moon with joy that the audience almost feels congratulatory of his accomplishment: "He did it! The Centipede can walk!" Heiter is proud of his success and in turn, the audience is—however conflicting the feelings produced—proud for him. He walks around his Centipede flexing, laughing, and taking photos, his subjects all-the-while squirming and crying with discomfort; nevertheless, this is Heiter's time to shine, and we respect that in part because of his sheer glee. He takes a mirror off the wall and places it in front of his Centipede—a moment simultaneously suggesting and parodying the "mirror stage"⁴ of their development as a self-aware creature-subject—and Heiter cries along with his Centipede tears of fulfilment, rather than anguish. This scene implies a positive, emotional forthcoming for Dr. Heiter. With the melodramatic string orchestra playing in the background, this scene is ridiculous, and it is exactly the over-the-top ridiculousness of this film that places the moment's situational comedy above the torment of Heiter's Human Centipede. Stam, Goldsmith, and Porton recognize a certain comedic "rule" which mandates that "laughing at death" is a theme that can be vulnerable to humorous treatment when examined in this context (2015: 70).

Bakhtin declares that to be entertained by carnivalesque images is to defy one's well-established behaviour, and that a certain degree of truth is discovered when one laughs or professes a desire for grotesque or vulgar imagery. As a direct relation to Rabelais, Bakhtin acknowledges a connection between "sexual stimuli together with defecation" that *THC* also visualizes with the quasi-sexual ass-to-mouth foreplay and the stimulated, erect nipples of the fit, tan, and beautiful American tourists. Of Rabelais' Fourth Book, Bakhtin argues that to appreciate the grotesque is to communicate wholeheartedly with humanity and truth:

At the end [excrement] is described as a tree, something pleasant. And the tirade concludes with an invitation to drink, which in Rabelaisian imagery means to be in communion with truth. Here we find the ambivalent image of excrement, its relation to regeneration and renewal and its special role in overcoming fear. ... An heir to grotesque realism he conceived excrement as both joyous and sobering matter, at the same time debasing and tender; it combined the grave and birth in their lightest, most comic, least terrifying form. (1984:175-176)

Again, we see an important shift towards the lower senses: smell, taste, and touch. Bakhtin's emphasis on "the feast" or the "drink" in his book and in this passage is a valid observation in terms of the way *THC* and the literature of Rabelais both rely on celebrations of otherwise abject bodies, collapsing an acute awareness of the body, and of the gruesomeness of birth and death, in a kind of sensorial feast.

These links between deviant behaviour and even observable behaviour, the genre of the carnivalesque, and the beauty of the grotesque body, all relate, on some level, to the idea of nonconformity. To enjoy, or to theorize a film that repulses many audiences is to oppose the initial behavioural "mimicry" discussed by Raymond Williams; to participate in carnival is to leave inhibitions behind, citing again what Stam, Goldsmith, and Porton call "formal harmony and unity in favour of the asymmetrical, the heterogeneous, and the miscegenated" (2015: 69). Likewise, to find beauty and worth in grotesque realism is to ignore sacred implications and acknowledge the body as an anatomical living piece of flesh and blood, rather than the privileged vessel of the immortal soul. They "laughed and scoffed at the deity; coupled with serious myths were comic and abusive ones" (Bakhtin, 1984: 6). In this regard, carnivalesque texts uncomfortably mingle the sacred and the profane.

In Bakhtin's description of death, "the soul, together with bile, blood, phlegm and flesh, leaves its bodily abode which has grown cold and has already acquired the aspect of death" (1984: 359). Grotesque realism acknowledges that death, discomfort, and biological degradation are all behaviours of the body that every living being must succumb to: "the bodily element [...] is presented not in a private, egotistical form, severed from the spheres of all life, but as something universal" (Bakhtin, 1984: 19). Bakhtin's book, and these passages, support the notion that behaving according to a social rule is egotistical and in favour of a hierarchical type of humanity, which he declares is elusive and unattainable. To discuss the relation between the literature of Rabelais and Tom Six's *THC*, and their use of inadequate cognitive archetypes, the amusement of carnival culture, and the appreciation for the grotesque body, is to link the concept of humour in one's own decay as a challenge—and an honest response—to the truth of bourgeois morality.

THC concludes with the death of three kidnapped experiment subjects who are surgically conjoined mouth-to-anus, against their will. Two of the subjects, we can assume, die of malnutrition, infection, or bile poisoning, while the other—the first in the chain of bodies—takes his own life after triumphantly escaping maker and captor, Dr. Heiter. Though Heiter is a madman, his attention to detail and his obsession with sterilization, cleanliness, and medical accuracy sets him apart from other villains of the so-called "torture porn" genre (including the villain of *THC II*), and also from what we have come to envision as a 'realistic' murderer. Tom Six successfully places the first film, *THC (First Sequence)*, into the diegetic world of his sequel when he opens *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)* (2011) (*THC II*) with a point-of-view shot of the 2009 film's denouement, followed by the closing credits, being watched by the would-be experimenter-villain of the sequel. This film-within-a-film, or *mise en abyme*, is used by Six to demonstrate the extreme and ultimately unrealistic silliness of the film's attractions, and the over-the-top inaccuracy (contrary to the tagline "100% Medically Accurate") of Part I's plot line, reminding the viewer that the original film remains *just* a film, albeit perhaps a very *real* object of grotesque fascination. Linda Williams argues in *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess* (1991) that body genres like horror and melodrama encapsulate the notion of excess. Like Vivian Sobchack's thoughts on the phenomenological sensation experienced by spectators of cinema, Williams agrees that "body genres" "foreground sensational engagement in explicit image and sound content and narrative focus" (Sobchack, 2004: 62). Williams tells us: "we feel manipulated by these texts—an impression that the very colloquialisms of 'tear jerker' and 'fear jerker' express—and to which we

could add pornography's even cruder sense as texts to which some people might be inclined to 'jerk off'" (1991: 5). Again, Williams argues that audiences mimic emotions in body genres because of our attraction to and appreciation of the spectacle. Tom Gunning, writer of "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde" ([1990] 2006), discusses our fondness for, and willingness to identify with, the spectacle and the artifice of the attraction, and that while we know that the "magic" is not real, audiences nevertheless feel assaulted and encapsulated by it. Horror and other "body genres" offer "attractive" moments [attractions] that are willing to exhibit and "rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator" (Gunning, [1990] 2006: 382). In this paper, Gunning offers similarities between amusement parks and cinema, carnivals, and film exhibition. He writes, "the cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle—a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself" (Gunning, [1990] 2006: 384). Tied directly into the attractions is the kind of direct address (and confrontation) of spectatorial desire that undergirds the *Human Centipede* films in general, but the first sequel in particular.

THC II thrives on the fear of, and desire for, replication of the first film's grotesque spectacle, providing a compelling re-enacting of Gunning's theories of exhibitionist cinema. Martin (Laurence R. Harvey), a disturbed recluse, is so inspired by the original *Human Centipede* film that he decides to replicate its gruesome experiments. That is, his motives are largely tied to recreating the prior film's attractions for himself as much, if not more than they are to any scientific curiosity. He does this in a way that is in direct contrast with Dr. Heiter's medically comprehensive method, housing his experiments in a filthy abandoned warehouse, and using duct tape and staples in place of sterile needles and sutures. Martin's social and psychological hindrances, in addition to the film's explicit scenes of bodily assemblage, provoke more realistic emotional, and biological reactions from its characters, whose bodily functions literally splatter the stage. Though arguably more gruesome in its imagery than the prior film, *THC II*, as a black and white film, beautifies realistic bodily grotesqueries through the use of low-key lighting, high-contrast close-up shots, and an exquisitely uncomfortable score that carry on throughout the film. In the opening sequence, we enjoy the capture of Martin's first Centipede-subjects. *Mise-en-scène alone* works to construct the psyche of Martin as an authentic psychopath, and to strongly express the exaggeration,

hyperbole, and excess that make up the fundamentals of grotesque style.

Contextualization of the Opening Sequence of *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)*

Martin (Laurence R. Harvey) is a mentally and intellectually challenged forty-something-year-old man who lives with his mother. Martin was subjected to sexual abuse by his father for several years and his mother still blames him for the imprisonment of her husband. Martin's therapist Dr. Sebring, a Charles Darwin-type character, confesses his desire to "fuck that retarded boy," thus causing Martin even more grief, aggression, and emotional torment, which drives the motive for his twelve-person *Human Centipede*-induced sexual fantasy.

As discussed above, *THC II* introduces its antagonist, Martin, watching footage from the last two minutes of *THC*. By opening with a point-of-view shot, the film forces the viewer immediately to identify with Martin in that moment, for presumably they have both shared the shock, and/or awe-inspiring pleasure of the Tom Six film-universe offered in Part I. Relating again to Gunning's concept for "rupturing the fictional world", *THC II* reiterates heavily on the fact that *THC*, and horror films as a whole, remain attractions-based, even when committed to an awe-inspiring realism ([1990] 2006: 382). Cynthia Freeland, too, suggests that in "realist horror" there is a shift from narratives committed to intricately unveiling supernatural monsters to "promising and withholding the *spectacle* of violence" (1995: 128, emphasis added). The dread of the *Human Centipede* films is largely attached to the coming spectacle produced by a reprehensible, but otherwise possible characters.

THC II follows its opening forced point-of-view shot with an establishing shot exposing Martin at work in the ticket booth of an underground parking garage. For Martin, this workspace acts as a place of independence and freedom from his disturbing domestic situation, and, consequently, is where Martin gathers the majority of his subjects. The scene is short and straightforward: Martin watches *THC* and as the final credits roll, he notices the security cameras capturing a man and a woman walking towards their parked car. Chaos ensues when the man realizes he has lost his keys and Martin assists them with his crowbar for what we assume is the purpose of helping the couple enter their vehicle. The man and the woman laugh at Martin's social awkwardness; this provokes Martin to shoot the man in the

foot and the women in the leg. Martin then uses his crowbar—a reoccurring weapon throughout the film—to knock the couple unconscious for the purpose of more efficiently loading their bodies into the back of his van. The sequence concludes with Martin back in his office chair, gazing at the now-paused film credits with a wide-eyed expression inspired by his recent adrenaline rush. The sequence occurs in full-circle; Martin’s breakdown, or moment of “clarity,” begins and ends with his admiration of *THC*. This five-minute sequence becomes a teaser attraction for the film to come: Not only does this scene begin and end with Martin secure in his office, the *film* begins and ends there as well. This turnaround is used to insist upon the psychological disturbance of Martin to the point where *THC* becomes fuel for his repressed aggression, but also a model for his ambition. This sequence epitomizes Martin’s belligerence; while it is not the climax of the film, it is the climax of Martin’s life as a whole.

Again, recalling Shelly’s *Frankenstein*, Bakhtin writes: “The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (1984: 317). The film starts at the peak of Martin’s anger when he begins to implement his fantasy of creating his very own “Human Centipede.” These grotesqueries are visualized, just as Dr. Heiter’s unrefined projector drawings were in *THC*, in a scrapbook heavily affixed with screen-grabs and doodles that fetishize and romanticize his favourite film. Likewise, Martin’s body is equally put on display as one of grotesque appeal: like the gluttonous characters found within *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Martin similarly possesses the fat, round belly, gaping mouth and swollen, popping eyes of the “gay carnival monster” (Bakhtin, 1984: 335). While Rabelais wrote of jovial, unbiased and utopian gluttony, that of festivals, carnivals, and feasts, Martin is situated within the grotesque image of the body, similar to the “Devil Pantagruel,” in his “immeasurable, and infinitely powerful” cosmic terror (Bakhtin, 1984: 335). Bakhtin writes: “This cosmic terror ... is the fear of that which is materially huge and cannot be overcome by force. Even the most ancient images of folklore express the struggle against fear, against the memories of the past, and the apprehension of future calamities, but folk images relating to this struggle helped develop true human fearlessness” (1984: 335-336). The scrapbook and *THC (First Sequence)* work as the template for Martin’s transformation into manhood. Bakhtin continues: “The struggle against cosmic terror in all its forms and manifestations did not rely on abstract hope or on the eternal spirit, but on the material principle in man himself. Man assimilated the cosmic elements: earth, water, air, and fire; he

discovered them and became vividly conscious of them in his own body. He became aware of the cosmos within himself” (1984: 335-336). A similar evocation of the ‘cosmos within ourselves’, *THC II*, contrary to the original film, is a look into the psyche of its antagonist, allowing the viewer to take a closer look at the character of Martin, and the motives behind his actions. Tom Six, in his broken English, reasserts this concept of psychological realism: “the film isn’t actually about a ‘Human Centipede’. It’s more, this time, about the main character. [...] If the film would be in colour—with all the diarrhoea flying around and the blood, it’s *so* distracting from the story—it would only be a gore film. And now, it has much more layers, I think” (Andrews, 2012: n.p.).

While *THC* focuses on the victims, the centipede concept, and the resilience of human nature, *THC II* uses this metanarrative plot structure to examine more closely the personal life of its aggressor, all the while interweaving the central features of grotesque imagery and gritty realism. Martin is not a medical doctor like Dr. Heiter; therefore, his centipede is excessively constructed, as mentioned earlier, by way of staples and duct tape. And his malnourished centipede victims require laxative injections to release their bowels. Unlike the more clinically detached Dr. Heiter, Martin rapes the tail-end of his centipede with barbed wire, creating a façade of power and a comparatively more excessive use of bodily “expressions” than offered by *THC*. As a result, *THC II* is even more a cinematic representation of grotesque realism than its predecessor. According to Bakhtin, the bowels and the phallus “play the leading role in the grotesque image, and it is precisely for this reason that they are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization. Next to the bowels and the genital organs is the mouth, through which enters the world to be swallowed up. And next is the anus. The main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of bodily drama, take place in this sphere” (1984: 317). While the motives of our villain are more pronounced and scrutinized in Part II than in Part I, the obscene nature of the Centipede’s origins, accompanied by the film’s graphic defecation scenes, intensify the grotesque nature of the film. Relating back to what Linda Williams discusses about body genres in “excess,” *THC II* can also be linked to her theories about the structures of fantasy. She writes: “Laplace and Pontalis maintain that the most basic fantasies are located at the juncture of an irrecoverable real event that took place somewhere in the past and a totally imaginary event that never took place. The ‘event’ whose temporal and spatial existence can never be fixed is thus ultimately [...] that of ‘the origin of the subject’—an origin which psycho-analysts tell us cannot be separated from the

discovery of sexual difference” (Williams, 1991: 10). In the opening scene, Martin fantasizes about his own Human Centipede in way that can be ironically psychoanalyzed as fuelled by his sexual abuse as a child, and the lack of compassion he receives as an adult from his mother, his psychiatrist, and his parking-lot customers.

Martin speaks very little dialogue throughout the film; his character is shaped entirely through David Meadows’ black and white handheld cinematography composed of close-up shots and Laurence R. Harvey’s vital expressions, particularly related to his wild, wide, almost swollen-looking eyes. Bakhtin writes that “the nose and mouth play the most important part in the grotesque image of the body. The grotesque is interested only in protruding eyes [...] the bulging eyes, a purely bodily tension” (Bakhtin, 1984: 316-317). Framing and lighting within the mise-en-scène of *THC II* contribute to the narrative development of Martin as a deranged psychopath, and echo Bakhtin’s interpretation of grotesque imagery in terms of transgressive bodily exaggeration and hyperbole.

At two minutes and thirteen seconds, *THC II* cuts to a frame-within-a-frame shot of Martin’s computer screen (Figure 4, above). Off-screen, we hear Martin breathing heavily and coughing amidst the cries, the crickets, and the birds that make up the credit sounds of *THC*. This close-



Figures 4, 5 and 6: Martin (Laurence R. Harvey) watches *The Human Centipede (First Sequence)* in *The Human Centipede (Full Sequence)*

up shot sets the visual and stylistic tone for the entire film, which is shrouded in shadow and rendered claustrophobic through smudged vignette edges made all the more striking by virtue of cinematographer David Meadows' low-key black-and-white chiaroscuro lighting. When the film cuts away to the left of our antagonist who holds the original perspective, the audience holds its gaze on Martin in the same manner that Martin gazes upon his screen (Figure 5, above). This gaze acts as an examination of the film's main character and the close-up; additionally, the eyeline match offered in Figure 6 above, allows the audience to become engulfed in Martin's personal space.

The close-up shot is used to emphasize Martin's facial features and bulging, highly expressive eyes, which often do the talking for him. Figures 7 through 10 (at right) are taken from Martin's "breakdown" sequence to demonstrate how the use of shallow-focus close-up shots frame his vulnerability, thus again showing Six's interest in the psychology of his antagonist rather than the plight of Martin's victims. Close-up shots are commonly rendered



Figures 7-10: Martin's Breakdown in *The Human Centipede (Full Sequence)*

in shallow focus to “suggest psychological introspection” (Prunes, Raine, and Litch, 2019: n.p.). Close-ups and extreme close-ups of Martin’s profile, deviating only slightly between eyeline angles, are framed and bordered in shadows as a way to focus the attention on his emotional and psychological state. Gunning discusses close-up shots in relation to his cinema of attractions, suggesting an added element of spectacle to whatever emotional reality is meant to be conveyed: “Its principal motive is again pure exhibitionism [... .] The enlargement is not a device expressive of narrative tension; it is in itself an attraction and the point of the film [... .] It is the direct address of the audience, in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by a cinema showman, that defines this approach to filmmaking” ([1990] 2006: 384). What I am suggesting is twofold: while such close-ups may, according to Gunning, work in service of a kind of disorientation or distancing (*dépaysement*), they also work in service of narrative to make a grotesque spectacle of emotion—to prolong emotional and psychological realities for the audience as a kind of extended moment. Edgar Allan Poe created entire stories that were extensions of emotional states, but that can read as strict realism, for all their excesses and occasional hints of the supernatural.

Likewise, the hard lighting creates a grotesque realism focus on Martin in that it both renders the scene in chiaroscuro shadows, and highlights the glare from Martin’s saliva, as well as the sweat, the grease, and the oil on Martin’s hair and skin. Both the man and woman are similarly framed in tight close-ups, yet they lack the spotlight that Martin is permitted. Martin remains illuminated by stark (unflattering) light throughout this entire sequence—in his office and in the parking garage—while his subjects are merely sculpted by matte greys and immersive shadows that reflect Six’s intentions of creating a film about the *character* of his antagonist; Martin does not share the spotlight with his guinea pigs. The opening scene—and ultimately, the entire film—are undoubtedly claustrophobic; we rarely travel outdoors and when we do, we are cemented within Martin’s kill-van, or caught in a torrential downpour. *THC II* primarily takes place either within the parking garage or locked Martin’s dark, and dingy warehouse, and our sense of claustrophobia are elevated. On the effect that the black and white film and his claustrophobic cinematography had on the construction of character, Six notes: “the story gets a little more dramatic and I think, a little more scary as well, because you, uh, *live more* with the characters” (Six, 2011, n.p.). The result may be termed a kind of spectatorial claustrophobia that forces affective confrontation with the characters.

When Martin shoots the couple, Six zooms in on the glistening blood pouring out of their wounds. Likewise, when Martin knocks the man unconscious with his crowbar, the close-up shot and low-key lighting emphasizes the beauty of the wound that Martin created (Figures 11-13, this page). These close-up shots are clearly not meant to emphasize the emotions of the characters—the light is used in these shots to show Martin’s masterpiece of excess; the victims are art objects, and the blood is his paint. Martin is an artist of the grotesque. The lighting in *THC II* prefers Martin as a subject and works in his favour, artfully illuminating his own artful creations, and echoing Bakhtin’s notion that “the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths. The outward and inward features are often merged into one” (Bakhtin, 1984: 317-318).

Currently, one can find (the cut version of) *THC II* on Canadian Netflix under the “Visually Striking” category, sharing a space with films like *The Revenant* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2015), *Only God Forgives* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2013), and *Under The Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013), to name a few. The film looks, feels, and sounds



Figures 11-13: Martin’s murder spectacle in *The Human Centipede (Full Sequence)*

like a cross between Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977) and Tsukamoto's *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1989), films that continually alert the viewer to their aesthetic beauty, while simultaneously pushing boundaries narratively, and atmospherically. Roger Ebert's "complementary: review of *THC II* acknowledges this aesthetic: 'I'm giving this movie no stars, because it exists in a universe where the stars don't shine. And, the black and white in the sequel really helps create a world with no sun, with no light at the end of the tunnel—a completely unremitting bleak, nihilistic horror'" (cited in Andrews, 2012: n.p.).

The sequence concludes with a medium-shot of Martin, viewed from the left, sitting casually, glancing towards his desktop computer as though his current actions were merely a daydream. This scene outlines our protagonist as a simple man driven by carnal, fantastic needs. His abuse as a child, and the physical and (significantly overstated) emotional abuse that he currently suffers from his mother, usurp his plausible fantasies. Likewise, the reoccurring angles and close-up shots of Martin expose his emotional depth. Though Martin is portrayed as being intellectually challenged and nonsensical, these shots, and his expressive eyes, tell us otherwise, even against the film's wider comedic over-psychologizing. This sequence is perhaps the least gruesome in the film as a whole; however, it is a vital example of Martin's progressive spiral into the terrible realities of his maniacal reverie. The use of shallow-focus close-up shots and black and white contrast lighting to frame Martin psychologically and aesthetically, paired with the forbidding humming of binaural pulses, bring Martin's inner world to spectacular life in a similar way to that which Six brings Dr. Heiter's motivations to life as carnivalesque pageantry. The motivations and focus may be different, but the grotesque-realist-attractions aesthetic remains the same.

Conclusion

Bakhtin believes that to participate in carnival and grotesque imagery is to find entertainment in satirical literature/texts (like the writings of Rabelais, and Tom Six's *THC* films), both of which collapse the binary between high and low, sacred and profane, human and nonhuman animal. To free oneself from the restraints imposed by good taste *is* to experience life (Bakhtin, 1984: 8-10). Breaking free from behavioural "mimicry" is to "[celebrate] temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; [carnival] marked the suspension of all hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (Bakhtin, 10).

Tom Six has been known to publically voice his discontent with censor boards, and the overzealous “political correctness” of high-class film criticism as a whole. His entire public figure is built around his embrace of audience backlash. Tom Six and his *Human Centipede* trilogy use gore and excessive corporeal violence to portray and reproduce similar reactions elicited through horror, comedy, and grotesque imaginings to become a ‘parody’ of oneself, and of the conventions by which he gained his success, and *The Human Centipede* franchise continues to exist outside of the current film universe as a self-referential and self-conscious pastiche of its own excesses. While Six’s villains defy the acceptable behaviour of social order, they also break *free* from behavioural and cognitive restraints, as do the audiences who react with a combination of laughter and repulsion to on-screen mouth-to-anus surgeries, drooling beady-eyed wannabe mad-scientists, and spraying diarrhoeal excretions. *The Human Centipede* films’ ‘100% medical accuracy’ suspends cultural norms and privileges to offer a not-entirely-unserious (and certainly not uncritical) escape into naughtiness.

Notes

¹ This essay excludes discussion of the third film in the trilogy, *Human Centipede III (Final Sequence)*. While that film maintains Six’s interest in upping the ante in terms of confronting a culture’s sense of good taste with extremely bad taste (and political incorrectness), it does so in far less sophisticated ways than its predecessors.

² See David Edelstein, “Now Playing at Your Local Multi-Plex: Torture Porn,” *New York*, 39, no. 4 (6 February 2006): 63-64.

³ “Purim Spiel,” or Purim play, is a satirical Yiddish festival or play dramatizing the Hebrew Book of Esther.

⁴ See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: Norton, 2006).

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