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Reflecting About Boundaries

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Reflecting About “Redefining the Self: *The Human Centipede* and Physical Spectatorship”,  
by Laura Wilson  
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*Part of the Editorial Board – 5.1 Boundaries*

As an issue, *Boundaries* was exceptionally wide-ranging. From Hugh Foley’s reading of the way contemporary US poetry has handled the ways that Donald Rumsfeld’s so-called *Reality Based Community* blurs the boundaries between the real and the representation, to Michelle Siobhan O’Brien’s analysis of Rebecca Belmore’s and Kevin Lee Burton’s interventions in Indigenous art, *Boundaries* realised *Excursions Journal*’s aim “to emphasise and promote the permeable nature of academic disciplines”.

Among the issue’s 9 essays and 4 reviews, Laura Wilson’s discussion of *The Human Centipede: First Sequence* was an exceptional piece of scholarship. Wilson, drawing on her own subjective responses to the legendarily disgusting film, uses *Human Centipede* to establish the concept of “physical spectatorship”: “the idea that embodied responses to film are textual constructions that return the viewer to a sense of their own corporeality” (p. 3). The boundaries that Wilson’s essay most powerfully asserted were those of the body with the outside world – boundaries that, to paraphrase her, her essay redefines and reaffirms even as it threatens.

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# Redefining the Self: *The Human Centipede* and Physical Spectatorship

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**Laura Wilson**

A tall slim man in a white doctor's coat and knee-high leather boots is striding around a leaf-strewn lawn as mist rolls across the grass and around his legs. The wide-angle medium-long shot transforms the space into a stage. By placing the camera and spectator in a distanced position of an audience in the theatre, the shot construction belies the forceful visceral response this particular scene invokes. Central to this stage is a twelve limbed beast made of three people who are attached to each other by their mouths and anuses. Just prior to this moment, the front segment, Katsuro, had begun to defecate, much to his despair. Veins bulge in Katsuro's face and neck, as medium close-ups show his strained resistance against the inevitable. The camera moves down his back to bring into frame the middle segment Lindsay who, with moist bloodshot eyes widened in terror, pushes her hand against Katsuro's bandaged backside in a vain attempt to avoid the human waste that is slowly making its way towards, and into, her mouth and gullet. The towering man continues to pace around the sorry creature, gleefully ordering in a deep and authoritative voice for the front section to “feed her”, and for the middle segment to “swallow it”. Wet tactile sound effects provide a soundtrack for the bowels over medium close-ups of Lindsay's convulsing throat, her body defying her will as she ingests that which would ordinarily be expelled.

As I watch the scene described above for the first time, my fingernails scratch the surface of my desk, and my body rocks back and forth in a futile

attempt at self-soothing. I hear the distant whine of a voice uttering again and again, “I don't want to, I don't want to”, before I realise it is my own. Finally, in a mixture of horror and relish, my back arches, my shoulders hunch forward and my chest heaves as I retch once, twice, three times.

I begin this article with a description of the notorious scene in Tom Six's *The Human Centipede: First Sequence* (2009, hereafter referred to as *Human Centipede*), and a personal account of my own viewing experience, because it serves as an entry point to my concerns at various levels. Firstly, in reviews, discussions and videos posted online, this particular scene is continually reproduced through various accounts of audience reactions and, as such, often functions as an avenue along which the film is discussed. Second, in methodological terms, it is this scene (and my reaction to it) that led me to question how and why such intensely physical responses can be evoked by the mere suggestion of faeces in film. Finally, theoretically, this moment in the film challenges the concept of a body defined by notions of interiority and exteriority. The structure of the centipede, where anus meets mouth and faeces becomes food, points to the illusory nature of a stable and defined body. Yet, in this article I will argue that the visceral impact of this scene redefines and reaffirms the very boundaries it threatens.

With a detailed observation of the responses *Human Centipede* evokes – and through an examination of how and why such reactions might occur – I seek to counter “pejorative critical reviews” and “censorial prohibition” that, as scholar Steve Jones argues, amount only to an “unwillingness to engage with [the film's] themes” (2013a, p. 2). As Jones points out in his article “No Pain, No Gain”, if inherently objectionable images are not clearly defined in terms of *why* they are offensive, notions of obscenity, disgust and “sick” are rendered meaningless (p. 2). Here, I will address that which is often avoided in audience and critical discourses, that is, how and why the centipede and its bodily functions are upsetting.

This article focuses on a particular border that *Human Centipede* transgresses and re-defines: the border of the conscious and unconscious body, the false boundary between that which we consider to be “me” and that which we consider to be other. The bodies I refer to are not only the victims in the film, but the viewers in front of the screen. I argue that the body of the viewer of *Human Centipede* is defined through physicalities constructed by the film (how this is achieved will be explored below). In this way, the viewer’s corporeality is both constituted by, and constitutive of the text. Such a particular and often disturbing film engagement is something I term *physical spectatorship*. Physical spectatorship is the idea that embodied responses to film are textual constructions that return the viewer to a sense of their own corporeality. Thus, the viewer is the body in front of the screen, but their physicality is manipulated and constructed through engagement with the film. Physical spectatorship therefore challenges the dichotomy of film as object/viewer as subject as well as the language we use to describe, or theorise, the film-viewer relationship. In this way, the notion of physical spectatorship is influenced by phenomenological film theory, in particular, the idea that meaning does not pre-exist either film or viewer, rather it arises from an encounter between the two. As film scholar Jennifer Barker argues in her book *The Tactile Eye*, “meaning and affect emerge in the fleshy, visceral encounter between film and viewer” (2009, p. 15). Although Barker’s work covers a range of film genres and styles, from Buster Keaton, to Andrei Tarkovsky, to animation (amongst others), I consider this approach toward theorising spectatorship to be particularly apt when exploring films notorious for eliciting intense and often uncomfortable physical responses. Throughout the article, I refer to the viewer’s body, corporeality and specific parts of the body. These are modes of physicality that, I argue, do not pre-exist the text; rather, I hope to show how they arise through an engagement between viewer and film.

The following analysis of *Human Centipede* arose from my own conscious and unconscious identities, inextricable as they are from social, political and cultural contexts. However, I would like to stress that I do not consider this meaning fixed, nor do I intend to universalise my responses and the concepts they touch upon. The scope of this paper does not allow for an interrogation as to how gender, race, social and cultural status has impacted on my responses albeit that this might make for a fascinating and complex project. My own experiences may or may not connect to that of other viewers, critics and scholars, but it is my hope that this subjective method of analysis will provide stepping stones for others to further develop discourses of physical spectatorship.

The idea that the viewer's corporeality is constituted by and constitutive of the text is in itself disturbing, as various assumed structures and dichotomies (i.e. film/viewer, object/subject) are ruptured and subverted by physical responses. In one of the more climactic moments in *Human Centipede*, where Dr Heiter's dream of joining separate organisms together by way of the digestive system becomes a reality, the subject is mutilated not through fragmentation or dissection, but by the obliteration of the body defined against others. Regression (or anxieties about it) to a pre-unified subjectivity is powerfully expressed through the flesh conjoined rather than the flesh disintegrated. As a consequence, each body becomes a segment, incomplete in itself and objectified. Orifices of the body become enclosed networks, more akin to the stomach or intestines than mouth and anus. Further, these body parts that are normally distant, in this moment meet in both space and function: the anus provides nutrition as well as waste, and this is passed through the mouth as both excrement and food. Finally, exteriors and interiors collapse within me, the gut of the viewer, as the burning taste of bile and unnerving tremors of my stomach make visible to me those organs that ordinarily escape consciousness. The centipede and its bodily functions are, therefore, inherently unnerving as they bring such

modes of embodiment into conscious experience. To explore this further, I aim to theorise that which often escapes analysis in relation to film spectatorship: those body parts that make up the gastrointestinal tract, or the gut, that are brought into play in films designed to revolt.

*Human Centipede* is by no means alone, or even original, in its ability to invoke the sensation of nausea and, potentially, the reflex of vomiting. In recent years, certain styles of film-making have reportedly induced widespread nausea and, occasionally, vomiting. For example, Matt Reeves's *Cloverfield* (2008) caused audiences to feel nauseated and, in some circumstances, vomit (to such a degree that theatres began to warn cinema-goers before they entered the screenings). These reactions have since been put down to motion sickness due to the fact *Cloverfield* is filmed entirely with a handheld camera. As with the nausea and anxiety reportedly induced by the use of sub-bass frequencies in *Irréversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002), feeling sick and/or throwing up due to prolonged exposure to shaky camera-work is a non-object related response. In such instances, the method of filming may escape conscious perception as the action and suspense narrative takes central focus and the effect of nausea becomes detached from its source, the cinematography, and is perceived as arising from within the self. The subject-position engendered by the film is thus constituted by the physicality of the viewer, and thereby undermines the distinction between text and audience. Nausea and vomit-reactions generated by *Human Centipede*, however, arise from the suggestion of a very specific object: faeces.

A number of questions are raised by the idea that *Human Centipede* engenders a particular visceral engagement between viewer and film through a representation of faeces. Why do faeces, or the suggestion of faeces, have such affective power? How does this scene capitalise on the potential for the representation of faeces to generate an intensely physical response? For me, even to envisage faeces is enough to increase the production of saliva in my mouth, and call my attention to my throat that, in such a moment, becomes

an expansive space, too open and too ready to allow the matter into my body. In my imagination, the excrement is entirely other to my body that is, and should be, safely closed off from the world outside. It is this illusion, and the fear of the desire to shatter the illusion, that faeces threatens and invokes, as Julia Kristeva explores in her essay *Powers of Horror* (1982). However, the extent to which the aversion to bodily waste is a response to otherness has been questioned. In his book that explores spectatorship from a cognitive-psychological standpoint, Carl Plantinga notes that many researchers “agree that disgust has a universal component; visual, tactile, or olfactory contact with rats, cockroaches, urine, feces, and vomit” and that this can, or should, be explored from an evolutionary standpoint rather than a psychoanalytical one (2009, p. 204). Such a view might explain why bodily waste features across a range of genres to generate disgust, from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò*, or the *120 Days of Sodom* (1975), through to “gross-out” comedies such as *National Lampoon’s Animal House* (John Landis, 1978) and the *American Pie* franchise: *American Pie* (Paul Weitz, 1999), *American Pie 2* (J. B. Rogers, 2001), *American Pie: The Wedding*, (Jesse Dylan, 2003), *American Reunion* (Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg, 2012). However, it does not account for the various ways in which human waste might be presented or why, under some circumstances, the overwhelming response is to laugh, and in others it is the fear (or even act) of vomiting.

The way faeces is represented in *Human Centipede* throws up further questions regarding how and why the film induces nausea. Unlike its sequel *The Human Centipede II: Full Sequence* (Tom Six, 2011), visual details of faeces are omitted in the original film. Instead, the film capitalises on the embodied aurality of human waste and the suggestive convulsions of throats. Sounds of digestion and flatulence are, I propose, highly recognisable and easily relatable to bowel movements. In turn, this bodily function is one that many or most encounter on a frequent basis. As a result, I argue we identify with the characters’ bodily sounds and movements in a form of corporeal



*mimicry* (an intense awareness on the part of the viewer towards a particular part of their own body that corresponds with the on-screen act). In his article “The Mimetic Hypothesis”, Arnie Cox argues that “part of how we understand human movement and human-made sounds is in terms of our own experience of making the same or similar movements and sounds” (2001, p. 196). The visceral sounds of digestion and bowel motions have a physical and mimetic potential because they signify the sensation of the viewer’s own bodily functions. By omitting the image, the film betrays the distance desired between the self and waste. Rather than an image on the screen, faeces arises from within the self, invasive and impossible to shut out.

In *Human Centipede*, corporeal mimicry is generated through an identification with the centipede’s digestive sounds and convulsions; this representation of faeces, bowel movements and the gut (rather than the faecal image) creates a physical engagement between the viewer and the film. At this moment, there occurs a “gap in the viewing experience”, a phenomenon that film scholar Richard Rushton argues is a moment in spectatorship defined by complete immersion in the filmic world. In his reworking of Metz’s theories of spectatorship, Rushton argues that the process of watching a film takes place:

along the trajectory of the opposing poles of “self” and “other”: at one pole – the pole of ‘otherness’ – there is a spectator who is completely swept up in and carried away by the film, the spectator who is completely lost in the film [...] At the other pole is the spectator who totally rejects what is projected in front of him/her (2002, p. 115).

There are times in cinema viewing where the viewer can overcome “self-ness” to be “engrossed” in the film, where “cinema gives rise to a loss of self” and the viewer is delivered “into the arms of the other” (p. 117). In spite of the ways *Human Centipede* re-inscribes a distance between viewer and film – through self-reflexivity and editing/visual style – it also stimulates an intensely visceral engagement in these defecation scenes that, paradoxically,

gives rise to this loss of self Rushton refers to by returning the viewer to an embodiment ordinarily disavowed. I have mentioned how, while watching the centipede under the throes of its bowel movement, I experienced a kind of detachment from the self where I did not immediately recognise my voice as my own. As my voice is a strong signifier of my individuality, and in this moment it became unrecognisable, the implication is that I was, in that instant, detached from what I consciously understand to be “me”. As Rushton has argued, these moments deliver the viewer into the arms of the other, and Rushton raises the question of what this “other” is. It may be possible to shed some light on this query through a consideration of what we might term the “psychology” of the gut.

In her book *Psychosomatic*, Elizabeth Wilson explains that although the entire digestive tract, from mouth to anus, is encased in a network of nerves called the enteric nervous system (ENS), the parts that are “most often available to consciousness” (the upper portions of the stomach, oesophagus and anorectum) are innervated by the central nervous system (CNS) (2004, p. 37). Therefore, although it is not unusual to be aware (or even hyper-aware) of the need/desire to vomit/defecate, or the discomfort of an upset stomach, it is rare for the lower portions of the stomach (small intestine and upper colon, those parts innervated by the ENS and also involved in the sensation of nausea and acts of vomiting and defecation) to enter conscious thought, unless they are called to our attention through ill health. Further, because the ENS can act independently of the CNS, it is unlikely for the viewer to consequently become conscious of these particular sections of the gut (p. 34). In this way, the ENS and CNS speak to theories of the unconscious and conscious mind, with nausea and vomit arising as hysterical symptoms of a hidden turbulence. The unconscious engagement created through the centipede’s sounds and convulsions thereby recalls a mode of embodiment ordinarily disavowed. The “other” to which we are delivered, therefore, is the self that has *already been* othered; the moment

in which my voice was displaced from my conscious being indicates not only a detachment from the self, but a return to a mode of being that is often placed in the realm of “otherness”: the gut.

This particular mode of physical spectatorship speaks to phenomenological accounts of the film-viewer engagement. In *Carnal Thoughts*, Vivian Sobchack describes her experience of watching *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) where the first shot is of the protagonist’s (Ada’s) fingers that are, initially, unrecognisable as fingers. Instead of being surprised when the film cuts to reveal definitively what the image is (was), Sobchack states that this moment culminated in a confirmation of what her fingers already knew. Sobchack’s fingers had “comprehended that image” and “felt themselves” before this “carnal comprehension” was refigured into “conscious thought” (2004, p. 63). For Sobchack, this move from unconscious, carnal comprehension to conscious thought was constituted by a shot change, a progression she considers pleasurable. A similar shift occurred in me as I watched the scene described at the beginning of this article, provoked by the emergence of the intense and overwhelming desire to vomit and simultaneous fear of vomiting. The grip of nausea, therefore, arises as an unpleasurable “culmination and confirmation of what my [gut] – and I, reflexively if not yet reflectively – already knew” (p. 63). That I reflexively understood this identification is evidenced by my actions: rocking back and forth, scraping my nails across my desk, moaning. These were not reflective acts; only after retching violently was I able to contemplate what had occurred. Before this response, the voice I heard was mere sound that, on reflection, I was able to recognise as a series of distinct and significant words. In this moment, I suggest, my gut-identification aligned me with Lindsay – not with her character trajectory, but with her status as gut. As gut, I identified with Lindsay-as-gut. I was swallowing, against my will, imaginary faeces. The words “I don’t want to” indicate an unwillingness to function the way I must, the way I inevitably will. They signalled a strong

reluctance to accept myself as gut; as such, I “other” my voice, and maintain a divide between my subjectivity and my throat, stomach and bowels.

Whereas the gut-identification is, I argue, a “gap in the viewing experience”, nausea and vomiting are forms of rejection of the subject-position engendered by the film (Rushton, 2002, p. 115). These responses parallel Lindsay’s stance as Katsuro begins to defecate: her hand pushing against his backside is an attempt to redefine the boundary that faeces threatens to subvert as it blurs the margins of inside/outside, food/waste, subject/object. Such reactions disrupt the viewing process and overwhelm the film’s manipulation of the senses. These responses create a hyper-awareness of the bodily state, and the viewer’s focus turns to *not* vomiting and self-comforting, offering reassurances that the scenario is not real in an attempt to soothe an upset stomach. On the (admittedly rare) occasions where vomiting does ensue, it is highly offensive to all the senses – the bitter taste, burning sensation, acrid smell, the sight of part-digested food, the sound of bodily fluids hitting the floor. The organic nature of vomit also redraws the line between viewer as biological organism and film as technology, reaffirming the definition of subject and object. These are not, of course, the only ways the spectatorship may be rejected. This is the moment of the film that the viewer is most likely to steel themselves against the inevitable. Like Lindsay’s hand pushing against Katsuro, they might tense their bodies and force their thoughts to go elsewhere; they may remind themselves that it is only a film, that it is not real; they may vocalise their anxiety with moans or shouts, thus disrupting the engagement that the bowel movements on-screen are making offensively visceral; they might turn their heads, close their eyes, place their hands over their ears, or walk away entirely. Those who refuse all these ways of disengaging from the film may find their body revealing its autonomy as their lungs expel air in a fit of nervous laughter, or their stomach turns and throat convulses, bringing up bile and a consciousness of the inner depths of the gut.

Intense physical responses that define the viewer against the film return one to an understanding and acceptance of subjectivity that preceded the text. At certain moments throughout this film, the viewer is “delivered into the arms of the other”, yet nausea and/or vomit returns them to their self (Rushton, 2002, p. 117). However, Rushton argues that there can ultimately be:

no return of the self to itself because there is no “self” up there on the screen to begin with. The experience, rather, has more in common with a divorcing of the self from itself than a fulfilling return of the self to wholeness (p. 117).

This analysis is particularly pertinent for Lindsay; by the end of the film, Lindsay has not been returned to wholeness, she has been rendered permeable, vulnerable, a fragment of a whole and divorced from the self or, rather, the idea of the self as whole and stable. For the viewer also, as identification moves from the unconscious to the conscious of the gut, through nausea, anxiety, retching and bile, the definition of the self is reaffirmed, yet the lasting power of *Human Centipede* lies in the fact it has underscored the absent and illusory nature of the self that was previously perceived.

By attempting to locate the gut in film analysis, notions of inside and outside are rendered meaningless. Although seemingly internal, the gut can be conceived as being on the outside of the body. As Wilson observes; ‘the gut is a tunnel that permits the exterior to run right through us. Whatever is in the lumen of the gut is thus actually outside of our bodies’ (2004, p. 44). Like the human centipede, the notion of a separateness of mouth and anus of the viewer is an illusion; they are connected via the enteric nervous system and both are part of the digestive tract. The human centipede speaks to our anxieties that we are not closed off from the outside world and from others, nor are we impermeable with a stable exterior closing off and protecting our interiors. Modelled on both an arthropod (the “real” centipede), and non-arthropod (the worm, as faecal matter works its way through the long body

like soil through the worm), the human centipede harks back to the primordial, threatening the fabricated distance between human and animal. Therefore, by signifying and locating the filmic gut in the viewer's body, the human centipede underlines the illusion that subjectivity is constituted as an interiority safely closed off from exteriors, and thus becomes one of the most powerful and notorious figures of horror in recent years.

Although I began this article with a narrative of my own personal viewing experience, there can be reservations in placing too much import on such an individual and specific account. However, this approach seems particularly apt for discussions attempting to bring light onto and into the gut. In the introduction to *Carnal Thoughts*, Sobchack criticises the notion of talking about the body as if it were “an abstracted object belonging always to someone else”, referring instead to the lived body, meaning “what it is to be ‘embodied’ and to live our animated and metamorphic existences as the concrete, extroverted, and spirited subjects we all objectively are” (2004, p.1 ). It is this lived body that I have attempted to express with “tactile foresight” rather than “visual hindsight”, in order to construct an understanding of the processual logic of *Human Centipede* (p. 64). Sobchack argues “that autobiographical and anecdotal material” are not “merely a fuzzy and subjective substitute for rigorous and objective analysis” but instead provide the “premises for a more processual, expansive, and resonant materialist logic” (p. 6). By opening this article with my own “anecdote”, I was able to explore the extent to which such an account opens up film analysis to allow for very specific and detailed physicalities. Further, by drawing attention to the equivocal nature of existence (metamorphic concrete, objective subjects) I have also been able to consider the complications between notions of spectator and viewer that this film highlights.

*Human Centipede* is part of a larger group of films released since 2000 that evidence a particular fascination with the mutilation and

degradation of the human body. These films are often roughly split between the sub-genre “torture porn” and the trend or style “New Extremism”. The former harks back to the sorts of blood-soaked aesthetics seen in exploitation horror of the 1970s and 1980s, while the latter is often regarded as a critically richer and more interesting hybrid of art and horror cinema (but not always, for example see James Quandt, 2004 and 2011). However, I suggest all films that fall under such categories share a particular visceral aesthetic where the look and sound of mutilation strains against notions of the viewer's body through the evocation of physical responses. I refer to such films as “mutilation films”. The impression of corporeality that this term evokes indicates not just the mutilation on the screen, but also, and perhaps more significantly, the modes of physical spectatorship the films construct.

Detailed analyses of mutilation, torture and abject by-products (human waste, blood, viscera), and the physical responses generated, challenge assumptions regarding the morality of viewing these films. Attacks on the human body in film are frequently met with accusations of sadism and perversion, however the above analysis, amongst others, demonstrate how uncomfortable physical responses are frequently generated through an identification with the victim. Rather than relying on the vitriolic impact of labelling something “filth”, while simultaneously declaring such texts as lacking in social, cultural or political meaning, such analyses are able to interrogate how and why certain representations are so disturbing.

In her article “Eat Shit and Die”, scholar Delores Phillips distinguishes the coprophagic scenes in *The Human Centipede* series from those in *La Grande Bouffe* (Marco Ferreri, 1973) and *Saló*. Phillips suggests that Ferreri's and Pasolini's films are able to “strike a posture against capitalism and excess” by having characters forced to eat excrement, while Six's offering merely “wallow[s] in spectacular filthiness” and is made only for “the mass consumption of an eager audience already gorged on televised excrement” (p. 1). The article acknowledges audience responses no further

than to suggest the films are received with “vertiginous enjoyment” and “dizzying disgust” (p. 14). Yet describing audience responses in this way opens the film up to explorations of pleasure and unpleasure, and the interrelatedness of enjoyment and disgust. Therefore, for the very questions *Human Centipede* raises regarding the “consumption” of faecal representations, the film becomes part of a social, cultural and political discourse that interrogates our experience of embodied existence.

Analyses of *The Human Centipede* films, and the mutilation film in general, prescribes an awareness and theorisation of how such films manipulate the senses. As Laura Marks observes, for theories of embodiment, the senses and the intellect are not separate (2000, p.151). Therein lies *Human Centipede*’s final affront. If, as Jones argues, notions of obscenity are rendered meaningless by turning away from objectionable representations and by refusing to critically address the tortured human body then to understand them as part of an embodied discourse they must of course be subjected to detailed analysis (2013a. p. 2). Yet, in the case of *Human Centipede*, faecal representations cannot be read from an objective distance but through an acknowledgement of our status as organic entities inextricable from our physiology. If *Human Centipede* is able to effectively reproduce the embodied process of faeces – the feel, sound, smell and even taste – it is only because this process originates within (and as) us.

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