

DR SMASH'S FILM CLUB, EPISODE SIX: CIRCLE OF SHIT
THE *HUMAN CENTIPEDE* SERIES (2009-2015)

DOCTOR SMASH'S FILM CLUB #6:
CIRCLE **of** **SHIT**
THE *HUMAN CENTIPEDE* SERIES (2009-2015)



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Hello and welcome back to Dr Smash's Film Club, the Repeater Radio show where I, Alex Adams, talk about movies, popular culture, politics and ideology.

In this episode, I'm going to talk about Tom Six's *Human Centipede* series, one of the more controversial trilogies in the extreme horror canon. First things first, and before I get stuck into my analysis, I'd like to give a pretty strong content warning here. The central idea of the *Human Centipede* films is, of course, a pretty gross body horror concept, but in my discussion of the second

film particularly I'm going to be talking about the explicit representation of sadistic sexual violence, so if that's particularly upsetting or triggering to you then I'd advise avoiding this episode.

Part of my task in Dr Smash's Film Club has been to investigate and comment on the politics of cultural production, in particular the politics of extreme or controversial cultural forms. This episode serves as a kind of summary to the arguments I've made so far, because in it I'm going to talk about the politics of provocation, pop culture punitivity, the relationship between text and audience, and the ethics of filmed violence.

A Siamese triplet connected via the gastric system. Ingestion by A, passing through B, for the excretion of C. A human centipede.

The Human Centipede (First Sequence)

So, to begin with, here's an explainer on the *Human Centipede* films, which were released in 2009, 2011, and 2015 respectively. The centipede of the title is a chain of human victims connected mouth to anus. In the first film, a mad scientist connects three victims in his basement laboratory, in the second, a sadist connects twelve victims in a grimy warehouse, and the third film features a human centipede five hundred victims long constructed by depraved prison authorities. So the central idea, which is riffed upon in various ways throughout the trilogy, is that of a gruesomely and sexually humiliating form of punishment and torture.

The Dutch director of the films, Tom Six, has claimed that the inspiration for this body horror spectacle was a gross-out joke about punishing paedophiles.

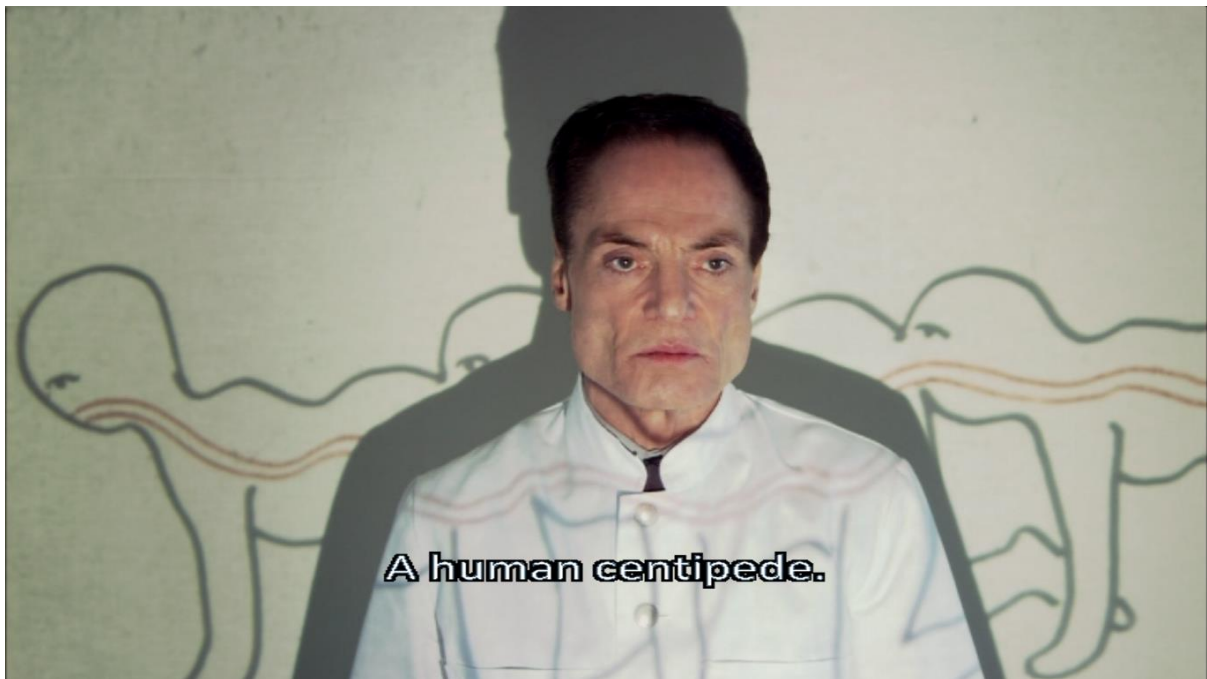
It all started with a very sick joke I always made when I was watching, with friends, television and we saw a child molester on. I said they should stitch his mouth to the ass of a very fat truck driver, that would be a good punishment for him. And everybody says, 'Oh, that's so horrible and disgusting.' And I kept thinking about that idea and I thought that's a great basic idea for a horror film. Because it's so universal, being attached to an asshole is – everybody understands the horror.¹

It's interesting that the films have a cruel joke at their origin, naturally, but it's also interesting that the films have their origin in conversational, everyday bourgeois punitivity. Fundamentally it is rooted in what Foucault calls in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) 'the spectacle of the scaffold,' the desire not only to watch violence but to enjoy it, to laugh along with the humiliation and degradation.

The first film, featuring a mad scientist figure who captures tourists and surgically connects them into a centipede, is formally a fairly conventional piece of horror cinema. It has a restrained and aesthetically accomplished look, and it relies on several stock characters and situations common to horror cinema, such as the mad scientist, the basement torture dungeon, and the two beautiful girls caught in the forest at night. Things get more interesting, however, with the second film, which is not a direct sequel in the usual sense. Despite the human centipede entering the popular imaginary as a provocative meme, and although the film garnered a certain amount of notoriety due to the scatological nature of the concept, many genre fans found the first film underwhelming in terms of

¹ Interview with Tom Six on *The Human Centipede* DVD.

the amount of gore and violence on display. For a film that had been positioned by industry hype as the last word in nasty, violent, sexually charged, body horror exploitation cinema, many fans felt that it was disappointingly tame, and they wasted no time saying so online.



When making the second *Human Centipede*, then, Tom Six deliberately made it as unrestrainedly unpleasant as possible, reportedly approaching his production team with a list of set pieces that he wanted to include, despite knowing that they would inevitably end in licensing bodies such as the BBFC and MPAA cutting or restricting the film. In due course, the film was cut and restricted. The BBFC refused the film a certificate at first, and they eventually passed it as an 18 certificate after significant cuts. As a result, the movie has attracted the reputation of being among the most disgusting or shocking or depraved movies ever made. Explicit violence aside, however, the major thematic element that made *Centipede 2* controversial was its engagement with the idea of copycat violence, as the events of the second film are shown as being directly inspired by repeat viewings of the first.

The third *Centipede* film is a very strange piece of work, and it extends the series' engagement with metacinematic parody even further. The two major actors from the first two films, Dieter Laser and Laurence R. Harvey, play prison wardens who identify the criminal justice potential of the human centipede by taking inspiration from the first two films. Based in the fictional George W. Bush prison, a nightmarish correctional facility with endemic violence and irresolvable problems of overcrowding, riot, and disobedience, *Centipede 3* is a bizarre prison drama overflowing with racism, torture, cannibalism, and sexual violence.

The films, then, are concerned with sexual humiliation and victimization, but as the sequence progresses, they engage more directly with ideas such as spectatorship, provocation, and, with a grim inevitability, censorship, offense, and political incorrectness. The first film was promoted as 100% medically accurate, the second as 100% medically inaccurate, and the third as 100% politically incorrect. More than just gross-out body horror, then, they are the thorough exploitation

of an idea grounded in punishment, voyeurism, spectacle, and the slippery relationship between text and audience.

One of my major tasks in Dr Smash's Film Club so far has been to locate films in their sociopolitical contexts and to identify any political work that they might be undertaking. The *Human Centipede* sequence is interesting because it engages this debate in a uniquely oblique and provocative way. Tom Six, the writer-director, has been lauded as a cerebral horror trailblazer and dismissed as a uniquely stupid troll in equal measure.

In *Splatter Capital*, a great little book published by Repeater in 2017, Mark Steven discusses the trilogy as a commentary on themes of economic circulation and the regurgitatory and exploitative nature of late capitalism. There is a lot to recommend this reading, as the centipede is, after all, a hugely suggestive metaphor. "It's the most horrible and horrifying story you can ever imagine. We're all in it, stitched together. Ass to mouth. Its name is capitalism, and it's choking to death on its own shit."² Tom Six has also remarked in an interview that he liked an audience member's interpretation of the first movie as being a sort of parable about swallowing politicians' bullshit.³

In some ways, then, the *Centipede* films fit into a broader trend of representing insect embodiment as a form of human humiliation. *The Palestinian Centipede* (2017), for example, by Lebanese novelist Issam Adel Hamad, uses the metaphor of 'insectization' to deal with themes of violence, dehumanization, and militarized colonialism during the 1975 Lebanese-Israeli war. It doesn't draw on Tom Six's films directly, but it shares the central metaphor of the transformation of humans into beasts, and exploits this in a range of interesting ways. More broadly, of course, modernist writers such as Franz Kafka and William Burroughs have used the metaphor of transformation and deformity as a way into themes of dehumanization, addiction, and neurosis.

People involved in the production of the films, however, don't really have that much that's interesting to say about them beyond Tom Six's stated goal to make films as objectionable as possible. Laurence R. Harvey, the star of *Centipede 2*, has remarked that he was influenced by Kristeva's writing on abjection and by Bakhtin's writing on the carnivalesque.⁴ His interpretation of Kristeva, though, is disarmingly straightforward: abjection, which he defines as the internal becoming external, is the source of horror, he says, which is why he made the artistic performance choices to dribble, make snot bubbles, and to sweat a lot. This laughably literal reading of Kristeva's feminist psychoanalytic musings on horror, the maternal, and the body, in which pooping is horrible because it is something coming out of the body, is not really to be taken seriously. Likewise, effects artist Dan Martin has made the frankly stupid suggestion that the second *Centipede* film is a commentary on the potential consequences of the underfunding of mental health services.

Unsurprisingly, the films have their many critical detractors. Roger Ebert refused to award the first film any stars in his review, and rather hyperbolically remarked that it "[occupies a world where the stars don't shine](#)."⁵ He condemned the second in even stronger terms, calling it "[reprehensible](#),"

² Mark Steven, *Splatter Capital: The Political Economy of Gore Films* (Repeater, 2017), p. 156.

³ Interview with Tom Six on *The Human Centipede* DVD.

⁴ The Evolution of Horror Podcast: Mind and Body, Part 27: *The Human Centipede 2*. <https://www.evolutionofhorror.com/mind-body-pt-27-the-human-centipede-2>

⁵ Roger Ebert, 'Ew! I hate it when that happens! *The Human Centipede* review.' *Roger Ebert* website, 5/5/2010. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-human-centipede-2010>

[dismaying, ugly, artless and an affront to any notion, however remote, of human decency](#)”.⁶ Ebert died in 2013, but one of the critics writing for his website called the third film charmless and boring, “[a cynical, and consistently unpleasant film with creators who try very, very hard to push as many of your buttons as they can](#)”.⁷

British BBC film critic Mark Kermode, too, was notable in his objection to the movies. He said he was no fan of the first film, and specifically called the second film “nasty” and “fetishized,” saying that he was “[very, very, very unhappy about its leering sadism](#).”

No – I thought it was foul and didn’t like it at all. I’m quite happy for it to be out there, I just thought it was loathsome and stupid and was, as I said, a little bit like wanting to vom. And then when it’s finished you think, ‘that’s fine, I don’t want to go there again.’⁸

He also objected to the “[smug repugnance](#)” of the third film.

Basically, it’s torture porn that thinks that it’s postmodern and intelligent, and in fact, it’s just wretched.⁹

So much for the film’s reception, which was predictably polarizing. But what, if anything, are these films doing, or trying to say? Tom Six has frequently cited directors like David Lynch and David Cronenberg as influences, saying that he is interested in disturbing imagery, suffering, the body as a site of potential horror, and extreme human experience. In particular, he has mentioned Pier Paolo Pasolini’s adaptation of the Marquis de Sade’s unfinished novel *The 120 Days of Sodom*, *Salo*, which relocates the action of Sade’s novel to Mussolini’s fascist Italy in the dying days of World War 2 in order to comment unambiguously on Italian fascism.

It’s worth thinking about *Salo* for a moment. As a gay communist in post-war Italy, Pasolini’s filmmaking practice was fiercely politically committed and fiercely moral, and *Salo* has always been read as a furious anti-fascist and anti-consumerist polemic. The film mirrors Dante’s *Inferno* in its structure, with each act being named after a particular circle of Hell. In particular, the circle of shit, which has sustained representations of victims being forced to eat mountains of human excrement, is often read as a critique of fast food, consumerism, and the force-feeding of ideology under fascism and under capitalism. Even the BBFC, who took 25 years to pass it uncut with an 18 certificate, acknowledge that *Salo* is an intelligent film that “[explores the idea that absolute power corrupts, and is intended as a critique of both fascism and consumerism](#).”¹⁰

It’s easy enough, then, to observe that Tom Six’s work has nothing of the depth of Pasolini’s. Pasolini was a poet, a journalist, a playwright, an essayist, and a radical intellectual whose cinematic

⁶ Roger Ebert, ‘An ugly, artless affront to human decency: *The Human Centipede 2* review.’ *Roger Ebert* website, 10/7/2011. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-human-centipede-2-full-sequence-2011>

⁷ Simon Abrams, ‘The Human Centipede III (Final Sequence)’, *Roger Ebert* website, 22/5/2015. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-human-centipede-3-final-sequence-2015>

⁸ Mark Kermode, ‘The Human Centipede 2’, 9/11/11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VIE3zjwHnw>.

⁹ Mark Kermode, ‘The Human Centipede 3’, 10/7/15. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gAV76bkvZY>.

¹⁰ BBFC, ‘BBFC Case Study: *Salo, or the 120 Days of Sodom*: Case Study’ <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/education/case-studies/salo-120-days-of-sodom>

work was intensely cerebral. His films engaged with a range of political themes, including forbidden love, mythology, the taboo, and the life of Christ, whereas Tom Six is only interested in sheer maximal provocation.

It's true that the closing moments of *Centipede 3* do articulate an anti-establishment critique of sorts. When the governor inspects the colossal prison centipede, he thinks it's a great idea.

Gentlemen. This is exactly what America needs. This may even get me elected President. You've convinced me. It's genius. Don't change a goddamn thing. My pals in DC – they won't believe their nearsighted eyeballs.

The Human Centipede 3 (Final Sequence)



But there is something rote and insincere about this critique, which shows the people in power as the ultimate sickos. It's too easy, really, for Six to tack a scene like this on at the end of a two-hour film – indeed, a five-and-a-half-hour trilogy – which shows prisoners as violent, wild beasts and which spectacularizes sexual torture for laughs. But disparaging Tom Six, as enjoyable as it may be, doesn't really get us anywhere analytically.

To return to *Salo*, Pasolini's final work has become particularly famous in horror circles, and often serves as a rite of passage for extreme film fans. Pasolini's intent, in *Salo*, was to create an unwatchably horrible film in order to confront the political sensibilities of the bourgeoisie at the time, to hold a mirror up to the filthiness of fascist society, and to condemn the injustices in post-war Italy. Ever since its release and its almost immediate banning, however, the mission to create an unwatchable film has been taken as a one-upmanship challenge by provocateurs like Tom Six, who are not, let's be honest, interested in critiquing society.

It's a film. The Human Centipede's a fucking film.

The Human Centipede 2 (Full Sequence)

I've talked about the Marquis de Sade a few times in Dr Smash's Film Club already. He is a particularly interesting reference point for debates about provocative material, mainly because his philosophical positions are deliberately and spectacularly offensive. He repeatedly defends rape, murder, despotic domination, torture, and so on, in utterly unambiguous terms throughout his famously misogynistic writings, writings which are often gruellingly repetitive in their didactic and direct and enthusiastic exposition of these ideas. The scholarly debate, however, has often focused on whether or not Sade actually means the obnoxious things he says or whether he is a satirist skewering the aristocratic depravity of pre-Revolutionary France. Certainly Pasolini's adaptation of his work, which quotes at length from essays on Sade by Roland Barthes and Pierre Klossowski, intends to redeploy Sade's rhetoric and style as a condemnation of fascist power.

It may not be quite clear that Tom Six really understands Pasolini's film, but his work does, interestingly, have something of Sade's slippery discourse about it. With Sade, it's impossible to tell whether he means it, and the same is true of Tom Six, whose approach to provocation and seriousness has the unfixable, sarcastic sensibility of a particularly mean-spirited shitposter. In *Centipede 3*, Six appears as a fictionalized version of himself, and when the two central characters inform him of their plans to recreate his human centipede for real, he explicitly says that he likes the idea.

The role of the spectator has long been a concern of extreme cinema. In Jörg Buttgerit's 1987 necrophilia shocker *Nekromantik*, for example, the protagonist goes to the cinema to watch a horror film in which a masked stalker salaciously murders a woman. Halfway through the movie, he walks out and commits a sex murder himself. We can easily read this section of *Nekromantik* as the dramatization of the moral panic idea that horror films directly inspire murder. Likewise, Tom Six has identified this sensitivity as particularly acute and repeatedly provokes it. At the same time as he insists that the films are just movies and that the condemnatory response to them is just professionally offended snowflakes being performatively oversensitive, he also explicitly shows the human centipede being re-enacted by, quote unquote, real people who have been inspired by Tom Six's films, and, to top it off, films himself saying that it is a great idea to do so.

Centipede 2 is particularly provocative, and was the cause of a particularly well-publicized moral panic. It upped the game in terms of grotesque effects shots, many of which were created and filmed in the full knowledge that they would never be seen by audiences because they would be removed by regulatory bodies. This is effects artist Dan Martin talking about Tom Six's vision for the first sequel.

Early on in the film, I said to Tom, 'Look, I don't want to do John out of work, but I feel like we're spending a lot of money on stuff you're never going to be able to use. Like, there's a checklist that the MPAA and the BBFC and whoever have as to what they will and won't let through, and you're basically just ticking off all the stuff that they don't allow. So you're not going to be able to use any of this. Like, you know, you're spending good money – and I'm enjoying making it – but you're spending good money making this stuff... would it not be better to have extra takes on the stuff we are going to be allowed, the stuff earlier in the film? We'll do other, extra stuff?' And he's like, 'No, well, that's the point. That's the whole point. Like everyone fucking got on me, on the internet, about the first movie, saying, Oh, it wasn't as extreme as we thought it was,' like, all

the, like he said, all the horror nerds were saying it wasn't extreme enough, it wasn't extreme enough. He's like, 'So now I'm going to show them, I'll make the most extreme film ever made.' And I said, 'But it's going to get banned.' And he said, 'Well, I want it to get banned, that's the whole point.'¹¹

[Dan Martin](#)

Tom Six got what he wanted. The BBFC demanded 32 cuts before they would pass *Centipede 2* with an 18 certificate, an almost unprecedented number of cuts amounting to over two minutes of excised footage.¹² This material, which apparently includes explicit close-ups, features very graphically depicted sexual violence, infanticide, coprophagy, and torture. The main character Martin uses sandpaper to masturbate and wraps barbed wire around his penis before raping someone, for instance, and a newborn baby is graphically killed by its own mother while she attempts to flee the carnage. All of these events remain in the film, but are suggested rather than graphically shown.

More important, however, than all of these gruesome and deliberately offensive set pieces, was the fact that thematically it was concerned with imitation and copycat violence. *Centipede 2* is centrally preoccupied with the relationship between audience and text. The protagonist Martin, in a gesture of supreme and deliberate tastelessness, is a child abuse survivor with an unspecified intellectual disability, and his slimy masturbatory enjoyment of the first movie is gruesomely emphasized in the notorious sandpaper wank scene. He is a superfan of the first *Human Centipede* film, and in his violent recreation of the centipede he conscripts twelve unwilling participants, quadrupling its length. Horror film, in *Centipede 2*, is a stimulant, a suggestion, almost an instruction. Likewise, in Sade's *120 Days*, storytellers describe sexual perversions which his characters then immediately and enthusiastically act out. In *Centipede 2*, horror films work in much the same way as pornography does for Sade, as an enervating and stimulating form of didactic guidance.

Much as antipornography campaigners have argued that exposure to filmed sexual acts can inspire or cause men to commit rape, many pro-censorship voices have argued that exposure to filmed violence – simulated or otherwise – can inspire or cause viewers to commit violence. This anxiety is particularly pronounced when it comes to images that are at once violent and sexual. The BBFC's concern with *The Human Centipede 2* was not so much that it is a tasteless, stupid and disgusting film, but that it dramatizes the enactment of a dark, violent sexual fantasy in which a movie plays a pivotally inspirational role.

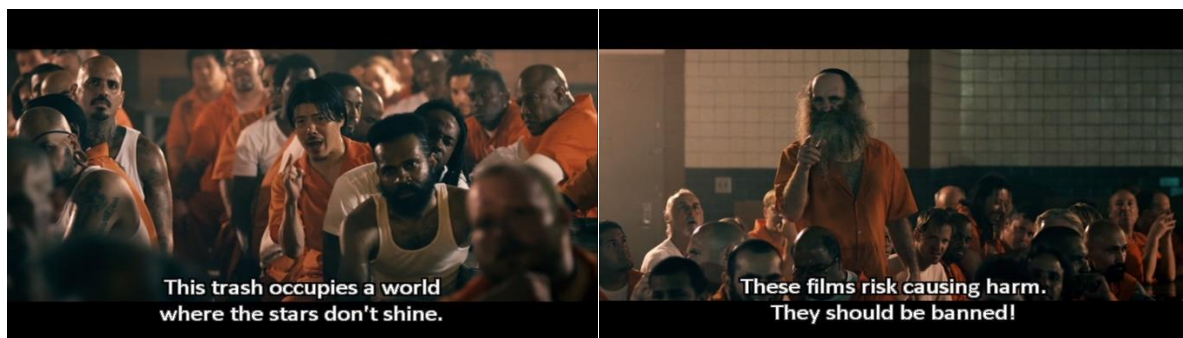
Of course, Tom Six knew that this was precisely the right button to press if you want to annoy the BBFC. Six has, if nothing else, the idiotic genius of the provocateur, and he is perfectly skilled in initiating a conversation in which it is impossible for anyone to say anything in good faith. You're not supposed to like the films, but if you object to them then Tom Six has gloatingly defeated you. You are either a wimp for getting upset or a censorious totalitarian for thinking the films are garbage.

¹¹ The Evolution of Horror Podcast: Mind and Body, Part 27: *The Human Centipede 2*. <https://www.evolutionofhorror.com/mind-body-pt-27-the-human-centipede-2>

¹² BBFC. 2016. *The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)*: Cuts Information. BBFC Website. <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/release/the-human-centipede-2-full-sequence-q29sbgvidglvbjpwwc0znza5mjc>

The films are, in fact, a great example of the dynamics of the cancel culture moral panic. Tom Six knows that courting censorship is a great way to build an audience. Because unlike so many people who claim to have been cancelled, Tom Six was, in fact, censored, and this restriction of his right to speech was, in fact, committed by the government. That said, as we have heard, it was clearly his intent for the film to generate controversy by being banned. Getting banned was a PR move, and the idiotic genius of this tactic is that by discharging their legal duty to restrict the film, the BBFC were forced into the position of giving Tom Six exactly what he wanted. In fact, they went further than he could have hoped, publishing a press release strongly condemning the film.

In *Centipede 3*, the deranged prison wardens screen the first two films to the prisoners, shortly before informing this audience that they are about to become a 500-man human centipede. At a couple of points, the audience scream out their objections.



Yo, what the fuck is this?
This trash occupies a world where the stars don't shine.
Oh man...!
These films risk causing harm. They should be banned!
[jeering]
The Human Centipede 3 (Final Sequence)

Portraying the then-recently deceased Roger Ebert as a whining crybaby, this segment of the film comments once again on the series' reception. Though Tom Six sneers at the complaints about *Centipede 2*, the professionally outraged are a key thematic resource and promotional asset for his films.

Perhaps the boldest thing the human centipede really represents, then, if we want to give it a conceptual reading, is the constant redigestion of the same old bullshit. Tom Six says something horrible, there is outrage, he makes an even more provocative statement, there is censorship, he uses the censorship to get attention for his next horrible statement, and so on, in a predictable, unidirectional, unedifying spectacle. To return to the film's origins in a poor-taste joke, it is interesting that the centipede-like cycle of provocation and outrage that the films incite and then feed upon resembles the culture war moral panic over cancel culture and so-called transgressive comedy. Edgy comics, who actually are very often just recycling tired and offensive cliches in a desperate bid to appeal to the lowest common denominator, love to provoke reactions just so they can get some publicity by going through the media cycle of cancellation. This regurgitatory force-feeding has something of the centipede about it.

So this concludes the sixth episode of Dr Smash's Film Club. Thank you very much for listening, as ever, and, once more, I'd like to recommend that you check out my website atadamswriting.com for more details of my work and for information about previous episodes. This is the last episode of Dr Smash for now, but I will see you soon!