

Film: The Human Centipede (2009)

Synopsis

The Human Centipede is a 2009 horror movie directed by Tom Six that recounts the story of German surgeon, Dr. Joseph Heiter, who helps two American tourists (Lindsay and Jenny) fix a “flat tire” ultimately drugging, kidnaping, and locking the girls in his household operating room. Dr. Heiter is medically renowned for separating conjoined twins. Now retired, his ultimate crazed surgery is something completely gory and unfathomable: connect his victims from mouth to anus to create a single gastrointestinal tract. During the movie, Dr. Heiter secures another victim, Katsuro, to create his human-based pet. He disassembles the mouths, buttocks, and knees of his victims to create a three person centipede.

How it relates to the field of psychiatry

Glimpses of Dissociation?

Dr. Heiter is initially portrayed as a medically-adept individual emanating with warmth and comfort as he helps two young girls fix their tire. He asks the girls to enter his home, offering them a glass of water. When the girls spill the water, Dr. Heiter yells at them, indicating the first sign of concern. The girls, as well as the audience, sense his labile change in affect. Fast forward a few minutes in the story and Dr. Heiter’s image continues to deteriorate. His kind and nurturing demeanor turns cold and detached as he describes the “stitching” operation to his patients. The ego defense mechanism of dissociation is evident as a remnant of a repressed trauma in Dr. Heiter’s past. This movie, inspired by World War II crimes, demonstrates trauma stemming from the chaos, suffering, pain, and hatred he saw during the war as a child. Any trigger, even the tipping of glass, could switch his persona; in this case, a crazed surgeon.

Past history of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, sexual or physical abuse?

A large part of Dr. Heiter’s past is unknown to the audience. His personality and behavior towards his victims may be a traumatic reenactment stemming from childhood neglect or physical/verbal abuse. Dr. Heiter ignores the health of his victims, such as when Jenny becomes septic. This could symbolize a moment in Dr. Heiter’s childhood of being neglected by his mother or father. The trope of childhood physical illness resulting in failure in maternal bonding with subsequent adult pathology has been seen in fictional (Elijah Price, *Unbreakable*, 2000) and true crime accounts (Ted Kaczynski) (1). His aggression when he yells at Katsuro to defecate in Lindsay’s mouth, forcing her to swallow feces, may be another reflection of a repressed memory that Dr. Heiter experienced as a child.

References

Biography.com, A&E Television Networks, <https://www.biography.com/people/ted-kaczynski-578450>, 2014

Key Words: The Human Centipede, Dr. Joseph Heiter, Dissociation, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD, World War II

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