David Cronenberg's The Fly

They were giving away T-shirts at the premiere of The Fly, Toronto filmmaker David Cronenberg's contribution to the Fly cycle of horror pics in this remake of the 1958 version. An excellent horror movie because it gives you something to throw up on as you watch the film, instead of barfing all over yourself. There are, of course, several currents in modern cultural nausea. For Sartrian existentialism, nausea was produced by a surfeit of being. In the nihilism of post-existentialism, however, nausea results from an absence of being. But in the technological transformations of absent being into mutated forms, nausea regurgitates upon itself to become not only nausea but normal. Techno-culture is, in this sense, deeply nauseating. And while Canadian filmmaking is not without its nauseants (Arthur Lipsett, for instance, or in his dizzy way Bruce Elder), David Cronenberg surely leads the pack by virtue of having attained a certain level of critical esteem at home and, as well, a certain level of distributive clout abroad among the mass-mechanisms of pulp-culture, with what Bill Beard has called his "regurgitative versions".

With The Fly, however, Cronenberg surpasses himself in the sheer intensity of his revulsion. The Fly is Cronenberg-plus: all the obsessions of the previous films raised to a quivering pitch of relentless gagging not only before the helpless corporeality of the flesh itself, but because of the human impossibility to do anything other than love even its most monstrous creations. As James Twitchell writes in his anatomical study of the horror film, "What is truly terrib- ile in the story of the transformation monster is incomplete transformation." And The Fly is a truly terrible film.

For one, because it's so unbelievably improbable: Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) is to scientists, real or demented, what Veronica (co-star Geena Davis) is to journalists or what Stathis Borans (third lead John Getz) is to magazine publishers. In short, it's a cartoon, from Seth Brundle's lob ("Dashboard phone-booths?"") inquires Ronnie as he's showing her the telepods) to such gems of dialogue as: "Ronnie: 'It's really big' Stathis: 'What is? His cock.'" Cartoon characters, cartoon setting (Toronto with American currency), and cartoon emotions. As one of the wits in the audience yelled out during the first (for a director as into 'flesh' as Cronenberg) astonishingly coy sex-scene between Brundle and Ronnie, "Don't touch his fly!"

Except that in the wonderful world of Cronenberg perception, the cartoons bleed. Suddenly. They not only bleed, they ooze, they putulate, they decompose, they crack open, they split apart, they are rent asunder - turning into quivering, fibrillating, spattering hunks of processed meat. Modern media systems, McLuhan taught, in reprocessing human beings into "the sex organs of the machine" turn the human inside-out, exterminating the nervous system. Cronenberg's earlier films, especially Videodrome (1982), are literal explorations of technological reprocessing, and The Fly is perhaps the most literal of Cronenberg's films. As Brundle delicately explains, puzzling over the quivering yecch of a baboon that his telepod (or media) reprocessing system has turned inside-out, that's, so to speak, the fly in the process. As Brundle literally discovers.

Even so, after Brundle has turned into Brundlefly, life goes on: hideous, mishappen mutant that he has become, he continues problem-solving at his computer, even as his fingers decompose onto the keys and his teeth or ears fall off. Life goes on, as Veronica finds she is pregnant with the mutant seed of Brundlefly, and has a hideous nightmare about giving birth to a huge, obscene, wriggling larva. As The Cramps sing in their popular song, "Insect Love," "I took a chance on inter SPECIES ROMANCE." So Brundlefly too loves. Why do you want to kill what's left of your humanity? he asks Ronnie after rescuing her from the doctor's office where she had gone for an abortion.

And if insect-man is capable of love, he is also lovable. As an anguished Brundlefly overhears Ronnie tell Stathis she couldn't tell Brundle about the 'baby,' one feels for the monster - as one feels for Frankenstein's creature or Charles Laughton's hunchback or Lon Chaney's phantom of the opera. It's in probing this nexus of monstrous sympathy that Cronenberg, with this film, really reaches the depths of his regurgitative vision. And, again, with the most appalling literalness.

Not only does Brundlefly vomit on Stathis (who's, by the way, trying to blow him away with a shotgun), but the upchuck is corrosive and eats through flesh and bone, fusing one of Stathis' hands into a molten stump and severing one of his feet. Cronenberg turns them this regurgitative vision on Brundlefly (who's locked Ronnie into the telepod intending to mutate himself, her and the baby into one recombined body) in the stomach-churning climax of the film.

Even then - that is, after Brundlefly has experienced two further incomple tete transformations that are monumental moments of horror, and monu ments to special effects' ability to make audiences experience the shattered remains of human identity as viscous crustaceans - even then, as the thing has put the shotgun to its head, pleading with Veronica to terminate its 'life,' she is still not without love.

For Cronenberg's ability to move the film from cartoon to the limits of despair approached early in this century by Kafka in Metamorphosis, The Fly is Cronenberg's crudest masterpieces of modern film horror. Unfortunately, by the standards of horror of the 20th century, whether that's at all a meaningful achievement (today that is, outside the now-place of a movie theatre) is open to question. If the Narcissus of antiquity sought his self-reflection in a pool of water, that Narcissus seeks his self-image in a celluloid pool of vomit says much about the retchedness of this culture that no film, however effective or corrosive, can change, can only exploit.

So the best I can recommend a hearty meal beforehand. That way you'll have a real souvenir to bring home afterwards.

Michael Dorland •