

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 idea, too. 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 Sartrean 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 neither surfeit nor absence, but norm. Techno-culture is, in this sense, deeply nauseating. And while Canadian filmmaking is not without its nauseasts (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 puke-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 corruptibility 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 terrible 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 lab-loft (“Designer 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 Cronenbergian animation, the cartoons bleed. Suddenly. And they not only bleed, they ooze, they pustulate, 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, exteriorizing 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 detachedly 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 been turned into Brundlefly, life goes on: hideous, mishapen 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

interspecies romance.” So Brundlefly too loves. Why do you want to kill what's left of my 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 then turns his 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 incomplete transformations that are monumental moments of horror, and monuments to special effects' ability to realize McLuhan's nightmares of mediatized humanity as vicious crustaceans — even then, as the thing has put the shotgun to its head, pleading with Veronica to terminate its ‘life,’ she is still capable of 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 surely one of the 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 no-place of a movie theatre) is open to question. If the Narcissus of antiquity sought his self-reflection in a pool of water, that technological Narcissus seeks his in a celluloid pool of vomit says much about the retchedness of this culture that no film, however effective or corrosive, can change, only exploit.

So enjoy *The Fly* if you can. I recommend a hearty meal beforehand. That way you'll have a real souvenir to bring home afterwards.

Michael Dorland



• A terrifying transformation for Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum)

THE FLY d. David Cronenberg p. Stuart Cornfeld sc. Charles Edward Pogue, David Cronenberg orig. story George Langelaan d.o.p. Mark Irwin. C.S.C. prod. des. Carol Spier ed. Ronald Sanders music Howard Shore co-p. Marc-Ami Boyman, Kip Ohman cast. Deirdre Bowen des./creation The Fly Chris Walas, Inc. unit prod. man. David Coatsworth 1st asst. d. John Board 2nd asst. d. Kim Winther 3rd asst. Patricia Rozema, Thomas P. Quinn prod. coord. Debbie Cooke visual cons. Harold Michaelson a.d. Rolf Harvey set dec. Elinor Rose Galbraith set des. James McAteer 1st asst. a.d. Nancey Pankiw set dresser Gary Jack, Danielle Fleury asst. set dresser Ian Wheatley props Marc Corriveau asst. props Paul Hotte sc. spv. Gillian Richardson cost. des. Denise Cronenberg ward. Trysha Bakker 1st asst. cam. Marvin Midwick 2nd asst. cam. Donna Mobbs cam. appr. Charlotte Disher addt. cam. Kenneth Post, C.S.C., Robin Miller unit pub. Prudence Emery stills Attila Dory const. Joseph Curtin scenic artist Nick Kosonic carp. Ian Fraser set des. Kirk Cheney asst. p. Rick Schmidlin, Susan Kinney asst. to the p. Barbara Mainguy prod. acct. Doreen Davis assem. ed. Steven Weslak 1st asst. ed. Michael Rea 2nd asst. ed. Susan Shipton, Cherie MacNeill asst. ed. (London) Kant Pan post-prod. coor. Carol McBride sd. eds. David Evans, Wayne Griffin dialogue ed. Richard Cadger a.d.r. ed. Robin Leigh sd. efx. ed. Jane Tattersall Foley Terry Burke asst. sd. ed. Steven Munro, David Giammarco, Sandra Moffat, Susan Maggi, Michael Followes, Pat Calvert prod. sd. Bryan Day, Michael Lacroix gaffer Douglas Scotty Allan best boy elec. David Willetts 1st elec. Ian Scott 2nd elec. Sam Bojin key grip Mark Manchester dolly grip David Hynes asst. grip Ron Paulauskas grip Don Payne sp. efx. Louis Craig, Ted Ross stunt coord. Dwayne McLean efx. spv. Lee Wilson trans. coor. Matthew Wolchock loc. man. Howard Rothschild make-up Shonagh Jabour hair Ivan Lynch negs. Jack Hooper music orch. Homer Dennison music ed. Jim Weidman music rec. Keith Grant re-rec. Gerry Humphreys “FLY” Creature Effects Peter Albrecht, Peter Babakitas, Brent Baker, Jon Berg, Margaret Beserra, Donald Bies, Robert Burman, Blair Clark, Stephan Dupuis, Keith Edmier, Bob Hall, Jonathan Horton, Sir Guy of Hudson, Conrak Itchener, Jim Smash Isaac, Michael Jobe, Marie-Louise Kingery, Patricia Kowchak, Anthony Laudoti, Kelly Lepkowsky, Michelle Linder, Donald Mowat, Jerrold Neidig, Gregg Olsson, Michael Owens, Zandra Platzeck, Robin Ralston, Michael Smithson, William Stoneham, Valerie Sofranko, Debra Tomel, Wim Jan Van Thillo, Carol Kaefer Walas, Mark Walas, Harold Weed, Mark Williams, I.p. Jeff Goldblum, Geena Davis, John Getz, Joy Boushel, Les Carlson, George Chuvalo, Michael Copeman, David Cronenberg, Carol Lazare, Shawn Hewitt, Brent Meyers, Doron Kernerman, Romuald Vervin p.c. Brookfilms Production dist. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. Colour, 35mm running time: 100 mins.