

David Cronenberg's
The Fly

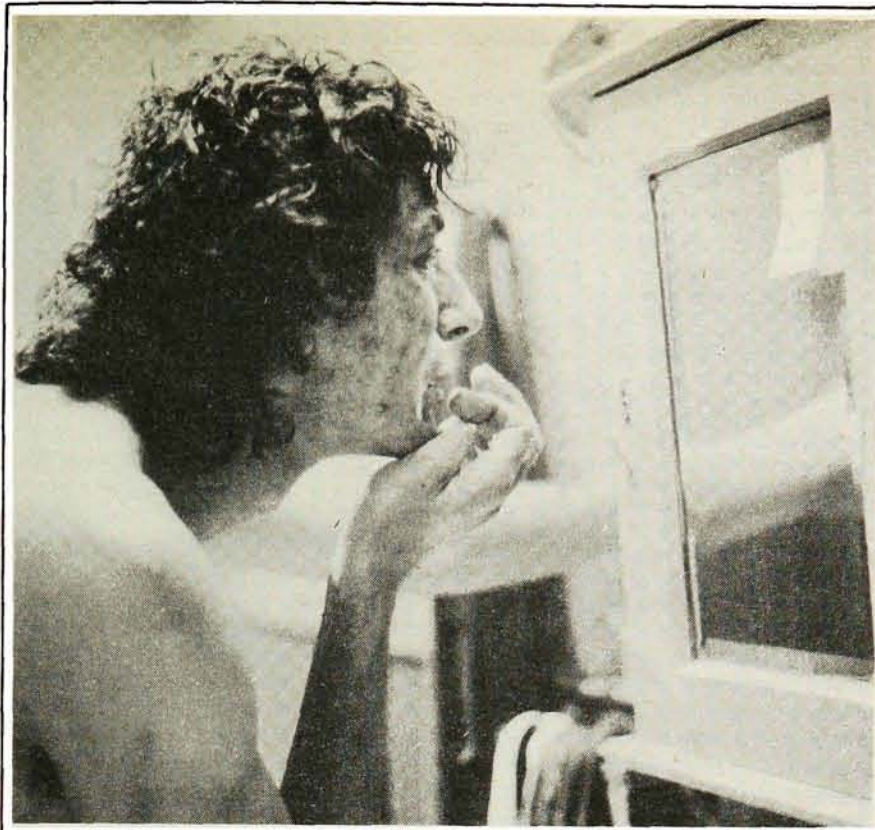
With everyone from Andrew Sarris on down to Bruce Kirkland heaping laurel wreaths on David Cronenberg and calling *The Fly* a masterpiece, it seems a little mean-spirited to sit here and say no, it isn't, it isn't a masterpiece — particularly since I'm one of those who, ever since *The Brood*, has been flinging his own laurel wreaths and trying to get the big boys to take notice. But *The Fly* is not a masterpiece.

Yes, it's Cronenberg's best direction to date. He could always do the scary stuff, but now he can do the rest of it just as well. It's funny when Jeff Goldblum sits down to play the piano. It's sexy when Geena Davis lends her stockings for an experiment. It's realistic and hot when they make love. It's exhilarating when he goes into his gymnastic routine and it's real-life rotten when she breaks down over her pregnancy.

Yes, it's Cronenberg's most handsomely-mounted production by far. Mark Irwin's camerawork is flawless, moody, claustrophobic and the source of a lot of tension. Carol Spier's art direction fleshes out the characters with tons of terrific details. The monsters and gore, by California's Chris Walas, are every bit as classy as those in *Aliens*. In all, this is the film that should, once and for all, lay to rest anybody's lingering qualms about the capability of Canadian crews.

Yes, the performances are dandy. Even the smallest role — the bar-girl pick-up (Joy Boushel) — is perfectly cast and played with a full measure of intelligence and intensity. John Getz, as Stathis Borans the heroine's editor and ex-lover, does good work in a crummy art. It's not his fault that Borans is Mr. Slime, but Getz tries to compensate anyway, making sure we know that he is, in his own sweaty way, in love. Borans-as-creep serves two functions: he denies us the traditional happy-ending escape route of the worthy second banana who puts the heroine's shattered life together at the end and he keeps our sympathy focussed on the doomed lovers. Who repay us in full. Jeff Goldblum is a perfect Seth Brundle (Where does Cronenberg get these names?), intelligent enough to be the genius he's supposed to be and carrying a physical and emotional intensity and a low-key self-confidence that only needs the slightest push to slip from charming to frightening. Goldblum knows how to give it that push and how to let Brundle's dignity and humor (on which he's got a perfect handle) shine through without ever lapsing into sentimentality. Geena Davis as Veronica has less to work with, but she still creates a rounded, believable character whose intelligence, humor, hardness and vulnerability all function together, coloring one another.

And, yes, the subtexts they're all rav-



• *The Fly* — a masterpiece of modern film horror

ing about are there and they're deliberate. We have the Monster As Metaphor For Disease: Guy gets cancer (genetic fusion with fly) and turns very ugly, inside and out, but the girl who loves him hangs on, trying to help, refusing to turn away as long as a trace of her beloved remains. In the end, she performs a mercy killing, proof of love and a demonstration that, in life, there ain't no happy endings. We have The Monster As Metaphor for Neurotic Lover: Guy falls in love, becomes jealous and turns himself into a monster (It's his own fault that the fly is in the telepod with him. If he'd been calm and sober, none of this need have happened.) Girl reassures guy of her love, but it's too late. All he wants now is to assimilate her completely, but she'd like to retain her sense of self. Girl kills guy and so much for Love The Redeemer. The two subtexts even fuse when Brundlefly sees assimilation as the cure for his condition.

This is Cronenberg's view of love and mortality. In an interview in *The Village Voice* (Aug. 19, 1986, p. 50), he states, "...somebody dies, somebody gets old, somebody gets sick. One of the key people in a romance becomes a monster sooner or later," and, later on says, "It's like looking on someone you love dying. It's unthinkable, but would you turn away? ...But you'll never conceive of these things unless you watch. If I did it offscreen, you wouldn't get it."

He does it onscreen. You get it and it works. Unless you're heartdead, you'll feel the pity and the terror for both the Brundlefly and Veronica that Cronenberg wants you to feel.

So what is there to prevent this from being a masterpiece? What could possibly be wrong with a movie that has all this going for it?

Well, actually, it's the text itself. It does provide a wonderful vehicle for the subtexts, but it doesn't really do very much else, like resonate, for instance. In the works that have taken centuries to earn their masterpiece status, *Hamlet*, say, or *Oedipus*, every time the text raises those issues that set you to musing on your own life, it simul-

taneously pulls you back into the story, focussing you, with heightened understanding and empathy, on the hero's very specific story.

This doesn't happen in *The Fly* for three reasons. First, the text keeps pointing you back at the subtexts. "I won't be another tumorous bore," says Brundle and, later on trying to convince Veronica to accept assimilation, "We'll be the perfect nuclear family," pushing you to remember that this is metaphor, pushing you to consider how this relates to you. Which, on a literal level, is not true.

This is a minor point (reason two, here), but not, I think, a negligible one: *The Fly*, on a literal level, has nothing to do with you and me. *Videodrome* is about watching TV and what it might do to you. We all watch the box. *The Brood* is about outer-limits therapy and child abuse and many of us have had experience of both. *The Fly* is about mutating into an insect and there's just no connection, not on the literal, story-telling level. Of course, you may not find much to connect you with the Greek king or the Danish prince, but their stories do a good deal more than function as metaphor.

This, as I said, is a minor point and if you decide I'm just plain wrong, I'm not gonna be heartbroken and I don't think the strength of my argument will be materially affected, because the real problem with *The Fly* is not its lack of connection with us, but its lack of connection between text and subtext.

Try this simple test: Imagine *The Brood* is about hypotherapy rather than the physical-manifestation therapy of psychoplasms. What you get is Samantha Eggar killing people and what you lose is the mind-body aspect of the film and the visual correlation between the brood and her natural child, which in turn loses you a whole lot of subtext about child abuse. Now try it as a movie about spouse abuse with a brood of murderous Art Hindles. Changes everything. How about *Videodrome* as a movie about radio. Okay, now let's try *The Fly* without the fly. Let's try it with

another creature — no, better yet, let's try it with just Brundle, the telepod and the computer. Remember, Brundle's experiment works because he taught the computer to love the flesh. But what if he taught it wrong, or too well and in transporting him, the computer changed him, scrambled his genes to agree with its faulty program. Change the design of the monster a little, drop a couple of specific references to insects and you can do virtually the same text with the same subtexts. You can swap telepods for a gene scanner and a radiation leak or any number of other things. You can chuck out science altogether and do it as a misfired magic ritual. You can almost do it as a werewolf story — haul genetic fusion back in for the climax. You can skip the genre elements completely and go for naturalism — cancer, a brain tumor, porphyria — there are lots of diseases that warp both body and mind. In short: *The Fly* isn't about the fly. In jargon: the text has been reduced to the status of pretext for the subtext. In effect: the picture heads toward flatness. Once you've "got it" there's nothing else to get. In a masterpiece, one of the things you find is a three-way resonance involving the tale, the perceptions of the audience member and the intended meaning(s) of the tale. Here, one side of that triangle just doesn't vibrate.

Which is why *The Fly* is not a masterpiece (Which may also be why it's being called a masterpiece: this is the first Cronenberg movie you can "get" without having to get right down eyeball to oozing eyeball with the weird, lunatic, gory bits. You can get the message without really enduring the fright and that makes it very safe, clean and respectable. Read Sarris or Jay Scott in the *Globe & Mail* — the way they talk in spots they could almost be discussing someone like good, grey Norman Jewison.)

If *The Fly* isn't a masterpiece, it's still a very good movie, head, shoulders and belly-button above most of the brainless, heartless drivel that passes for horror and science fiction on the screen these days. Cronenberg's accomplishment is not to be denied and the recognition is long overdue.

Finally, to reverse the field completely: there is a sense in which *The Fly* may be considered a masterpiece. Years ago in an art history course, I stayed awake long enough to learn that "masterpiece" originally referred to the work the student did that summed up all he had learned from his master and signalled that he was now going to strike out on his own. Cronenberg has no master in that sense. He is, like most post-studio-era-directors, largely self-taught. Still, he has said he learned a lot about the human elements in storytelling from producers Stuart Cornfeld and Mel Brooks, and *The Fly*, despite a weaker story than *The Brood* and less excitement than *Videodrome*, is arguably his best work. His ongoing thematic elements are present, clear and fully explored. His command of the medium is assured and his work with actors is well above his previous standard. It is possible then that he can and will take what he knows and use it to begin building an entirely different kind of David Cronenberg film.

Andrew Dowler •