

WHY FLESH? EXAMINING THE POWER OF FLESH IN DAVID CRONENBERG'S *THE*

FLY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of body horror, specifically how one film's use of body horror impacts the body and the flesh within the body. "Why Flesh? Examining the Power of Flesh in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* is a close-viewing analysis of the film and how Cronenberg's carefully constructed film allowed for him to isolate the ways in which body horror truly terrifies audiences and forces them to confront themselves. Through the examination of flesh as it is impacted by pregnancy, aging, and chronic illness, *The Fly* acts as an excellent lens to discuss not only popular themes in body horror, but also get at the root of why they are horrifying.

Keywords: body horror, Cronenberg, *The Fly*, flesh

Why Flesh? Examining the Power of Flesh in David Cronenberg's *The Fly*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE	i
COPYRIGHT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCING THE FLESH	1
CHAPTER 2: FLESH AS RENEWAL, NEWNESS, AND REBIRTH	7
CHAPTER 3: FLESH AS PENETRATION AND SEX	19
CHAPTER 4: FLESH AS TRANSFORMATION	29
CHAPTER 5: WHAT'S LEFT OF THE FLESH?	39
WORKS CITED	44
APPENDIX A: COPY OF TUDOR'S RANK ORDER CHARTS	47
APPENDIX B: DELETED BUTTERFLY BABY	48
APPENDIX C: SCREENSHOT FROM FILM: SILHOUETTE OF SETH BRUNDLE	49
APPENDIX D: SCREENSHOT FROM FILM: THE BRUNDLEFLY	50

CHAPTER 1: Introducing the Flesh

**“I don’t think that the flesh is necessarily
treacherous, evil, bad.
It is cantankerous, and it is independent.”**
David Cronenberg, *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p. 80¹

Why are we afraid of our own bodies? Maybe the more appropriate question would be, why are we afraid of our bodies changing? Michael Collins writes that “At first glance any popular text that makes such extensive use of the body in peril seems exploitative and crass, but it is through this use of the body that genre defines and justifies it” (28). Many stories and films explore this idea of the body being put in danger or the body being dangerous itself, but there are few directors who are as dedicated to exploring the body as David Cronenberg. Specifically, he wants to know what the body should *not* do. Because of this, I wanted to better understand the flesh from his perspective. While primarily coming in from a literature background, film analysis is something that I have always been interested in, and *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986) certainly got my attention. While I utilize many literary analysis strategies for a close-viewing of this film, I will also examine the mise-en-scène for select scenes of importance that indicate the significance of the body, the flesh, and body horror. Particularly, the different stages of the body in peril: pregnancy, aging, and chronic illness; all work together in Cronenberg’s *The Fly* to expose the things that we are truly most afraid of and uncomfortable with. These are things that are unavoidable in life for most, if not all, people. We age from the moment of birth. Pregnancy impacts all people. Chronic illness will be a factor in nearly every life at some point. Cronenberg’s *The Fly* does not let us forget these facts.

¹ Cronenberg, David. *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, edited by Chris Rodley, Faber and Faber, 1997.

When considering horror, there are many types of horror subgenres, including: classic slasher films like *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984) or *Friday the 13th* (Sean Cunningham, 1980), found footage horror that most people associate with *The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) or *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007), and monster horror (where *The Fly* from both 1958, directed by Kurt Neumann, and 1986 could easily find a home, but it is more likely to be the home for creatures like Godzilla). Cronenberg's *The Fly* has a clear place in the body horror genre. Body horror has many varying definitions depending on the author, but for the purposes of this paper, body horror will be using the identification provided by Ronald Allan Lopez Cruz. He states "Body horror, a genre trope that showcases often graphic violations of the human body, is also justifiably called *biological horror*. The true biological nature of the horror elicited by these films is here discussed in light of hybrids, metamorphoses, mutations, aberrant sex, and zombification" (161). People are often afraid of the things that can change them, whether this is the zombie story, a disease, a mutation, or some horrifying alteration that either affects their lives or can end them. Cronenberg has carved out a particular section of the body horror genre due to his fascination with mutation and transformation.

Changes to the self is one fear that any person can have. Additionally, as long as technological advancements have been made, people have been cautious or outright afraid of what the future may bring. Andrew Tudor notes "interestingly, David Cronenberg's powerful 1986 remake of *The Fly* minimizes the 'price of progress' subtext in favour of an approach which dwells on the metamorphosis and brings out the internal potential of the story" (157). This is a deviation from the trends traced by Tudor at the start of his book. Despite *The Fly* coming out in 1986, its previous iteration could be examined in Tudor's rank order of horror-movie monsters between the years of 1931-1984. When examining over nine hundred films that came

out in this timespan, Tudor found that there were 169 cases of mad scientists, 134 cases of science creations, 97 cases of mutations, and 43 cases of bug-eyed monsters (20). This data also found that of those 900+ films, 251 of the sources of the threat were scientific in nature (Tudor 21).² This data shows a clear and deliberate societal fear of advancements in technology.

Whether it is how the new generation will be affected by this technology or how changes will impact societal traditions in some negative way, this fear is one that can still be traced today with the popularity of social media and Artificial Intelligence.³ Based on these findings, however, Cronenberg wanted to stray away from those fears of the future despite still indulging in the “mad scientist” story line.

The Fly had quite an interesting lifespan before it reached Cronenberg. When researching the origins of the story, it can be traced all the way back to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Ovid tells a story of a young girl who is an excellent weaver named Arachne; she is turned into a spider. The next notable example comes with Franz Kafka’s novella *The Metamorphosis* in 1915. This story follows a salesman named Gregor Samsa who wakes up one morning to find he has turned into a large bug, often depicted to be part of the beetle family. In 1957, George Langelaan wrote a short story for *Playboy Magazine* in which a scientist named André Delambre became horribly transformed after an experiment with teleportation fused him with a house fly. The major issue here, however, is that André had created two creatures: a man with the head and arm of a fly and a fly with the head and arm of a man. The following year, Vincent Price starred as André’s brother in the film adaptation of Langelaan’s short story. Not much was changed between the two stories other than a new shot at the end of the 1958 film: when they found the fly with the

² See Appendix A.

³ Just this August in 2024, the film *Afraid* was released by Blumhouse Productions about an AI programmed house that terrorizes a family.

head of André in a spider's web, the audience can hear him scream for help for a moment before he is put out of his misery. This history all brings us to Cronenberg's 1986 adaptation of *The Fly*. It's only with Langelaan's short story that the story started to sound similar to what Cronenberg wrote and adapted, but the question becomes why did Cronenberg decide to focus so much on the flesh?

In order to fully understand the discussion of Cronenberg's *The Fly*, there needs to be a description of the film's plot.⁴ Seth Brundle and Veronica Quaipe meet at a science symposium where Veronica, a journalist, is trying to find the next big story for *Particle Magazine*. She was sent here by her boss and ex-fling Stathis Borans who is a recurring thorn in the side of the emerging love affair between Seth and Veronica. Seth invites Veronica back to his place to see his breakthrough in science and transportation where he teleports her stockings as a demonstration. Instead of breaking the story for the magazine, Seth offers to let Veronica monitor, film, and document his progress until he can successfully teleport himself in order for it to later be published as a book. During this endeavor, Seth attempts to teleport a baboon that is turned inside-out by this teleportation.⁵ This is when the first discussion of the flesh takes place, and Seth and Veronica have sex. Afterwards, Seth has a eureka moment and is able to successfully teleport a second baboon. Stathis, meanwhile, sends Veronica a threat to publish the story before it is ready, so when she leaves to deal with this, Seth drinks himself into a jealous haze and decides to teleport himself immediately. He does not know that a housefly slipped into the telepod with him. From there, Seth begins a slow transformation into a mutated and unrecognizable creature referred to as the Brundlefly. Veronica finds herself pregnant and

⁴ While other films will be discussed, in this thesis, unless otherwise named, all parenthetical timestamps will refer to Cronenberg's *The Fly* for conciseness. The same applies to other versions of the film or story, particularly when the name is the same.

⁵ As the first discussion of the flesh occurs directly after this, a scene discussion will occur in chapter 2.

realizes that it likely happened after Seth teleported, so she becomes set on getting an abortion. The Brundlefly finds out about her plans and captures her in order to fuse himself, Veronica, and the fetus together into one being. Stathis shows up in an attempt to save Veronica but nearly loses his life in the process. The film draws to a close as the teleportation goes wrong once more, and the Brundlefly becomes fused with the telepod door. It is in agony, only able to crawl toward Veronica and silently beg for death, and Veronica, weeping, pulls the trigger of Stathis' shotgun. The Brundlefly is dead.⁶

Cronenberg argues that this film is a metaphor to aging in the book *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*: “Why not look at the process of ageing and dying, for example, as a transformation? This is what I did in *The Fly*. It's necessary to be tough though. You look at it and it's ugly, it's nasty, it's not pretty. It's very hard to alter our aesthetic sense to accommodate ageing, nevermind disease [...] There is an impulse to try and accommodate ageing into our aesthetic” (82). This is a curious comparison as many people latched on to the possibility that this film was a metaphor for the HIV/AIDS epidemic due to the timing of the release. Many still examine *The Fly* with much of Cronenberg's other works such as *Shivers* (1975), *The Brood* (1979), or *Rabid* (1977) in an effort to understand his use of body horror, especially as he depicts the spread of parasites, the destruction of humanity, and the transformation of the flesh. The issue is that *The Fly* is a largely private affair that is less concerned with the impact on the world at large as seen in some of his other films. *The Fly* is an intimate tragedy that we must bear witness to. While Cronenberg's plan for his film as a metaphor for aging works excellently, *The Fly* also sets up multiple layers of analysis of the flesh. In the following chapters, I will examine the renewal and newness of

⁶ There were a few alternate endings filmed after the death of the Brundlefly. They were cut, however, after scoring very low with test audiences and Jeff Goldblum himself speaking out against these endings. These will be discussed in the next chapter.

flesh, the flesh as penetrative, and the flesh as transformation in Cronenberg's *The Fly*. This is ultimately to determine how Cronenberg utilizes body horror in *The Fly* to show everyone the things they are truly most afraid of when it comes to facing the ways their bodies can change.

CHAPTER 2: Flesh as Renewal, Newness, and Rebirth

**“Thus it is the body, the ‘book of blood’
on whose pages the lexicon of horror is inscribed,
and with the spine cracked,
we begin to read.”**

Michael J. Collins, *The Body of the Work of the Body:
Physio-Textuality in Contemporary Horror*⁷

Renewal

The first time flesh is mentioned in *The Fly*, it is shadowed by the teleportation attempt of the first baboon which ended in a brutal, gruesome death for the creature. This is not only our first discussion of the flesh in *The Fly*, but it is also the first, and very jarring, instance of body horror in the film. At about eighteen minutes into the film, the scene begins with the script of the computer’s screen front and center. It is analyzing what the audience soon sees to be the baboon, its weight, the primary chemicals of its makeup such as potassium, iodine, nitrogen, and carbon. There is no music as the computer whirs and buzzes. We are then shown Seth, focused and typing at the computer while Veronica stands to the side and films with her camera. There are several harsh bulb lights in the background, one brought close for Seth to see the keyboard clearly. It is nighttime based on the dark skyline in the background windows, and the apartment walls are lined with shelves of books and files. This is Seth’s laboratory, home, and the place of all his experiments. Seth gives the command “Initiate in five seconds” as the computer beeps and buzzes with action. Veronica only moves to capture Seth’s movements. The sound of machinery turning on begins to overtake the sound of the computer as the telepod activates. We see the computer screen to confirm that the telepod is turning on before the camera zooms in over Veronica’s shoulder, looking behind Seth at the first telepod. A baboon is slumped against the

⁷ Collins, Michael J. “The Body of the Work of the Body: Physio-Textuality in Contemporary Horror. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol.5, no.3 (19), 1993, International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, pp. 28-35. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43308161>. Accessed 12 May 2022.

glass door, looking out in confusion. Seth looks back to watch the baboon be teleported. Music begins to swell with the sound of the machinery powering up. Everyone is waiting in anticipation for what will befall this baboon. A flash of lightning clashes on the baboon, and he is gone from the first telepod. He has been teleported. We see the computer screen once more, a flash of genetic coding and sequences cloud the screen. The music feels hopeful as another flash of white light hits the second telepod. Seth stands and Veronica follows with her camera. Seth crouches in front of the glass door, foggy from the teleportation. He leans in close and there is a moment where everyone is waiting once more, accompanied by a beat of silence. Then, a bloody stump hits the glass door, and Seth recoils while Veronica draws away from the camera. The score turns to one of suspense and fear as Seth looks back to Veronica before opening the door. The fog clears and Seth stares down stoically at the twitching mass of organs, muscle, sinew, and bones. It is struggling to scream, bits of fur poking out in the wet gore. The camera zooms in. Pieces have become detached completely as what appears to be a fully backwards and inside-out creature squeals in agony. The scene cuts abruptly on that sound. Cronenberg takes his time with showing this moment, allowing the audience to see the consequences of Seth's lack of knowledge of the flesh as he is clearly missing this key element to make organic material teleport successfully.

It is after this horrifying incident that Seth talks about how the computer can't deal with the flesh and how he will need to teach it. Shortly after this, Veronica ends up flirting and having sex with Seth for the first time. In the end, she playfully bites Seth's arm and explains that she can't help it. She says, "You know, that's why old ladies pinch babies' cheeks. It's the flesh. It just makes you crazy" (23:43-9). This makes Seth think about how the computer should be understanding and interpreting flesh, and he launches into an experiment. Mary Campbell writes

that “Cronenberg’s doctors are in the grip of a technological enthusiasm stronger than human will or discretion, and their zealous tinkering with Nature reaps from her a calamitous revenge. Nature, like technology, can run rampant, and more than any specific cause it is this effect of rampancy that we have come to fear” (335). In Seth Brundle’s case, he was a driven, focused scientist with few distractions on his plate. He longed for some form of company in Veronica who created a new distraction. Her very presence began to spell his doom in the same way that she inspires him to succeed. William Beard writes that “The device [the telepods] is linked with the liberation of anti-rational, interior, visceral forces (here ‘the flesh’) that appear to alleviate a condition of overrationality, self-control, and solitude” (199). Veronica is the catalyst to this liberation. The night they are celebrating the successful teleportation of the second baboon, Veronica has to leave to deal with her ex-boyfriend and current boss. This drives Seth into jealous drinking and ranting about Veronica and Stathis’ relationship. Seth, in this moment, is the computer being driven crazy by the flesh, and his hubris is punished with the presence of Nature in the form of a housefly in the telepod. Cronenberg himself comments on this in *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*: “Seth Brundle has built his whole career, life and understanding of the world on cerebration and the thought process. He cannot totally let go of it. He has to get drunk to get jealous, to talk to the ape” (115).

Upon teleporting for the first time, Seth experiences a sense of renewal. He can feel that something has changed within him as he feels stronger and full of vitality. He performs acts of strength that are not impossible for a human but were previously unthinkable for him on the morning after changing history in a drunken, jealous rage. Seth performs an extended acrobatics routine in front of Veronica as if excited to illustrate his new-found skills that even he is just now uncovering. It’s childlike in nature as he is not even interested in sitting still in his seat without

holding his body up on the arms of the chair. Veronica is completely speechless by this and does not pose any follow-up questions at this moment, instead allowing herself to be openly and unabashedly impressed. Time is shown as passing as if over the course of a day rather than the implied weeks or possibly months it takes for Seth to develop severe acne and an insatiable libido. It is as if he is going through puberty all over again.

Seth's renewal is not initially seen to be an issue of the flesh, however, as he refuses to see the changes in himself as bad. He thinks these changes are solely due to going through the teleportation pods. He thinks teleportation has given him the additional benefit of being a better version of himself. He is so certain of this that he tries to push Veronica into the pod so she can experience this feeling too. When she fights back, this is the first real indication that Veronica is afraid of the changes she is seeing in Seth, and, much like a child or teenager, Seth is irate that she doesn't want to do what he says and tosses her aside in favor of trying to find someone or something that excites him and fulfills his desires. Additionally, Seth has developed a strong craving for sugar. His impulses have driven him to eat large amounts of candy bars and junk food. It's easy to chalk these behaviors up to the fly DNA in him as house flies are often attracted to sugar and sweets. This could also be seen as juvenile behavior on Seth's part, eating only candy and sweets for meals because he is experiencing his second childhood.⁸

Newness

The problems become compounded, however, when Veronica realizes that she is pregnant. Based on the timing of the pregnancy, she knows that Seth Brundle is the father, but she believes it is likely after he became the Brundlefly. She decides almost immediately that she is going to get an abortion. She is paralyzed by the idea of having a baby that could appear

⁸ This term "second childhood" is important and will be revisited in chapter 4.

normal and human only to become warped and mutated just as she has seen with Seth. She even has a nightmare about getting the abortion in which she feels like something is wrong the whole time. This scene starts off very quiet. They are in a procedure room with doctors and nurses in scrubs and Veronica in a patient gown. She is wearing the necklace that Seth gave her earlier in the film despite not typically wearing jewelry. Stathis and a nurse are holding either hand and soothing her while the hospital machinery beeps in the background. A doctor dispassionately declares that “She’s expelling it. It’s coming out.” Veronica is panting, her legs spread in stirrups on the table. It’s a very vulnerable position, and she is either looking down at the procedure or has her eyes closed from the discomfort. Another doctor, likely an anesthesiologist, comes over and checks her pulse after being in the background and watching the monitors. The camera that began at the sterile operating room lights has zoomed in to focus on Veronica’s face, distressed and damp with sweat and tears. She sobs, “No, please, no,” as she rubs her abdomen. The camera pans down her body slightly to see blood on her hospital gown along with some of the surgical clamps. She has been used as a table in her own abortion. We then cut to the doctor⁹ holding a suction tube between her legs, reassuring her that it will all be over soon. The nurse that was comforting Veronica comes around to assist the doctor, and suddenly the doctor comments “There’s more in there.” The camera shows Stathis’ concern before showing Veronica still holding his hand. This time, she is framed by her own legs in the camera shot. The doctor tells her that she is going to have to push. The camera moves to be over Veronica’s shoulder to show Stathis moving behind her head, the nurse moving to her side, and the doctor leaning forward to press on her lower abdomen. Despite Veronica’s fear and anxiety as well as the anxiety brought

⁹ This doctor is played by David Cronenberg himself! In *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, it’s noted that Geena Davis was not comfortable with anyone else to be between her legs, and David Cronenberg said “it was a very convenient place to direct the scene from” (152).

about by the quiet of the scene, it is a moment where the medical team moving to help her feels like everything will be alright. The camera focuses on Veronica's face as she pushes. Stathis has propped her head up, and she now has little choice but to see what comes out of her. The doctor begins to recoil as Veronica gasps, her eyes widening in horror. She screams "No!" and begins to thrash around the table. Stathis draws back in shock, unable to comprehend what he is seeing. The nurse looks to the doctor as Veronica continues to scream and the first bit of music creeps into the scene. The doctor is staring down at something. We see Veronica once more screaming and grabbing at the nurse, Stathis, anyone who may be able to get her away from this horror. Then the camera settles on a long, writhing maggot the size of a human baby. It is thrashing in the doctor's hands as music swells and Veronica's screams echo in the room of stunned onlookers. Then, Veronica wakes up from this nightmare, panting but home in bed. Her body is still pregnant, so her peril is still present, but there is no maggot in the room.

Veronica is terrified of what is growing in her body. She knows that Seth has grown to seemingly accept the extreme changes he is going through, but she cannot endure the knowledge that a creature like the Brundlefly may be growing inside of her. Veronica decides that she wants to tell Seth about the baby, but she grows horrified at the sight of the changes to him. At this point, he looks less like a human and more like a sentient lump that was once human. She finds that she cannot tell him and leaves only for Seth to overhear her telling Stathis to take her to get the abortion right away. It is an interesting view of pregnancy and abortion that occurs in this particular Cronenberg film:

Sexual intercourse and pregnancy tend to render ambiguous the otherwise clean biological outlines of our identities. The sense of blurring in intercourse is reflected in such terms as *death*, the old slang word for orgasm, and *sexual union*. Abortion

legislation is complicated precisely by our inability to agree on the point at which mother and fetus become separate individuals (Campbell 341).

Veronica undergoes two separate scenes of attempted abortion: one that is a nightmare and one in which the Brundlefly kidnaps her. In the nightmare sequence, Veronica is driven to the hospital by her ex-boyfriend Stathis and immediately taken in for the procedure. This is the ideal scenario, even though it devolves and is ultimately revealed to be a nightmare. In stark contrast is her real attempt after failing to tell Seth what is going on. She tells Stathis that she wants the thing in her body removed immediately, and she doesn't care that it's the middle of the night. Stathis finds a doctor, and Veronica has to answer scrutinizing questions as a result. Stathis tries to move things along by asserting that she believes the baby will be deformed, but the doctor is not satisfied with this answer, trying to push Veronica to be tested for this condition, this deformity, discounting the fact that her body is her own. She pushes back, however, never wavering from her stance. Her body belongs to her, and this flesh, the thing growing inside of her, needs to be removed at once. Campbell references another of Cronenberg's films *The Brood* in which, in the end, "the natural daughter of the unnatural mother sees, in a moment of distress, growths on her arm which signify that she has inherited her dead mother's terrible faculty for embodying emotion. What had seemed a learned behavior, and therefore controllable, turns out to be a genetic trait" (342). This is Veronica's fear. She knows that her pregnancy will most likely lead to some version of what Seth is enduring, and this terrifies her. The audience is left to interpret whether this fear is of the creature itself or of the all-around suffering that giving birth to this kind of thing will create.

This fear is a visceral one that many other films seek to explore. In *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981), the demonic possession set forth by the Necronomicon takes over a person's body

and leaves nothing of the original person behind. It acts as a parasitic infection, spreading from one to another in the cabin. One girl sees that her hand has become infected, and she chooses to amputate her arm rather than become completely consumed. This impulse is seen in other films that examine infection and containment. Zombie films are famous for showing moments in which a person is infected and must make a decision about their life and the safety of the others around them. In *Train to Busan* (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016), it occurs more than once when a person has been bitten and chooses to stay back and fight while protecting their loved ones before they turn. The idea with *The Fly*, however, is seeing the loss of autonomy in Veronica as her choice is questioned by her ex-boyfriend and the doctor while the Brundlefly plans to have her body fused with his own so they are one flesh forever.

The idea of pregnancy as parasitic is a taboo one in society: babies are meant to be causes for celebration rather than the feeling of loss of one's self. Dana Polan refers to this concept of forced acceptance of progeny as "domestic warfare" (144). Cronenberg has addressed the fears and horrors of pregnancy and childbirth in many of his films, but one of the most well-known pregnancy horror films comes from Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). This film acts as an excellent image of "domestic warfare" as Rosemary and Guy are constantly pushing one another in a passive-aggressive "dance" of power. As her body begins to undergo changes and she begins to feel extraordinary pain, Rosemary tries to take back some semblance of control by getting her hair cut extremely short. Guy immediately reacts to this with disgust and irritation as her loving husband: "Don't tell me you paid for that" (59:33). Later when she approaches Guy with her insecurities, he says, "You look great! It's that haircut that looks awful. You want the truth, honey, that's the worst mistake you ever made" (1:01:02-13). Any friend outside of the satanic cult that tries to help her dies mysteriously or later turns out to be in the cult, further

leaving Rosemary isolated and afraid. She feels insane and alone, unable to turn to anyone with her concerns without being told that she is insane.

Rosemary's Baby relates back to Veronica's fear around the birth and pregnancy process. Veronica is terrified by what may be inside her, unable to think it will be anything but a monstrosity. Rosemary wants her baby more than anything, despite being in terrible pain for nearly three months of the pregnancy. When she learns about witches and witchcraft, Rosemary believes that the coven next door is after her baby. She tells Guy, "They use blood in their rituals! And the blood that has the most power is baby's blood. And they don't just use the blood, they use the flesh, too" (1:33:00-16). There's that word again: *flesh*. This is the only time flesh is mentioned in *Rosemary's Baby*, and, in this case, it makes sense that the flesh is directly related to a baby. Even with Veronica's fear around her pregnancy, the life within is representative of newness. It makes sense that new, pure flesh would be considered the strongest. Around the point in *The Fly* when Veronica discovers that she is pregnant, the word "flesh" is left behind in favor of the word "body." Veronica seeks out her own autonomy, insisting that her body should mean her choices. Rosemary's plight is similar as she asserts that she "won't have an abortion!" (1:20:15). When she discovers that her baby is alive and actually the son of Satan, she now has the decision to take her place as his mother. She is resistant when speaking to the cult leader, Roman.

"You're trying to get me to be his mother."

"Aren't you his mother?" (2:14:38-42).

This moment is the last line spoken in the film, allowing Rosemary to make the choice to step over and care for her baby, despite what he is and how she was manipulated into giving birth to him. Veronica's decisions about getting rid of Seth's baby is constantly questioned and prodded

at by her ex-boyfriend, the doctor, and Seth himself (more Brundlefly than Seth at this point in the film). While nowhere near the manipulation Rosemary faced, Veronica's pregnancy is one that she did not want to be the new flesh. She desperately did not want to bear a monster into the world.

Rebirth

The filmed and, ultimately, deleted endings must also be considered in this section. Originally, there were two scenes filmed to be set after the death of the Brundlefly. Both of these act as dream sequences that Veronica has before waking up in Stathis' arms, indicating that they are back together.¹⁰ The dream stays roughly the same: a chrysalis on a tree branch breaks apart to reveal a baby which giggles and spreads a set of butterfly wings before flying away. Veronica then wakes up and reassures Stathis that she was only having a dream. In one version, she is heavily pregnant, and the implication is that she kept Seth's baby despite all her fears and worries of what it will become. In the other version, her stomach is flat leaving audiences to wonder if she is still early on in her pregnancy or if she was dreaming of the baby she had aborted. Setting aside the logical issues of a man and woman and a fly creating a butterfly baby,¹¹ this hopeful note that the film intended to leave off on changes the entire meaning of the film. The despair at the death of Seth is what makes this movie so memorable (in addition to the grotesque make-up and SFX). Despite all Veronica's efforts to help and care for Seth, he dies from the renewal he created in himself. He was lost to his new flesh the moment the telepod door closed with a fly trapped within. Creating room in this film for a rebirth of Seth via his progeny

¹⁰ There are versions of each of these scenes where Veronica is in bed, alone, indicating that she is either still living alone or single and grieving the loss of Seth.

¹¹ See Appendix B.

would have made for a much less impactful message. The flesh, in this case, could not be a method of rebirth even if it can be renewed and new itself.

Seth immediately sees Veronica's pregnancy as a part of him that will be left behind when he is gone. He takes her away from the doctor's office and begs her not to kill him in reference to the fetus. Veronica begs him to understand, but he only changes tactics. He now wants to combine them all into one flesh to be the "ultimate family." Since they will be a body comprising of what is left of Seth, Veronica, and a (possibly) mostly human baby, he believes that this new thing will be more human than he alone ever was. This proves to be Seth's final act of hubris. He does not anticipate that Stathis will have the strength to shoot Veronica's telepod after being so horribly injured and thus ruin the plan. When he tries to break out of his own telepod in anger, Seth's mutated, destroyed body is teleported with part of the telepod and subsequently fused together. Campbell points out that, in Cronenberg's films, "Each of the mistaken scientists is destroyed by his own creations" (342). This is a common theme in horror in which a new technology is advancing too quickly: the scientist is either the one destroyed by it or lives to see it cause destruction and misery. In the case of Seth, he is both destroyed by the technology and lives just long enough to witness the pain he causes Veronica. As the Brundlefly fused with the telepod door crawls toward Veronica, the last traces of humanity break through as Seth reaches out to Veronica and points the rifles to his head. It is a silent plea for mercy as he is in so much pain and misery from this mistake that he appeals to the humanity in her to end it for him.

Had Seth not overheard her speaking to Stathis about her pregnancy and intention to abort, he would never have seen her again. Just prior to this moment, he had told her to leave and never come back, citing the fact that he was very afraid he would hurt her. He does so in his

roundabout Seth way through a philosophical but deeply sad discussion on insect politics. The viewer is left with Seth's fears that there is not enough humanity left within him to keep Veronica safe. It is a sacrifice he tries to make akin to the previously mentioned plight of those bitten in zombie films. He wants her to leave for good in an effort to protect her from himself. The part of the flesh which makes him human, what has not gone crazy from the genetically spliced fly driven by impulse and instinct, has realized that whatever he is becoming is not some kind of wonderful evolution but rather something that could harm the woman he loves. It is a part of Seth that is not seen again until he begs Veronica not to kill the part of him that lives in her.

CHAPTER 3: Flesh as Penetration and Sex

**“Sexual promiscuity is not terrifying,
but bodily transmutation is.”**

Mary Campbell, *“Biological Alchemy and
the Films of David Cronenberg.”*¹²

Sex is one of the most obvious themes in much of Cronenberg’s cinema, so it would be a disservice to his films to not discuss the ways he toys with sex, gender, and sexuality on screen. After all, due to the timing of the release of *The Fly*, many people in the audience saw the film as an allegory for the raging HIV/AIDS epidemic. Cronenberg, however, was genuinely taken aback by this. According to *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, “If you think of *The Fly* as an AIDS movie, then you have to think that Geena Davis [Veronica] gave it to him [Seth], because he’s a guy who’s never been fucked before. Then, is she going to die? That’s why I don’t want it to be AIDS, truly” (127). Nonetheless, the analysis can be drawn, and there is still a lot to be interpreted about the intentional sexuality within *The Fly* and the flesh within.

Seth is confirmed to be a virgin when he and Veronica meet.¹³ His exact age is not clear in the film, but he is likely meant to be in his late twenties or early thirties based on how he was “an inch away from the Nobel Prize for physics. He was only 20 at the time” (17:37-42). It seems Brundle falls into the trope of scientists so dedicated to his work that carnal pleasures have fallen to the wayside. After the baboon failure, Seth says the computer “can’t deal with the flesh” (20:21). He explains, “computers are dumb. They only know what you tell them. I must not know enough about the flesh myself” (20:34-40). This is a statement made shortly before he and Veronica began their romance. Beard writes “the device is linked with the liberation of anti-

¹² Campbell, Mary B. “Biological Alchemy and the Films of David Cronenberg.” *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, edited by Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004, pp. 333-45.

¹³ See the previous quote from *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* as the director himself says Seth has never had sex.

rational, interior, visceral forces (here ‘the flesh’) that appear to alleviate a condition of overrationality, self-control, and solitude (the shy and solitary Brundle embarks on a romantic relationship with a journalist, Veronica Quaife, and it is she who inspires him to the crucial insight that allows his machine to work on living forms)” (199). Later when arguing with Veronica, he yells, “I’ll bet you think you woke me up about the flesh, don’t you? But you only know society’s sick, gray fear of the flesh. [...] I’m not just talking about sex and penetration. I’m talking about penetration beyond the veil of the flesh—a deep, penetrating dive into the plasma pool” (48:21-44).¹⁴ This is also the last time the word “flesh” appears in the movie. Beard goes on to say that “Now, in *The Fly*, the desexualized male protagonist undergoes a process of sexualization—a process that at first seems to empower him, but that ultimately... render[s] him disoriented, desubjectified at last utterly abject and pitiable” (201). This is further seen in the discussion on how Seth’s body seems to enter a second puberty. His face becomes riddled with acne, he develops bad body odor, and his sex drive increases to the point that Veronica can no longer keep up.

Before going through the telepod with the fly, Seth was a rather bashful, nerdy archetype. Cruz questions “can we not sympathize to a certain extent with these abominable males, losers in a culture dominated by physical beauty, spurned by females?” (165). It’s interesting that *The Fly* does this in reverse; Seth is desperate for Veronica’s attention, but she never actually spurns him. It’s his perception of her actions when they are trying to celebrate that cause him to experience the jealousy that leads to his hubris. After experiencing sex for the first time, combined with the success of the second baboon’s teleportation, Seth allows himself to give in to hubris, alcohol,

¹⁴ Amazon Prime’s “General Trivia” points out that “Seth’s saying ‘Drink deep, or taste not, the plasma spring,’ is a reference to a famous quote from Alexander Pope’s ‘An Essay on Criticism.’ The full quote is: ‘A little learning is a dang’rous thing: drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring: Their shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, and drinking largely sobers us again’” (48:27).

and jealousy. Cronenberg says in *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* that “Seth Brundle has built his whole career, life and understanding of the world on cerebration and the thought process. He cannot totally let go of it. He has to get drunk to get jealous, to talk to the ape” (115). He teleports himself and unknowingly becomes fused with a housefly. After his teleportation, he is nearly insatiable with Veronica, urging her to go through the telepod under the belief that she will become “superhuman,” initially because she cannot keep up with his newfound sexual desires. Beard argues that “*The Fly* then systematically demonstrates how even the most worthy and virginal (i.e., non-promiscuous, non-predatory) entry into the realm of the body and sexuality leads to infection and death” (201-2). This is a trope seen in many areas of the horror genre, whether the group of horny teens at summer camp are being punished in the *Friday the 13th* franchise or in urban legends around the campfire of couples at a make-out spot and hook-handed maniacs on the loose. Sexual activity being punished in storytelling is nowhere near a new idea. However, more often than not, women get the raw end of the deal in horror media with horrible murderers chasing them or being forever traumatized by their boyfriend’s murder. Cronenberg likes to take this trope and twist it. In this scenario, Veronica was forced to kill what remained of Seth and likely aborted the fetus.

In other Cronenberg films, though, the woman is often a monstrous mother figure in films such as *The Brood* or *Rabid* as she spreads her infectious children and pathogens (respectively) to her victims. *The Fly* stands out from others, though, as Beard notes:

The exciting and horrifying otherness that was at first automatically connected with the female object of desire in Cronenberg’s work has now fully migrated into the male self. *The Fly* is actually a didactic demonstration of this: Ronnie is a psychically well-balanced, normally-functional person who, in a loving way, initiates Seth into the domain

of sexuality and ‘the flesh’; it is *Seth* who subsequently turns into an insect as the result of some secret innate otherness that has been released by this process. The female object of desire is still the catalyst in the production of monstrosity, but she is not monstrous herself—*he* is the monster, and his monstrosity is innate (202).

This is also seen when Cronenberg returns to these ideas in his 1996 film *Crash* as he corrupts the male protagonist, uses sex and sexuality to drive people further into a kind of madness, and continues the “othering” of female bodies. Campbell writes “in Cronenberg’s world, sexuality, like technology, is a destructive enthusiasm, an agent no longer of Eros but of Thanatos” (336). In other words, sex is no longer an erotic action but rather a deadly one.

Seth’s growing sexual appetite is quickly punished, however, as he later seems to lose his means of penetration. Cruz writes that “he cannot mate in his final form, and his large body cannot sustain itself for long on the body fluids of prey. The Brundlefly is an abomination not only for its appearance and its corruption of an erstwhile human body but also for its physiological impracticalities and inefficiencies” (163). This raises the question: why does Seth feel the need to merge with Veronica and the fetus? Is he driven by his baser sexual desires to reproduce? Or is it some sort of parasitic drive now that he is not fully human? Brundle loses his penis as his body transforms. Several unidentified lumps of flesh are in his medicine cabinet to which he adds his teeth. He refers to his teeth as “relics of a bygone era” and his fingernails and ears are also in the “museum” (1:15:19-23). We also see his nude silhouette without any means of external penetration (1:15:46).¹⁵

This scene stands in direct juxtaposition to Veronica’s abortion nightmare as it occurs directly after Veronica wakes up. The computer screen is once more front and center, as the text

¹⁵ See Appendix C.

“The Brundlefly Project. Problem: to refine fusion program” is typed slowly onto the screen. The next shot is Seth’s mutated hands hunting and pecking on the keyboard. His middle and ring fingers on both hands have fused together. He has no fingernails on his hands. The skin is wrinkled and dark, and he holds a pencil between his thumb and what appears to be his pointer finger. We cut back to the computer screen as he types “Goal: to decrease to a minimum the percentage of fly in Brundlefly.” At this point, a raspy sound comes in and when the camera cuts away from the computer screen, we see a creature. It hardly looks like Seth anymore. He is breathing heavily and laboriously from his mouth, and this sound is unsettlingly raspy and almost metallic.¹⁶ The camera is an upward shot, focused only on his shoulders and head for the moment, watching Seth mull over his planned experiment. He has patches of hair, a lumpy shape of a face, and his teeth look jagged in his mouth. The parts of his bare body that are currently visible are also lumpy with thick black hairs jutting out in random spots. The camera cuts back to the computer screen as Seth seems to have gathered his thoughts. He types, “Solution: the fusion by gene-splicing of Brundlefly with one or more pure human subjects.” The sound of Seth breathing and typing scores this moment of otherwise silence as the camera cuts back to Seth. He makes a vocal command to the computer, which he has done multiple times throughout the film. The computer, though, plays back his command on a loop with a repeating error on the screen: “Error—pattern mismatch. Voice not recognized. Voice not recognized...” Seth is shown, shocked, and he puts the pencil in his mouth between his teeth to try and override the error. The message repeats until the computer finally stops and switches back to manual input. Seth seems irritated and removes the pencil from his mouth with a soft snapping sound. The camera shows a tooth fall to the keyboard of the computer before cutting back to show Seth’s face with blood

¹⁶ This is likely a reference to Langelaan’s short story “The Fly” as the wife constantly describes her husband as making “metallic sighs” when he is annoyed or frustrated at the situation (48).

pouring out of his mouth. A few more teeth clatter to the keyboard. Seth stares in silence, running his tongue over the bare gum in his mouth. He sighs.

We then see Seth, hunched over in a well-lit but garbage-filled bathroom as he carries his teeth to the medicine cabinet. Seth's body, once physically fit and attractive is only vaguely shaped like a human. The strange lumps that mottle his skin have changed how he walks and moves, and he can no longer stand up straight. The camera focuses in as he looks in the medicine cabinet's mirror. He studies himself for a moment, now without his teeth, and he shakes his head ruefully before he tells the teeth in his hand that they are relics. He opens the cabinet where we immediately see his ear in a soap dish and what could be a penis in a jar. The camera pans over the shelf in silence in order to take in the other unidentifiable lumps in containers or just placed on the shelf. They are all bloody and dark, but do not appear to be rotting. The camera returns to the establishing shot and shows Seth depositing his teeth into a container before he puts them in the medicine cabinet and closes the door. Veronica has entered the apartment in the meantime, taking in the sight of garbage piles and food wrappers as she approaches the bathroom door. Seth turns from the medicine cabinet and the camera shows the two of them in different door frames on either side of Seth's dimly lit bedroom. Seth's silhouette in the doorway is one that is difficult to comprehend, and Veronica cannot bring herself to get any closer. The silence in these moments force the audience to absorb the shock of seeing Seth in this moment, try to comprehend what is going through his mind as he continues to lose the physical markers of humanity.

By this point in *The Fly*, Seth is at his most vulnerable, and possibly most feminine, and the Brundlefly is becoming much more dangerous, and more masculine in its need to reproduce. Seth warns Veronica to stay away despite the emotional turmoil this puts them both in. It's only

due to the fact that the Brundlefly overhears Veronica talking about getting an abortion that the story does not end when the lovers part there. By neutering Seth, the role of the “monstrous” parent falls once more to the mother (Veronica). The key difference here is that Seth, or rather the Brundlefly, is the only parent who wants this child to survive.

Cronenberg enjoys playing with these ideas of sex and penetration, as seen in his film *Rabid*. In this film, the female lead, Rose, is left with a disfigurement after a plastic surgeon utilizes his experimental skin grafting procedure to save her life. The disfigurement is a mutation that craves blood from other humans, and it hides within the scar tissue in her armpit, waiting to strike. The appendage is phallic in shape, and, as Rose takes the lives of her victims, what it leaves behind or impregnates them with is a mutated, fast-spreading form of rabies that soon spreads like wildfire. Then, in 1975, Cronenberg played with the concept of a pregnant male in *Shivers* as Nicholas Tudor is one of the main infected people on an isolated island community. His body acts as an incubation chamber for multiple parasitic flesh creatures that spread like a virus through bodily fluids and compel their hosts to continue spreading them. Polan writes, “To put it bluntly (as a scientist in the film does when he refers to the parasites as ‘combination aphrodisiac and venereal disease’), the parasites are the outbreak of libido, of the Id as destructive desire against all the restraints of established order and propriety. The parasites strengthen sexual drives, and the film views this process with revulsion, picturing female desire, incest, homosexuality, rape, and adultery as equivalent forms of evil, of what the film imagines as a fundamental challenge to the very security of human life” (146-7). While *Shivers* shows these various forms of debauchery in the same lens of disdain, it seems to be more interested in how the mob mentality drives the depravity further. Campbell writes “In both *Shivers* and *Rabid*, transformations involve transference and confusion of sexual characteristics, resulting in

ominous parodies of the Androgyne: men parodically giving birth to monstrous lumps of flesh in the former, a woman with a phallic organ that sucks in fluids rather than expelling them in the latter” (339). It is clear, then, that Cronenberg is no stranger to this idea of challenging gender. Cronenberg said in an interview with William Beard and Piers Handling in *The Shape of Rage*, “Human beings could swap sexual organs, or do without sexual organs as sexual organs per se, for procreation. We’re free to develop different kinds of organs that would give pleasure, and that have nothing to do with sex. The distinction between male and female would diminish, and perhaps we would become less polarized and more integrated creatures” (190). As seen in this discussion, Cronenberg likes to toy with these concepts of gender and sexuality, and his beliefs seem to extend off the screen as well.

In his interview with Beard and Handling, Cronenberg said, “But I suppose underneath I always have a feeling that my existence as a member in standing of the community is in grave jeopardy for whatever reason. That’s a personal chaos—it’s as though society has suddenly discovered what I really am, what is really going on inside, and wants to destroy it” (175). Cronenberg states in this interview and in many other sources that he often finds himself relating to the parasite or the disease. Xavier Reyes argues, “parasitic horror is closely linked to the abhuman because it foregrounds physiological disarray, but primarily revels in infection phobias and tells stories about the gradual domination of one body (the human) by another (a foreign and sometimes supernatural one). In body horror that develops this thematic strand, the emphasis is as firmly placed in the body of the invader as interstitial locus of doubt—who and what is it?—as it is in the potential obliteration of the former body, either that of an individual or of all humanity” (110-11). Does Cronenberg feel less related to humanity as a result of relating to parasite? Campbell states, “the key to their fearfulness is that the diseases are either animate in

themselves, or so alter the metabolism and consciousness of their victim that he/she seems to have abandoned our species, embodied the disease. The diseases could be seen from their own perspective as new life forms—and we are asked to see them that way” (343). Cronenberg would likely agree with Campbell on this idea.

Furthermore, Seth struggles to come to terms with what is actually happening to his body as it changes around him. Steven Shaviro writes,

Passion is imprinted directly in the flesh, prior to any movement of self-conscious reflection. Psychophysiological changes are continually occurring, at a rate that exceeds our ability to assimilate or understand them. In *The Fly*, Seth Brundle’s rationalizations of his state always lag far behind the action, visible changes in his body. He posits a series of ideological explanations—a leap into the plasma pool, a bizarre new form of cancer—each of which is discredited as his physical transformations continue. He is finally compelled to admit that he suffers from ‘a disease with a purpose’ of its own, one to which he cannot himself be privy. He is in effect excluded from the scene of his own metamorphosis. Human subjectivity cannot absorb or ‘recognize’ the being of a fly. And so the movements that turn Brundle into ‘Brundlefly’ are necessarily passive and unwilled (145).

Shaviro hits on many important things here. Veronica is the one who notices the strange hairs growing from Seth’s back. She cuts them from his back and sends them to a lab to be tested where the results were “not human” and were likely “insect hairs” (55:32-56:05). This scene is the actual turning point for Seth as after his argument with Veronica here, he takes a good look at himself in the mirror. He sees his fingernails begin to fall off, and he cannot shave these strange new hairs off himself. He only comes to the conclusion that this may be “a disease with a

purpose” when he no longer has fingernails to bite and has found he can climb the walls and ceiling like an insect (1:08:19). He is likely also trying to find optimism in these moments as he is still deteriorating overall. He speaks as if the disease is separate from himself even as it is transforming him, even as he is being irrevocably changed.

CHAPTER 4: Flesh as Transformation

**“We are who and what we are because of our genes,
and that genetic makeup is beyond our control.
Also beyond our control are mutations,
which are random and unpredictable.”**

Ronald Allan Lopez Cruz, “Mutations and Metamorphosis:
Body Horror is Biological Horror”¹⁷

People want what makes them comfortable. Cronenberg denies us that comfort by forcing us to look, to bear witness to this transformation and decay. He never wants us to forget that the flesh is something that can be disrupted. To this point, Shaviro writes “the body is the site of the most violent alterations and of the most intense affects. It is continually subjugated and remade, and in this process it experiences extremities of pleasure, pain, and horror. The flesh is less rigidly determined, more fluid and open to metamorphosis, than we generally like to think” (129). We may feel comfortable in our own bodies, but Cronenberg wants us to know that we should not feel this comfort. The flesh betrays us all without exception.

In this final stage of flesh, Seth Brundle has lost himself just as much as he has lost his original shape and body. Beard writes “[Brundle’s] personality becomes twisted, then his body begins to change in disgusting ways, and finally even his species mutates into something wholly monstrous. The means of this dreadful alteration is linked once more with disease and the progress of a malign revolution of the flesh that ends by utterly drowning the ego-subject” (200). The beloved, meek scientist is long gone, replaced by an instinct-driven creature that is struggling to remember what it felt like to be human.¹⁸ People often draw comparison between

¹⁷ Cruz, Ronald A. L. “Mutations and Metamorphoses: Body Horror is Biological Horror.” *The Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2012, pp. 160-168, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2012.654521>. Accessed 28 Feb. 2022.

¹⁸ According to the Amazon general trivia, “the line, ‘I’m saying I’m an insect who dreamt he was a man and loved it, but now that dream is over, and the insect is awake.’ is a reference to author Zhang zi’s famous Butterfly Dream story. It’s also a reference to Franz Kafka’s famous short story, The Metamorphosis” (01:18:04).

the 1958 film and short story by Langelaan about a scientist who fuses with a fly in a teleportation accident, but this alarming transformation that Seth is undergoing is much more similar to that of Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. In "The Fly" by Langelaan (1957) and the 1958 film starring Vincent Price, the transformation is instantaneous. The focus of the horror is focused more on the tragedy of the wife having to help her husband either find the escaped fly that has his human head and arm or help him kill himself. However, the drawn out isolation of *The Metamorphosis* is one that Cronenberg is focused on with Seth Brundle. The transformation is slow and uncomfortable, the human flesh disintegrates and changes until it is no longer recognizable. Beard continues "*The Fly* has far more invested in the humanity of its characters, and far more to lose when that humanity is destroyed, than any modern carnival-of-abject-excess horror movies have" (200). Gregor Samsa has been in this position too, locked away in his room for the duration of Kafka's novella, unable to communicate effectively with his family as he begins to forget what it was like to be human. When it comes to *The Fly*, Beard argues "ultimately, then, the film's dramatic project is to observe in the most microscopic and unflinching way possible the utter destruction of a human subject by the forces of an inconceivable otherness. This otherness is given the most alien and disgusting organic form the film's imagination can devise: an *insect*" (200). We must ask ourselves this: why is the insect the most disgusting flesh imaginable? Why is this the most debased Seth can be?

The problem is that an insect is not the worst flesh imaginable. Cronenberg has used the groundwork of others before him (Ovid, Kafka, Langelaan) to lay out the metaphor of the fly creature. The real horror of Seth's transformation is how foreign it feels to us. It feels like something that could never occur, but the reality is that his transformation is something that can or will happen to us all. The transformations are read more often as a disease; as even Seth

describes his transformation as “a disease with a purpose” (1:08:19). Collins argues that “medical horror functions through the natural mixture of two frightened mysteries, that of the body’s capacity to destroy itself and that of medicine’s purpose to alter the body” (32). This is a horror that many who have struggled with chronic illness or conditions can understand implicitly. The body has an issue whether that is a sickness or a tumor or chronic pain, and this thing that is affecting the body will change the person inside and out. It changes the personality, the thought process, the ability to function. Then treatment can help or hurt. Medicine often will change a person to some extent to the point that they learn a “new normal.” Collins says, “a diseased body is completely at the mercy of its affliction on the one hand and its treatment on the other; it is no wonder that there is such a preponderance of works dealing with sickness and medicine in the most sinister of terms” (31). Seth Brundle is initially on top of the world, a flood of good days as his body seems to have been altered in an overall positive way. However, as he begins to decline, he knows he has nowhere to turn. There is no medicine that can help him in his condition, and he is afraid of his own mortality. He calls Veronica over, not knowing if he is contagious or if he is harboring the one and only form of this transformative sickness. He begs for her help as she holds him and his ear falls off. She cries because what else is there to do?

Veronica tries to suggest going to the doctor, but Seth is certain that he will end up poked and prodded at, possibly treated as a cancer patient. Susan Wendell writes that “in the recent past, many healthy people with disabilities were forced to live in long-term care institutions under medical supervision simply because they needed services to perform tasks of daily living” (161). At this point, Seth is not a “healthy” person with a disability. He is barely able to keep himself upright, and the likelihood that he would end up in an end-of-life care or hospice facility

is extremely high considering his condition. His thoughts are scattered, and he has discovered that he cannot eat solid food without first vomiting on it to dissolve the food.

The good days return as Seth finds a balance with the insectoid side of himself. He starts to learn his new needs, and he embraces them. Cruz writes “in *The Fly*, Seth’s transformation to the Brundlefly is protracted and gradual. There is nothing particularly glorious about it, although Seth himself seems morbidly fascinated with his transformation” (163). This is the only real sign left of our scientist from the start. He desires to understand more and craves knowledge about what has begun to consume him. Cruz writes “*The Fly* presents a type of mutation that progresses until the deformation completely destroys the body” (164). Seth likely is trying to find a way to reach stasis, to either slow the progression or stop it, but it is clear that he does not seem to believe there is a way back. Reyes writes “The victims in body horror are not merely maimed, killed, or metamorphosed, but brutally and usually irrevocably so” (107). Seth Brundle knows that he has been changed irrevocably. Before Veronica visits him the last time, he is trying to consider his options on his computer. He has begun altering the telepods into gene splicers, likely so he can find a human to splice himself with. Whether this would actually slow the progression of his transformation or not is an answer that we ever receive. Shaviro states

as Brundle turns into Brundlefly, he leaves behind the now useless traces of his former existence: teeth and other body parts, and bits of regurgitated, half-digested food. At one point, he even proposes (with dark humor) to preserve these relics, to turn his loft into a ‘Brundle museum.’ The image of increasing disorder, composed of leftover bits and pieces of himself, is entirely apt. Brundle’s past existence is not entirely effaced; it remains in the form of discontinuous fragments. He has not been translated from one state of being into another so much as he has been uprooted from the fixity of human

identity, and submitted instead to a process of continual flux. It is at the point of greatest intimacy, in his own home and in his own body, that he had become a stranger (146-7).

In Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Gregor's sister, Grete, is described as "walking on tiptoe as though she were entering the room of a gravely ill patient or even a stranger" (56). This idea of being a stranger to oneself extends outwards to being a stranger to one's family. Despite the fact that the Samsas accept this insect-creature to be their Gregor, they no longer treat him with respect as they would if he were the recognizable and contributing young man they knew before. "Since he himself could not be understood, it occurred to no one, not even his sister, that he could understand the others" (Kafka 60). Instead, he is a shame in their family, a burden to hide away behind old furniture. Kafka details this as "Everyone had gotten into the habit of using his room to store things there was no space for in other parts of the apartment" (95). Later, when Gregor leaves his room to listen to Grete play her violin, Kafka writes "he too was covered in dust; he dragged around threads, hair and food scraps clinging to his back and sides" (100). Gone are the good days for Gregor, but not necessarily due to his condition. We will never know if, with proper care and attention, he could have lived a much longer time. Instead, he was treated as a burden despite years of being his family's bread-winner.

This brings us to what *The Fly* is really trying to use the flesh to transform. What change are we meant to see if not disease or sex or rebirth? Cronenberg says in *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* "Why not look at the processes of ageing and dying, for example, as a transformation? This is what I did in *The Fly*. It's necessary to be tough, though. You look at it and it's ugly, it's nasty, it's not pretty. It's very hard to alter our aesthetic sense to accommodate ageing, never mind disease. [...] There is an impulse to try and accommodate ageing into our aesthetic" (82). This is the aspect that is key when considering the flesh as transformation. There

are many ways the flesh can change and can change us, but Cronenberg wanted to show what we often refuse to examine in *The Fly*: the flesh as age. In the introduction given for Susan Bernofsky's translation of *The Metamorphosis*, Cronenberg writes, "I woke up one morning recently to discover that I was a seventy-year-old man. Is this different from what happens to Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*?" (Kafka 9). This was written eleven years ago, as he is currently eighty-one-years-old. How often must this discovery occur to him, to any of us, each morning? Cronenberg goes on to pose the question,

How similar would the story be, then, if on that fateful morning, the Samsa family found in the room of their son not a young, vibrant traveling salesman who is supporting them by his unselfish and endless labor, but a shuffling, half-blind, barely ambulatory eighty-nine-year-old man using insectlike canes, a man who mumbles incoherently and has soiled his trousers and out of the shadowland of his dementia projects anger and induces guilt? If, when Gregor Samsa woke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed right there in his bed into a demented, disabled, demanding old man? (Kafka 16-7).

When considering these thoughts that Cronenberg has been mulling over for years himself, it becomes clear that the flesh of Brundle is meant to be a representation of the horrors of aging or as I mentioned before the idea of second childhood. This is a concept that comes up with those who have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. According to Han Yu, "the idea that existence is cyclical can bring us a certain composure in the face of life's tribulations and vulnerabilities. It can help us appreciate the words of the ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes that 'old men are children twice over,' as well as William Shakespeare's dictum that old age is a 'second childishness.'" Essentially, Yu notes that there can be a comfort to the acceptance of the

fact that a second childhood comes with this diagnosis. In many cases, though, Alzheimer's is not necessary for a certain degree of helplessness in old age to come about. In this sense, Cronenberg has touched on something very raw and terrifying within *The Fly* that not many will want to examine. Many scholars do not consider the angle of age, instead examining the subtext or the sexual aspects. I wanted to look at this fear of aging flesh and the effect on the body to better understand why this is one of the main fears Cronenberg is so concerned with in his film. For example, by the final transformation, Seth can no longer be reasoned with. He has made a decision on what he wants, and his mind cannot be changed. This struggle feels very similar to the stubbornness of a child who is throwing a tantrum, but this will obviously have much more grave consequences.

This scene begins with Stathis entering Seth's apartment. This is the first time Stathis has been inside, so he is taken aback by the disarray of garbage and the overwhelming smell. The camera follows him as the score begins to swell towards the final confrontation. The climax of the film is rapidly approaching, and Stathis has brought a rifle. He assembles his weapon and loads it before the computer catches his attention. The camera returns to a familiar shot as it looks up at him from below, but this is intentionally to allow the audience to see the skylight of Seth's apartment over Stathis' shoulder. Stathis presses a few buttons on the keyboard, and the computer beeps to life with the message "Gene-Splicing Methodology." It explains having two subjects in two separate telepods that will come out as "genetically-fused" combination in the third telepod.¹⁹ Stathis is shown to be mulling this revelation over, trying to understand the implications when a dark shadow is seen moving across the ceiling. The orchestra grows louder with suspense as a high-pitched violin floods the ears. Stathis begins to approach the third

¹⁹ This third telepod is a prototype that Seth had in his lab at the start of the film and has only brought back online for this purpose.

telepod and its opaque door, but a sudden screech echoes as Seth drops from the ceiling onto Stathis from behind. Stathis is knocked onto his back where he sees what little is left of Seth Brundle standing before him. He aims his rifle, but Seth pushes it away and seizes Stathis' left hand. The camera then shows Seth's mouth agape as vomit pours from his mouth and over Stathis' hand and wrist.²⁰ Stathis begins to scream immediately as the acidic affects take hold. Seth looks almost to be shushing him before the camera focuses entirely on Stathis' closed fist, melting into a mutilated mess at the end of his arm. The camera flashes between Stathis' agonized face, the hand, and the now gleeful look that is overtaking Seth. Stathis drops the rifle as his body begins to go into shock, and Seth allows him to fall to the floor. The camera follows them down as Stathis uses his right foot to try and draw the rifle back to him, but this proves to be a mistake as Seth crouches over his ankle and proceeds to vomit over the limb. The music is at a crescendo as Stathis can hardly manage to scream through the pain. He appears to pass out as the bubbling, pus-colored liquid eats through his sock, his skin, his flesh, and his bone. Seth grins as he pulls the severed foot away from his leg. Seth climbs over Stathis to do this once more to his head, but Veronica pleads for him to spare Stathis from where she is waiting in the skylight windows. In this moment, we actually see what has become of Seth's jealousy. Before, it was a fleeting moment that caused him to make an impulsive decision. Now, in the moments where he feels strongest, when his mind is more fly, or childlike, than himself, he is gleeful and excited. He is like a cruel kid tormenting an insect before killing it.

This is not the end of the transformation, however. Seth's body is still just the slightest bit recognizable. Cronenberg cannot let that stand. Seth brings Veronica to the telepod and explains his plan to help him be "human" once more. The camera follows his explanation as he gestures

²⁰ According to the information compiled on a blog post by Karli Ray, "Brundlefly's vomit was made of a mixture of honey, eggs, and milk."

to the different telepods. It's as if he is explaining his original experiment to her once more. The tense music begins once more. Seth presses some buttons on the computer and the screen says, "Initiate fusion sequence." A two-minute countdown begins. The camera moves to show the two "fusion" telepod doors open with the final, opaque telepod waiting ominously in the background. The camera returns to Veronica and Seth. She is crying, terrified and confused. Seth is certain and unmovable on his decision. He begins to drag her to the closest telepod, and she struggles desperately. Her hand comes out and pushes against his jaw. This struggle is all it takes for his lumpy, mutated body to give way.

The lumps were a cocoon of sorts for the mass of his new, final form growing underneath. Veronica rips away Seth's jaw, and they both freeze for a beat. She screams in horror and drops it, twitching onto the ground. The noises that Seth makes are unnatural, like screams but now static. The camera goes immediately to Seth's arm, his fingers now pincers gripping Veronica's wrist. His knees snap backwards as slimy chunks of flesh and sinew fall away. Bug-like appendages tear out of his back and his feet separate. The orchestra tries, but it cannot drown out Veronica's sobs and panicked "Oh please. Oh, God, please!" or the sounds of skin tearing and bones snapping. The creature shuffles backwards, dragging Veronica with it. The camera returns to show Seth's face, his tongue lolling from his gaping jaw as his human eyes bulge for an instant. His face splits in half as a bulbous head molts through the old one. More flesh falls away, sloughing onto the floor as the Brundlefly continues its mission to fuse with Veronica. Large, black eyes blink out from the mess of goop and flesh. They are not emotionless. They look intelligent and oddly familiar which is all the more unsettling. It throws Veronica into the telepod, and as she looks out and begs to be let out, the audience can only see

the Brundlefly staring back at them.²¹ It is a twitching, buzzing monster that has replaced the loveable Seth Brundle. It continues with its objective to fuse with Veronica and the fetus, even though Seth would have never hurt Veronica in this way prior to this transformation.

Why not discuss Cronenberg's original intentions with *The Fly*? The simple answer boils down to the fact that aging is a source of discomfort. Facing our own mortality is hard, but it can be easier done if the mortality is preventable. Avoid sex to prevent STDs/STIs. Avoid hubris and remain humble lest we give in to the horrors of the mad scientist. There is nothing to stop us from aging, however. We will all reach that time of second infancy, and dignity may leave us in the dust. It's one of the truly horrifying realities of life, and Cronenberg hits the nail on the head as we watch Veronica see the changes in her great love. Seth has good days where he is stronger, but the bad has begun to outweigh the good. This is what waits for us all at the end. In the same interview with Beard and Handling, Cronenberg said, "How about some of these films being a rehearsal for a life after death or a transmuted life—a life that is transformed into something else" (185). Could the flesh then be a transformation to death? A life-long passage to the grave?

²¹ See Appendix D.

CHAPTER 5: What's Left of the Flesh?

“It is hard to think of the horror genre without thinking about the body’s messy and intimate materiality—its blood and guts, its painful vulnerabilities, its inevitable rot and decay—and the forces that threaten to exceed and transform the apparently inviolable cohesion of our physical state: the monstrous, the freakish, the parasitic, the hybrid”

Xavier Aldana Reyes, *The Cambridge Companion to American Horror*, p.107²²

When considering the depictions of the flesh in *The Fly*, it’s important to consider why the word itself is used so often. *The Fly* uses the word “flesh” nine times before it switches to the word “body.” In turn, the word “body” is said ten times before the movie ends. The use of flesh has been established as three pronged: renewal, penetration, and transformation. However, the use of body is frequently reserved for discussions on Veronica’s autonomy. This transition from “flesh” to “body” also occurs when Seth is no longer quite Seth.

Seth’s “body” is no longer what it once was, and he seems to have lost his own autonomy. He fears he will lose control and hurt Veronica because he is no longer fully himself. By the time he kidnaps her from the abortion clinic, he is not thinking as logical Seth Brundle. The Brundlefly is desperate for survival and has consumed Seth’s mind, controlling his body, and driving the urges of his flesh to survive by any means necessary.

So, why did the words change so abruptly? Flesh could just be only aspect of the whole body, so the word is necessary to humanize. When the switch happens, the film is no longer concerned with focusing in on specific aspects by using the word “flesh” but is rather examining the whole being. Body is the word primarily showing the need for Veronica’s autonomy as an individual rather than one aspect of flesh. When Veronica goes to her ex-boyfriend, Stathis, for advice, he jokes, “Do I have permission to claim your body when this is all over?” (1:06:47-9).

²² Reyes, Xavier Aldana. “Body Horror.” *The Cambridge Companion to American Horror*, edited by Stephen Shapiro and Mark Storey, Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 107-119.

Not long after this, Veronica discovers that she is pregnant. She finds that she can't tell Seth, so she goes to Stathis. Here, the word body occurs four times in the conversation as Veronica cries and demands that she be taken to get an abortion immediately. "No! Now! I want it out of my body now." "There could be anything in here. In me! In my body." "'Cause I don't want it in my body. You understand me? I don't want it in my body!" (1:19:16-33). She never once thinks of this as her baby. She calls it Seth's baby when she first finds out that she is pregnant, but this is immediately followed by the maggot nightmare. She knows that something horrible will come from bringing life to this child, so she wants to make the only choice that she feels she can. The transformation she is undergoing is one that is very humanizing, even if it is part of the larger fantasy scenario.

However, when the word "body" is used around Seth, it is always in reference to the unusual changes affecting him: his vitality, his physicality, his age. When the word "body" first comes up, Veronica says "You can't have any—have any fluid left in your body" after they have had hours of sex (45:49-51). As Veronica tries to persuade Seth to stop having sex, she notices strange, coarse hairs on his back and points them out. Seth retorts, "I'm looking forward to a hairy body. It's one of the compensation of old age" (46:18-32).²³ Veronica then cuts the hairs that she later has tested in a lab. When Seth begins to protest, she says, "Relax, Brundle! I don't really think you want a body covered with these" (47:10-14). These lines all occur seconds before they fight, and Seth shouts his line "I'll bet you think you woke me up about the flesh, don't you?" (48:21-24). From there, the woman that Seth tries to bring in instead of Veronica, Tawny, asks him if he is a body builder in reference to his physique. Seth comments, "Yeah, I build bodies. I take them apart, then I put them back together again" (51:19-24). Seth is clearly

²³ This is one of three mentions of age in the film: the old ladies that pinch babies' cheeks, the suggestion that Seth and Veronica go on a trip like an old married couple, and this.

referring to himself, but this is also before he knows that he has been genetically spliced with a fly. He seems detached from his body, disconnected from how he just broke a man's wrist in an arm-wrestling match. He simply eats his chocolate bars and gets Tawny back to his apartment to show her teleportation. He even seems like a mad scientist in this moment as he carries the drunk Tawny up the stairs to his apartment, the sinister track of Howard Shore accompanying him. This detachment is in direct contrast with Veronica's frantic awareness of her own pregnancy. She is conscious of each passing moment, afraid of the possibilities that await her and the fetus.

When Seth, now more Brundlefly than Seth, finds out about the pregnancy, he wants one thing and one thing only: to keep his offspring alive. When Veronica says she's afraid to do so, the Brundlefly has a simple solution: combine them all into one body. "We'll be the ultimate family," he asserts as he leads Veronica to a telepod. "A family of three, joined together in one body. More human than I am alone" (1:27:57-28:08). The problem here is that, if this is successful, Veronica's bodily autonomy would be gone. Seth has already not been himself for a while as the fly within him has changed something irrevocably.

The various ways flesh in *The Fly* can be categorized all culminate to the body. The flesh as newness and renewal is Seth's one shot at being human again while also condemning Veronica to either a life of raising a baby that may be plagued with the same burden as the Brundlefly or losing her life as herself. The flesh as penetrative is Seth's battle, not only with his ability to reproduce, but his own relationship with gender and sexuality. The flesh as transformation shows Seth's progression in both Cronenberg's original intent as a metaphor for aging as well as a person with a chronic disability. By themselves, the different aspects of the flesh can be examined in these lenses very closely. However, they do not become truly tangible until they are all considered part of one body. Seth's body and Veronica's body, even Stathis'

body at the end of the film, each undergo a transformation, a change that affects parts of their individual flesh. The individual flesh in turn, much like Cronenberg's favored parasites, wreak havoc on the body.

The idea that the body as a whole is impacted by one or more aspects of the flesh is nowhere near a new idea. This is especially common when examining *The Fly* and the flesh in through the lens of disability. Wendell writes

Defining what I mean by chronic illness would help to clarify the distinction between healthy and unhealthy people with disabilities, but it is not easy to pin down chronic illnesses with a definition. Usually, they are understood to be illnesses that do not go away by themselves within six months, that cannot reliably be cured, and that will not kill the patient any time soon (162).

This explanation feels fairly accurate, but also frustrating, as there often is not a clear definition for what makes a chronic illness. Is someone disabled when their daily lives are impacted? How impacted must their lives be by this disability for a person to be considered chronically ill? When it comes to Seth, his life is obviously deeply impacted rather immediately. He is actually improved by the DNA in his body right away. There is nothing wrong, in fact. No illness, no disability. It is not until Veronica leaves and about four weeks pass that we see his body beginning to deteriorate. He can barely walk. He cannot eat. His body is literally falling to pieces around him. Wendell would likely define Seth as an unhealthy person with a disability in this stage. However, as he progresses, his body begins adapting to his new normal. Seth is compromising with himself to try and make the best his situation. Does he have any other option? No one with a disability really does. Each day is another compromise if it is not already a decided battle.

When it comes to body horror, few do it better than David Cronenberg. *The Fly* stands as an example of how the body and flesh can be taken apart and put together again. Seth and Veronica undergo the renewal of flesh together both through his teleportation and her pregnancy. Seth experiences the flesh as sex and penetration by losing his virginity and later losing his external sexual organs. Finally, our three characters all undergo a transformation of the flesh that leaves an imprint on their bodies forever. Stathis loses his hand and foot when he tries to fight against the Brundlefly, but he still manages to save Veronica from the telepod in his injured state. Veronica's body begins to change with pregnancy as well as bearing the trauma of her lost love. Seth undergoes the most obviously dramatic transformations of the three both physically, mentally, and emotionally throughout the film, leaving him a shell of what he used to be and not even safe within his own body. Ultimately, Cronenberg's adaptation of *The Fly* is one that deserves the recognition and study it has received and likely will continue to receive. The careful humanization of the flesh within the body is just another layer clear of artistry by a practiced director. Whether the audience digs into the meat of the metaphors or sits back to enjoy the gory, tragic love story, *The Fly* is one of the films that will endure the test of time.

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Appendix A

Table 2.2 Rank order of horror-movie monsters, 1931–1984^a

<i>Monsters</i>	<i>Number of cases</i>	<i>% incidence^a</i>
psychotics	271	28
mad scientists	169	17
science creations	134	14
vampires	101	10
mutations	97	10
ghosts	77	8
magicians/witches	70	7
natural nasties	67	7
prehistoric	57	6
space 'men'	50	5
zombies	48	5
demons	47	5
bug-eyed monsters	43	4
satanists	39	4
werewolves	27	3
mummies	14	1

^a Percentage figures have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number, as they are in all the following rank-order tables.

Table 2.3 Rank order of sources of horror-movie threat, 1931–1984

<i>Source</i>	<i>Number of cases</i>	<i>% incidence</i>
scientific	251	25
supernatural	241	24
magical	141	14
psychiatric	136	14
evil/unexplained	132	13
natural	104	11
extraterrestrial	79	8

Appendix B



Appendix C



Appendix D

