

An Official 'Bad-Bug-Movie' Review
ENT 812, Insects in the Cinema
Michigan State University

MAN, NATURE, MACHINE

“The Fly” as an allegory for the role of emerging technology
and the disruption of the natural
An analysis by T. Michael Kates

Introduction-

Since Mary Shelley penned her classic novel *Frankenstein* in the early nineteenth century, she wrote the seminal work of literature addressing the role of science and the responsibility and relationship between a scientist and their work and creation. As time has progressed, the endeavors of science have become bolder; the animated frog legs that inspired Shelley have given way to genetic recombination and cloning. Science has yet to demonstrate the ability to cheat death, but it is continually evolving in its quest to forge life from the very building blocks of existence. *The Fly*, is one of many works, ranging from books to cinema, that address this area of uncertainty accompanying the new ground covered by pioneering research and enterprise. These works encompass doomsday scenarios that seek to shock people and create an emotional reaction to the story, but these works also serve as thought experiments that test how mankind will react to the originations of modern science.

The Film-

The 1986 version of the film, “The Fly” is loosely based off George Langelaan’s short story by the same name. This story was published in the June 1957 issue of Playboy magazine. The film outlines the story of a brilliant scientist who convinces his wife to kill him after he scrambles parts of his body and exchanges his head and one arm with that of a fly during an experiment involving the disintegration and reintegration of matter. The story involves the man’s brother seeking to understand the circumstances of his brother’s death. In 1968, a film version was produced, following the storyline of the short story. The film was a huge success and was followed by two sequels, *Return of the Fly* and *Curse of the Fly*.

The 1986 version of the film was directed by David Cronenberg. Cronenberg is known as a very influential horror director, famous for creating films containing body or venereal horror. These films are typified by the concept of body transformation by disease or other methods. Cronenberg is also skilled at developing stories in which the psyche is intertwined or symbolized by the physical. *The Fly* is typical of this type of story.

The story follows a brilliant young scientist named Seth Brundle, played by Jeff Goldblum, who successfully creates a device to facilitate the teleportation of objects from one phone booth-like “telepod” to another. His methods are successful for transporting inanimate objects, but when he attempts to transport living things, the telepod fails. The outcome is a scrambled version of whatever

creature he attempts to transport. While he is perfecting his work, he meets Veronica Quaife, a science and technology journalist who agrees to cover the progress of his research. Through a series of events the two become romantically involved and grow close as Seth's research progresses. One day Seth decides to go through the machine after solving the problem of teleporting living things. While doing so, Seth inadvertently combined himself with a fly that happened to have entered the telepod. At first, he does not feel any ill effects. In fact, he feels rejuvenated and states that "...human teleportation, molecular decimation, breakdown, reformation, is inherently purging." Seth believes that his machine has a purifying effect and has made himself greater. During this series of events, Veronica becomes pregnant with Seth's baby. Seth slowly begins to degenerate into a creature unknown to science, which he calls "Brundle fly." The collision of fear, loathing, and ethical dilemmas brings about many questions that are to be asked about the nature of science, the relationship between the scientist and his creation, and how we should approach new technologies in the future.

The man-

Seth Brundle embodies the spirit of modern science. He is quietly brilliant and sees a way that he can improve the lives of other people. He is not malicious and has no intent to create a machine or technology that would ever cause anyone any harm. Seth is driven by a desire to achieve, independent of the promise of fame or fortune. He simply desires to create useful technology.

In most cases, new technologies are not created with the intent of causing harm. There are notable exceptions to this rule, but even things such as dynamite and atomic energy were not developed with the intent of being agents of harm, the nefarious uses of their discoveries became issues after their inventions took form and others became the proprietors. Nobel and Einstein were noted pacifists who were horrified when they realized the implications of their life's work, which was fueled by the pure desire to examine the fabric of nature. In a world where any invention can be twisted into a tool with unintended consequences, the responsibilities become enormous, as the scientist releases their discoveries into the world and has little control over how discoveries are used.

Science is shifting from gazing at the stars and is peering into the cell and observing the mechanisms that make life work. The biotechnology revolution created many new opportunities for science to implement these discoveries to improve life. Agriculture benefits from resistant varieties that reduce the application of insecticides or change weed control practices, allowing farmers to reduce tillage and enhance soil quality in many instances. Medicine and human nutrition could also benefit from these technologies, allowing more nutritious food to be grown for impoverished people groups and for medicines to be produced by genetically modified bacteria.

In many instances, the implications of discoveries are not fully understood until the passage of time. When Seth emerged from the telepod, he felt no adverse side effects. Only after time had elapsed did the negative effects manifest themselves, at first they were masked by the good traits that were emerging and were overlooked. Many ask if the biotechnological revolution will be considered positive when looked at through the glass of history. In many ways that is the

nature of science, that the implications of what is being explored or done are not often fully understood.

What is unique about *The Fly* is the creation is not outside of humanity; the change is within a man himself. The typical book or movie of the renegade technology involves a monster being created and wreaking havoc on the creator. In this case the man is the monster he creates. The idea of science turning man into a monster is an interesting concept. Often the creation is outside of the persons grasp, and they feel responsible, yet there is little that can be done. It can be used to argue that by using technology we are in fact destroying human capital and our environment through by war, pollution, environmental degradation and poor health conditions. The promise of becoming greater through science can actually be a false hope and can become a cancerous tumor as easily as it can heal.

Nature-

When Seth Brundle is transported from one end of his laboratory to the other he transforms himself by joining his genetic material with that of a fly at a molecular level. This inadvertent fusion causes a downward spiral that ends in a catastrophic failure that ends Seth's life. In this case, albeit inadvertently, Seth played God. Whether God is an actual entity or the natural order established by millions of years of evolution, the Brundle fly represents a disruption in this order and poses a problem, but in fact nature provides a course correction and stabilizes the situation. Nature has a way of asserting itself and evolution will establish a new equilibrium; this simultaneously gives scientists comfort and fear.

Knowing that a new equilibrium will be retained explains why tinkering with the natural order often seems to be devoid of major consequences. In the case of biological control, when insects are released to combat pests, a majority do not work because the insect is not adapted to the new environs. In these situations often the disruption of the natural order does not have immediate or clear consequences. On the other hand, the establishment of new equilibrium can be at a great cost and can have dramatic consequences. In the case of global climate change, a new equilibrium is being created, but the things that happen as the shift towards the new equilibrium occurs can have catastrophic consequences. As was argued in earlier sections, often the consequences of our actions are not immediately apparent. It often takes time for a new equilibrium to establish or a tipping point to be reached.

Although Seth did not intentionally cause the combination of fly and man, he continued to attempt it again. In a scene removed from the final film, Seth proceeds to combine a cat and a baboon. When he does so the creature is so ugly and is in such pain he kills it with a metal pipe. He continues to attempt to question what is natural, and even his final solution involves making a super organism by combining himself with Veronica and their unborn baby.

The Child-

The Fly ends with no concrete resolution of fate of the unborn child of Seth and Veronica. The child has the genetic material of the deformed Seth. The

transformation of Seth into an unrecognizable entity frightens Veronica. She has nightmares about the potential insect child that she has growing inside of her and is fearful of what the child may be like. In several scenes she seeks an abortion in an attempt to preemptively end the life of the unborn child. This is representative of the choice we have as scientists regarding the future of discoveries or creations. When a technology poses problems, two reactions are possible. First, an outright end to research or ban of the technology can be implemented, effectively aborting the unborn or fetal technology. In the other case, the technology can be viewed with caution and can continue to be developed. In this case the baby contains half of the fly DNA that Seth carried. In effect it represents a possible dilution or a less potent use, while still offering some of the positive changes that Seth encountered.

In the sequel to *The Fly*, *The Fly II*, the child of Seth and Veronica, Martin Brundle is born and becomes the property of Bartok Industries, which funded Seth's telepod work. In the film Martin is dealt the task of repairing his father's work and continuing the development of teleportation technology. The film ends with the destruction of the president of Bartok Industries in a telepod and the restoration of Martin to full humanity.

The Fly asks the question: what do we do with concepts or technologies that create a real possibility for danger but could also be used for good? The follow up question that needs to be asked is if the good possibilities afforded by a technology outweigh the possibility of its misuse, or its risks. Only in the last several decades has questioning science become the normal reaction to new technology. After Rachel Carson penned *Silent Spring*, people have become more skeptical of the merits of new technology. Technology has been identified as an agent capable of good, but also as an agent of unspeakable harm. These are questions that must be wrestled with and are vital to the practice of good science. In the mean time we shall have to be content to battle the monsters of our own design or be willing to abort the offspring of an awful marriage of technologies.