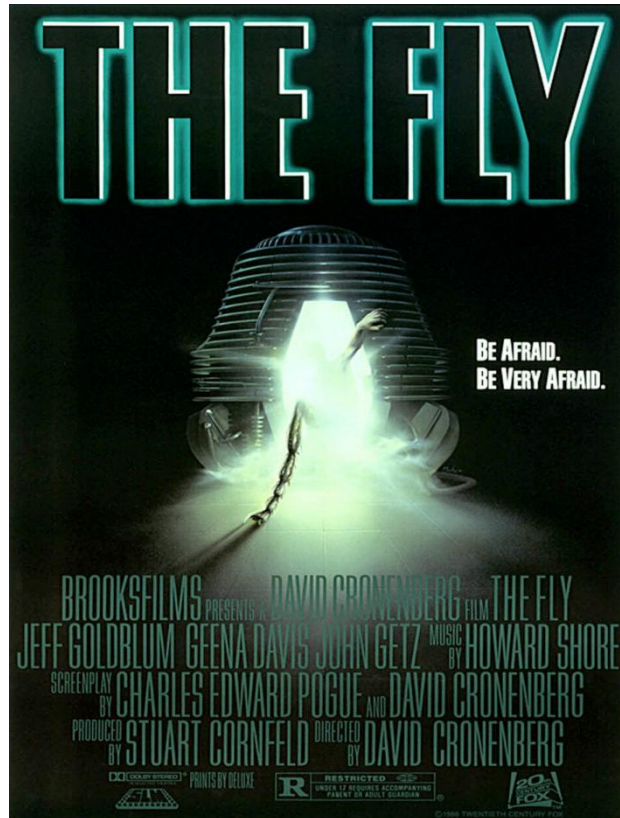


**An Official 'Bad-Bug-Movie' Review**  
**ENT 812, Insects in the Cinema**  
**Michigan State University**

**The Fly (1986)**  
**A review by Pete Nelson**



**Introduction:**

In 1957, Playboy Magazine published “The Fly”, a short story written by British writer and one time Allied powers secret agent George Langelaan (1). Unbeknownst to Playboy Magazine and Langelaan at the time, “The Fly” became the inspiration for two different films and an opera sharing the same title as the story, with each film giving rise to a sequel. The 1986 release of “The Fly” was by far the most successful out of all of the projects the original short story spawned, differs the most from the original story, and launched actor Jeff Goldblum into stardom (2).

“The Fly” (1986) is a remake of the first film spawned by Langelaan’s short story, originally released in 1958. The original version of “The Fly” featured an incredibly different plot than the 1986 remake; aside from the characters having the same names, there are almost no similarities (3). The 1986 adaptation of the fly was produced by Stuart Cornfeld, whose early career as a producer included “The Elephant Man” (1980), “The Fly”, “The Fly II”, and “Mimic”. Interestingly enough, the last three films all share a common theme: entomology. Was Cornfeld interested in the field at the time? Perhaps Cornfeld was fascinated with the insect world but decided against a career in

entomology to pursue a career film, guaranteeing him a sexier lifestyle and more money? Personally, I doubt it. Cornfeld took a brief hiatus from producing films and returned with heady films such as “Tropic of Thunder”, “Blades of Glory”, “Zoolander”, and “Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story” in the 2000s (4). Obviously Cornfeld’s choice in movies shifted from an entomological theme and arguably took a turn for the worse, leading me to believe that he chose to sacrifice any artistic integrity he may have had in order to follow trends and make more money. I wonder if this caused any internal conflict for Cornfeld, leading him to ponder his life decisions late at night. Obviously if he had chosen a career in entomology, this would not be a problem.

“The Fly” was directed by David Cronenberg, who in my opinion is most well known for his obsession (or man crush?) with actor Viggo Mortensen. Cronenberg most recently directed “A History of Violence” and “Eastern Promises”, both starring Mortensen. “A Dangerous Method” is currently in pre-production and will be the third movie in the Cronenberg-Mortensen legacy. Interestingly enough Cronenberg directed the film “Spider” (which did not star Viggo Mortensen), released in 2002, a psychological thriller devoid of any entomological or arthropodal content or themes. In addition to directing “The Fly”, Cronenberg wrote the screenplay along with the help of Charles Edward Pogue, who wrote the screenplay for the visually stunning but otherwise predictable “Dragonheart”, “Krull the Conqueror”, and “Psycho III” (5, 6).



“The Fly” stars a young Jeff Goldblum who was on the cusp of stardom prior to the release of the film. Goldblum had previously starred in movies such as “The Big Chill” (1983) and “Invasions of the Body Snatchers” (1978), and played a minor part in “Annie Hall” (1977) (8). Geena Davis co-starred in “The Fly” with Goldblum. Prior to “The Fly”, Davis’ most notable film was “Transylvania 6-5000” (1985), the first of three movies in which Davis and Goldblum co-starred “Earth Girls Are Easy” (1988) being the third) (9, 10). The romantic interaction between Goldblum and Davis on-screen in “The Fly” proved to be more than just in the screenplay. The two were married from 1987-1990 and according to Goldblum they still remain friends (7).

“The Fly” was a hugely successful investment for Brookfilms and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. Filmed at a cost of approximately \$15 million, “The Fly” grossed over \$40 million dollars and was the #1 grossing film in the US for two weeks. Critically, “The Fly” was well received and Goldblum’s performance was called a “tour de force”, subsequently propelling him into stardom (11). “The Fly” was nominated for, and received, one Academy Award, the 1987 Oscar for Best Makeup. Makeup artists Chris Walas and Stephan Dupuis’ design for Goldblum’s various stages of transformation into the hybrid “Brundlefly” creature were state of the art at the time and shocked viewers (12).

Around the time of the release of “The Fly”, advances in computers and technology were taking off. With the advent of the IBM personal computer, computers were beginning to find their way into people’s homes and were no longer thought of as reserved for scientific laboratories, taking up entire rooms. Although at the time the average family did not have a PC in their home, the more widespread distribution of PCs caused a higher awareness of computers (13, 14). Because of this awareness, computers and technology were increasingly becoming integrated into popular culture, often times preying on an individual’s wildest fears. To a certain degree “The Fly” plays on the new role of computers in society and popular culture. Many movie-goers were most likely unaware of the capability of computers at the time, or what they might be in the future, thus “The Fly” was able to capitalize on such fears and captivate the audience.

Prior to, and at the time of, the release of “The Fly”, genetic engineers were making the kind of advances Watson and Crick only dreamed of when they proposed their accepted model of DNA as a double-helix structure (15). Pioneered in 1973 by two American biochemists, genetic engineering was a new scientific field garnering the interest of many. In 1976, the National Institutes of Health set forth safety guidelines to control gene-splicing procedures performed by scientists (16). Initially these guidelines were strict because of safety concerns of such research. This concern quickly spread to the public, where the average individual did not have the necessary knowledge to comprehend the mechanics of genetic engineering nor understand the potential of the field (17). Throughout history, new areas of scientific study generally cause widespread fear because of a lack of understanding and familiarity; genetic engineering is no exception. The “scientific methods” employed in “The Fly” would have definitely been unsettling to movie-goers with little or no scientific background. Again, “The Fly” was able to effectively capitalize on the lack of understanding and fears of its audience, captivate them, and prove to be an exciting film with enough relevance to current events and society that viewers might think the happenings on screen were possible.

### **Synopsis:**

“The Fly” begins at a party where scientists are meeting with the press to drum up interest in their research. Seth Brundle (Goldblum) meets Particle Magazine and freelance journalist Veronica Quaife (Davis) and tells her that he has invented something that will change the world and life as we know it. Quaife is skeptical, but follows Brundle to his laboratory where he reveals and demonstrates his “telepods”, devices that are capable of teleporting inanimate objects, but are unable to teleport animate objects. Quaife agrees to document his efforts in teleporting animate objects and as the two begin to spend more time together, they fall in love.



After a failed attempt to send a baboon through the telepods, Brundle is inspired by a comment made by Quaife and makes an adjustment to the computer controlling the telepods. Brundle and Quaife soon find out that the adjustment is exactly what was needed, as a second attempt to send a baboon through the telepods is successful. Shortly thereafter Quaife finds a package from an ex-boyfriend who happens to be the publisher of Particle magazine, threatening to expose Brundle's work. Quaife leaves immediately to address the potential threat to Brundle's work, leaving Brundle in his laboratory dejected and confused. Brundle then proceeds to become intoxicated and drunkenly decides to teleport himself. In a freak coincidence, a housefly enters the telepod while Brundle is preparing the teleportation process. Brundle takes no notice of the tiny house fly and continues his preparations for the process. Brundle's successful teleportation is confirmed again, as he was "disintegrated" and "reintegrated" in two different telepods, with out any troubles. Or so he thinks, as the uneasy music in the background causes the viewer to question whether or not the interaction with the fly will lead to any undesired effects...

Almost immediately after his teleportation, Brundle begins to act strangely. First, he grows thick, coarse hairs on his back that are unlike any human hair. He develops a strong desire for sugar and a hyperactive and impatient attention span, which raises suspicions in Quaife. Brundle and Quaife's relationship rapidly deteriorates and Brundle's insatiable sex drive finally causes the two to split up. Brundle is adamant that Quaife go through with the teleportation process herself to become his equal, but she refuses. Brundle leaves Quaife in search of a partner who could match his strengths.

After spending time in search of a suitable partner with no luck, Brundle is confronted by Quaife about the changes she has observed in him. Through the makeup artist's skill, it is apparent that Brundle's condition is deteriorating as his face has become covered with sores and lesions. Brundle refuses to acknowledge Quaife's concerns that something may have gone wrong with the teleportation process. Instead, Brundle believes that the teleportation process distilled the inferior qualities out of him, creating an enhanced version of Brundle, capable of accomplishing things he never dreamed of doing prior to the teleportation. Eventually, Brundle notices his body rapidly deteriorating, causing him to suspect that something may have gone wrong with the teleportation process. Again, the makeup artist's skill truly shines, as Brundle's body begins a disgusting and disturbing transformation, losing fingernails, oozing green goo, and losing hair and pieces of flesh. After reviewing the computer records from the teleportation event, he learns that a housefly was present in one of the telepods and

something went terribly wrong with the teleportation: the process combined the two organisms into one.



As “The Fly” progresses, Brundle’s body deteriorates further and he maintains a video record of his changes with the help of Quaife, who continues to show concern for the well being of her ex-lover. More and more, Brundle begins to demonstrate the qualities of a housefly, such as externally digesting food and walking vertical surfaces such as walls and ceilings. As Brundle becomes more like a housefly, his features become less and less human, with pieces of his body falling off and his flesh appearing to be lumpy and cystic. Brundle dubs himself the “Brundlefly”, and warns Quaife not to return, as he can no longer be trusted.

Meanwhile, we learn that Quaife is pregnant with Brundle’s child and has to confide in her ex-boyfriend (the publisher mentioned before) because of Brundle’s condition. Quaife decides that she wants an abortion to prevent a child with any resemblance to the Brundlefly. Quaife’s ex-boyfriend accompanies her to a doctor’s office with the intention of having the abortion performed and while they are waiting for the doctor, the Brundlefly breaks into the doctor’s office in a dramatic scene, complete with an exploding glass wall. Brundle proceeds to kidnap Quaife and bring her back to his laboratory, as earlier Brundle overheard a conversation between Quaife and her ex-boyfriend about the aborting the pregnancy. Brundle begs Quaife to keep the child, as it is the only remaining element of his humanity. Quaife’s only response is that of horror and disgust.

Quaife’s ex-boyfriend follows the two to Brundle’s apartment, armed with a shotgun and the intent to finish off the Brundlefly. An altercation between the ex-boyfriend and Brundle ensues, eventually leading to Brundle’s metamorphosis into the final stage of the “Brundlefly,” a crude insect form lacking any human flesh. This scene is particularly graphic as large chunks of flesh fall from Brundle’s humanoid body, revealing a sickly, arthropodal appearing life form bearing little resemblance to any human. Brundle is able to momentarily subdue his opponent by externally digesting his hand, a very gross and painful process. Brundle then places Quaife in one of the Telepods in an attempt to fuse himself and Quaife together into the “ultimate family.” Clearly at this point in the movie, Brundle has completely lost it. Quaife’s ex-boyfriend interrupts the process, saving Quaife and transforming Brundle into a conglomeration of

the Brundlefly and the telepod machinery. What remains of Brundle then begs Quaiife to end his life through a series of gestures, and she reluctantly agrees to comply. The film ends as Quaiife pulls the trigger of the shotgun, ending the life painful existence of her former lover.



### **Analysis & Review:**

The main character, Seth Brundle, undergoes a series of interesting changes that are not only related to his physical appearance. In the beginning of “The Fly”, Brundle comes across as a timid nerd, who according to Veronica Quaiife “didn’t seem to get out much”. Brundle obviously had issues with self-esteem and his perception of what he could accomplish, as it appeared he had little experience with women and admitted that he was not much of a scientist, but rather relied on others’ abilities to create his telepods. In the beginning of the film, Brundle’s physical appearance works to suggest the previously mentioned characteristics, as he seems a bit frail and owns multiple sets of the same outfit, which he wears on a daily basis.

Upon his teleportation and reintegration with the housefly, we begin to notice a change in Brundle. He immediately acts more confident in himself and his abilities, stating that he “is in the prime of his life” and can “accomplish anything”. Also notable is his initial physical change, thanks to some unnecessary scenes in which Brundle is scantily clad, or completely nude. Brundle demonstrates this new, stronger physique by doing hand-stand pushups, something he would have never been able to do prior to his teleportation incident.

Quickly enough, Brundle’s change proves to be impermanent. Although it appears he has not lost much of his physical strength, his body begins to disfigure and appear repulsive. Brundle’s demeanor changes as well, becoming impatient, hyperactive, and seemingly less emotional. These changes continue throughout the rest of the movie until Brundle’s transformation into the Brundlefly that has few, if any human characteristics.

Known as the “Baron of Blood” or “King of Venereal Horror”, David Cronenberg’s re-imagining of “The Fly” and Brundle’s transformation should not be a surprise to the viewer if they are familiar with Cronenberg’s body of work (18). Many have viewed Brundle’s transformation as an allegory to the AIDs epidemic, which at the time of the release of the movie gained significant attention world-wide in the media,

politics, science, and healthcare (19). Cronenberg denied this and I agree with him. At no point in the movie is there any interaction that could suggest the spreading of a disease such as HIV. Rather, Brundle's transformation is due to a mishap in a scientific experiment and is not communicable throughout the movie to any other characters. Cronenberg went further to explain that instead of symbolizing the AIDs epidemic, the movie and Brundle's transformation are metaphor for death and the deterioration of the body that leads up to it. Based on Cronenberg's penchant for blood, gore, and all things disgusting, this the metaphor makes much more sense. In the movie we see Brundle go from weak to strong, back to weak again, and finally to a point where he is non-human. Is Cronenberg warning us of what negative effects science may have on humans? Possibly, is he trying to get a scare out of his viewers so that they will tell their friends how great the movie was? Most likely. People are fascinated with death, the process of aging, and attempting to delay getting old, and Cronenberg's depiction of Brundle's transformation is perfect for captivating an audience.

The other significant character in the movie, Veronica Quaife, plays an interesting role. In the beginning of the film, Quaife is depicted as a tough as nails, go-getting' freelance journalist. She's fiercely independent and refused to take shit from anyone, including her ex-boyfriend who is now signing her paychecks. Quaife sees something in Brundle and takes a gamble on him. In the process, Quaife inspires confidence in the initially shy man, not an easy feat, and unfortunately her gamble on Brundle pays off in the form of a story she never hoped for.

Disappointingly, as Brundle's transformation progresses and Quaife is no longer spending time with her mutating ex-lover, we find her becoming increasingly dependent on her ex-boyfriend, who at the beginning of the movie appears to be a self-absorbent ass. Is Cronenberg's intention to be misogynistic and display Quaife as weak and unable to stand on her own? I hardly think so. To me, Quaife symbolizes the need all humans have for someone to fall back on for support in hard times, especially in times when the happenings are as unfamiliar as they are in "The Fly". While relying on her ex for support, Quaife seems to remain incredibly faithful to Brundle during his transformation, demonstrating her true concern for the man. This also leads me to believe that Quaife symbolizes the fact that when people are down on their luck, they are often able to remain true to their ideals and values.

Entomologically, "The Fly" has its moments but probably wouldn't inspire any college-bound students to consider a career in entomology. The common housefly, *Musca domestica*, is prominently featured in the film, as it was combined with Brundle into the "Brundlefly". While undergoing his transformation and mutation, Brundle displayed a few qualities true of houseflies including their ability to walk on horizontal surfaces, or upside-down, and their external digestion by releasing enzymes on their food, then sucking up the digested food (20). Brundle's transformation into the final stage of the Brundlefly is a bit disappointing, as the creature bears little, if any resemblance to a housefly. For the purpose of the film, the appearance of the Brundlefly makes sense, but as an entomologist I was hoping for something that required some analysis of the structure of the creature from a systematics point of view.

All in all, "The Fly" is a film of decent quality that propelled Jeff Goldblum into stardom, provided David Cronenberg with a stronger platform to continue his moviemaking, and inspired a sequel and an opera. In late 2009, Cronenberg announced

that he planned a remake of “The Fly”, and I have a couple of items I am truly hoping will show up in the film. First, it would be great to see the esteemed and talented Mr. Goldblum again in the film, even if it were only a cameo. Second, even though the Brundlefly creature was great in the original, I am hoping for a creature (insect) that entomologists can truly appreciate, or at least make fun of for its flaws. With any luck, the next adaptation of “The Fly” will be as successful as the 1986 version and help launch the career of an actor ready to fill the shoes Goldblum left empty as he made seemingly inevitable the switch over to primetime television.

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