

In Cronenberg's *The Fly* (1986), scientist Seth Brundle's body becomes the site of a gruesome transformation that features the gradual deterioration of his human physical characteristics. Watching Seth's bodily metamorphosis is an especially visceral experience for a human audience to endure, because some of the biological transformations that take place undermine the logic of human anatomy. Witnessing Seth's fingernails and teeth sloughing off with such an alarming ease doesn't easily register in our minds as a normal, explicable, medical phenomena. Rather, these "*bodily affections are not psychoanalytic symptoms to be deciphered*" since they occur as brute biological processes without an accompanying psychic element to the illness that might let us grasp the nature of the transformation (Shaviro, 128, 9). For example, cancer or common genetic diseases have a predictable, intuitive outcome on the body. But in *The Fly*, although it's narratively conveyed to us that the fly's DNA has been spliced into Seth's DNA, there is no reliable way to predict the outcome of his biology – the audience needs to brace for all the possible ways that flesh can be reconfigured. Rarely is the SF world operating on a familiar logic that the audience can safely hedge their bets on; this is a world that is pushing biological, technological, and sometimes psychological boundaries. Much discourse on Cronenberg's films talk about what it's like to watch flesh be pushed beyond the logical boundaries of biology. What is also interesting is to consider how Seth's flesh functions as an allegory for existentialist despair since the chaos and unpredictability of his biological transformation is working to slowly isolate him from his own humanity. The experience of watching Seth slip away also dislodges the comfort and security we may feel about our own humanity, seeing as it can wither away as fast as our biological parts can. The film visually portrays Seth's metamorphosis through the incremental loss of his body parts, but his psychological descent into despair is revealed through the reactions he has to these physical changes. This relentless downward spiral shatter the

traditional, logical boundaries that exist between the mind, body, soul and even animality, since the kind of empathy that's extended to an insect differs from that given to a human. The grotesque, malformed, hybrid that Seth becomes challenges not only our perception of him but also his perception of himself. That is what grounds his psychosis. This paper will argue how *The Fly* uses flesh to create an allegory for psychosis, showing that Seth's bodily metamorphosis can be a representation of what it feels to lose your humanity altogether.

While the physical effects of the transformation are laid bare in the film (i.e., we get to *see* with *our* own eyes how Seth slowly swaps his human features for fly characteristics), the psychological dimension of his transformation is more nuanced, intricate, and inhere more in what these bodily changes represent to the viewer. These bodily changes – the decaying ears, falling teeth – aren't gruesome just because of the level of detail that goes into making them medically accurate; nor is it so much about how they are animated to look especially fleshy, like with thick pus, yellow lighting, close-up shots; but rather, it's what those transformations represent to us as human viewers. When we see an ear, which represents our ability to listen and understand other people, fall off with such ease seemingly out of nowhere, it shocks the audience. This shock is harboured in the security we think have in our closeness to our own humanity. We often think that even if we were to get cancer, our body would decay but our soul would remain ever-so present. We don't imagine that losing such important parts of us – like our ears that help us listen, our teeth that lets us smile, would be accompanied with an equal loss in our soul. However, Seth's metamorphosis is interesting because he appears to be declining psychologically at the same rate that he is biologically degrading – his *“psychological and physiological processes occur simultaneously, and neither can be said to be the cause or ground*

of the other”, since this binary between mind and body, or thought and matter are violently pulled apart, yet held in suspension as we watch both elements of Seth’s *Being* wither away simultaneously (Shaviro, 129).

Two scenes, I will argue, strategically use formal elements to help show this psychological decline that occurs alongside the physical metamorphosis. The first scene occurs at the start of Seth’s transformation, and the second scene occurs towards the later stages. I’ll juxtapose these two scenes to support my claim that the physical changes he goes through reflect his psychic reaction to his condition. In this first scene, Seth has already begun to feel frenzied and behave erratically. At around the 51:00-minute mark, Seth takes the woman from the bar back to his laboratory. As she sits on the stairs in exhaustion, Seth picks her up and starts to carry her up the stairs. From this point onwards, the camera is mostly behind Seth’s legs, as he ascends the stairs rapidly, with vigor and strength. Suspenseful musical chords start erupting at the same time, which, coupled with the low-lighting and shaky camera movement, paints a picture of a man who has a questionable amount of energy and persistence to get this woman somewhere. As she sits in the chair, waiting for his demonstration of his machine to conclude, the background music gradually slows down in tempo, creating a sense of tension and anticipation. The camera begins to move slowly and steadily towards her face, intensifying the focus of her watchful expression. Suddenly, the suspense is shattered by a series of extremely loud electrical zaps and shocking sounds emanating from the machine.



The jarring noises pierce through the previously calm tempo, heightening the atmosphere of unease and unpredictability in Seth's lab. Concurrently, the lighting in the room is cast an eerie flashing blue that changes the grey laboratory into something vivid and "alive"; it mimics a *Frankensteinian* ambience that builds up the suspense towards Seth's transformation. The camera pans to the machine, from where Seth emerges, fully nude, body glistening in sweat.

We hear his panting, and see his muscular body walk up towards the woman, as the camera angles up and lowers down.

We get shots of his back, with the insect hairs sprouting out of his scabs, and then a shot of his face, full of sweat and skin that looks scabbed and sickly. The cacophony of Seth's panting, growing louder with each breath, crescendos into a primal groan as he is laying nude on top of this woman. This scene uses Seth's panting sounds, as well as the mise-en-scene of sweat, frizzy hair,



toned sinewy musculature, to convey the sheer virility and passion that is being driven through his body. Each shot is meticulously framed to emphasize the monstrous metamorphosis overtaking his demeanor. His face, contorted with sweat and sickly marks, reflect the physical toll of his transformation. Seth's mental state is well represented by this scene especially since his body has not yet undergone a full gruesome transformation, yet we can sense the sickness of

his mind. All the formal elements of the scene work well together to show the edge that he's on, painting a portrait of a man who's teetering on the edges of sanity. His inappropriately excessive energy borders on the irrational, the unhinged, and reveals himself as a person



who's "*rationalizations of his state always lag far behind the actual, visible changes in his body*" (Shaviro, 144). In the next scene, we see how Seth's psyche reacts to the deterioration of his physical body.

The second scene occurs around the 1:04:32 mark, as Seth's love interest, Veronica, pays him a visit to check on his well-being. As he's describing what he thinks is happening to his body, Seth recoils from her touch, and a distant shot captures his body, which is slouched over with (fly) vomit on his shirt. Looking



decrepit and frail, this scene is a stark contrast to the earlier phase of his transition. Here, Seth looks so vulnerable it borders on appearing somewhat infantile, appearing to not control his bodily expulsions, waddling away from Veronica in a limped posture. Struggling to draw breath, his speech is punctuated by a sudden cry of frustration. This is a significant departure from his previous composure in the movie. As he struggles to put food in his own mouth, he vomits

involuntarily, and we see a slimy goo dripping from his mouth. Moments later, as he's touching the side of his own face, we hear a crispy peeling sound that's followed by the whole of his ear detaching. His panting increases, and his voice trembles with raw emotion as he admits his terror. Veronica hugs him, and as Seth speaks, we hear a significant fluctuation in his voice as he repeats the same line twice but in a vastly different tone. First, he says "help me" with a scared tone that dips down towards the end. However, as he makes his second plead for help, his voice softens, sounds higher-pitched, and rises with a desperation and childlike innocence that underscores the fear and helplessness that's consuming him. Seth is aware that his humanity is rapidly diminishing before his own eyes, and his quivering, hopeless appearance is a stylistic testament to that fact.





For the first scene, we get an image of picturesque virility and masculinity, as well as a strong presence of erotic energy from both actors, who are seen nude, sweaty, and posed in such a way that they take up a large part of the screen. Seth's exaggerated sense of urgency and persistence in bringing the woman up the stairs and into his lab hint at a delusion, obsession, false sense of self that is driving his actions. By contrast, the second scene portrays Seth more at a distance, capturing his cowering appearance and the vomit smeared across his chest that was previously exposed and strong looking. Even in sound, his exhaustive panting has turned into a sickly heavy breathing that sounds struggled. If we include the narrative details of the story, it's clear that as he watched his body fall apart, he realized that he was losing all his human marks, and his ability to live out his romantic affair with this woman who he'd been interested in from the start.

What scared Seth wasn't the perceived changes in his being. In the first scene, he was vastly different – manic, erratic, somewhat dangerous to others. During that time, the state of his body was at a physiological prime; his body was able to do acrobatics, perform sexual acts for extended periods of time, and win arm wrestles with men twice his size. What began to shatter his ego and drive the fear into him was when he saw his human features become overridden by the animalistic ones. Even when, later in the movie, he came to terms with the physiological changes, proudly declaring that he's become Brundle-fly, he becomes aware of his urge to consume his love interest, which sparks the speech about insect politics and the brutality of nature. The existential dread of watching one's humanity slip away as swiftly as the skin can sludge off the bone is what drove dread into him. This aspect of Seth's transformation is what produces a grave sympathy in the audience – we can see that this is a human being whose soul is not quite ready to let go of their body yet. These changes occur *“at a rate that exceeds our ability to assimilate or understand them”* which explains why we get surprised each time a part

of Seth falls off (144). There is a particular scene towards the end of the movie where someone is pushing Seth's face out of the way as he is dragging them into the machine, and his entire face just smears off. Drawing the similarity of Seth's metamorphosis to a psychosis or loss of humane self parallels Cronenberg's idea that the corporeal is used sometimes allegorically, and that *The Fly* is "*an examination of what is universal about human existence, and that ... We've all got the disease – the disease of being finite. And consciousness is the original sin... consciousness of the inevitability of our death.*" (Sanchez-Biosca, 290).

Thus, the intertwining of Seth's DNA with a fly goes beyond a simple SF narrative about genetic hybridity. The film gives us an intentional glimpse into particular, idiosyncratic aspects of Seth's life, allowing us to feel a profound sense of loss as his humanity unravels. We feel empathy for the good-natured scientist who's sacrificing certain humanistic, hedonistic pleasures to bring scientific developments to a new frontier. We feel empathy for the man who tenderly falls for a woman. We feel empathy for him as a human being who didn't want to lose everything that mattered to him. So, when we watch his ears, nails, and face fall off, as his love interest shrieks in horror and blasts his face off, it's clear that the discomfort we feel is not simply due to a repulsion toward genetic mutations, but



rather from the existential fear of our mind, body, and soul being torn apart, rendered meaningless to one another, like Seth's blown-apart body sprawled on the floor.



CITATION LIST

Sánchez-Biosca, Vicente. "Metamorphosis as Fantasy of the Hybrid. Postmodern Horror and the Destiny of the Human Body in *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986)." *Unforeseeable Americas*. Brill, 1999. 286-300.

Steven Shaviro. "Bodies of Fear: The Films of David Cronenberg." *The Cinematic Body*, by Steven. Shaviro, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 127–56.