

From **The Eternal Future of the 1950s: Essays on the Lasting Influence of the Decade's**

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“Something’s lost in the translation!” Hemimetabolic Adaptation (or Incomplete

Metamorphosis) in David Cronenberg’s *The Fly*.

Richard Berger.

‘Yeah, I build bodies; I take them apart and put them back together’ – Seth Brundle (*The Fly*,
1986).

This chapter foregrounds the idea that adaptation and remaking culture can be conceived of as biological (and therefore ‘natural’) processes of transformation and re-appropriation in popular culture. Indeed, many have argued (e.g. Benjamin, 2015) that all texts are inherently translatable – within certain conditions; for scholars such as Edmund Chapman, “[t]exts always possess translatability, along with untranslatability. Textuality is the interplay or tension between these two poles.” (2019: 22). This chapter examines David Cronenberg’s remake of Kurt Neuman’s 1958 sci-fi horror, *The Fly* – itself based on a short-story by George Langelaan, published in *Playboy* just a year earlier. On the surface, Cronenberg’s film uses the original version as a route into examining body-dysmorphia and disease, as well as being – as we shall see – a comment on the transformative elements of texts as biological entities. The film can also be viewed as a text that predicts the digital image-obsessed ‘Instagram’ age. There is some dispute, however, if *The Fly* (1986) is even a

remake at all, and if it is, what kind of remake it can be described as: ‘In the most general terms, film remakes are generally understood as films based on other films. Clear examples of this would be *The Fly* (1986) which is based on the earlier film of the same name’ (Herbert, 2017: 34); whereas for Marty Roth, ‘*Fly* is an original film that has almost nothing in common with the 1958 film of that name’ (2002: 231).

This chapter will examine the two poles between translatability and untranslatability, and sketch out the ways in which both films (and the source story) contemplate biological transformation and metamorphic processes and states. In this analysis, Cronenberg’s film stands as a metaphor for the process of adaptation/remaking itself; both films are biologically connected, rather like the twin brothers featured in the movie he would make next, *Dead Ringers* (1988).

Metaphors of biology and flesh have been used before by adaptation critics, to describe the process of transforming a text from one medium to another; from Virginia Woolf’s famous proclamation that the translation of literary texts in to visual ones was akin to a violent sexual assault (1966: 269) – a comment perhaps about how her own status as an author alters during the metamorphic process. There have also been the (literal) benign Darwinist principles telegraphed in Spike Jonze’s *Adaptation* (2002). In terms of visual-to-visual translation, then surely David Cronenberg’s 1986 remake of *The Fly* (1958) is an adaptation that directly deals with the *process* of adaptation (both literally and figuratively) in ways which extend the biological metaphor into new and interesting territories? Though Cronenberg has been a controversial and much scrutinized auteur for some, film critics have nevertheless noted the “fantastic machines” (Clarke, 2002: 175) of teleportation narrative, but missed the biological links. These ‘biological links’ will be addressed directly in this chapter.

The Fly is David Cronenberg’s only remake, although he is a filmmaker who has dipped his toe more-than-once into adaptation waters. Indeed, he is known for his adaptations

of seemingly unfilmable works, such as his stagings of William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and J. G. Ballard's *Crash*; all novels/films that feature male characters which stand as metaphors for their own creators; *Naked Lunch* deals directly with Burrough's tragic marriage to Joan Vollmer, and *Crash*'s central protagonist is even named 'James Ballard'. Both versions of *The Fly* feature a central male scientist, and while both attempt to play God, in the remake Brundle acts as a vehicle for typical Cronenbergian themes of body-dysmorphia, in ways which suggest that the film could be viewed as his most personal work. Indeed, Cronenberg's film asks us to consider the director as scientist, and that the film is his laboratory. For R. Barton Palmer:

“[T]he most useful approach to Cronenberg's filmmaking is through a complex web of literary intertexts, the other works to which his films refer and that they often remake or recycle, ranging from those authors whose works the writer-director has adapted for the screen” (Palmer, 2012: 175).

Ostensibly based on the 1958 movie, the credits of *The Fly* cite George Langelaan's 1957 short-story as its inspiration. In doing so, as this chapter will argue, Cronenberg's version attempts to efface the Kurt Neumann directed Vincent Price B-Movie horror classic and replace it with something more complex and visceral. Indeed, the short-story and subsequent filmed versions are about the biological metamorphosis of a human-being into something else: the 1958 fly being a 'complete' swap between human and insect (biologically termed a 'holometabolous' adaptation) resulting in two entities, and Cronenberg's incomplete metamorphosis (the alternative 'hemimetabolous' version) into 'Brundlefly'. Patrick Gonder notes a racial undertone in the original movie:

“When Andre merges with the fly, their union creates two monsters with both insect and human characteristics. The fly parts are black and bestial, the color difference emphasized by Andre's lab coat and his ghostly pale head perched on the fly's body

as it screams in the spider's web. Andre and The Fly give birth to racially mixed monsters, twin symbols of the racist fears of miscegenation, and, consequently, both bodies must be destroyed" (2003).

While, as Bruce Clark (2002) astutely puts it, "...stories of metamorphosis are inherently self-referential: they are always also allegories of the media through which they are communicated".

This chapter will further argue that the two (one unseen, one seen) metamorphoses in each film stand as metaphors for the process of adaptation itself - between complete and incomplete versions of texts in initially different, and then the same media. While the 1958 adaptation was a signalling perhaps of the high-capitalist tech society to come, Cronenberg's remake concerns itself with the failure of technology to solve global problems, and so re-tools the story to be one about body-horror; which some scholars have perhaps lazily ascribed to the HIV/AIDs pandemic of the 1980s¹. Films are often viewed through their own contextual lens, as Mathijs observes: "[R]eviews of *The Fly* suggest that the film itself is an AIDS metaphor" (2003). However, uncoupling the film from its own time – and its later circulation through the 'memescape' - and accounting for the scale and reach of how both versions themselves became source texts for a range of sequels, suggest a reappraisal might be worth pursuing. While, accepting that '[a]daptation can be a violent process, in either direction' (Milligan, 2017), this chapter will also cover how previous versions of texts can gain an 'afterlife' (Benjamin, 2015) through streaming services and their attendant Electronic Program Guide (EPG) preferencing technology - rendering Cronenberg's direct framing of Langelaan's story as source, highly problematic. Indeed, social media channel *Looper*, in 2015, cited Cronenberg's *Fly* as one example in their 'Movie Remakes that were better than the original' YouTube video.

¹ See Snowden (2012).

The 'Pupa' Phase.

Surprisingly perhaps, *The Fly* (and its remake) has been overlooked by some key writings on 1950s science fiction². As Clark notes, 'criticism has been focused on cinematic matters, particularly Cronenberg's transformation of Neumann, with little reference to Langelaan' (2002: 169). First published in *Playboy* in 1957, and then re-published in by *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (Fig. 1) in their 'The Best of 1958' issue, George Langelaan's *The Fly* is a parable, warning readers of the dangers of the new technological world. The focus of this collection is remakes of science-fiction films from the 1950s, because it was an era, defined both as nostalgic and forward-thinking. This immediate post-war period saw the start of the 'Space Race' (in 1957), the touch-paper being lit for the later Vietnam War, the development of the hydrogen bomb and the first successful organ transplants from 1954. Television went 'color' in 1950, and soon became a mass medium – almost overnight in the UK, for the Queen's Coronation in 1953. In Langelaan's story – itself a blend of horror and science-fiction – television is employed as a metaphor to describe the process of transmission, between one form and another; domestic technology here standing-in for the biological process. It is clear that the source story is more interested in the technical apparatus of teleportation, than the biological process; the 'Fly' here, is a terrible (and tragic) mistake, warning audiences about the unintended consequences of rapid technological change.

Set in France, the story is told in the first person, similar to the flashback device used in *Double Indemnity* (1944), as a young woman, 'Helene', recounts her 'crime' to her brother-in-law, Francois. And like in that film, we begin with a telephoned confession. In this 'pupa' text of what would eventually 'evolve' into Cronenberg's *Fly*, Langelaan uses that

² See Matthews (2007), Bliss (2014) and Jones (2018)

domestic technology, as the crucible for his teleportation device, the telephone call box – just 5-years later, on the eve of John F. Kennedy’s assassination, that same call-box would transport a new kind of ‘mad-scientist’ throughout time-and-space, in the BBC television series, *Doctor Who* (1963 -). Helene is the wife of a man forged in modernity: the self-proclaimed genius, Professor Andre Delambre. In secret, and as a side-line to his classified government work, Andre has created the first teleportation device. Helene’s tragic fable recounts to readers, how in incremental stages, her husband is now ready to share his research in classic 1950s sci-fi fashion; that is in non-peer-reviewed spheres.

After a disastrous attempt to teleport Dandelo (the couple’s cat), Andre experiments on himself, but does not realise a house-fly has also entered the call-box. In a series of tragic events, which cause Helene to be committed into an asylum and eventually lead to her suicide, Andre’s experiments produce two new beings: a human with a fly head and hand/arm (fused with what was left of poor Dandelo) and a fly with a human head and hand. Both of these creatures (or versions) presciently predict the two filmed adaptation/remakes.

The Holometabalous Adaptation.

The term, ‘holometabalous’ describes the development of an insect as a ‘complete’ biological transformation, and is used here as a metaphor to frame Kurt Neuman’s transformation of his source material. *The Fly* is an example of a synchronous adaptation, coming just a year after the initial publication of Langelaan’s short-story in *Playboy*, and in the same year the piece was re-published as an example of the best contemporary science-fiction writing. Considering the popularity of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (Fig. 1), it would be fair to say that a sizeable audience would have read the source material either before, or immediately after watching the adaptation. Now considered a 1950s B-Movie classic, *The Fly* features an actor synonymous with the horror genre, Vincent Price.

Staying surprisingly close to the source material, the film also employs a flash-back device, as Helene recounts how she came to kill her husband – a type of assisted suicide we will eventually learn. Brother-in-law Francois tells the police that that the happily married Andre and Helen, “wouldn’t harm anything. Not even a fly” – a line later used to chilling effect a few years later in the closing scene of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960).

The film opens with non-diegetic ‘buzz’ string effect sounds, and the opening titles resemble a hive, which suggests a level of biological infidelity at least – it seems any buzzing creature will do. The ‘Disintegrator/Integrator’ device, as it is described, is now rendered as two large metal pods – directly recalling the ‘pupa’ phase of a fly’s life-cycle. Its instrument panel is pure 1950s sci-fi, with large switches, levers, dials, gauges and the inevitable reel-to-reel computer tape machine. Again, recognisable to audiences of the era, as the new IBM 700/7000 series mainframe computers were the subject of many news and magazine features from 1952 onwards; readers and audiences were confronted with a new technological aesthetic of large rooms full of grey boxes, covered in winking lights and reel-to-reel spools whirring away (Fig. 2).

As with the source story, television is again employed as a signature metaphor to explain the teleportation process, and in so-doing, reducing a fully biological form to that of an image or radio frequency. As with the source story, early experiments with the teleportation device are not a success, with decorative writing on a transported plate being reversed (in Langelaan’s version, the words ‘Made in Japan’ are inverted on a teleported ashtray). Again, Dandelo the cat comes to a sticky-end. While directly addressing her anxiety around rapid technological progress, Andre’s wife, Helene, confesses her fear of the ‘suddenness of our age’. The ever-present Fly (heard, but not seen) finally sneaks back into its man-made pupa and is fused with Andre and he attempts to teleport his own body, in a grand act of hubristic scientific rationalism.

Teleportation has been used liberally by science fiction writers, since Edward Page Mitchell's 1877 story 'The Man Without a Body', to overcome the problem of moving characters through/across large distances in time and space - a trajectory which would eventually result in H. G Wells' *Time Machine* a few years later in 1895, and (literally) with the TARDIS³ in 1962. It would be the genre defining television serial *Star Trek* (1966 – 69), which would make the most of the storytelling possibilities of teleportation, sometimes adding their own time-travel element in episodes such as 'All Our Yesterdays' (1969). *Star Trek* was created in more colourful and optimistic times, however science-fiction from the more immediate post-war period, was far more interested in what could go wrong...

Film scholars such as Michael Bliss estimate that 182 science fiction films were produced in the US, between 1950 and 1959. Bliss also notes that, "the supposedly placid 1950s were haunted by the stuff of nightmares" (2014: 8). The political context of the era is often cited as the reason for the themes of technophobia, invasion and paranoia, mobilised by the science fiction movies of the era: "American science fiction films operated as projections of US anxieties about communist infiltration" (Jones, 2018: 13). For Melvin E. Matthews:

"Americans became accustomed to living in an atomic world and all that went with it: bomb tests, civil defence messages and drills, maps of the United States showing those places the Russians would likely attack, and maps of New York and other big cities showing the levels of destruction from the center of an atomic blast" (2007: 79).

The rise of totalitarian powers in the post-war period certainly provided fertile ground for science fiction writers, and there is no doubt that the 1950s was a grim period for some - in the UK, food rationing did not end until 1954. However, the discovery of DNA in 1953 perhaps was far more influential on *The Fly* and further extends the biological interpretation

³ Doctor Who's infamous time-machine is a 'Type 40' TARDIS (Time and Relative Dimension in Space) - forever in the guise of a police call box, since its 'chameleon circuit' jammed.

of its 'afterlife' (Benjamin, 2015); for the first time, the human body had been reduced to *code*; flesh had been transformed into the helix. The 1950s was a decade defined by medical firsts, as just a year later, the first human organ transplant was successfully carried out. For some, these biological advances were terrifying, and as Gonder reflects: "It should be no surprise that these fears concerning reproduction, mutation, and monstrous disobedient bodies would find expression in the horror film" (2003).

By the 1950s, cinema itself was under-attack. In 1952, new government legislation forced movie studios to divest themselves of their own cinema chains. While cinema had boomed as a medium during the war years, by the 1950s weekly attendances at picture houses was in steep decline. Indeed, as Martin Halliwell notes, "the fiercest cultural rivalry of the 1950s was between the established film industry and the emerging medium of television" (2007: 147). No wonder then that *The Fly* was shot on new anamorphic lenses, collectively called 'Cinemascope' as a means to offer a new vibrant colour palette to tell its terrifying story, as a counter to television's monochrome flicker – its sequel, *The Return of the Fly* (1959), would be shot on far cheaper black-and-white film.

So, while it should not be a surprise then, that Langelaan's source story paints such a truly terrible picture of the result of the 'mixing-up' of organs and limbs, Andre's transformation in the filmed adaptation is truly horrific. As in the Langelaan source text, the result is two new beings: a human-fly, and a fly-human – a complete, if unequal exchange between human and insect; a 'holometabolous' adaptation. Price's Andre is left with an insect head and arm, and the fly now sprouts a human head and hand. Andre must now hide in his laboratory, leaving Helene do to the explaining, only appearing to his wife with his head and arm covered by a black cloth. Decades later, another filmmaker interested in deformity, David Lynch, would use a similar black cloth to hide the features of John/Joseph Merrick in his biopic, *The Elephant Man* (1980). Even with his new features hidden in this way, Price's

frame is effectively imposing, as he gesticulates with his one good arm, and careens about his laboratory. Sound is employed to great effect, particularly when he needs to ‘feed’ from under his cloth. The most chilling moment of the whole feature, is perhaps when one of the most famous and recognisable voices in 1950s popular cinema, is reduced to a tinny shriek coming from the garden - a viscerally unpleasant scene, marking perhaps the moment where horror and science-fiction truly blended to really gruesome effect.

The Hemimetabolous Remake.

In biological terms, an incomplete metamorphosis is described as ‘hemimetabolous’ and is here used to describe *The Fly*’s 1986 remake. David Cronenberg’s version of *The Fly* directly cites George Langelaan’s short-story as the source material, and so in one sense could be called an adaptation. It is perhaps then worthwhile to spend some time on why this film is a remake, although one with some marked differences from its predecessor. These alterations may have been made for sound narrative reasons, as Thomas Leitch notes, “Kurt Neumann’s original version of *The Fly* (1958) was structured as a mystery...But since such a structure would be less effective for the remake of a well-known story, David Cronenberg’s 1986 version of *The Fly* employs a much more linear structure” (2002: 42).

First of all, it is not unusual for remakes to attempt to efface other versions in the same media by framing the original film’s source material as its inspiration. This is especially the case with American remakes of French cinema (see Mazdon, 2000). In this way, “rather than creating new audiences for their source films, remakes typically seek to overshadow or even efface them” (ibid, 2017: 27). So, instead of bringing the original film into a circuit of influence, the remake shuts-it-out – a phenomena rendered pointless when the streaming era a few decades later would loop Neuman’s 1958 film into any EPG search for *The Fly*, gaining a new textual ‘afterlife’ (Benjamin, 2015) through new models of digital distribution.

Secondly, the original film is so ‘faithful’ to its source material (a biologically ‘complete’ transformation), separating the two would be as futile as Helene’s misguided attempts to reverse Andre’s transformation.

From his debut feature in 1969 with *Stereo*, Cronenberg had always written his own screenplays, based on original ideas – although encompassing many of the same themes of body modification, sexual transgression and the breakdown of social order. For William Beard, “Cronenberg’s world has always been characterized by philosophical pessimism, intellectual schizophrenia, and horror and sadness in the emotional sphere” (1994). His period of adapting/remaking other works really began just prior to filming *The Fly* with 1983’s *The Dead Zone* – based on a Stephen King story. This era marked a rich sextet of adaptations/remakes, almost spanning two decades, right up until 1999’s *Existenz*.

Cronenberg’s interest in adaptation/remaking should not come as too much of a surprise, because as a filmmaker, he has always been interested in both textual and bodily transition: “David Cronenberg’s career of film adaptation then functions as a practical application of his thematic fascination with augmentation, mutating one narrative body into another” (Milligan, 2017).

In interviews, Cronenberg would often cite Burroughs and Vladimir Nabokov as his literary heroes (see Beard, 2001: 287), and this middle-period of his work can be viewed as a filmmaker taking stock of a body of work, pressing ‘pause’, and reflecting on their earlier career. In 1958, when George Langemaan’s short-story was re-published and Kurt Neumann’s adaptation made its debut in movie theatres, David Cronenberg was fifteen years old, and living in Toronto, Canada. Colin McGinn points out that most people feel an aversion to flies and insects, which is gleefully reflected in Cronenberg’s film: “*The Fly* is an emblem of our mortal organic condition, our connection to the world of biological process: digestion, dying, the soft and the slimy” (2012: 11). But, the teenage Cronenberg had a keen

interest in lepidopterology and botany, which would later lead him to enrolling on a science programme at that city's University in 1963. So, it can be stated fairly assuredly that the adolescent future filmmaker (and cinema obsessive) must have a least known of the *The Fly's* existence, in one form or other.

The poster for the original version is interesting (Fig. 3), as it features a close-up of Patricia Owens (as Helene) screaming – an image more in common with the horror genre, than science-fiction, and again one which could also have further inspired the poster for Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). In examining what Jonathan Gray terms the 'paratext' – an, "off screen studies... a screen studies that focuses on paratexts' constitutive role in creating textuality", (2010: 7) – it is clear that the original movie was marketed in a way to play-up its 'shock' qualities. The teenage Cronenberg may even have seen this poster – or a later one featuring Vincent Price's malformed hand – while bicycling around 1950s Toronto. The poster for his remake is a little more ambiguous (Fig. 4); at first glance it looks like science-fiction text, with its 'pod' and ambient light emanating from it, perhaps reminding audiences of *Cocoon* (1985) from the previous year. However, in infamous tagline, 'Be Afraid. Be Very Afraid' – spoken by Geena Davis' Ronnie in the film – and the green-tinge of the ambient light, puts the film, paratextually at least, very much in the territory occupied by another movie which effectively blends horror and science-fiction, *Alien* (1979).

Cronenberg's version seems far more interested in flesh and the potential of the human body to 'remake' itself, than technology; his 'telepods' look like chrysalises – suggesting that his teenage interests in moths and butterflies are still percolating. His protagonist, Seth Brundle, is not here to warn us about a highly technologized future, where men can finally play God, but, as he puts it in the movie, "society's deep fear of the flesh". Cronenberg's film is an asynchronous remake, made three decades after the original, and exhibited in an era so hungry for the 'new' that audiences would now know Vincent Price for

his chilling voice-over as a coda to Michael Jackson's 1984 song 'Thriller' than for his scary turn as a human fly in the 1950s – he would later give the view that Cronenberg's version of the story, 'went a bit too far' (IMDB).

Set in contemporary 80s America, Jeff Goldblum's performance is of a rather odd and lonely scientist, a counter to Vincent Price's strident pioneer. In this telling, he is not married, but has a love-interest (and later girlfriend) in Geena Davis' Ronnie, a crusading journalist firmly in the Lois Lane mould. Their flirting provides many comic moments; at one point Seth attempts to teleport one of Ronnie's stockings. Seth is far more amusing than the straitlaced and suited 1950s Andre: "In *Fly*, Jeff Goldblum performs manic stand-up comedy" (Roth, 2002: 230). Ronnie is however attracted to Seth's genial eccentricity, a counter to her more 1980s corporate incarnate and conventional ex-boyfriend and boss, John Getz's Stathis Borans. For Beard, "Cronenberg's later male protagonists are repeatedly driven from their isolation by the proddings of sexual instinct and the yearning for emotional connection" (1994).

There is no cat this time, but a monkey (a nod to the early days of the space programme, perhaps), which, unlike Dandelo, comes to a very messy on-screen end – a deleted scene from the original cut, features a cat/baboon hybrid, which was eventually beaten to death by the scientist, which did not work well with test audiences. Seth sticks with metaphors of flesh, when describing how his computer, "translates and rethinks [meat]...rather than reproducing it", which perfectly encapsulates Cronenberg's own relationship with his source material and his approach to remaking the 1950s version. At one point Seth articulates his ambition to teach his computer to "go crazy", about flesh. Although Cronenberg eschews the cheap tricks of the original - with all of the off-screen buzzing (both diegetic and non-diegetic) - Ronnie does employ insect metaphors to describe her

relationships with Stathis: “I still have the residue of another life, you know. I have to get rid of it and scrape it off my shoe”.

Seth’s transformation, when it comes, is something of an anti-climax; there is no obvious visual clue that the teleportation process has been anything other than a complete success – although the audience has seen the fly enter the pod, and presumably knows what is coming. But, “what arrives is not what departs but merely a resembling object” (Snowdon, 2012: 57). Instead, Cronenberg is keen for his audience to watch the slow metamorphosis into ‘Brundlefly’ – something that was off-screen in the original movie:

“Whereas in Cronenberg’s *Fly* of 1986 a fully computerised teleportation creates the fusion of human and fly into one entity – the ‘Brundlefly’ – the transformative catastrophe of the 50s versions yields two metaphors a fly-headed human and a human-headed fly” (Clarke, 2002: 185).

The first signs are thick black hairs, growing through Seth’s skin, here seen in gleeful close-up as if viewed through a microscope. In one scene which surely directly references the original movie, Seth shovels sugar into his coffee – the sweetener being used to attract the human-headed fly in the 1958 adaptation. Gradually, Seth’s heightened physical abilities become more apparent, as well as his increased sexual appetite. In scenes which could never have been filmed in 1958, Cronenberg’s remake depicts extended bouts of lovemaking, once Seth and Ronnie finally commit to each other. As Seth’s body begins to change, the camera revels in close-ups of flesh and skin – there are no black cloths here to spare audiences of the metamorphosis. If the comic-book hero genre is defined by its characters coming to terms with their abilities, Seth skips a step and dismembers a man in a bar’s arm-wrestling context.

The film’s eventual tag-line (uttered by Ronnie), “Be Afraid. Very Afraid”, marks the moment when the exhilaration of Seth’s new body gives way to the full horror of his transformation; his skin begins to weep/leak, and nails fall-off his increasingly elongated

fingers – both the 1958 and 1986 versions are interested in limbs and hands. Jeff Goldblum’s Seth tries to hide these adaptations with gloves, as does Vincent Price’s Andre. Cronenberg’s fly is not a ‘complete’ exchange between two entities, but a ‘fused’ being, composed of both fly and human – but being neither human *nor* fly. This incomplete (or hemimetabolous) translation between human and insect is described by Seth as being “spliced together”. He eventually needs to augment his biology with walking sticks, technology now providing his needed extra limbs, once the biological process has all but played-out. Rejected human body parts (such as ears) are kept and curated, as Seth attempts to keep the conceit of scientific discovery alive.

In this last third of the film, Seth begins to describe his condition as an illness, or disease: “It wants to turn me into something else”, which McGinn also notes: “[T]he story is a metaphor for aging and with it the diseases of aging” (2012: 14). Ronnie’s pregnancy adds a *Demon Seed* (1977) dimension, and the dream sequence where her graphic abortion procedure results in a pupa being removed from her body, foreshadows Cronenberg’s next movie, *Dead Ringers* (1988) and more directly for the sequel *The Fly II*. Like Franz Kafka in his *Metamorphosis*, Cronenberg is much more interested in the aftermath of Seth’s transformation into an insect – something which the Langelaan short-story and 1958 adaptation only briefly concern themselves with, and then only through flashback. Stathis, now in full newsman mode, senses a potential publishing coup, but is thoroughly disgusted when he watches a film of Brundlefly feeding – the same scene is mirrored in the original film, but Andre’s head remains hooded throughout. Here Cronenberg and Charles David Pogue’s screenplay gets closest to Kafka, in having Seth utter surely the movie’s most moving lines (to Ronnie): “I’m saying that I’m an insect who dreamt he was a man, and loved it. But now the dream is over and the insect is awake...I’m saying...I’ll hurt you if I stay”.

If Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* gave us both the science-fiction genre and the mad scientist in 1818, then Cronenberg surely remembers that novel's 'Modern Prometheus' subtitle, in the (uncharacteristically for him) unsubtle staging of his Gothic ending - as Brundlefly looks down from his tower, after capturing Ronnie from the clinic. His desperate 'cure' is to first attempt a three-way 'splice' (another stage of holometabolous adaptation), initially with Stathis, and then with Ronnie and their unborn child - before finally shedding his skin completely and completing his evolution into a hybrid insectoid human: "*The Fly* features a...horrific turning away from science and subsequent liberating but ultimately destructive descent into the darker recesses of the self" (Palmer, 2012: 188).

Brundlefly is finally fused with his own machine - now looking more like a medieval torture device, such as an Iron Maiden, rather than a technology with limitless possibilities. He asks Ronnie's help in his own assisted suicide, ending this film where the 1958 one began, and in doing so, predicting a new biological *post*-human (or augmented reality) era. If the 1958 movie warns humanity about the perils of 'playing God', then the 80s remake presciently predicts this era's social media obsession with transformation, reinvention and body image. While our mobile phones and digital devices use facial recognition technology - marketed to users as a more convenient security protections - *The Fly* becomes a parable, its corollary in George Langemaan's original story. In a hyper-mediated culture of 'selfies' and Instagram filters, the scene where Seth's computer's fails to recognise Seth Brundle's new augmented reality, speaks to the superficiality of our image conscious era - mirrored in the way Cronenberg's film (deliberately) misrecognises the 1958 original.

Fly-trap.

David Cronenberg was a teenager in the 1950s, and his remake of *The Fly* filters the concerns of that decade, and maps them onto more contemporary anxieties about disease and post-humanity. The 1950s was also a decade defined by classic science-fiction films, many of

them concerned with the future and a fear of technology, dozens being remade in the years to come. Has there been a decade since which provided such fertile ground for remaking, adapting and repurposing – all broadly from the same genre? Both the 1958 and 1986 versions of *The Fly* became themselves source material (or ‘pupa’) for sequels: *The Return of the Fly* (1959) is something of a curio; coming -hard-on-the-heels of the original movie, it is shot in monochrome, and again features Vincent Price, but this time playing Francois, the brother of Andre from the earlier version. *The Curse of the Fly* (1965) marked something of a continuity departure as it was produced in the UK. Still featuring members of the Delambre family (this time, Andre’s grandson, (Martin), the film was something of a ‘lost text’, never getting a VCR release and having to wait until 2007 to be included in a DVD boxset with all its textual forbears (Fig. 5) - including Cronenberg’s remake and its sequel.

The unimaginatively titled *The Fly II*, the sequel to Cronenberg’s work, mirrors the progeny focus of both *Return* and *Curse of the Fly*; Eric Stoltz is Seth and Ronnie’s son, Martin – a reference perhaps to Andre’s grandson in *Curse*. Martin’s birth scene takes its beat from Ronnie’s dream sequence in the Cronenberg version, as he is delivered in a larvae sack. This version of the story amps up the gore, but has very little of Cronenberg’s finesse, dark humour or body aesthetic. Unpopular with critics and Cronenberg fans alike, if it had been conceived in any other period, it may also have become another ‘lost text’ like *Curse*, but the EPG of the streaming era now acts as a gateway to oft forgotten versions. Any search for ‘Fly’ on Netflix or Amazon Prime, naturally calls back into existence, and ‘traps’, other films with that word in the title. EPG algorithms loop into their searches other work by David Cronenberg, as well as films featuring Jeff Goldblum, Geena Davis, Vincent Price and Eric Stoltz. The 21st Century saw further mutations of the story, with Cronenberg himself directing an operatic version in 2008 and Brandon Siefert and Menton3’s 2015 five-part comic book series, *The Fly: Outbreak*, set directly after events in *The Fly II*.

In the streaming era, a remake can no longer ‘efface’ the original version, and now has to live alongside it, in ways perhaps not imagined by the creators. This has significant implications for scholars of adaptation and remaking culture, as inevitable comparative strategies will be enacted by audiences. Fans of *Homeland* (2011 – 2020) and *Euphoria* (2019 -) will be directly educated by their television, tablet or laptop, that they are in fact watching remakes of Israeli television serials. In *Netflix Nations*, Ramon Lobato describes the ways in which “[t]itles appear and disappear and catalogues shrink and expand, as the platform is accessed from different points of the world” (2019: 14).

Cronenberg’s film now exists in a sphere of influence, with all other versions of the *The Fly* and attendant paratexts – George Langelaan’s short-story is very easy to find online, and will be out-of-copyright in 2042. Cronenberg’s movie is scattered across *YouTube*, in hundreds of fractured 8-10 minute clips, with each ‘click’ calling-up dozens of related documentaries which dissect the film, and video-reappraisals made by people who were not born in the century both *Fly* movies were created in. These new audiences, used to the promiscuous possibilities of streaming platforms, are entirely comfortable in creating their own commentary films which compare and contrast Cronenberg’s film with the original, but not in ways bound to any fidelity values. On social media platforms, comparative approaches can be more playful and egalitarian, with some meme creators explicitly referencing what Cronenberg’s film has to say about our image obsessed era (Fig. 6).

Creators of memes enact almost oppositional fidelity approaches, which adaptation and remaking culture scholars, could learn a great deal from; Bradley E. Wiggins and G. Bret Bowers have claimed that, “people create memes as part of a larger albeit idealized conversation where their contribution might be noticed and remixed further...Members of participatory digital culture *want* [original italics] their revisions of memetic content to be remixed, iterated, and distributed further as memes” (2015). As a perfect illustration of this,

The Return of The Fly (1959) has also provided rich source material for meme creators (Fig. 7):

As a metaphor for remaking culture, Cronenberg's film demonstrates that adaptation is a highly biological - and therefore 'natural' - process, in popular culture. Now seen as the Godfather of body-horror by a new generation of filmmakers and audiences, Cronenberg himself is now a filmmaker whose work others are remaking - his 1997 feature *Rabid*, was remade in 2019. A teenager in the 1950s, his remake of *The Fly* also demonstrates how that decade *remade* him, transforming a budding amateur scientist, into a celebrated artist; we are all capable of personal transformation, if we dare...

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Filmography

Adaptation (2002)

Alien (1979)
Crash (1996)
The Curse of the Fly (1965)
Dead Ringers (1988)
The Dead Zone (1983)
Demon Seed (1977)
Doctor Who (1963 -)
Double Indemnity (1944)
The Elephant Man (1980)
Euphoria (2019 -)
Existenz (1999)
The Fly (1958); (1986)
The Fly II (1989)
Homeland (2011 – 2020)
Naked Lunch (1991)
Psycho (1960)
The Return of the Fly (1959)
Star Trek (1966 - 1969)
Stereo (1969)

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