



**IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS**

# The Fly

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away the film's ending.

In his inspired overhaul of the 1958 original, David Cronenberg's fusion of romantic melodrama and body horror sees reclusive scientist Seth Brundle fall for journalist Veronica Quaife, as he completes work on a revolutionary teleportation device. But when an experiment goes awry, Seth undergoes a grotesque transformation. Released during the AIDS epidemic, this devastating meditation on death, disease and disintegration was all the more potent given the real-life horrors unfolding at the time.

**Michael Blyth, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk)**

## Contemporary reviews

'Is this a romance?' Seth Brundle ingenuously asks Veronica Quaife as they plan a holiday to celebrate the success of his teleportation project. And, indeed, *The Fly* is romance Cronenberg-style, where lovers are transformed by desire into victims of uncontrollable destructive urges, unleashing disaster on themselves and others. Brundle is a typical Cronenberg hero, obsessional, repressed, sublimating sexuality in scientific enquiry. Characteristically, sexual and intellectual knowledge are linked: Seth's work is blocked by his lack of sexual experience, and only when his affair with Veronica brings him into intimate and pleasurable contact with human flesh is he able to figure out a successful teleportation programme.

So far, so good: love provides the breakthrough to the scientific discovery which, Seth claims, will 'change the world as we know it'. Before long, however, the dark forces of the human unconscious intervene to put paid to naive notions of scientific progress: within minutes of celebrating his success, Seth is blinded by jealous rage, throws scientific caution to the winds, and teleports himself together with the insect whose genes will fuse with his, transforming him into a sub-human monster. Put so schematically, *The Fly* would seem to confirm the accusations of self-defeating pessimism made against Cronenberg by critics like Robin Wood. The evil forces within (particularly male) individuals quickly overcome the good, and external agencies are either indifferent or powerless to contain and manage them (Seth builds his telepods without supervision or interference from Bartok Science Industries, while his rival in love, *Particle Magazine* editor Stathis Borans, seems to enjoy a similar autonomy within Monolith Publishing).

This emphasis on the individual detached from society and institutions clearly puts Cronenberg's work outside the 'progressive' strand of modern horror identified by Wood and others in, for example, George Romero's films. It belongs rather within more extreme Gothic traditions in which the human body becomes the external site of an internal struggle between ego and id, 'good' and 'bad' psychic forces, providing a metaphor for modern anxieties about the loss of individual identity in a dislocated, divided self. This tradition, rather than attempting political or social criticism, radically questions what it means to be human, seeing progress in limited, individual terms (if it is possible at all—generally, an apocalyptic act of destruction is the only solution to the disintegration of human values).

In *The Fly*, Seth's mutation into Brundlefly is presented explicitly as a loss of humanity consequent upon sexual desire going out of control: he teleports himself prematurely to punish Veronica for leaving him to go to Stathis, an act of power and revenge which is also a fall from grace. Jeff Goldblum's wide-eyed performance perfectly expresses Seth's engaging innocence, at the same time presaging his transformation into bug-eyed monster; and he gives that transformation a tragic dimension as Seth, at first unaware that the violent change in his personality is the result of his fusion with the fly, and convinced that he has freed himself from the shackles of straight society, suddenly comes to realise that he is in the process of mutation and that it is irreversible. This self-knowledge (manifested in a series of very funny cracks at the expense of his physical and mental deterioration) redeems him up to a point, and there are two very touching scenes, one in which Veronica, having witnessed Seth uncontrollably vomiting, losing an ear and sundry other parts, loves him enough to suspend her disgust and embrace him, and another where Seth, at a more advanced stage of transformation, asks Veronica to help him become human again, but then sends her away because he knows he will hurt her if she stays.

Love is not enough to save Seth, however; he mutates into a monstrous, uncontrollable id and has to be put down-leaving Veronica holding the baby, so to speak. Indeed, she is already responsible for quite a lot: for seducing Seth in the first place and triggering the jealousy which leads to his tragic decline, for instance. And it is in her that the film invests the human values of compassion and co-operation (though in the beginning it's not clear whether she acts out of love or career ambitions). All this may seem more of a burden than a tribute to feminine values, but there is no doubt that the future will be better left to Veronica than either Seth or Stathis.

This *Fly* has little in common with the 1958 version of which it is supposed to be a remake, and which appears positively discreet by comparison. Cronenberg's films (*The Dead Zone* apart) usually contain a high disgust quotient, and *The Fly* is no exception – Seth's transformation and his repulsive insect habits are graphically portrayed. For many, this is the unacceptable face of the horror film, but then Cronenberg has always worked outside conventional boundaries, in the cracks and crevices of human experience. It is there, after all, that we hide what we would rather not know.

**Pam Cook, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1987**

David Cronenberg understands and trusts the narrative conventions and in his movies the skeleton is always threatening to burst right through the skin. In *The Fly*, the skeleton is, of course, the original film, a pretty undistinguished 50s B about a scientist whose failed experiments leave him stuck with a gigantic fly's head on top of his still-human body. Cronenberg's treatment streamlines this basic horror-movie conceit almost to the point of abstraction – and complicates it emotionally at the same time. This *Fly* is a chamber-movie of horrors, as spare and depopulated as one of Bergman's island psychodramas.

The island here is the loft-laboratory of scientist Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum), who has been monkeying around with a pair of homemade teleportation pods, trying to find a way of transporting objects from one place to another by molecular recombination. It's practically the only setting, and Brundle and his girlfriend, a magazine writer named Veronica (Geena Davis), are virtually the only characters. (Veronica's editor and jealous former lover, played by John

Getz, flits in and out of the action, just to give the plot some mild twists.) Brundle becomes a monster in a much more alarming way than the 50s fly-man did: human and insect characteristics are all mixed up in him, every cell genetically altered, so that he is never fully one thing or the other. His transformation isn't a sideshow stunt, it's like a horrible, wasting disease, and Brundle's body never really looks like a fly's-it's just a riot of grotesquely mutating flesh. (The suggestions of cancer and AIDS are obviously intended.)

Cronenberg has no interest in some of the staples of 50s horrors: the threatened townspeople, the screaming in the streets, the tabloid headlines. His minimalism evokes the impoverished feel of those earlier films, but, because it's deliberate, it goes much farther: he seems to have isolated, in remarkably potent form, the poignant monster strain that runs through so many horror pictures.

### **Terence Rafferty, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1986/87**

---

#### **THE FLY**

*Director:* David Cronenberg

*Production Companies:* Brookfilms,  
Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation

*Producer:* Stuart Cornfeld

*Co-producers:* Marc Boyman, Kip Ohman

*Unit Production Manager:* David Coatsworth

*Production Co-ordinator:* Debbie Cook

*Post-production Co-ordinator:* Carol McBride

*Location Manager:* Howard Rothschild

*Assistant Directors:* John Board, Kim Winther, Patricia Rozema,  
Thomas P. Quinn

*CASTING:* Deirdre Bowen

*Screenplay:* Charles Edward Pogue, David Cronenberg

*Original Short Story:* George Langelaan

*Director of Photography:* Mark Irwin

*Additional Photography:* Kenneth Post, Robin Miller

*Assistant Photographers:* Marvin Midwicki, Donna Mobbs

*Computer/Video Effects Supervisor:* Lee Wilson

*Special Effects:* Louis Craig, Ted Ross

*The Fly Created/Designed by:* Chris Walas Inc

*Fly Creature Effects:* Peter Albrecht, Peter Babakitis, Brent Baker,

Jon Berg, Margaret Beserra, Donald Bies, Robert Burman,

Blair Clark, Stéphan Dupuis, Keith Edmier, Bob Hall, Jonathan Horton,

Sir Guy of Hudson, Conrad Itchener, Jim Smash Isaac, Michael Jobe,

Marie-Louise Kingery, Patricia Kowchak, Anthony Laudoti,

Kelly Lepkowsky, Michelle Linder, Donald Mowat, Jerrold Neidig,

Gregg Olsson, Michael Owens, Zandra Platzek, Robin Ralston,

Michael Smithson, William Stoneham, Valerie Sofranko, Debra Tomei,

Wim Jan Van Thillo, Carol Kaefer Walas, Mark Walas, Harold Weed,

Mark Williams

*Editor:* Ron Sanders

*Production Designer:* Carol Spier

*Visual Consultant:* Harold Michelson

*Art Director:* Rolf Harvey

*Set Designer:* James McAteer

*Revolving Set Designer:* Kirk Cheney

*Set Decorator:* Elinor Rose Galbraith

*Set Dressers:* Gary Jack, Danielle Fleury

*Scenic Artist:* Nick Kosonic

*Costume Designer:* Denise Cronenberg

*Wardrobe:* Trysha Bakker

*Make-up:* Shonagh Jabour

*Title Design:* Wayne Fitzgerald, Gary Kanew

*Opticals:* Dream Quest Images

*Music:* Howard Shore

*Music Performed by:* London Philharmonic Orchestra

*Orchestrations:* Homer Dennison

*Music Editor:* Jim Weidman

*Music Recording:* Keith Grant

*Sound Recording:* Bryan Day, Michael Lacroix

*Sound Re-recording:* Gerry Humphreys

*Sound Editors:* David Evans, Wayne Griffin

*Dialogue Editor:* Richard Cadger

*Sound Effects Editor:* Jane Tattersall

*ADR Editor:* Robin Leigh

*Foley:* Terry Burke

*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Dwayne McLean

*Stunt Double for Mr Goldblum:* Brent Meyers

*Gymnastic Doubles:* Doron Kernerman, Romuald Vervin

*Animal Training:* Steve Martin's Working Wildlife

#### **Cast**

Jeff Goldblum (*Seth Brundle*)

Geena Davis (*Veronica Quaife*)

John Getz (*Stathis Borans*)

Joy Boushel (*Tawny*)

Les Carlson (*Dr Cheevers*)

George Chuvalo (*Marky*)

Michael Copeman (*2nd man in bar*)

David Cronenberg (*gynaecologist*)

Carol Lazare (*nurse*)

Shawn Hewitt (*clerk*)

USA 1986

92 mins

---

## IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

### **The Fly**

Wed 26 Oct 21:00

### **La Llorona**

Thu 27 Oct 20:30; Mon 7 Nov 21:00

### **Frankenstein**

Fri 28 Oct 18:20; Tue 8 Nov 18:20; Sun 27 Nov 13:00

### **Celluloid Screams and Live Cinema UK presents: Ghostwatch + Q&A**

Fri 28 Oct 20:20

### **Viy**

Fri 28 Oct 20:45; Tue 8 Nov 20:50

### **Creature from the Black Lagoon (3D)**

Sat 29 Oct 11:40; Tue 1 Nov 20:50

### **A Nightmare on Elm Street**

Sat 29 Oct 18:30; Wed 30 Nov 20:50

### **Candyman**

Sat 29 Oct 20:45; Thu 17 Nov 20:50 (+ intro)

### **Nightbreed – Director’s Cut**

Sun 30 Oct 15:10 (+ intro); Sat 12 Nov 20:35

### **28 Days Later**

Mon 31 Oct 18:00 (+ Q&A with director Danny Boyle); Sat 26 Nov 20:45

### **Kuroneko (Yabu no naka no kuroneko)**

Mon 31 Oct 21:00; Fri 18 Nov 18:15

### **I Walked With a Zombie**

Tue 1 Nov 18:10

### **Us**

Tue 1 Nov 20:40; Sat 19 Nov 15:10; Tue 29 Nov 20:40

### **The Autopsy of Jane Doe**

Wed 2 Nov 18:10; Sat 26 Nov 20:40

### **Let’s Scare Jessica to Death**

Wed 2 Nov 20:45; Sat 19 Nov 20:45

### **Blacula**

Thu 3 Nov 20:55; Sat 26 Nov 13:00

### **Cronos**

Fri 4 Nov 18:30; Sat 19 Nov 12:10; Sun 20 Nov 18:30

### **Fright Night**

Fri 4 Nov 20:50; Tue 22 Nov 20:40 (+ intro)

### **Possession**

Sat 5 Nov 20:20 (+ intro by author Kier-La Janisse); Sun 27 Nov 15:30

### **Ganja & Hess**

Mon 7 Nov 18:00; Sat 26 Nov 15:20

### **Inferno**

Wed 9 Nov 20:40; Sat 26 Nov 18:20

### **The Entity**

Fri 11 Nov 17:55; Tue 15 Nov 20:30

### **Nosferatu (Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens)**

Sun 13 Nov 15:50 (+ intro by Silent Film Curator Bryony Dixon); Sat 19 Nov 14:10

### **The Skeleton Key**

Mon 14 Nov 20:45

### **Def by Temptation**

Wed 16 Nov 18:10 (+ intro); Sat 26 Nov 18:10

### **Jennifer’s Body**

Sun 20 Nov 15:15; Mon 21 Nov 18:00; Fri 25 Nov 20:45

### **Pontypool**

Mon 21 Nov 20:30; Sun 27 Nov 12:20

### **Under the Shadow**

Wed 23 Nov 20:40; Tue 29 Nov 18:10

### **Ouija: Origin of Evil**

Thu 24 Nov 20:40; Mon 28 Nov 18:10

### **Pet Semetary**

Fri 25 Nov 18:15; Mon 28 Nov 20:40

### **Good Manners (As Boas Maneiras)**

Sun 27 Nov 18:10; Wed 30 Nov 20:25

## IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS EVENTS

### **City Lit at BFI: Screen Horrors – Screen Monsters**

Thu 20 Oct – Thu 15 Dec 18:30-20:30

### **Beyond Nollywood World Premiere: Inside Life + Q&A with director**

### **Clarence A Peters**

Sat 29 Oct 14:00

### **Matchbox Cine presents House of Psychotic Women**

### **Son of Ingagi + Panel Discussion**

Wed 9 Nov 18:10

### **Live Commentary with Evolution of Horror, Brain Rot and The Final**

### **Girls**

Sat 19 Nov 18:00

---

## BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

## BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](https://player.bfi.org.uk)

## BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

**Join the BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](https://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)