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*Body-horror movies : Their emergence and evolution.*

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**Body-Horror Movies:  
Their Emergence and Evolution.**

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# Abstract

The subject of this thesis is the body-horror film, considered as a cycle which emerged in the early 1970s and which lasted until the late 1980s when it went into decline.

It begins with a discussion of the body-horror film, what it is and how it can be distinguished from other kinds of film product. This is then followed by a detailed examination of the two clusters which comprise the cycle i.e. medical body-horror and non-medical body-horror.

Following this the cultural context is discussed in an attempt to explain what motivated the production of these films, providing a background against which the films of David Cronenberg can be considered. A detailed discussion of Cronenberg's work, from **Shivers** (1974) to **Dead Ringers** (1988), then follows, with particular attention given to his concept of 'creative diseases' and New Flesh.

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# Introduction

This thesis grew out of a fascination with horror movies in general and with the work of David Cronenberg in particular. The purpose of the thesis is to extend existing ideas about generic change. It is also driven by a certain impatience with the way in which genre criticism tends to reduce variation between one film and another belonging to the same group. For this reason I want to discuss the cluster of body-horror movies that emerged in the 1970s and continued through the 1980s as a cycle. Foregrounding the idea of cyclical emergence, development and decline enables an analysis which does not simply attempt to define a particular group of horror products, but which examines their defining features in relation to their historical and cultural context. Also, because it is impossible to look at the body-horror cycle without looking at the work of David Cronenberg, the thesis brings together the two critical concepts of genre and authorship rather than treating them as mutually exclusive.

In Chapter One I outline the key characteristics, iconography and themes that make up the cycle, as well as arguing that there are two distinct sub-clusters of body-horror, medical and non-medical, before setting out a list of movie examples for analysis. Chapters Two and Three take up this task by discussing each listed movie in detail.

As cyclical changes and developments are motivated by external as well as internal forces, Chapter Four is concerned with examining the cultural context in which body-horror movies were made and released. This chapter is focused particularly on how body-horror movies draw on the popular discourses about the body and body fitness and health circulating at the time in women's magazines, health and fitness journals,

television and other media coverage of such illnesses as AIDS and cancer. I also examine the importance of special effects in body-horror movies and how they make possible the showing of disruption and transformation in the body.

Chapter Five features a detailed analysis of the work of David Cronenberg beginning with **Shivers** (1974) and ending with **Dead Ringers** (1988). This chapter shows how Cronenberg's particular iconography and themes emerged and developed. I also argue that Cronenberg's contribution to the body-horror cycle is particularly important with reference to his concept of 'creative diseases' and the notion of the New Flesh.

# Chapter One

## What are Body Horror Movies?

“Man fancies himself the crown of creation, and he believes that he can dominate and manipulate his *biological* surroundings at will.”<sup>1</sup>

“Our *bodies* are an environment which can become *anarchic*, regardless of our subjective experience of our government of the body.”<sup>2</sup>

Body-horror movies have been with us for almost thirty years. However, what they are and how they fit with the more general category of horror movies is problematic. In part this is because they possess features that are not common to horror movies as a whole and secondly, they do not, as a discrete cluster, have the stability, unity or cohesiveness that, for example, ‘stalker movies’ have. As Andrew Tudor has said,

“Genres, and sub-genres within them, develop through a kind of survival of the commercially fittest. Financially successful films encourage further *variations* on their proven themes, thus generating a broadly *cyclical* pattern of successes which then decline into variously unsuccessful repetitions of the initial formula [my italics].”<sup>3</sup>

The reference to a cyclical pattern of development is important here because it suggests that genres change over time and that the cycles that make them up are not only quite varied in themselves but also have start points and end points. This is particularly true

of the body-horror movie. However we cannot consider the reasons for their emergence in the early 1970s and their decline in the late 1980s, or indeed how they vary between one another, until we consider what unites them as a group.<sup>4</sup>

To do this, we might first consider the term itself, for body-horror, at its most basic level, refers to bodies and how bodies can cause in us a feeling of horror when they no longer correspond to our conventional idea of them. Body-horror thus refers to movies which are not simply about bodies, but bodies undergoing change because of disease, age, drugs, medical interference and other more supernatural causes. However, as a critical term related to films, it only surfaced in the mid-1980's and is contained in two articles published in *Screen 27*, 1986.<sup>5</sup> These are 'Vile Bodies and Bad Medicine' by Pete Boss, and 'Horrority - The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films' by Philip Brophy. Together, these two articles help us to understand the importance attached to the body in this cycle of movies and why this cycle should have emerged at the time it did. Contemporary cinema, Boss argues,

“... displays a considerable range of images informed by popular attitudes towards modern medicine and related areas. Surgery, terminal illness, organ transplants and bio-medical research are topics which are regularly and eagerly exploited for their potentially disturbing values, providing material for single instances of graphic gore on the one hand, or entire plots on the other”.<sup>6</sup>

If he is right, then it is not surprising that the horror cinema, along with other forms of cinema, should take as its subject the body. However, as Brophy points out, it is not just a concern with the body that distinguishes contemporary cinema from earlier

cinemas but rather “the *destruction* of the body”.<sup>7</sup> For this reason he says contemporary horror cinema “tends to play not so much on the broad fear of Death, but more precisely on the fear of one’s own body, of how one controls and relates to it.”<sup>8</sup>

This is useful because clearly not every film that has an image of bodily destruction is a body-horror movie. For example, Martin Scorsese’s **Taxi Driver** has scenes in which bodies are destroyed. However they are not scenes of body-horror as described by Brophy. Similarly, not all films which have homicidal killers are body-horror movies either because a) the killing in body-horror movies is motivated by fear of the ‘killer’s’ self, not fear of others and b) the person whose body we see being destroyed or mutilated is principally that of the killer himself or herself. Further the destruction of the body in body-horror movies is treated in a significantly different manner from that which occurs in other horror movies as the destruction of the body and changes to it are the central focus of these movies. For this reason the changes they undergo have to be shown, not told. As Brophy says,

“It is the mode of *showing* as opposed to *telling* that is strongly connected to the destruction of the body”.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, in my view, it is this particular feature or emphasis that is the basic defining characteristic of the body-horror movie as it allows us to distinguish them from ‘stalker movies’ for example. Stalker movies, as Vera Dika suggests, emphasize the act of ‘looking’,<sup>10</sup> not showing. Hence the importance in them of point-of-view shots.<sup>11</sup> In body-horror movies, however, these are almost entirely absent and this is because it is the killer’s own body that is the site of horror and thereby the site of speculation,

interrogation and inquiry and the focus consequently of special effect treatment which becomes increasingly important in these movies following **The Exorcist**.

A movie that exemplifies this is **Rejuvenator**. In **Rejuvenator** [1988] a wealthy, ageing, former film star, Ruth Warren, seeks an elixir which will make her permanently young again. She funds the research of a brilliant scientist who eventually develops such a serum. The serum unfortunately relies on human brains for its production and Ruth is told that it will probably have side effects. Desperate to be young once again Ruth says, "I can't wind up any worse off than I am now!"

This notion, however, proves to be all too ironic because although the serum works, it has appalling side-effects. Ruth becomes young again, but only for a short time. When the medicine wears off, her body undergoes not only a reversal to old age, but also a hideous transformation.<sup>12</sup> She becomes a graphic example of the body in turmoil and disorder. Her head swells to an immense size. Her fingers extend and become claws. She speaks in a strange, deep voice and, most grotesque of all, she eventually begins to find her own supply of brains, by ripping them directly from living humans. Ultimately, the changes become more frequent and nothing, not even fresh brains, can reverse the transmutation process.

Both aspects of body-horror described by Brophy are present here. Ruth cannot control her own body – indeed her body comes to control her – and each time she changes we are shown the changes taking place in increasingly graphic form. For example, when Ruth's body changes for the first time the camera lingers on her bulbous head dripping with slime. However, each subsequent time the serum wears off her transformation assumes even more revolting features until eventually we see her head has become a

huge exposed brain covered with bulging veins. Although this stage of her transformation is not shown in its entirety (probably due to the fact that this is a low-budget production) there is very little cutting away from the sight of Ruth Warren's body once it becomes more monstrous. When she finally dies as a result of the serum ceasing to have any effect her body rapidly collapses in a shower of putrescence, and in order to further emphasize the hideousness of her transformation and her physical deterioration, as well as to induce in us a feeling of revulsion, it is shown entirely in close-up.

From this it should be clear that the act of showing that which is horrifying is very important in these movies. For this reason the focus on *how* and *why* the body is disrupted is fundamental in defining these films as a distinct cycle. Moreover it explains why the special effects used in these films have to be very convincing and it is not insignificant in this regard that during the 1970s the special effects industry underwent a revolution in techniques making use of for example developments in latex prosthetics and enabling young effects technicians such as Rick Baker, Rob Bottin and Tom Savini to produce forms that looked so gross that, as William Paul notes "the grossness itself became an attraction."<sup>13</sup> However, no less important than this, is the concern with bodies and with bodies undergoing change and being besieged because it is this fact that motivates the characters in these movies, the actions they perform, and where they perform them. For this reason the cluster of movies that are body-horror can be divided into two sub-groups: one group in which change to the body is the result of an act by a doctor/scientist and another group in which the change to the body comes about without medical intervention. For the sake of clarity one group might be described as a medically-based cluster and the other one as a non-medical one.

In medical body-horror movies the main protagonist is usually a doctor, scientist or someone with medical connections who, as a result of being 'mad' or misguided causes change to occur to the bodies of others as a result of performing corrective or cosmetic surgery or transplant operations on them or as a result of injecting them with drugs and life-prolonging or life-giving elixirs/serums. The settings are usually medically related (hospitals and other non-specific medical establishments) or are settings which allow unorthodox medical practices to take place, for example, small towns or self-contained institutions which have closed communities and the narrative is usually structured in the following way:

1. Doctor/scientist/pseudo-scientist offers help to desperate patient, or is shown to be on the verge of a new medical discovery/breakthrough.
2. Doctor/scientist/pseudo-scientist operates or gives drug.
3. The operation/drug seems successful but problems ensue and a type of medically induced metamorphosis takes place.
4. Doctor/scientist/pseudo-scientist admits problem/guilt, or goes mad.
5. Patient attacks doctor/scientist, patient goes mad.
6. Mayhem ensues, people are slaughtered, patient dies/commits suicide/is killed, or very occasionally the patient lives and a relatively happy ending takes place.

Examples of movies making up this cluster are:

**Circus of Horrors** (1959, GB)  
**Les Yeux sans Visage** (1959, France)  
**Corruption** (1967, GB)  
**The Exorcist** (1973, US)  
**The Stepford Wives** (1974, US)  
**Shivers** (1974, Canada)  
**Rabid** (1976, Canada)  
**Massacre Mansion** (1976, US)  
**Coma** (1977, US)  
**The Manitou** (1977, US)  
**The Brood** (1979, Canada)  
**Scanners** (1980, Canada)  
**Dead and Buried** (1981, US)  
**Re-Animator** (1985, US)  
**Dead Ringers** (1988, Canada)  
**Rejuvenator** (1988, US)  
**Frankenhooker** (1990, US)  
**Body Parts** (1991, US)

In non-medical body-horror movies, conversely, it is the main protagonist (almost exclusively male) who undergoes some form of metamorphosis and the metamorphosis is usually the result of disease, alien invasion, supernatural intervention or something else that is even more bizarre, for example, the hallucinations in David Cronenberg's **Videodrome**. Also the settings in this cluster are not usually medically related but are nevertheless ones where movement is very restricted so that the metamorphosis that the

main protagonist undergoes is made all the more horrific, especially if it is witnessed by another character trapped within the same space. Examples of this are **The Exorcist** where the metamorphosis occurs in a bedroom; in **Alien** where the action takes place in a spaceship; in **The Howling** where the action takes place in rooms which are locked; in **An American Werewolf in London** a living room, a darkened cinema and an underground railway station are used; in **The Thing** where the central location is a remote research station in the Antarctic, full of small rooms; in **The Fly** where experimentation takes place in an enclosed laboratory and in **Videodrome** where the action takes place in an apartment and inside a sort of virtual reality helmet. Finally, because the changes that take place to the body are not the result of human or medical intervention, the narrative in these movies is organized differently and usually as follows:

1. The protagonist is/are introduced. There is no evidence of any abnormality.
2. A strange encounter or accident takes place.
3. The protagonist starts to feel different or strange in some way - outward signs.
4. The protagonist then undergoes a transformation (usually a slow process to emphasize the horror inherent in a mutating body)
5. The full transformation/metamorphosis is then shown.
6. The protagonist then usually starts to kill others.

7. The protagonist then ends up dead or else is changed irrevocably.

Movies making up this cluster include the following:

**The Exorcist** (1973, US)

**Alien** (1979, GB)

**The Howling** (1980, US)

**An American Werewolf in London** (1981, GB)

**The Beast Within** (1982, US)

**The Thing** (1982, US)

**Videodrome** (1982, Canada)

**The Fly** (1986, Canada)

**Rejuvenator** (1988, US)

**Tetsuo** (1989, Japan)

**Tetsuo 2 – Body Hammer** (1992, Japan)

There are thus significant differences between the two sub-groups. The movies that make them up can all legitimately be considered body-horror movies (albeit of two kinds) because in all of them the editing and cinematography are used in such a way that the focus is completely on the body's metamorphosis, such that, the body is the site of horror and this plays on the audience's fear/fascination with seeing what is horrible/monstrous. To show this we need now to look at each sub-group or cluster in more detail. This is the subject of the next two chapters.

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<sup>1</sup> Nillson/Lindberg, *The Body Victorious*, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society*, p.7.

<sup>3</sup> *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, p.23.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to make the distinction between genre and cycle because the term 'cycle' makes it easier to talk about these movies as products and also suggests that their production is generated by outside influences during a particular period in history. The term genre is more specifically about categories which are always in our heads, even if those categories are not being used to make movies at a particular point in time.

<sup>5</sup> These articles are the first ones which speak of body-horror as being a separate strand within the horror genre.

<sup>6</sup> Pete Boss, 'Vile Bodies and Bad Medicine', p.14. Boss 's article does not focus purely on the horror film but he notes that the most clearly defined occurrences of the above are to be found in the horror genre.

<sup>7</sup> 'Horrority - The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films', p.8.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p.8.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p.8.

<sup>10</sup> *Games of Terror*, p.14.

<sup>11</sup> Although body-horror movies may use point-of-view shots they do not function in the same way as in 'stalker movies'. We may be forced to look at the transformation for example, but the emphasis is on being shown the horror of what is taking place rather than being positioned with a killer.

<sup>12</sup> This transformation is the main reason I have included **Rejuvenator** in both clusters. Ruth Warren's body eventually undergoes a form of metamorphosis from within and her body tends to change in confined spaces in order to accentuate the horror. However, the concerns of this movie belong firmly to Group A (medical body-horror) despite some similarities in plot structure with those movies in Group B.

<sup>13</sup> *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*, p.381.

## Chapter Two

### Medical Body-Horror Movies

In the previous chapter I looked at how body-horror could be defined and how as a grouping or category it could be broken down into two relatively distinct clusters. I now want to look in detail at each of these clusters and the movies that comprise them in terms of the definition of body-horror that I gave earlier, beginning with the first group. The movies I consider, however, do not exhaust the cluster. However, because they are early, mid and late examples of this cluster a discussion of them should throw some light on not only how they work as body-horror movies but also on how as a cycle body-horror develops.

As I indicated earlier, this cluster is mostly concerned with body-horror caused as a result of medical intervention situated in medical environments and in which the main protagonist is a doctor/scientist or has some sort of medical connection. However, because the first three movies that I list as belonging to this cluster were made before the 1970s outside of North America they do not belong completely to the cycle of body-horror movies that I am considering. Nevertheless, they are important precursors to the cluster because they each have as their main protagonist a plastic surgeon and present the issue of facial scarring and plastic surgery in a particularly graphic way. In **Circus of Horrors** (1959, GB), for example, the plastic surgeon runs a circus which provides him with a cover for collecting facially scarred women which he is able to operate on and then kill off when he becomes tired of them. In **Les Yeux sans Visage** (1959, France), a surgeon unsuccessfully attempts to restore beauty to his daughter's disfigured

face by using facial skin from women he has murdered and in **Corruption** (1967, GB) a surgeon attempts to restore the scarred face of his lover by murdering and decapitating other women, albeit in a dream which turns out to be a premonition.

In terms of plot structure and iconography these movies also adhere to the schema I outlined as belonging to or typical of the first cluster. The surgeon in each case is portrayed as brilliant but insane, the narrative emphasis is on plastic surgery and other medical procedures which keep going wrong and the operations themselves are shown in graphic detail.

The first examples thus of Group A which are specific to the cycle are **The Exorcist** (1973, US) **The Stepford Wives**(1974, US) **Shivers**(1974, Canada)<sup>1</sup> and **Coma** (1976, US). Taken as a group they do not appear to have a great deal in common, a fact that is reinforced by the first being described as ‘a demonic possession movie’, the second being labelled ‘a science-fiction thriller’, the third ‘a gory horror’ and the fourth ‘a medical thriller’. However, all of these movies have thematic and iconographic traits that typify body-horror movies.

For example, **The Exorcist** is primarily a tale of the demonic possession of a young girl. In this respect therefore it belongs to a well-established type of horror film in which the monster has its origins in myth/legend and in which the struggle between good and evil serves as the main theme. However, the monstrous demonic possession of Regan McNeil and the even more gruesome medical tests she undergoes is shown in such a graphic way that the film may be considered as much body-horror as conventional demon horror for when Regan is possessed her body changes to such a degree that she is almost unrecognizable as the young girl introduced at the beginning

of the narrative. Her voice becomes deep and throaty. She utters copious expletives. Her face is disfigured by deep weals. Her flesh is bloated and her eyes are totally white, later becoming yellow. As she curses and vomits green bile she is shown in close-up, as she is when she violently masturbates with a crucifix, levitates and then performs a 360 degree turn of the head. Apart from the obvious sensationalism of this sequence in which we see her change from child to demon, the fact that we are shown her monstrous body and also the fact that Regan is no longer in control of it render it truly body-horror, a view which is corroborated by William Paul who in fact regards the film as seminal,

“If *The Exorcist* established the body as the site of horror, the horror film through the 1970s became increasingly focused on the body, and specifically on two interconnected aspects of the body: its excretions (products of the body beyond our control), and as a corollary of this, lack of control (the automatic responses of the body).”<sup>2</sup>

This lack of control however is not limited to the scene above; it is also apparent in the scenes in which we see Regan undergo horrific medical tests, specifically an arteriogram, which involves a large needle being put into the neck and blood being drained off, to find out what is wrong with her. Here then surgery is presented as both a necessity and a repulsive practice, in this case almost a form of torture<sup>3</sup>, in a way that is typical of medical body-horror movies generally. Hospitals, thus, and hospitalization has, as Boss observes, a dual or contradictory character or function,

“Despite the immaculate order of the hospital, its brilliance and asepticism, the banishing of the signifiers of death and decay, it remains a sanctuary of

contemporary terror. The image of fully institutionalised modern medicine, hospitals [with] banks of life-support equipment, the inscrutable terminology, the rigid regime and hierarchy, *one's own body rendered alien, regulated, labelled, categorised, rearranged, manipulated, scrutinised and dissected* [my italics]"<sup>4</sup>

The possession narrative, therefore, and the search for a cure for it through surgical procedure creates an opportunity for special effects to be used to gruesome and stunning effect and **The Exorcist** is no exception to this.<sup>5</sup> Further because this was the first time that a large, mainstream audience had viewed such grotesque imagery on the cinema screen and the first time that the body had been seen to transform so graphically<sup>6</sup> it may therefore justifiably be regarded as a seminal movie. Also because it deals both with medical issues and bodily transformation which is generated internally, it fits both clusters as I have defined them.

Compared to **The Exorcist**, **The Stepford Wives** (1974) the second in this category, is very much more of a minor entry. However it has a place here because its narrative concerns the actions of a 'mad' scientist who creates new, 'perfect' robot women to replace the real women of Stepford, and because there are throughout the movie comments about perfection and cleanliness suggestive of the growing preoccupation with body image during the 1970s, and with cosmetic surgery in particular.

**Coma** (1977) also is another movie which does not fully exhibit the features associated with body-horror movies, but like **The Stepford Wives** it does have some relevance, in part because of the issues that it raises such as organ transplants and, in part, because it shares with other medical body horrors certain iconographical features and certain

narrative and plot ones as well. *Coma* utilizes a hospital setting as a background for the narrative action. The narrative itself concerns the use and supply of organs for transplant surgery. Young people, we learn, are admitted to hospital to undergo relatively simple surgery. They then fall into a comatose state. Their bodies are then secreted away and kept in suspended animation at a private institute, through the use of the latest computer technology. Their organs are then removed and sold to the highest bidder. The tale is a genuinely gruesome one, as is its subject, the illegal trade in body organs. As such it is a movie which plays on the fear we have of hospitals in general and of the operating table in particular. More especially it plays on the fear we have when we surrender control of our bodies to someone else. Thus as Boss suggests,

*“Modern medicine, its methods of quantification and treatment, its technology and power, stands, at once, as that which improves or prolongs our (physical) existence, and as the constant signifier of its limitations, a condition which allows it to slide rapidly from reassurance to disturbance in its imagery [my italics].”*<sup>7</sup>

And disturbance here is conveyed not just through the actions of the head of the hospital who is revealed to be both mad and a criminal (he is the person masterminding the illegal trade), but through the very reduction of our bodies to parts offered for sale and through the opportunities that modern science creates for certain members of the profession to perform a form of institutionalized quasi-cannibalism.<sup>8</sup> As Mary B. Campbell states,

“Of all technologies, medicine is the one that seems most harnessed to the individual will and discretion of its practitioners...a perception...clearly exploited for its horrific potential in Michael Crichton’s *Coma*.”<sup>9</sup>

Clearly then, these three movies relate to body-horror as I have described it. However, it is the movie **Shivers** (1974) which corresponds most markedly with medical body-horror as I have outlined it. Also known by another title as **They Came From Within**, the movie concerns, as the title suggests, the invasion of our bodies by parasites which are created from within through the actions of a mad scientist. It also incorporates many other elements which not only place it within the body-horror cycle but also mark it out as the seminal work in this field. These other elements are as follows,

a) The setting – the action takes place in a building called Starliner Towers which because it is so sterile, seems more like a hospital than an apartment block.

b) The narrative emphasis on disease - in this case the parasites are supposedly developed as an alternative to organ transplants, but in fact they are a bizarre combination of aphrodisiac and venereal disease. They also manifest themselves as lumps or tumours which move.

c) The death of the mad scientist who commits suicide after unleashing the parasites on the community of Starliner Towers.

d) The body out of control, Cronenberg’s concept of a ‘creative disease’, and finally, the emphasis on *showing*, as opposed to the telling, through the use of visceral set pieces which focus on the revolting way in which the parasite moves between bodies and how

those bodies react to it and in the emphasis placed on gory special effects in which changes occurring to the body are shown in horrific detail.

For all of these reasons **Shivers** is really the first movie which embodies all those aspects of body-horror which I believe are central to this cluster, not just some of them as is the case with **The Exorcist**, **The Stepford Wives** and **Coma**.

The next three movies in this group are also directed by David Cronenberg, namely **Rabid**, **The Brood** and **Scanners**. **Rabid** (1976) has plastic surgery and disease as its two main themes. The setting for the first half of the narrative is the Keloid Clinic where Dr Keloid performs cosmetic surgery mainly on wealthy and ageing clients. Keloid himself is not mad and the skin graft surgery he performs on a young woman called Rose, who has been admitted to the clinic after suffering terrible injuries following a motorcycle accident, is genuinely life saving. However, the skin grafts are of a new type, and although he claims they are “morphogenetically neutral”, they have, we are told the same ability to “form any part of the human body that a human embryo has”. Because of this there is always a possibility of carcinomas forming after the graft. Thus Keloid may be seen as somewhat misguided and his grafting technique results in the development of a strange growth inside Rose’s armpit, a growth which looks like something between a hypodermic syringe and a penis. When she eventually wakes from her coma it soon becomes clear that something is not quite right and she starts attacking patients using her ‘syringe’ to suck out their blood. They in turn become rabid, sweating profusely, foaming at the mouth and becoming extremely violent. The disease spreads rapidly until a clean-up squad is formed. The disease, we assume, is finally contained but Ruth is killed at the hands of one of her victims and her body thrown into a garbage truck by the clean-up squad.

Once again we see here a medical procedure going wrong, creating a ‘disease’ which changes the body into something different. Once again, too, we see those who have the disease being unable to control their bodies. The emphasis on *showing* rather than telling and the use of close-up is evident also in the scenes where we see Rose being operated on, also in the scenes where we see her penetrating others with her ‘hypo-penis’ and in the scenes when we see the hydrophobic subsidiary characters biting chunks of flesh from their victims.

More complex than **Rabid** is **The Brood** (1979) the next film in this cluster. In this we are introduced not just to the issue of disease (specifically cancers) being brought on by the use of psychoplastics (a fictional form of psychiatric treatment), but also to the issue of child abuse, mothering and childbirth. The setting for much of the movie is the Somafree Clinic run by Dr Hal Raglan. Raglan is not mad but he is misguided. His revolutionary new treatment, psychoplastics, works on the premise that if the mind can make the body manifest its inner torment physically (as lumps, weals, tumours etc.) then the patients’ mental illness will be cured. However there is a downside to the treatment for, although it enables the patients’ inner torment or rage to take on physical form, the form it assumes develops a life of its own and becomes uncontrollable. As Jan Hartog, a patient of Raglan’s now suffering from Lymphosarcoma (a type of cancer), says

“Raglan encouraged my body to revolt against me and it did. Now I have a small revolution on my hands, and I’m not putting it down very successfully”.

The main character in the movie is Nola Carveth. She is Raglan’s ‘star’ patient and, as we learn later, the mother of the mutant ‘children’ (i.e.the brood), who attack those

close to her daughter, Candy. The brood to which Nola gives birth is the product of Raglan's psychoplastic treatment and of the rage she bears as a result of being abused as a child. Hence her over-protection of her daughter. The brood thus are not only examples of the monstrous in themselves, in so far as they are physically deformed, but they are also, as we learn in the penultimate scene of the movie, products of a body or a person (namely Nola) who has herself unwillingly become a monster. And because they are born out of external placental sacs on Nola's body, they lack a navel. This we deduce when we see, in close up, Nola biting open the placental sac to release the next addition to her brood. Central then to **The Brood** is the concept of the body in rebellion and the body as something rendered alien and beyond control, as a result of the actions of a concerned, but hopelessly misguided, medical practitioner.

**Scanners** (1980), despite having certain similarities with **The Brood**, is a rather different proposition in body-horror terms. The narrative revolves around a group of highly developed telepaths referred to as 'scanners' and who are involved with a strange organization called ConSec. However, unlike ordinary telepaths (who supposedly can read the minds of others) these scanners are able to control the minds of people they scan, sometimes with devastating consequences. As the narrative develops we discover that the two main scanners (Cameron Vale and Daryl Revok), who are presented as good and evil respectively, are in fact brothers and the sons of a Dr Paul Ruth who is, we learn, a "psychopharmacist by trade, specializing in the phenomenon of scanners". Dr Ruth, we learn, works for ConSec and experimented with a new drug in the 1950's called ephemerol, a drug which we are told was to be taken as a tranquilizer by women when they were pregnant. The drug, however, had to be withdrawn because it produced scanner-like side-effects but Ruth was so excited about it that he gave it to his wife when she became pregnant first with Revok and then with Vale. Because they were the

first and because the dosage given their mother was very high, these children developed amazingly strong scanning powers, so much so that the same drug that their mother had taken as a tranquilizer had to be used to calm them down. This does not, however, assuage Revok's craving for power and the means by which he plans to achieve it, namely by creating a scanner army, forces his brother into defying him pitching the full strength of his scanning powers against those of his brother in a final battle sequence.

The body-horror character of this movie thus can be seen to be motivated by the scanning as well as by the determination on the part of a misguided scientist (Dr Paul Ruth) to develop a 'wonder drug' to help pregnant women, something which results in producing monsters and reviving in us memories of the tragic aftermath of Thalidomide in the 1960s. Also, as with other medical body-horror films the doctor becomes unbalanced and ends up dead, shot by a member of ConSec a company he once owned. The first and most memorably graphic image of body-horror however is that of Revok scanning a member of ConSec and making his head explode across the screen in close-up gory detail. There are other scenes involving Revok or Vale which have a graphic touch, but the most spectacular of all is the final sequence in which they each battle for supremacy using their scanning powers. Here we really witness the body as the site of horror, for as they scan one another, the veins in Vale's arms begin to bulge and blood begins to spurt from them. Revok's face also becomes covered by throbbing veins as Vale's chest and face begin to ooze blood. Vale then pulls lumps of flesh from his face and his hands until finally his body spontaneously combusts and his eyes explode. The whole of this sequence in which we see Vale's body decompose is not surprisingly entirely in close up. However, this sequence is not the final one, for at the very end of the movie a twist in the tale is revealed which I discuss in a later chapter.

Cronenberg's contribution to this cluster is clearly therefore a massive one. However, there are two movies in this cluster made between 1974 to 1980 which are not directed by Cronenberg. They are **Massacre Mansion** (1976) and **The Manitou** (1977).

The main protagonist in **Massacre Mansion** is a mad scientist, Dr Len Chaney, who performs eye transplant operations on his blind daughter, Nancy, to try and restore her sight, which he was responsible for her losing. In the process Dr Chaney at first a brilliant, innovative eye surgeon becomes a madman. Prepared to do anything to get the eyes he needs to restore his daughter's sight and believing that he needs to take eyes from subjects who are living not dead he sets about kidnapping his 'donors', removing their eyes and then locking his eyeless victims in a cage in the cellar. Thus, not only are we treated to the spectacle of eyes being removed, we are also shown at great length the empty, bloody eye sockets of the still living eyeless victims. Again surgery is presented as something both horrible and frightening and each operation goes wrong. So Nancy becomes more and more scarred around her eye sockets. This drives Chaney even further into madness and even though he shouts "Nancy's going to have one last chance, I am in complete control!" he obviously is not in control at all eventually removing the eyes of his assistant to transplant them into Nancy. Nancy, however, cannot take any more and when she discovers those who have 'donated' their eyes locked in the cellar, she frees them. They then take revenge on Chaney, trap him and pluck out his eyes, holding them up to the camera so that we as members of the audience can gawp and gasp at the grotesque sight. **Massacre Mansion** thus has all the marks of the medical body-horror film as I have outlined it taking Franju's **Les Yeux sans Visage** as its base reference point, but inverting it so that in this case the narrative involves a face without eyes and not eyes without a face.

The other movie that I have included as an example of this sub-cycle, and which was made after 1974 and before 1980 is **The Manitou** as it draws attention to the fact that even a movie which deals with possession first and foremost can utilize the imagery and settings typical of a body-horror movie to make its premise all the more horrifying. Although there are no ‘mad’ scientists in **The Manitou**, the idea that the medical profession cannot always cure everything that is disease related nevertheless drives the narrative. The story begins quite typically with Karen Tandy developing a lump on her neck. Over a period of three days this lump gets bigger and bigger. At first the doctors think it is a fast growing malignant tumour and they attempt to remove it surgically. This fails and it quickly becomes evident from the X-rays that are taken that it is not a tumour at all but a foetus. The narrative then turns into a tale about possession. The foetal lump we learn is in fact that of an immortal Native American spirit or manitou called Misquamacus. To be reborn it requires a host, either man or animal. The lump therefore on Karen’s neck is malignant but not cancerous. For this reason it cannot be removed by surgery but only by the intervention of a medicine man and when it is reborn we are shown its birth in graphic detail tearing the skin apart and erupting from the lump looking like a grotesque dwarf-like monster covered in slime. This birthing sequence, the tumour, the hospital setting, all evidence the way in which body-horror iconography can be used in a film whose subject is not first and foremost about medicine, medical treatment or body change.

The next examples in my cluster are two movies made after 1980 which deal specifically with the concept of re-animation using special serums. **Dead and Buried** (1981) has as its premise the notion that the dead can be brought back to life. This theme is of course one that is fairly common in the horror genre, but here it is treated very differently.<sup>10</sup> One of the two main protagonists is a man called Dobbs, who works

as a mortician in a small town called Potter's Bluff. After many strange events involving dead people reappearing with new identities we learn that Dobbs is not just a mortician but a scientist of sorts concerned to find a way of keeping the body eternally young. To do this he has been reanimating anyone from the town who has died, even visitors, using special embalming fluid he has made to reanimate the corpses after rebuilding their bodies. Dobbs believes he is helping keep the body eternally young. There are many scenes of bodily destruction in **Dead and Buried**, including one of a man being beaten and burned, another of a man attacked with boat hooks having his throat cut and stomach slashed and a third where we see a hypodermic needle stuck into an eyeball. We also see a man having tubes put up his nose and acid pumped into his face, a woman's scalp being pulled off to reveal a pulsating brain, a torn off limb moving independently, and a dead body whose face has been shattered and its skin removed, being rebuilt. In all of these sequences the effect of horror depends upon the special effects ingenuity of Stan Winston and the use of cinematography. Further, our fear of losing control of our bodies and becoming or being made something other, i.e. a zombie, is central to the movie. Potter's Bluff is also a small town and this together with the hospital and mortuary scenes add to the overall body-horror effect and to the idea that we here see a way of life that is altogether different from the norm. As the sign above the town tells us "Welcome to Potter's Bluff, A New Way of Life".

The other example of a film which deals with the subject of bringing the dead back to life is obviously **Re-Animator** (1985). Indeed the subject of this film is signalled right at the very start, for here, before the credits have come up, we see a mad scientist, Dr Herbert West, reanimating a dead colleague using a glowing greenish yellow serum which he calls a re-agent. The corpse's eyes bulge and then pop in a shower of blood and gore, and when the credits do appear, the titles are overlaid with images of body

parts. Our familiarity with and knowledge of body-horror, therefore, and all that we associate with it in its medical guise are clearly and explicitly appealed to and our investment doesn't go unrewarded for as the narrative progresses we are treated to a great many scenes which are typical of medical body-horror movies generally. For example, there are many scenes in the university morgue where we are shown a graphic brain autopsy and dead bodies, all of which have been mutilated in different ways. Every detail of bodily destruction is followed in close-up. There are numerous scenes of bodies in turmoil. These include a reanimated mutilated cat corpse, a male corpse spewing gore and being re-killed with a bone-saw, Hill (the other mad scientist in the story) being decapitated by West only to have his head and body reanimated, and a morgue full of corpses which in the end turn on West and Hill. Hill has his head crushed until it collapses and West is strangled by the reanimated intestines from Hill's body which finally explode. The setting is obviously medical. The main protagonist is a mad scientist. The narrative centres on the use of a 'wonder drug' to try and beat death and the overall emphasis is on showing the horror as graphically as possible. Further, as in **Dead and Buried**, the bodies are not only destroyed but zombified as well and thus can neither control themselves or be controlled. As a result, West pays the ultimate price for his madness and for his desire to perfect a re-animating agent by ending up dead himself.

The last four movies in this cluster take us into the 1990s. However, because I have already discussed **Rejuvenator** (1988) in Chapter One and I provide a detailed account of **Dead Ringers** in Chapter Five my discussion here concerns only **Frankenhooker** (1990) and **Body Parts** (1991).

**Frankenhooker** is not the only body-horror film that Frank Henenlotter has directed. There are others like **Basket Case** (1981) and **Brain Damage** (1987), but because these do not feature ‘mad scientists’ at work nor deal with the subject of reanimation they do not really fit with the category of body horror as I have outlined it.<sup>11</sup> Further, **Frankenhooker** brings to the medical body-horror movie a distinct sense of black humour, (a trait which is also evident in **Death Becomes Her**)<sup>12</sup>, and this makes it a particularly interesting late example of the sub-cycle, suggesting that as cycles begin to come full circle, they have to find new ways of dealing with the subject matter if they are not to decline.

This black humour becomes all too evident if we consider the narrative trajectory of **Frankenhooker**. Jeffrey Franken is a sort of amateur scientist who has developed a preserving liquid, an oestrogen based blood serum, which enables him to keep body parts fresh until he can put them together, and then through the use of electricity (in much the same way as Frankenstein does) bring them back to life. These body parts he keeps in an old freezer full of preserving fluid and some of them belong to his girlfriend, Elizabeth, who has been killed in a freak accident and whom he wants to restore. All he needs are the right parts. With these he says “It’ll be a whole new you! I can make you the centerfold of the century.” Determined to rebuild and reanimate Elizabeth, Jeffrey decides to seek guidance by drilling into his brain. As a result of this he decides to develop a new drug called ‘supercrack’, which he then gives to a group of prostitutes. When the drug takes effect, their bodies explode and Jeffrey takes home the parts in order to rebuild Elizabeth. Once rebuilt and reanimated, an extremely scarred Elizabeth wanders into town. In an argument in which punches are exchanged her head is knocked off. Jeffrey finds her and takes her home, only to be confronted by the fact that the remains which he had kept in the freezer cabinet have all become reanimated.

Jeffrey is then killed but then reanimated by Elizabeth. The twist however is that his body is now female!

Surprise twists, which generate the humour in this movie, are however also a feature of the final example I include in this cluster, namely **Body Parts** (1991).<sup>13</sup> As the title itself suggests the subject of this movie is transplant surgery and it is reinforced by the opening credits where we are shown drawings of body parts (sinews, muscles etc.) all coloured in red. The narrative action is triggered when Bill Chruschank, a prison psychiatrist, has a serious car accident in which he loses an arm. A seemingly benevolent female doctor called Dr Webb tells his wife that they can replace his arm with the arm of another person which she can attach to Bill's shoulder. His wife agrees to the procedure thinking that it is for the best. When the bandage comes off, Bill's arm however is a mass of scars and stitches. Further, it doesn't look as if it belongs to his body. But after weeks of physiotherapy Bill returns home and the arm seems fine. However, quite soon after the arm starts to do things of its own accord, for example hitting his son and almost strangling his wife. Eventually Bill discovers that the arm he has been given belonged to a mass-murderer called Charlie Fletcher. This causes him to change his view of Dr Webb whom he learns has also used the legs and other arm of Charlie Fletcher to transplant onto two other people. Quite understandably Bill feels that his arm does not belong to him. Because of this he cannot control it and asks Webb to remove it. When she retorts, "...the pain you're in isn't that important when I balance it against the significance of the experiment" we see her in a new light, no longer benevolent but indeed a mad scientist. Bill however is convinced that the evil that resided in Charlie lives on in his arm and he tries to convince the other two recipients of Charlie's parts of this fact. When they go home, Draper, who has Charlie's legs, is

attacked in his apartment. When Bill arrives he finds him dead on the bed with his legs torn off. Lacey, an artist who is also the recipient of Charlie's other arm, also meets a gruesome end when a shadowy figure throws him out of the window and rips off the arm. Eventually we learn that Charlie Fletcher is not dead at all, or rather his head isn't because Webb has transplanted it onto the shoulders of another body. However, Charlie's head has decided that it wants back its own body parts. Bill confronts Webb in the operating theatre where he sees Charlie's torso and limbs suspended and moving around in a huge tank. Webb explains that "Grafting on limbs was only the beginning...now we transplant heads with full brain chemistry and functions intact." Webb then tries to remove the arm she had grafted onto Bill but Bill escapes and shoots her, Charlie Fletcher and the limbs in the tank. Unusually for a body-horror movie Bill survives Webb's maniacal experiment and the film has a happy ending.

**Body Parts** is a particularly interesting addition to the cycle because although it has a slightly supernatural slant to it, it retains all the components that I have outlined as body-horror. Webb the 'mad' scientist; Bill Chruschank whose body is out of his own control; the hospital setting; the use of surgical procedure and most importantly of all bodies and body transplants which induce horror and revulsion in characters and in us. The special effects in the movie are also extremely gruesome and well executed. The scenes in which we see the missing limbs and the transplanting process are highly detailed, very gory and filmed in close-up, with no cutting away. They also bring home to us and to Bill the horror of surgical procedure, especially transplants. The sight of Charlie Fletcher's gaping shoulder socket before he is fully anaesthetized revolts Bill as much as it does us.

**Body Parts** is not necessarily the last gasp of medical body-horror but it does show that if cycles are to continue then they must constantly rework and add to the formula in order to survive. The films I have written about in the medical cluster thus have many similarities but they also show a pattern of development which does suggest an end to the cycle. It is notable that the special effects, for example, become more and more extreme in their presentation and also the inclusion of black humour in the films becomes progressively more pronounced. So, although some of the early examples I have given are graphic in terms of special effects the humorous aspect was not present. It is not until **Re-Animator** that black humour begins to play a significant part in body-horror movies and even this film has tragic moments amidst the gore. Films like **Frankenhooker**, however, take the humour and gore to extremes, so much so that even the gore becomes funny. This type of excess and humour is common to many horror cycles as they go into decline, for example the cycle of horror movies initiated by Universal in the 1930s becomes the subject of parody in the 1940s by such actors as Abbot and Costello and in recent years Freddy Krueger in the **Nightmare on Elm Street** 'slasher' series has become a wise-cracking character, overly sanitized and far removed from the terrifying child murderer he was in the first movie. It could be argued, then, that there are limits to the amount of play allowable in these models and that excess and humour are the last resort because there is nothing more left to say and we know the formula so well that parody and self-referentiality are the only option available before the cycle ends.

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<sup>1</sup> **Shivers** is a seminal body-horror movie and will be examined in greater detail in the chapter on David Cronenberg.

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<sup>2</sup> William Paul, *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*, p.354.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p.385. William Paul comments on this scene in terms of its body-horror, the idea that “an actual medical procedure...could explicitly become a vehicle for horror”.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Vile Bodies and Bad Medicine’, p.20.

<sup>5</sup> The special effects were created by Dick Smith.

<sup>6</sup> Although horror movies such as H.G.Lewis’s **Blood Feast** and George Romero’s **Night of the Living Dead** showed dismemberment and cannibalism extremely graphically, and may even have played a role in the development of the special effects seen in body-horror movies, they were not seen by a large, international audience at their time of release i.e. 1963 and 1968 respectively. Also their themes are somewhat different to those which I have postulated as body-horror.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Vile Bodies and Bad Medicine’, p.19.

<sup>8</sup> This issue of the body being reduced to parts will be developed in more detail in relation to the concept of the grotesque and the work of Bakhtin and others.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Biological Alchemy and the Films of David Cronenberg’ p.308-9, in *Planks of Reason*, Barry Keith Grant (ed.)

<sup>10</sup> Zombies and man-made monsters are staples of the horror genre, however in **Dead and Buried** it is the aspects of body-horror which are foremost i.e. camera close-ups on the site of horror, the reason Dobbs gives for creating zombies and the setting. Although many zombie movies, from **Night of the Living Dead** (1968) onwards, have scenes of bodily destruction, the explanation for zombification is somewhat different to **Dead and Buried** or **Re-Animator**, therefore I have not included them in this thesis.

<sup>11</sup> **Basket Case** is about Siamese twins separated as children. One is ‘normal’ (Duane-an all-American name) and one is ‘abnormal’and deformed (Belial - a name for the Devil, from the Hebrew meaning worthless). Duane is saved and Belial is thrown into the garbage to die. Rescued by a compassionate Aunt, Belial is reunited with Duane and the two boys grow up together. Duane cannot divest himself of his responsibility to Belial so he carries him around in a wicker basket (hence the title). Belial eventually avenges himself on those responsible for the separation. Duane doesn’t want to be a part of the killing anymore, but Belial won’t let him ‘separate’ mentally. They both apparently end up dead (despite their appearance in two sequels). **Basket Case** deals more with the audience reaction to the grotesque rather than the focus on the body itself in turmoil or disruption. Because Belial is born deformed, rather than the body being changed by someone or something, the connotations seem to be somewhat different here. **Brain Damage** features an ancient magical parasite called Elmer/Aylmer who can inject a euphoria-inducing fluid into the back of his owners neck. However, Elmer must eat human brains to survive and Brian, his owner, has to find the donors! There are some elements of body-horror here in as much as Brian’s body changes through Elmer’s drug and it is very graphic, but, as with **Basket Case**, the connotations are different. The story is more of an allegory about the danger of hallucinatory drugs.

<sup>12</sup> **Death Becomes Her** is a mainstream movie marketed as a black-comedy. The stars (Bruce Willis, Meryl Streep and Goldie Hawn) find themselves in a truly eternal triangle situation, Bruce Willis is a plastic surgeon who operates on both the female characters (wife and mistress) to preserve youth and reduce obesity respectively. Not only does the premise confirm its body-horror origins but also the fact that a special elixir becomes involved in the plot and this ultimately fails leaving the two women immortal but completely decrepit. This movie also suggests that the concerns raised in low-budget examples of body-horror had become more pronounced culturally.

<sup>13</sup> There is a late addition to the cycle called **Body Melt** (1993, Australia, Dir. Philip Brophy). I don’t think it is just coincidental that this movie is directed by someone called Philip Brophy . Considering the

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content it seems to have been made by someone with a particular interest in body-horror and its cultural context, which suggests that author and director are one and the same (although I can find no evidence to confirm this assumption). Much of the action in **Body Melt** takes place on a 'health farm' called Vimuville. Vimuville stands for Visceral-Muscular-Vitalization-of-Latent-Libidinal-Energy. It turns out that it was originally a chemical plant and they are manufacturing a new secret designer body drug. Typically this is a misguided scientist narrative. The drug is supposed to be helpful but ends up killing people in a variety of disgusting ways. Scenes of gaping necks and stomachs from which tentacles erupt, slime, gore and stretching skin all shot in close-up to heighten the revulsion and the 'How did they do that factor?' The video sleeve sums it up, saying, "the first symptoms are hallucinogenic, the second are glandular and the third result in total body melt." This movie seems to have been made specifically to cash in on the interest in body-horror, but it also demonstrates a last gasp of the cycle and, like **Frankenhooker**, it does not take its subject at all seriously.

## Chapter Three

### Non-Medical Body Horror Movies

“Long Live the New Flesh!”<sup>1</sup>

In Chapter One I argued that there are two clusters of body-horror movies which can be considered as medical and non-medical. The second cluster in this cycle, non-medical, is different to the first cluster in as much as the change in the body is not the result of medical intervention but is generated internally. Also the plot structures and characters are different. However, both clusters place emphasis on the changing of the body through the use of graphic special effects and both clusters also utilize cinematography and editing in such a way that the body is clearly the site of horror. In addition, this cluster makes use of confined spaces to suggest a feeling of entrapment thereby making the metamorphosis all the more horrific, reminiscent of the shower scene in **Psycho**.<sup>2</sup> Unlike **Psycho**, however, someone else is usually present, so that the audience not only sees the metamorphosis but also the reaction of the trapped spectator and even on those occasions when no on-screen observer is present, as in the first transformation scene in **An American Werewolf in London**, we are still forced to witness the event because the camera never cuts away from the spectacle. As a result there is nowhere else to look producing effects which will be made clearer when we consider the films themselves.

The first example I list as belonging to this cluster (after **The Exorcist**) is **Alien** because, although it does not have all the features associated with this cluster it does have some of the imagery that is found in the later examples. Set within the confines of a spaceship, *The Nostromo*, **Alien** is first and foremost a monster movie. Nevertheless

it is also something of a hybrid drawing on both horror and Science Fiction and this is characteristic of many of the movies in both clusters. However, **Alien** also represents a turning point, like **The Exorcist** before it, because of the use it makes of special effects. **Alien**, like **The Exorcist**, sets up new graphic boundaries for a mainstream audience to react to. In light of this it is important to remember that David Cronenberg's movies, as graphic as they are, were not truly a part of mainstream cinema. This suggests that body-horror imagery was beginning to have resonances across the horror genre as a whole and was not just contained within a low-budget, non-mainstream cycle.

As the events that make up the narrative of **Alien** are well known I shall confine myself here to a discussion of only the opening section to demonstrate its relevance to this cluster. This section begins with Kane investigating the alien spacecraft. Finding himself in the dark, eerie confines of the egg chamber he is subsequently attacked by a 'face-hugger' which bursts out from one of the eggs. As he returns to the Nostromo the crew wait to see what happens to him, thinking he will die from suffocation. Ironically, after the 'face-hugger' falls from Kane's face he seems fit and healthy, but very hungry. As the crew sit down to their meal, Kane eats ravenously. Suddenly he falls across the table in agony. The crew then turn him over and as he strains and screams, his chest starts to burst open and a new baby alien bursts out of his body in an explosion of blood and gore. The 'face-hugger' has impregnated him and the baby alien, to which he has given birth, eventually grows larger and larger, killing all but one of the crew in the process. Clearly no metamorphosis occurs in this section (or indeed in the film as a whole), as Kane himself does not change, but it is an important sequence because birthing is an aspect of body-horror which recurs frequently in these narratives and his body acts as host to another, an 'other' which, like all the other movies in this cluster, is not the result of medical intervention. It is also important to note that the birthing takes

place in a confined space and is watched by people who are in some sense 'trapped'. There is also an element of the grotesque here in the way that the bloody eruption occurs alongside food and its consumption.

**The Howling** is yet another example of groundbreaking special effects as well as being the first movie in Group B which fully qualifies as a non-medical body-horror movie. Although the narrative is traditional in the sense that it deals with the myth of the werewolf, the treatment is somewhat different from earlier werewolf movies. The werewolf legend has been a favourite in the horror genre for many years, but not until recently could the total transformation of a human into a werewolf be shown on the screen in any really convincing detail. With the introduction of prosthetic effects, however, this changed, enabling transformation scenes to be presented in ways that were much more horrifying. Transformation had been shown before in such horror movies as **Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde** (1932) and **The Wolfman** (1941) but the transformations were not the main focus of the movies, even though they were a major selling point. When **The Howling** and **An American Werewolf in London** were released the most important feature associated with them was the graphic transformation scenes and they were sold almost entirely on this basis, a fact which explains why very few photographs of the werewolf effects were allowed to be distributed prior to release.<sup>3</sup> Audiences were tempted into seeing something remarkable because the emphasis again is on 'the showing' or the 'spectacle' of transformation rather than on its explanation.

**The Howling**, however, is not simply a body-horror film, but a body-horror comedy because it is part parody of and part homage to earlier werewolf movies. The plot is simple. Karen White, a news reporter, arranges to meet a contact who is supposedly a serial killer called 'Eddie the Mangler' in a private booth in a sex shop. In the course of

their meeting and in the confines of the booth, Eddie, much to Karen's horror, turns into something other, although we do not know what as only Karen and not us witnesses the transformation. Eddie is then shot and killed by police patrolmen. Later on two of Karen's colleagues, Terri and Chris, search Eddie's apartment and find a room covered with drawings of werewolves signed by Eddie (Quist), as well as newspaper cuttings reporting various horrible murders. Karen then visits a psychiatrist, Dr George Waggner, whom we saw in the opening credits as the guest on a talk show claiming that,

“Repression is the father of neurosis. We should never try to deny the beast, the animal within us.”

Waggner recommends to Karen that she should visit his so-called 'colony', “It'll enable you to try and get back to what you really are.” Little does she know that he means this quite literally.

When Karen and her husband, Bill, arrive at the colony it seems strange and uncomfortable. They begin to hear howling noises at night, and Karen discovers a cow with its throat torn out. Meanwhile Terri and Chris discover that Eddie's body has disappeared from the morgue. Terri goes to the colony to tell Karen.

Later, Bill is bitten by what is apparently a wolf in the forest. Previously vegetarian, he now becomes a carnivore. One night he goes to the forest and meets one of the women who belong to the colony. As they copulate they both become werewolves. Bill's teeth grow into slavering fangs. Hair begins to grow all over his body and his hands become claws.

Meanwhile Terri tries to find Eddie Quist. She discovers a house in the forest. There she finds the same sort of drawings that were in the city apartment but no sooner has she found them, than she is attacked by a wolf creature.<sup>4</sup> Managing to escape by chopping off one of its forearms which then, spewing forth blood and gore, changes into a human limb, she runs through the forest to Dr Waggner's house from where she phones Chris for help. Then, as she rummages through the filing cabinet looking for information on Eddie Quist, a werewolf suddenly appears and attacks her, biting out her throat. Karen then arrives at Waggner's office and finds Terri's mutilated body. Turning round she sees Eddie Quist sitting up on a table. He has a bullet hole in his head and he tells her that he wants to give her a piece of his mind. Then pulling some sort of brain tissue from his head he begins to change into a werewolf. This is perhaps the most significant and defining moment in the movie because it becomes apparent that in this movie, these werewolves unlike werewolves in other movies do not change involuntarily during a full moon, but instead they are true shape-shifters. In other words they have control over their own transformation and as Eddie's transformation progresses Karen looks on, completely horrified and rooted to the spot. His face begins to bubble and pulsate. His fingers stretch into claws and his teeth become fangs. In a tour de force of prosthetics his jaw stretches into a full snout before our and Karen's very eyes. His eyeballs then yellow and his ears become pointed until he becomes a fully formed werewolf. Shocked from her fixation, Karen then picks up a jar of acid, throws it over Eddie and escapes.

Eddie, however, is not dead for when Chris stumbles across him in in his search for Terri he has begun to change once again. To put an end to this once and for all Chris shoots him in the neck with a silver bullet.<sup>5</sup> He then finds Karen and together they drive away after first setting fire to the barn in an attempt to destroy all the remaining

members of the colony. However, as they do so, their car is attacked and Karen gets bitten by Bill who has become a werewolf. The penultimate scene of the movie shows Karen on air warning the public of the danger they face. As she does so she herself changes into a werewolf and Chris has to shoot her with a silver bullet. The members of the public, however, are not wholly convinced for in the final scene we see a group of men who have been watching the TV broadcast debating whether or not what they saw was fact or fiction, with one insisting that it was fact, whilst another asserts that it was nothing more than a product of what “they can do with special effects these days”.<sup>6</sup>

Although **The Howling** is not groundbreaking – the way in which it deals with the matter of believability in and the scepticism about monsters for example is quite conventional - it is interesting because it suggests that here the monsters are not in a state of trauma but are in fact happy with their changing flesh referring to it even as “a gift” because they see it as a release from the confines of human existence. Secondly, it is interesting because it suggests that we, like Karen, are fascinated with the grotesque as the transformation of the human into an animal and with the grotesque, as Bakhtin has also observed, “a body in the act of becoming”<sup>7</sup> and because of this, the movie gains something of a subversive edge because the werewolves here *are* perfectly happy to look grotesque and transgress the boundaries of what it is to be human. Further, order is not restored at the end of the movie because, as we learn in the post-script, not all the werewolves were killed in the fire at the colony and Eddie Quist’s sister is shown with the men in the bar asking for a hamburger “Done rare!”

**The Howling** thus adheres to most of the criteria I outlined for the second cluster, but one which conforms more fully and which is also a body-horror comedy is **An American Werewolf in London** because it has just one protagonist. In this movie

David Kessler is the main protagonist who is attacked by a werewolf on the Yorkshire moors early on in the movie. Unlike his friend Jack, who is killed in the attack, David survives. But after having strange nightmares in hospital he is visited by his dead friend Jack and he is told that he should kill himself because he will turn into a werewolf when the moon is full. Eventually, David leaves the hospital to stay with Alex, the nurse who looked after him. Whilst in her apartment he is again visited by an extremely decrepit looking Jack and once again Jack tells David to kill himself before others are killed.

The next day David wanders around Alex's apartment waiting for something to happen. Finally the full moon rises and sure enough, in an incredible Academy Award winning special effects sequence,<sup>8</sup> David does change. Just as the most significant moment in **The Howling** was Eddie Quist's transformation, so too is David's change in this movie. Eddie's change happens in a slightly darkened room, whereas this takes place in a well-lit living room. As I mentioned earlier, this change does not have a witness in the room but the audience is forced to watch every detail in close-up nonetheless. As Philip Brophy points out,

“It's not unlike being on a tram and somebody has an epileptic fit – you're right there next to the person, you can't get away from it and you can't do anything.”<sup>9</sup>

As the transformation begins David starts to scream in agony. Being a more traditional werewolf narrative he changes involuntarily unlike the intentional shape-shifting of Eddie Quist. As he screams his whole body starts to stretch. His hand extends in front of his own eyes and becomes a huge claw. He grows hair, huge fangs and pointed ears. Then his face elongates into a wolf snout. Finally he falls onto all fours and is completely transformed into a werewolf. It is this scene which links this movie closely

to **The Howling**. It is also the most central scene in the movie. Both of these werewolf movies deal with bodily destruction through metamorphosis. Although at one level they represent a fear of bodily change (David in **An American Werewolf in London** and Karen in **The Howling**) they also seem to subvert the notion that a grotesque bodily change is bad. Eddie Quist and the rest of the werewolf colony certainly enjoy their ability to change at will and to some extent David actually enjoys the vigour that his first transformation gives him.

However, unlike **The Howling** there is a return to order at the end of the movie. After David has changed there is no longer anything remotely human about him and he attacks and kills several people. Waking up in the wolf cage at London Zoo he wonders what happened. He eventually discovers the truth and after realizing he cannot commit suicide he goes to a sex cinema where he meets Jack for the last time. The other werewolf victims are with him and they also tell him to commit suicide. However, he changes again inside the cinema and proceeds to cause mayhem and death in Piccadilly Circus. When he leaps at Alex as she tells him she loves him, he is shot dead by soldiers, thereby fulfilling the classic demise of the werewolf seen in numerous earlier werewolf movies.<sup>10</sup>

**The Beast Within** is the next example in this cluster because its plot structure seems to fit closely with others in this group. The narrative tells how a woman is raped by a strange creature in a swamp. Seventeen years later her son contracts a mysterious illness and the family go back to Mississippi to look for the origin of the disease. The son starts to show signs of change and eventually transforms into a giant, flesh-eating insect. As with the previous two movies, the transformation scene again seems central. According to Philip Brophy,

“The boy undergoes an agonising transformation on his hospital bed, where a mutated cicada-like creature erupts *out* of his body, in full view of his mother, ‘presumed father’, a doctor, and us....The boy not only goes through a transformation, but his body is discarded, shed to make way for the ‘beast’ within. The horror is conveyed through the torture and agony of havoc wrought upon a body devoid of control. The identification is then levelled at that loss of control – the fictional body is as helpless as its viewing subject.”<sup>11</sup>

Further, this final stage occurs in full view of witnesses and it also appears to have the birthing element as the creature actually erupts from the boy’s body.

In John Carpenter’s remake of **The Thing**, a different creature altogether is encountered, and yet it still features many of the elements I have described in relation to the other examples in the non-medical cluster. Based more closely on the short story ‘Who Goes There?’<sup>12</sup> than the Howard Hawks/Christian Nyby version (1951), **The Thing** features an alien being which assimilates any other life form it comes into close contact with.

Set in the icy cold wastes of Antarctica, the movie opens with a scene of a husky dog being chased across the snow by a helicopter. As the dog runs away a man in the helicopter fires gunshots desperately at it. The dog and the helicopter both end up at the base camp of a US survey team. The man still pursues the dog attempting to kill it. When the team try to stop him he ignores them and ends up being shot by one of them. The confusion here engenders a sense of foreboding in us and in the main characters. Eventually however, because it transpires that the occupants of the helicopter were Norwegians, some of the survey team go by helicopter to the Norwegian base to try and

find out why this should have happened. The base camp, however, is deserted except for one man they find inside with his throat cut and more importantly, outside, they find the burned remains of something vaguely human but horribly twisted. They decide to take the monstrosity back to their base camp and when Doctor Copper slices open the 'corpse', he finds inside the twisted mess normal human organs. Meanwhile the husky has been rescued and Clarke takes it to the dog pen. As Clarke leaves however the dog begins to change. As it does so its face splits wide open and masses of tentacles explode from within. Its body sprouts spidery legs and sprays the other dogs in the pen with what appears to be acid. Unable to escape the dogs become terrified as do we, for we are made to witness every gruesome detail and when the rest of the team arrive they cannot believe their own eyes. The 'thing' is huge. It stretches up to the ceiling and in amongst the mess of slime, jelly and goo we see both the twisted head of a dog and something that appears to be a giant seed pod opening up. At this point the 'thing' is then immolated by a large flamethrower. This, however, is only the beginning for as Doc Copper explains after having performed an autopsy on it,

“What we're talking about here is an organism that imitates other life forms, and it imitates them perfectly.”

Thus, this movie is not about one person undergoing a metamorphosis, but about the human body being forced to change from within via an outside influence. Further, as an example of body-horror, **The Thing** features some of the most outrageously inventive special make-up effects ever committed to celluloid<sup>13</sup>, for as each time the shape shifting 'thing' assimilates a character the assimilation process is shown in great detail through the use of close-up and because the transformation process usually occurs in rooms where the characters trapped (at one point some of the team are tied to chairs in

close proximity to a character who undergoes change) the spectacle appears even more horrific to watch and once it is acknowledged that this life form has the capability to assimilate endlessly, it is able to continue to astound whenever another body is taken over. Indeed the most remarkable sequence of all takes place when Doc Copper attempts to revive Norris after a presumed heart attack. Doc uses defibrillator pads to try and restart his heart. When he uses them a second time his arms go straight into Norris's chest. The chest gapes revealing a huge set of jaws which then close and 'bite' off Copper's arms at the elbows, leaving bloody stumps. Then tentacles sprout from the entire body, ripping it apart before the horrified men. Most bizarre of all, Norris's neck stretches until the head pulls off. A tentacled tongue appears from its mouth and proceeds to pull the head towards a cabinet. Suddenly spidery legs sprout from the sides and antennae sprout from the top of the upside down head. Indeed this sequence calls to mind something that Bakhtin commented on, namely that,

"If we consider the grotesque image in its extreme aspect, it never presents an individual body; the image consists of orifices and anxieties that *present another newly conceived body* [my italics]."14

Given this, the potential of a movie that uses the grotesque to keep us in a state of continual shock and horror is enormous and when Palmer sees this 'newly conceived body' scuttling towards the door he echoes our words and thoughts when he says, "You've got to be fucking kidding!" Indeed he is right because not only are the special effects in this movie remarkable in themselves but the effect on us as spectators is remarkable for through them, as Steve Neale remarked,

"The spectator has been, like the fictional character, astonished and horrified."15

However, this effect of horror and astonishment is not only fundamental to Science Fiction as Neale suggests but fundamental to body-horror movies also for the simple reason that for the full effect of horror and astonishment to be achieved it is absolutely essential that everything in body-horror is *shown*. For this reason the rupturing and dismantling of the body is the ultimate coup de theatre of this movie cycle and for the same reason it is because of this, namely access to the grotesque in a very overt way that body-horror movies may be thought to transgress the usual boundaries of body-fascism frequently encountered in mainstream media products.<sup>16</sup> After all, in these products, the body is commonly presented as a commodity, which, in order to sell and to be consumed, must be shown to be as perfect and attractive as possible whether it be in films, magazines or on television. As Deborah Lupton says, quoting from S. Bordo,

“The ideal here is of a body that is absolutely tight, contained, ‘bolted down’, firm (in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control).”<sup>17</sup>

If a body is shown having its ‘internal processes’ disrupted out of control and not a perfect specimen, it can be seen to challenge the spectator in some way. Movies, thus, which like **The Thing**, revel in the spectacle of bodily transformation are movies which necessarily induce horror or astonishment in us, but also at the same time the often cathartic effect of “gross out.” As William Paul suggests,

“Gross-out signifies an art of inversion. If traditional aesthetics values the beautiful, gross-out clearly poses the opposite; but its force is nonetheless based on a sense of traditional values – except they are inverted. The repellent becomes the attractive, or, perhaps more accurately, we must acknowledge that we find something attractive in the

repellent. Things could not repel us if we were not initially attracted. In the confusing process of this push-pull aesthetic we are forced to consider what we mean by both *repellent* and *attractive*.”<sup>18</sup>

This is why I suggest that these movies can be seen as transgressive. They challenge the audience to react in a different way and this challenge can be seen in the next two movies from this cluster directed by David Cronenberg.

**Videodrome** and **The Fly** both deal with non-medical metamorphosis in a particularly extreme way. **Videodrome** features a protagonist called Max Renn, a buyer for a cable TV station. He is looking for something much tougher than the usual soft-porn fare that he buys. His friend Harlan seems to find what Max wants in the scrambled transmission of a hardcore, sadomasochistic channel. This turn of events impacts upon the rest of the narrative in quite specific ways.

Max meets a radio show host called Nikki Brand and they strike up a sadomasochistic relationship (unsurprising considering the surname Cronenberg has given her). Nikki sees and enjoys the hardcore show which is called Videodrome, eventually deciding she wants to be on it. To prove this to Max she burns her breast with a cigarette saying, “I was made for that show.” Max tries to find out more about Videodrome and asks his colleague Marsha about it. She tells him, “Videodrome is for real, it’s not acting, it’s snuff TV.” Now concerned for Nikki, Max, on Marsha’s advice, goes to find a character called Brian O’Blivion at a place called The Cathode Ray Mission. It is a place for people addicted to TV and looks like a decrepit AA clinic. Max meets O’Blivion’s daughter, Bianca, who runs the mission, but not her father.

After this encounter Max continues to watch Videodrome. He then gets a delivery of two videotapes, one is his wake-up cassette and the other is from O'Blivion. It is at this point in the movie where reality becomes increasingly difficult to separate from hallucination, and it is apparent even at this point that the O'Blivion videotape has some bearing on this. As Max holds the tape it moves, the tape reels swelling, the plastic seemingly pliable. On the tape O'Blivion appears to speak directly to Max saying, "TV is reality and reality is less than TV." As he talks about video hallucinations he says,

"I could feel the visions become flesh... uncontrollable flesh. I was Videodrome's first victim."

While saying this he is apparently strangled by two hooded characters. Then Nikki appears on screen saying to Max, "Come to me." The TV pulsates and breathes, veins seem to run across it and it moves as if alive. Max goes to kiss Nikki's lips and ends up pushing his whole head into the screen.<sup>19</sup>

He takes the tape back to Bianca telling her, "Careful, it bites!" She tells Max that the Videodrome signal causes hallucinations and then induces brain tumours in the viewer. It turns out that O'Blivion is not alive, he is 'stored' on hundreds of videotapes. Bianca says, "My father helped to create Videodrome. He wasn't afraid to let his body die" and then gives Max more tapes. On the cassettes O'Blivion tells him that the Videodrome signal "will change human reality" and that there is "nothing real outside our perception of reality." At this point the hallucinations seem to take over totally. A huge pulsating slit appears in Max's belly. He pushes his handgun into it, then pulls out only his hand. The phone rings, a voice says, "Barry Convex would like to speak to you about Videodrome." Max goes to a shop called Spectacular Optical, an optometrists, and

Convex gives him a strange helmet which will record his hallucinations saying that “exposure to violence opens up the brain to reception of the signal.” Max sees Nikki in this latest hallucination within the ‘virtual reality’ helmet. As he whips her she becomes Marsha. Max wakes in his own bed to find a dead Marsha next to him. It is yet another hallucination pointed out to him by Harlan who arrives after a panicked call from Max. It is soon revealed that Harlan is part of the Videodrome conspiracy and that he was playing tapes to Max. There was never a signal on the TV. After this Max no longer knows what is real and what is hallucination, and importantly neither does the audience. Convex places a videotape into Max’s belly opening and tells him to go to Civic TV station and kill his partners.

This is the juncture at which the movie starts to properly reveal its body-horror agenda. Although the original appearance of the belly slit could be classed as the first moment of body-horror it is not really until Max has become completely enveloped in hallucination that we see the slit as part of a transformation into something very different. As Steven Shaviro explains,

“Max doesn’t merely lose any point of reference outside of what’s imprinted on the video screen, he comes to embody this process directly, as he is transformed into a human video machine.”<sup>20</sup>

Max is no longer truly Max. The outside influence of Videodrome has changed him not just mentally but physically. Convex inserts a video tape into Max’s belly slit, after which Max pulls out the previously implanted gun and it melds to his hand with wires, screws and points of metal. His hand becomes a fusion of metal and flesh, a biomechanical monstrosity, an illustration of Bakhtin’s idea that,

“An object can transgress not only its quantitative but also its qualitative limits, that it can outgrow itself and be fused with other objects.”<sup>21</sup>

Because of this Max is able to go back to Civic TV and shoot his partners before going on to the Cathode Ray Mission to kill Bianca O’Blivion. Bianca however manages to placate him and as she pulls the video cassette out of Max she tells him,

“It’s always painful to remove the cassette. You’ve become something quite different. You’ve become the video word made flesh.”

She then encourages him to go and kill those involved with Videodrome. Max leaves saying, “Death to Videodrome. Long live the new flesh!” and proceeds to kill Harlan with a bomb generated from his belly slit. He then finds Convex at a spectacle conference, whereupon he shoots him. Convex collapses and the body erupts into a mass of tumours and gore, again all shown in close-up.

After performing these assassinations, Max then goes to a harbour and sitting down on a mattress in an old, decrepit boat he sees a television set with Nikki on the screen. Nikki speaks to him and explains what has happened to him. Because it makes explicit Cronenberg’s idea of the creative metamorphosis, the new flesh, this is the most important part of the narrative. It is therefore essential to quote Nikki’s explanation in full.

Nikki: “I’m here to guide you Max. I’ve learned a lot since I last saw you. I’ve learned that death is not the end. I can help you.”

Max: "I don't know where I am now. I'm having trouble...finding my way around."

N: "You've gone just about as far as you can with the ways things are. Videodrome still exists. You've hurt them, but you haven't destroyed them. To do that you have to go on with the next phase."

M: "What phase is that?"

N: "You've already done a lot of changing, but it's only the beginning of the New Flesh. You have to go all the way now, total transformation. Do you think you're ready?"

M: "Yes."

N: "To become the New Flesh you first have to kill the old flesh. Don't be afraid to let you're body die. Watch. I'll show you how. It's easy."

Max sees himself on the TV screen. Holding the gun to his head, he says "Long live the New Flesh!" and then blows out his brains. The TV explodes in a mess of entrails. The scene is then replayed, this time with Max doing it for real.

**Videodrome's** narrative is challenging and at times disorientating. For example, it is not always clear if Max is hallucinating or experiencing events in reality. However, it is important to this cluster and to body-horror generally because of what it has to say about body-transformation in general and about New Flesh in particular, something which is taken even further in the next movie **The Fly**.

This version of **The Fly** bears little resemblance to the original version from 1958, mostly due to Cronenberg's very different perception of the story. **The Fly** is partly a fusion of medical and non-medical body-horror which mostly takes place within the confines of a laboratory.

Seth Brundle, a physicist, invents a system of teleportation. After arguing with his lover Veronica, a journalist, he gets drunk and teleports himself, not realizing that a fly is in the telepod with him. Inevitably, Seth undergoes a metamorphosis which eventually transforms him into something new, half man-half fly. This description, however, barely touches on the concept of the New Flesh. During the course of the narrative there are several scenes which really crystallize Cronenberg's vision of creative diseases more precisely. Early on Seth teleports a baboon which ends up turned inside out. He says that the computer cannot "deal with the flesh" and so he must teach it about the flesh. Veronica tells him that he must program the computer to "be crazy about the flesh", to understand it rather than creating a synthetic version of it. He teleports another baboon and this time it is successful. Veronica records every stage on video tape.

After Seth's drunken teleportation with the fly, he thinks everything is fine. But Veronica notices some coarse hairs growing on his back. Then his reactions speed up. He starts to perform acrobatics and eats lots of sugar, "I think...it's purified me, it's cleansed me." Veronica becomes concerned as his speech becomes more and more agitated and his face begins to show signs of change. Thinking that the teleportation has made him some sort of superhuman, Seth wants to do the same to Veronica. She knows there is something wrong but Seth will not accept it. His diatribe to Veronica reveals much about the concept of the New Flesh.

“You’re afraid to dive into the plasma pool aren’t you. You’re afraid to be destroyed and recreated. I bet you think that you woke me up about the flesh, but you only know society’s straight line about the flesh. You can’t penetrate beyond society’s sick, gray fear of the flesh. Drink deep, or taste not the plasma spring! I’m not just talking about sex and penetration, I’m talking about penetration beyond the veil of the flesh. A deep, penetrating dive into the plasma pool.”

As his transformation continues, the *showing* of it becomes gradually more graphic, courtesy of extremely repulsive special make-up effects created by Chris Walas.<sup>22</sup> His face becomes lumpy and discoloured. When he looks in the mirror to try to shave, a tooth falls out and a fingernail spurts greenish goo before coming off. He says,

“Oh no, what’s happening to me? Am I dying? Is this how it starts?”

**The Fly** has been read variously as a metaphor for the manifestation of cancer, AIDS and the ageing process, and not without reason. However, Cronenberg himself favours the ageing metaphor saying that,

“Ten years ago my movies were potent and thirty years from now – when hopefully AIDS doesn’t exist – they should still be as potent. They will be about ageing and any kind of disease you can still get. They will be about cancer, death, a compression of mortality.”<sup>23</sup>

What I find particularly interesting about **The Fly** is that the body-horror imagery is so powerful that the movie is capable of supporting many different readings. Disease manifests itself in many different ways, as does the ageing process, so that they are

almost interchangeable in their metaphoric function. If, as I have suggested, body-horror is a way of transgressing the boundaries of body fascism inherent in modern western society, then it is appropriate that readings of **The Fly** should encompass a fear of cancer, AIDS, and ageing, as all of these, because of their association with death is something that Western society is so afraid of, but even more scared of because, as Susan Sontag notes,

“The most terrifying illnesses are those perceived not just as lethal *but as dehumanizing*, literally so [my italics]”<sup>24</sup> and that “the most feared diseases ... transform the body into something alienating ... leprosy and syphilis were the first illnesses to be consistently described as repulsive.”<sup>25</sup>

This fear and repulsion are both shown as Seth realizes that there has been a fusion of himself and a fly at the molecular-genetic level and as transformation accelerates he is soon walking on crutches. As his appearance becomes more and more leprous Seth comments to Veronica,

“You were right. I’m diseased. I think it’s showing itself as a bizarre form of cancer. General cellular chaos, revolution. I’m just going to have to disintegrate. I won’t be another tumorous bore talking endlessly about his hair falling out and his lost lymph nodes.”

As he speaks to Veronica he vomits onto his food and then one of his ears falls off. This may sound almost farcical, but in fact it is both disgusting and saddening, very much like the reality of seeing someone die from a progressive, terminal disease. When she comes to see him again he has mutated even further. Now he can walk on the

ceiling, like a fly and his appearance is lumpy and hairless, but he seems more cheerful.

He explains,

“I seem to be stricken by a disease with a purpose. Maybe not such a bad disease anymore. I know what the disease wants. To turn me into something else, something that’s never existed before.”

Seth makes Veronica record his new habits on tape. The relation to disease and ageing is quite evident here. He talks about his teeth as being useless and the fact that he can chew up solid food but he can’t digest it. This is the reason for vomiting on the food. The vomit is a corrosive enzyme which liquifies the food in order for it to be eaten. One of the many symptoms associated with terminal disease and ageing is quite often a difficulty encountered with digestion. As if to compound the issue, Veronica discovers that she is pregnant. She has a nightmare in which the baby is born as a giant, wriggling maggot, and immediately decides that she wants an abortion. By this time Seth is unrecognizable. When he breathes it sounds like a ‘death rattle’, his face looks tumorous, his body is crippled and he constantly twitches. He has actually used his bathroom cabinet as a place to keep his ‘relics’, the bits which have fallen off him.

Veronica goes to see him one last time and when she sees the extent of the transformation decides that she wants to go ahead with an abortion, believing that the baby will inherit this molecular-genetic change. As she waits in the hospital, Seth smashes through the window. He had overheard her conversation with Stathis Borans, her editor telling him that she wanted to get rid of the baby. He says to Veronica, “The baby might be all that’s left of the real me,” and then takes her back to his laboratory. Stathis arrives first with a shotgun, but Seth jumps through the skylight and proceeds to

vomit onto Stathis' hand leaving a corroded, bloody stump. He does the same with his foot. Veronica manages to stop Seth killing him, but Seth wants to teleport them both to try and make him 'human' again. As he tries to drag her to the telepod she hits his jaw and it falls off. His outer body completely collapses, birthing the real 'Brundlefly'. This new 'thing' throws Veronica into the telepod. Stathis, however, is still capable enough to shoot the cables between the telepods and Seth teleports just as he starts to break out of his telepod. This results in a grotesque biomechanical fusion of Seth and telepod. It crawls helplessly along the floor, pulls the shotgun to its head and begs with its eyes for Veronica to kill it. She doesn't want to because she knows that it was once Seth, but eventually she shoots.

This may be a tragic tale, but it is one which thousands of people have to contend with, namely confronting disease and confronting the dying process. As Cronenberg himself states,

“Why not look at the processes of ageing and dying, for example, as a transformation? This is what I did in **The Fly**. It's necessary to be tough though. You look at it and it's ugly, it's nasty, it's not pretty. It's very hard to alter our aesthetic sense to accommodate ageing, never mind disease.”<sup>26</sup>

As I have discussed **Rejuvenator** at some length in Chapter One I will now look at the final examples in the non-medical cluster, namely **Tetsuo-The Iron Man** and **Tetsuo 2-Bodyhammer**, both of which are directed by Shinya Tsukamoto. Inspired and influenced by David Cronenberg, Tsukamoto takes the concept of the New Flesh to extreme limits. These movies are Japanese, not North American, but I have included them in my list because they are good examples of how body-horror has crossed

cultural boundaries and retained its unrestricted and transgressive imagery. Cronenberg says that, "I notice that my characters talk about the flesh undergoing revolution at times,"<sup>27</sup> and this is certainly what seems to happen in both **Tetsuo** movies. In **Tetsuo-The Iron Man**, the opening sequence shows a man slicing open his leg and then inserting a long piece of coiled metal into the gaping wound, an image reminiscent of **Videodrome**. Tetsuo encounters a woman with a biomechanical hand who then pursues him. She pulls off her own ear (echoes of **The Fly**) and then attacks Tetsuo. He apparently kills her and then his own arm mutates and becomes metal and flesh.

Later he encounters another woman<sup>28</sup> who dances in front of him with a strange, coiled metal attachment between her legs. This attachment is eventually thrust into Tetsuo's anus. He screams and then wakes up. Just as Seth Brundle undergoes a gradual transformation, so does Tetsuo. He gradually becomes more metal than human even developing a huge, metal, rotating drill-penis with which he attacks the woman he is with. She then stabs him, and pipes and coils emerge from his back. Eventually she sits on the drill-penis and it tears her apart.

Tetsuo ends up as a mass of pipes, coils, circuits and crushed metal with a small amount of human face left. Soon he is told by a man who comes up to him,

"Even your brain will turn to metal. Let me show you something wonderful. A new world."

The two begin to fight but Tetsuo ends up killing the other iron man and then, assimilating him, he undergoes a total transformation, just as Max Renn and Seth

Brundle do. Eventually Tetsuo is huge, he is on top of a pile of metal and reveals the face of the assimilated iron man who speaks saying,

“We can mutate the whole world into metal. We can rust the world into the dust of the universe. Let’s do it!”

As with the other movies in this cluster, confined spaces and the use of close-up with no cutting away from the inevitably graphic transformation scenes feature heavily.<sup>29</sup>

**Tetsuo 2-Bodyhammer** is a sort of sequel/remake of **Tetsuo-The Iron Man**. Events are triggered by the kidnapping of Tetsuo’s son at the beginning of the movie. Tetsuo begins to transform again after having visions or flashbacks about training with weights as a child to make him strong. He starts to transform when he gets angry about the kidnapping of his son. He is welded into a chair by some sort of doctor who puts a helmet on his head saying, “Select an image from the man’s brain,” a scene again reminiscent of **Videodrome**. His body again fuses with mechanical objects. Guns are birthed out of his chest, much like **Alien** but here the ‘monster’ is mechanical. He starts to shoot. Then one of the doctor’s henchmen transforms. His arm becomes a huge gun, again an image related to **Videodrome**. There is also a suggestion that the doctor is a ‘mad’ scientist type character who is ultimately responsible for transforming these people. Tetsuo becomes a mass of metal rods, springs and blocks looking in the final instance like a cubist figure created by Georges Braque. At the end of the movie, we are told that he killed his parents but he has come to the conclusion that to destroy is a good thing. He shoots out metal tentacles and kills the doctor’s henchmen and eventually becomes a huge tank-like vehicle made of bodies melded together.

The imagery in both films is of prime importance. Biomechanics has become a reality with pacemakers, hip replacements, steel head plates and it is as if Tsukamoto has taken this reality to its logical conclusion, a place where man is more mechanical than human. Western society and its obsessions with youth and bodily perfection is almost at the point where it could totally rebuild a body. But Tetsuo represents the New Flesh in a way that questions what it actually means to be human. He accepts the revolution of the flesh, and it doesn't matter what that new flesh looks like. To quote Cronenberg,

“The most accessible version of the ‘New Flesh’ in **Videodrome** would be that you can actually change what it means to be human in a physical way... We are physically different from our forefathers, partly because of what we take into our bodies, and partly because of things like glasses and surgery. But there is a further step that could happen, which would be that you could grow another arm, that you could actually physically change the way you look, mutate.”<sup>30</sup>

As I have shown, the non-medical cluster focuses specifically on the graphic transformation of the body in a confined space and how that change is generated internally as opposed to externally. The other important feature of the movies in this cluster is the fact that they are transgressive because they show the grotesque body as opposed to hiding it away. As with medical body-horror movies, the cycle also develops over time: not only do the images of destruction become more graphic, but they become more bizarre, reaching their zenith with the **Tetsuo** movies. I want now to determine where the particular images and themes come from. This is the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Final words spoken by Max Renn in Cronenberg's **Videodrome**.

<sup>2</sup> **Psycho** is not a body-horror movie, but I have mentioned Hitchcock's use of the shower where Marian is stabbed to death by Norman Bates because there is clearly an emphasis on the vulnerability of the victim in this confined space. The audience is both witness to the murder and yet also imprisoned by the use of the camerawork and editing just as much as Marian herself is. This entrapment is particularly important in non-medical body-horror because seeing the transmutation is paramount.

<sup>3</sup> The pre-release photographs could only be seen in specialist SFX fan magazines such as *Fangoria*, #11, February 1981 ('Rob Bottin and **The Howling**'). Even these photographs however do little to prepare the viewer for the full spectacle of the transformations.

<sup>4</sup> It is notable that all the werewolves in this movie stand upright. They do not fully become wolves in the sense of walking on four legs, despite their appearance.

<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that these werewolves are far from traditional, they can be killed in a traditional manner, in this case with silver bullets.

<sup>6</sup> This is a nice touch of knowing humour especially as the special effects by Rob Bottin and Greg Cannom were considered groundbreaking at the time. It is also interesting to note that the effects consultant on **The Howling** was Rick Baker who created his own stunning werewolf transformations in **An American Werewolf in London** a year later. Baker was a great pioneer in special effects, especially prosthetics, during the late 1970's and 1980's and Rob Bottin was one of his proteges.

<sup>7</sup> *Rabelais and His World*, p.317.

<sup>8</sup> Extremely convincing werewolf transformation make-up by Rick Baker. The final wolf creature is not quite so good unfortunately.

<sup>9</sup> 'Horrority – The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films, p.9.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, although this is a traditional werewolf tale, David is killed with ordinary bullets, not silver ones.

<sup>11</sup> 'Horrority – The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films, p.9-10.

<sup>12</sup> Written by John W. Campbell Jr.

<sup>13</sup> These amazing effects were created yet again by Rob Bottin, as well as special visual effects by Albert Whitlock and a special thank you to Stan Winston for additional effects.

<sup>14</sup> *Rabelais and His World*, p.317.

<sup>15</sup> Steve Neale, 'You've Got To Be Fucking Kidding!' Knowledge, Belief and Judgement in Science Fiction', p.161, in *Alien Zone*, Annette Kuhn (ed.)

<sup>16</sup> This issue will be developed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>17</sup> Deborah Lupton, *Medicine as Culture*, p.37.

<sup>18</sup> *Laughing Screaming: Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy*, p.420.

<sup>19</sup> The surreal make-up effects in **Videodrome** were created by Rick Baker.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, p.138.

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- <sup>21</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.308.
- <sup>22</sup> The special effects went on to win an Academy Award.
- <sup>23</sup> Chris Rodley (ed.), *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p.128.
- <sup>24</sup> Susan Sontag, *Aids and its Metaphors*, p.38.
- <sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p.45.
- <sup>26</sup> Chris Rodley (ed.), *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p.82.
- <sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p.80.
- <sup>28</sup> It could actually be the same woman but it's hard to tell.
- <sup>29</sup> Tsukamoto created the special effects.
- <sup>30</sup> Chris Rodley (ed.), *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p.80-82

## Chapter Four

### Desirability and Disorder

“The emphasis placed on youth and beauty as the attributes of a desirable body has generated a huge industry devoted to bodily maintenance. The industries around cosmetics, fashion, fitness, sport, leisure, bodily cleanliness and diet rely upon the discourse which insists that youth and beauty equals normality and social acceptability”<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of this thesis I stated that body-horror movies emerged at the start of the 1970s. Having discussed the formal defining characteristics of body-horror, it is now possible to begin to identify what the reasons were for the emergence of this cycle at this time.

Prior to the 1970s, magazines and television programmes had been telling us how to become fit, lose weight, gain weight, be ‘beautiful’, stop drinking/smoking etc. In the 1970s, however, this concern for health and fitness reached obsessional proportions, although some of the attitudes, for example towards thinness, originated in the 1960s. As Richard Klein notes, “Since Twiggy the look of anorexia has been chic” with the result that our ideal of beauty now, as it is “portrayed in the media and reflected in taste, has been growing steadily, alarmingly skinnier,”<sup>2</sup> a view which is supported by Mulvey and Richards,

“The 70s like the 60s continued to promote a very thin figure... There was immense pressure to stay thin and many people, especially young girls, came near to death in their efforts to maintain a pre-pubescent body shape.”<sup>3</sup>

Plastic surgery was also available before the 1970s but during the 1970s, according to Mulvey and Richards ‘ordinary people’, as well as the rich and famous, started to use it as a way of changing their appearance or looking younger.

“Developments were reported in women’s magazines, rumours of film stars having surgery abounded, but there was as yet a gulf between what was acceptable for them and what ordinary people would do for themselves. That was all to change very shortly however. Soon anybody who felt they deserved it was having a facelift or liposuction.”<sup>4</sup>

However, important though the above are as signifiers of an increasing obsession with the body, the main signifier of this obsession was the birth of what might be termed a ‘fitness revolution’. In the course of the 1970s jogging rapidly became the number one training regime and “The growing popularity of wholefoods and health foods eased in a new awareness of proper fitness and real sport.”<sup>5</sup> Body-building also took on more epic proportions. The early 1950s examples such as Steve ‘Mr Universe’ Reeves later led to the development of famously muscle bound hulks such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Lou Ferrigno and Sylvester Stallone, as well as the fast-growing group of women who also took up the ‘sport’. Body-building not only grew in terms of its advocates, but also within the media arena encompassing international contests for male and female body-builders, a range of magazines devoted to body-building and along with it the mass marketing of drinks/foods for muscle gain and its inevitable downside, steroid abuse.

Likewise, jogging became lauded as the way to health and fitness for life; despite the fact that its 'inventor' Jim Fixx died of a heart attack at fifty years of age. Once jogging became fashionable and available to all, it was not long before more and more 'get fit' techniques were being developed and then adopted by the general public. A whole range of fitness techniques including aerobics, callisthenics, step-workout, weight training, 'Thigh-Master', rowing machines, exercise bikes, home gyms, circuit training, the list is almost endless. As a consequence of this a market was built up around the whole area of fitness with the arrival of the home workout video - the first being Jane Fonda's Workout with its notorious "Feel the burn" cry.<sup>6</sup> After the success of Fonda's video, many other 'stars', many of them supermodels, followed suit e.g. Cher, Cindy Crawford, Claudia Schiffer, Elle McPherson, (as well as numerous British personalities) each of them producing videos of their own, and it was such a lucrative market that even older stars such as Angela Lansbury joined in with her fitness video for older people.

However, as Mike Featherstone has noted, there is a more sinister aspect to this,

"The emerging problem of ageing populations within late capitalist society has pushed a new discourse, demography, to the fore, centred on *a regime of diet, jogging and cosmetics to control the alienated and disaffected citizens of retirement compounds* [my italics]."<sup>7</sup>

If Featherstone is right, then body-horror, like the discourse of demography, might be seen not only as a means of exploiting this obsession but critiquing it as well because body-horror is not about being super-fit but it is about the body being disrupted and

decaying. Further, most of the movies that are concerned with metamorphosis were released in the 1980s a decade in which, according to Mulvey and Richards,

“The body as a cult was so strong that Lycra cycling shorts, leotards and leggings were worn in the street... [and that]... people came to know a lot about fitness and diet in the 80’s... sport seemed to be a part of everyones’ life.”<sup>8</sup>

Also in the 1980s the cosmetics industry began to pay even more attention to the notion of ageless beauty. For example, it is claimed that liposomes were very important in skincare in the 1980s, “Anti-ageing was a frequently repeated beauty promise... suddenly it was another necessity to ‘manage’ our ageing processes”<sup>9</sup> and in the 1990s, the fitness obsession reached its zenith with the arrival of the personal trainer, a development initiated in Hollywood where stars such as Demi Moore and Madonna had their own trainer to develop a daily personalized work-out routine, a trend which was soon taken up by those outside the world of showbiz, who had the money to pay for it. The boom continued with the result that more and more different ways of achieving health, fitness and longevity were explored ranging from health farms to dieting, cosmetic surgery, genetic engineering<sup>10</sup>, organ transplants (including the use of pigs organs to transplant into humans) and cryogenics which involves freezing the body until such time that the disease from which it is suffering becomes curable.

This obsession with health, fitness and longevity can also be linked to an increasing concern about disease, especially cancer and AIDS because as people became more aware of healthy bodies so they also became more aware of sick ones. Thus, as Susan Sontag has pointed out, cancer having once been demonized as some sort of ultimate

horror from which to die, was replaced in the 1980s by that other worst nightmare disease/death scenario, AIDS:

“More than cancer...AIDS seems to foster ominous fantasies about a disease that is a marker of both individual and social vulnerabilities. The virus invades the body; the disease is described as invading the whole society.”<sup>11</sup>

What role, however, did these concerns and practices play in the emergence and evolution of the cycle of body-horror movies which I discussed in the previous chapters?

In his book *The Body and Society* Bryan S. Turner states that,

“The Western tradition of the body has been conventionally shaped by Hellenized Christianity, for which the body was the seat of unreason, passion and desire... the flesh was the symbol of moral corruption which threatened the order of the world, the flesh had to be subdued by disciplines, especially the regimen of diet and abstinence.”<sup>12</sup>

In this respect Western society seems to have come almost full circle. However, the need to subdue the flesh because of its propensity for corruption, is no longer entirely a spiritual notion. To quote Turner again,

“It is possible to trace a secularization of the body in which the body ceases to be the object of a sacred discourse of flesh to an object within medical discourse

where the body is a machine to be controlled by appropriate *scientific regimens* [my italics].”<sup>13</sup>

However, although Turner claims that the sacred discourse has been replaced with a secular one, I think that the two have actually combined in the late twentieth century. To illustrate this we can usefully look at attitudes taken to ageing and disease, particularly those that concern cancer and AIDS.

Contagious diseases have been written about and documented for centuries. Leprosy, plague, smallpox, cholera, typhus, and influenza (to name a few) have all been responsible for decimating populations. In the mid-14<sup>th</sup> Century the worst epidemic ever to strike humankind was the bubonic plague or ‘Black Death’, killing around a quarter of Europe’s population over six years. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century smallpox killed around 60 million and in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century cholera killed around 100 million.<sup>14</sup> Not only that; these epidemics also created not only a fear of diseases which are contagious but also an idea that once most of these diseases had become controllable others would inevitably develop to take their place in the hierarchy of disease.<sup>15</sup>

Cancer is not one disease amongst others but a type of disease or genre with many different forms and characteristics. It is also not a new disease. Nor is it a contagious disease like those mentioned above. Cancers have been killing us for centuries, but now they are more noticeable because many of them affect older people. Thus, as the average lifespan of humans rose, especially in Western society, cancers became more conspicuous with the result that now cancer, rather than other diseases or simply a hard working life, is cited as the most frequent cause of death despite the fact that many of its forms are now curable and despite the fact that as research in the United States has

shown the death rate from cancer has fallen progressively for all age groups below the age of 55.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, what seems to have engendered this view of cancer as the ultimate death sentence is the extent to which it manifests itself as a malignant tumour disease. Further, once tumours have become manifest, it is the secondary symptoms of the disease and the body's reaction to the various therapies used to combat this disease which give cause for concern. These therapies are typically chemotherapy and radiotherapy which have more obvious side effects than surgery (the primary approach to curing cancer) because they affect the body outwardly, e.g. hair loss and violent sickness. Also, depending on the type of cancer, this can cause severe pain for although the onlooker cannot see the tumours the fact of their presence is signified by the agony and turmoil they create inside the body. Also, despite the fact that cancer is not a contagious disease, many people are afraid of touching those suffering from the disease. This could be more to do with the association between cancer and death rather than with cancer. However as Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner indicate,

“Within consumer culture it is hardly surprising that ageing and death are viewed so negatively – they are unwelcome reminders of the inevitable decay and defeat that are in store, even for the most vigilant individuals.”<sup>17</sup>

Because of this, the cause of cancer is frequently seen to lie with the victims themselves and as Susan Sontag perceptively notes,

“It seems that societies need to have one illness which becomes identified with evil, and attaches blame to its ‘victims’..”<sup>18</sup>

As a consequence, there is a tendency to think that if we 'look after' our flesh it will not become corrupted. Hence the ideology of body-fascism and the practices that go with it.<sup>19</sup> This linkage between disease, unacceptable lifestyle and evil became even more prevalent during the 1980s with the emergence of AIDS, for when the AIDS virus (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) first came to the attention of the general public the disease happened to become first evident in the gay community. The media is not exactly renowned for its discretion or sympathy when issues such as this arise and because of this AIDS became thought of as the 'gay plague'. The media exploited this, thus encouraging the false idea that AIDS could only affect homosexuals.

There is, of course, as Lorraine Sherr points out, "something especially frightening about new diseases,"<sup>20</sup> and this was certainly the case with AIDS. However, because it was a disease thought erroneously to be restricted to a certain minority it was perceived as a disease with a supposedly moral meaning. As I mentioned previously, cancer had always been the disease to have blame attached to it, but AIDS soon became the new cancer, and in this case it was contagious. Because it was originally perceived as a 'gay disease' this left many people feeling safe from it and furthermore enabled some bigots to claim that AIDS was punishment for being homosexual.

However, when it became clear that AIDS was a disease which could affect anyone, even young and vigorous people, those who had taken the moral high ground were thrown into confusion, for although it was no longer a 'gay plague', it could nevertheless still be seen as some sort of judgement on those who were perceived to be promiscuous and this, as Bryan S Turner suggests is "a manifestation of a deeper malaise in the social structure."<sup>21</sup> Because of this AIDS therefore became seen as a disease that was inseparable from moral issues and moral judgement. However because

it is a virus which exhibits cancer-like symptoms and often results in a cancer known as Kaposi's sarcoma<sup>22</sup> which manifests itself as purple lesions on the skin, not unlike those which Seth Brundle develops in **The Fly**, the disease becomes compounded with cancer and therefore something not just to be feared but feared because it is unknown. As a result AIDS and the means of its transmission i.e. sex and blood, creates a situation which, as Sherr notes, becomes, like cancer, associated with death.<sup>23</sup> For this reason it is not just death and the sight of it that is the object of fear in body-horror movies but blood and sex as well, as they are polluting agents.

Thus, when Sontag says that, “..the non-us, the alien...A polluting person is always wrong”<sup>24</sup> she is essentially positing the idea that if we happen to become diseased, Western society and its obsession with bodily perfection makes us a thing to be feared and preferably hidden away as Seth Brundle in **The Fly** decides to do when he begins to genetically mutate, his cancer/AIDS like symptoms forcing him to stay within the confines of his laboratory because if it is a form of cancer, he doesn't want to become a bore by talking about his tumours. This highlights the problem that many cancer/AIDS patients suffer, the problem of a disease which seems to override everything else, such that the human becomes '*the non-us*'. To quote Sontag again,

“What counts more than the amount of disfigurement is that it reflects underlying, ongoing changes, the dissolution of the person.”<sup>25</sup>

Seth Brundle exemplifies this, for with him the change is irrevocable and his original persona is rapidly left behind as his transformation becomes complete. When he becomes what he calls 'BrundleFly', he says quite categorically 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.”

Because of this the most horrifying, yet fascinating part of the movie is the transformation and the fact that we are shown it through the eyes of Seth’s lover, Veronica. Thus, although Seth himself is hidden from public gaze, we are shown the actuality of disease and this encourages us to see the film as one which is making a statement about the nature of what it is to be human and the need on our parts to accept that bodies become diseased, that bodies get old and die.

The dissolution of the body may be frightening, but no less frightening are the efforts that the West has made to stem the tide of dissolution. Dieting and fitness, plastic/cosmetic surgery, organ transplants and genetic engineering thus are as much the stuff of body-horror as ageing and decay and disease and like the latter are a prominent feature of the last twenty five years. Richard Klein notes that,

“For more than forty years – more intensely in the last twenty – the health-beauty-fitness industry has mobilized immense resources of wealth and creativity to persuade us of the virtues of skinny.”<sup>26</sup>

Certainly the last twenty years have seen a huge increase in the amount of literature related to health and fitness, most particularly in the areas of dieting and exercise. In W.H. Smith’s store alone there are at least twenty monthly magazines devoted entirely to these areas e.g. *Health and Fitness*, *Slimming World*, *Best Diet Now*, *Women’s Health*, *Men’s Health*, *Flex*, *Men’s Workout*, *Muscle Journal*, *Musclemag*, and *Muscle and Fitness (for living superfit)*. This is not even counting most women’s magazines

which now have advertisement sections for cosmetic surgery clinics and numerous dieting features.

Dieting, fitness and abstinence, however, are not the only signifiers of a desire to keep the body free from disease. There are others, not least the emphasis on looking good and in this it is argued that Hollywood played a crucial role, for as Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner claim in *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*,

“The Hollywood cinema helped to create new standards of appearance and bodily presentation, bringing home to a mass audience the importance of ‘looking good’...the major studios carefully disciplined and packaged film stars for audience consumption. To ensure that the stars conformed with the ideals of physical perfection new kinds of make-up, hair care, and techniques such as electrolysis, cosmetic surgery and toupees were created to remove imperfections.”<sup>27</sup>

That Hollywood should set the standards for the general public regarding how they would want to look if they could should come as no surprise as it is an industry which thrived (and still does thrive) on physical appearance. However, the standards that Hollywood began to set for looking good during this period become very marked for not only did it suggest that beautiful bodies must be free from imperfections but they also increasingly suggested that a body free of imperfections is a youthful one and also one which remains youthful. Hence the popularity of dieting, exercise and cosmetic surgery in order to stave off the ageing process. It comes as no surprise then that the first video fitness guru should be Jane Fonda who had been a bulimic for a number of years and who, it was also rumoured, had undergone cosmetic surgery to remove her

two lower ribs in order to make her waist smaller. Whether or not this is true, it does suggest that in a consumer culture surgery is no longer simply for the sake of health but for beauty and imperfection, and that Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner are correct when they suggest that,

“Within consumer culture, the inner and the outer body become conjoined: the prime purpose of the maintenance of the inner body becomes the *enhancement* of the outer body.”<sup>28</sup>

This certainly seems to be the case throughout the last twenty five years. Dieting has become the most common form of bodily control generating a whole range of magazines and books specially devoted to exercise, dieting, calorie counting and health food regimens which I outlined previously. Indeed Richard Klein claims that,

“The diet industry alone, with its products and services, generates over 30 billion dollars a year of the American economy. Imminent future developments in pharmaceuticals, in new diet drugs, could raise even that figure substantially.”<sup>29</sup>

Thus, as Klein suggests, dieting now starts earlier and earlier and as he claims now “grown to be common among nine and ten year old girls”<sup>30</sup> with the result that not only are eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa<sup>31</sup> on the increase, but that being fat has been increasingly seen as an indicator of not being fit.<sup>32</sup> More worrying than this, however, is the prevalent notion that being fat (and by fat I do not mean clinically obese) equals a lack of control. Fat thus invites blame and shame in the same way that cancer and AIDS did. Consequently it is no surprise that teenagers resort to excessive dieting in the first instance in order to be thin to avoid the stigma attached to being

overweight and despite the fact that in recent years many of these ideas have been disproved (e.g. many overweight people are actually fit and healthy) and despite the fact that dress sizes eight and ten are not the average. Most women are not that thin, just as most men are not musclebound hulks.<sup>33</sup> Even so body-fascism has made sure that it is seen to be somehow wrong to be overweight.<sup>34</sup>

During the 1990s the feeling of inadequacy felt by many has also been added to by the cult of the supermodel. Supermodels tend to be extremely rich, extremely thin and, according to a set of spurious, constantly changing standards, extremely beautiful. Jennifer Craik points out that,

“The most important requirement for modelling is to meet precise bodily specifications. These have changed over time, generally imposing smaller limits. In the 1970s, for example, models were required to be tall, flat chested, small hiped and broad shouldered. Agencies impose strict weight limitations, usually below a model’s ‘natural’ weight. Although models in the 1980s were more generously proportioned, new criteria stressed fitness, muscles and cosmetically enhanced bodies.”<sup>35</sup>

In other words, they have to conform to an ideal that is unattainable for most ordinary people and quite often this so called ‘ideal’ is faked, airbrushing techniques and computer technology being used to cover up unwanted elements e.g. eyebags, acne, moles and even to ‘slice’ off a bit of excess flesh.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, models have been raised to the level of movie stars in terms of their perceived status as perfect human beings. Not only that; they are also the ultimate commodity whose whole purpose is to sell products and look good. Hence, as Craik notes,

“Dieting and eating disorders have become the norm for models; along with dancers and actresses, models are called ‘vocational anorexics’ whose condition is directly related to the requirements of their jobs.”<sup>37</sup>

Some models have also recently spoken of a high incidence of drug use in the modelling industry due to the constant pressure to stay exactly the way they are. To quote fashion model Suzie Bick,

“It’s very easy to hit the bottle because you feel so empty inside, because you know it’s all about appearance. You might start to find comfort in drinking or taking drugs. I think it is a breeding ground for addiction.”<sup>38</sup>

It is also important to note that models become redundant once a new look is in or they have grown too old to photograph well, as Joan Juliet Buck (editor of *French Vogue*) comments, “As we all know, you cannot photograph, with the wonderful colour film today, a woman past a certain age (which is unfortunately somewhere around thirty) and put her on the cover”<sup>39</sup> and despite a trend in the mid-1990s for using older models in fashion shows and photographs it has not lasted as is evidenced by the fact that famous model and actress, Isabella Rossellini, was fired by cosmetic company Lancome when she was forty because they no longer thought her suitable to sell their products.<sup>40</sup>

Extreme perceptions of what the body should be like led, of course, to even more extreme steps being taken to ensure the body remained looking good. Plastic surgery in this respect is not a new technique, forms of it have been around for centuries.<sup>41</sup> However, its use as a purely cosmetic tool is mostly confined to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and in particular the latter half of it. Sander L. Gilman states that,

“The past two decades [1980s and 90s] alone show startling growth. In the United States in 1981, 296,000 such procedures were undertaken; in 1984 there were 477,700 “aesthetic” operations; in 1996 the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery (AAFPRS) survey stated that 825,000 plastic and reconstructive procedures had been performed on the face alone in 1995, an increase of 9 percent since 1993.”<sup>42</sup>

The use of plastic surgery by movie stars as a means of ironing out their physical imperfections has already been referred to, but in the last twenty five years plastic surgery has become more and more commonplace amongst ‘ordinary’ people and increasingly used as aesthetic or cosmetic surgery. As Gilman points out,

“As testament to the popularity and growth of aesthetic surgery, in 1994 65 percent of these procedures were done on people with family incomes less than 50,000 dollars a year, even though neither state nor private health insurance covers aesthetic surgery.”<sup>43</sup>

Once a technique mainly used to remodel faces and limbs destroyed by war, accident, disfigurement or disease, plastic surgery has now become quite literally a cosmetic, a form of embellishment, for many people such that the range of available surgical enhancement or surgical alteration is now vast. Used extensively after both World Wars to rebuild the noses of disfigured soldiers, rhinoplasty, commonly known as a ‘nose-job’, became the most common reconstructive operation. Rhinoplasty was eventually widely available through hospitals if it was deemed to be essential for psychotherapeutic purposes. However, it was the advent of private cosmetic surgery clinics and the surgeons who set them up which would quite literally change the face of plastic surgery. These cosmetic surgeons were seen as miracle workers especially by

their ageing clientele. A nose which was too large could be made smaller, breasts enlarged,<sup>44</sup> ears pinned back, faces lifted, tummies tucked, eye bags removed, lips enlarged with collagen, ribs removed for a smaller waistline, all of course if you could afford to pay for it. This is why Gilman refers to it as “aesthetic” surgery, as the name, he says, “seems to be a label for those procedures which society at any given time sees as unnecessary, as non-medical, as a sign of vanity.”<sup>45</sup> In light of this, it is interesting to note that in America the latest fad for teenagers in the 1990s, especially girls, is to have ‘nose jobs’ or breast augmentation as a birthday present. Also as Jennifer Craik points out,

“One of the most controversial features of the modelling industry has been the manipulation of the body to conform to requirements. Cosmetic surgery has become endemic [and] face lifts, liposuction, breast and lip enhancement have become commonplace.”<sup>46</sup>

That anyone would undergo surgery if they really didn’t need to except for health reasons seems incredible, but in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century cosmetic surgery is a booming industry and the latest in a long line of invasive cosmetic procedures is liposuction. Liposuction is a way of removing excess fat from parts of the body such as thighs, bottom and tummy. Possibly the most revolting spectacle to watch, the procedure entails a large metal rod being inserted into, for example, the thigh. The surgeon then thrusts the rod into the fatty deposits and sucks them up and through attached plastic tubing. The fat and bits of blood are then caught in a jar. People will literally pay several thousand pounds or dollars for this treatment.<sup>47</sup>

As I have already said, the majority of these cosmetic procedures are not necessary; instead they are performed purely to satisfy the dictates of body-fascism. Face lifts make you look younger, except they can also make the face mask-like. Breast enlargements are supposedly to make women more attractive or feel more 'womanly', even though in recent years the dangers of implants have been making the headlines.<sup>48</sup> Liposuction removes fatty deposits, except those same deposits may come back in later years unless a strict diet is followed.<sup>49</sup> Certainly there are people whose lives have changed for the better by having for example a rhinoplasty, but ultimately the reason why the procedure is performed is because Western society has developed certain unattainable standards of beauty. Those who think that their noses are too big have been led to believe that this makes them 'not normal'. In order to 'fit in' therefore they must change. As Deborah Lupton points out,

“If the fleshly body represents oneself, then it is imperative to ensure that the appearance of the body is as attractive and conforming to accepted norms as possible.”<sup>50</sup>

*Cosmetic* surgery thus, as opposed to *plastic* surgery, is used to aid conformity as well as to give an appearance of longevity. Lupton refers to it as 'body-work', invoking another common metaphor for the body, that of the body as machine, and Lynn Payer even suggests that,

“The popularity of the idea of the body as machine may explain why coronary bypass surgery caught on very quickly in the United States.”<sup>51</sup>

This notion of body-work implies major changes to the outer structure. Just as, for example, a car would have welding done or a re-spray so, the human body can be cut and shaped to make it 'look better' and keep on functioning. To quote Lupton again,

“Taken to its extreme body-work embraces cosmetic surgery, where the body is cut, reshaped and stitched together to conform to accepted notions of beauty.”<sup>52</sup>

Given the prevalence of the above over the last twenty five years it is not altogether surprising that body-horror movies have frequently used these ideas as inspiration for their narratives and iconography, but because body-horror movies also show these regimes and procedures as dangerous they tend to undermine or subvert the idea and those discourses which claim that *beauty and youth equal normality and social acceptability*.

For example, the movie **Frankenhooker** shows Jeffrey Franken's dead girlfriend being remade out of body parts from other women. When she is stitched together and reanimated she doesn't look 'better' or *conform to accepted notions of beauty*. Instead she looks grotesque. In **Death Becomes Her**<sup>53</sup>, the wife and ex-wife of a plastic surgeon are remodelled by him. One has had a weight problem, the other doesn't want to age. When they gain access to a mysterious elixir they live forever. However, their bodies constantly fall apart and they have to have more operations to fix them up again.

Thus, living forever is not always presented on the screen as a good option and neither is cosmetic surgery. Also the fact that **Death Becomes Her** is a big-budget Hollywood product is significant because it shows how the issues and problems associated with plastic surgery have filtered through into the mainstream and although this movie is

primarily a comedy it uses graphic, if slightly surreal special effects to support its premise, and also is quite overt about its stance on so-called perfect bodies and the issue of longevity at any price.

Another movie which raises similar arguments about beauty and longevity is **Rejuvenator** in which an ageing, former movie star, Ruth Warren, wants to be young and beautiful again claiming that,

“It’s inhuman to allow a woman of my charm and ability to rot away in this ugly carcass.”

Accordingly she takes the new serum developed by a brilliant scientist and she becomes young again. But the effect lasts only for a short while for ultimately the serum results in her body undergoing a hideous transformation which I have described in Chapter One.

One might therefore argue that, as David J. Skal points out, “Rejuvenation and eternal youth are the driving illusions of the cosmetic surgery business”<sup>54</sup> and that these *illusions* are revealed for what they are in body-horror movies namely illusions whose destruction has dire consequences, as is signalled in **Re-Animator** for example, where the reanimating serum can bring the dead back to life, but they are merely zombies with no thought processes. And indeed a book published in 1995 which draws attention to what these consequences are is one called *Stop Ageing Now! The Ultimate Plan for Staying Young and Reversing the Ageing Process*, for although it buys into the same cultural obsession regarding youth and is obviously written with the best intentions, its chapter headings are very suggestive of the problems that Western society has with

ageing e.g. *Quick Fix for Senility and Other Ageing Problems, See Your Immune System Grow Young, Beware the Fat That Makes You Old and Cancer: You Can Grow Old Without It.*<sup>55</sup>

That age has become a negative cultural value and that in particular the external signs of old age are *culturally stigmatized*<sup>56</sup> is made all too clear in Deborah Lupton's book *Medicine as Culture*. Given this it is perhaps not surprising that a large number of body-horror movies deal directly with ageing and cosmetic surgery as a means of highlighting the negative consequences of attempting to change something which is a natural process, as well as showing those changes very graphically. Indeed this emphasis on cosmetic surgery in body-horror has not gone unnoticed by other writers and Skal claims that the explosive growth of cosmetic surgery is paralleled by,

“The unprecedented plasticity of the human body as depicted in motion picture special effects of the 1970s and 1980s.”<sup>57</sup>

However, it goes further than this because the surgery used to ensure that bodies remain young and beautiful also extends into the area of organ transplants. Indeed one might argue that, unlike bodies, transplants become the ultimate commodity in Western society because they are lifesavers and the surgeons who perform transplants are perceived as miracle workers, somewhat similar to cosmetic surgeons. However, because not enough organs are ever donated, demand far outweighs supply and this has given rise to the emergence of a number of disconcerting practices as Deborah Lupton notes,

“An international trade in human organs exists in which impoverished people from developing countries such as India undertake to have their own organs surgically removed, including kidneys, eyes and pieces of skin while still alive and sold to western nations.”<sup>58</sup>

One might argue that body parts have become not only a major commodity, but also an ethically dubious commodity and the buying and selling organs from developing countries is the latest in a long line of exploitative practices which Western society is responsible for. An even more grim and grisly aspect of this organ trade is suggested in news reports of children in Brazil, being found dead with parts of the body removed especially organs. Therefore my suggestion that the story of **Coma** involves a form of institutionalized quasi-cannibalism is not entirely misconceived for although the story is fiction the fiction now seems to be turning into fact for the organ trade, whether legal or illegal, certainly posits the body as the ultimate commodity with the body reduced to the status of meat and its prime function is to be used as parts and as long as the body functions *normally* it doesn't matter where the parts come from.

This idea of the body being reduced to parts is highlighted in the movie **Body Parts**. When Bill Chrushank loses his arm in a car accident he undergoes an arm transplant, a new procedure developed by Dr Webb. However, she is eventually revealed to be an archetypal mad scientist figure. The arm is in fact from a mass murderer and it retains the killer urges of its previous owner. If the body-horror cycle is broadly oppositional to body-fascism then **Body Parts** is a good example of this because it raises the question, *what is normality?* On the one hand Bill Chrushank could live without an arm, or have a prosthetic one fitted, making him *abnormal* and not *socially acceptable*. On the other hand he could have a transplant, which of course he does and this should

make him *normal* again in terms of social acceptability. However, the arm makes him behave like the murderer it came from. Therefore Chruschank may appear outwardly normal with his new arm and yet it makes him function *abnormally*. This raises again the common medical discourse about the body, that it must function properly and for a long time, in order to be seen as *normal*.<sup>59</sup> Death is perceived as a failure, therefore everything must be done to prevent it even transplanting a murderous arm in the case of **Body Parts**.

Further, as horror movies have always focused on death it is no surprise that death or destruction related to some form of surgical procedure should be utilized in body-horror narratives. Genres after all, as Steve Neale has argued, are not static systems but “processes”<sup>60</sup> which the reader uses to make sense of the movie. If body-horror is to be considered a cycle it must make use of the “repertoire of existing generic elements” as well as adding new ones in order to keep the cycle alive and “in play”.<sup>61</sup> Body-horror clearly does this because not only has the cycle expanded this *repertoire* by using contemporary issues, images and debates in its narratives and for its themes and iconography without departing from the expectations we have of horror films in general, but also it utilizes older generic elements such as ‘mad scientist figures’. The use, thus of the regimens and procedures I discussed earlier have all been instrumental to some degree in the emergence of the body-horror cycle making them different from what had gone before.

However, the most important difference between body-horror and conventional horror lies in the use of special makeup effects and in the emphasis on the showing over the telling. I already argued in a previous chapter the horrific impact of surgical scenes and transformation sequences would not be the same if the special effects were not so

convincing. Indeed I also argued that the primary defining feature of body-horror is that of a refusal to cut away from the spectacle of the body in profuse disarray. It is also important to note here that this particular area of special effects could only have developed and been shown in movies due to the change in censorship regulations in the United States. The MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) finally abandoned the Production Code in 1968 and replaced it with a ratings system. The four categories, G (General audiences), PG (Parental Guidance suggested), R (Restricted – under 17 requires adult accompaniment) and X (No one under 17 admitted), encouraged “the production of all types of films rather than those addressed purely to a family audience..[therefore]..different films can quite properly be aimed at different audiences.”<sup>62</sup>

Clearly then, alongside the impact of cultural concerns, changes within the industry also enabled different types of movies to surface. Once the showing of almost anything was allowed it was not too long before the special effects technicians really came into their own and it is their makeup effects which give body-horror its specific iconography.

“Elaborate, unsettling cosmetic effects had been achieved in motion pictures since the days of Lon Chaney, but they took on a new level of realism with the perfection of a material that would become an almost alchemical substance of the late twentieth century. The use of the substance, latex foam, not only expanded the technical capabilities of the special-effects artist, but the resulting public spectacle of infinitely plastic human bodies paralleled and reflected the quantum growth of cosmetic surgery as a cultural activity and obsession during the same period.”<sup>63</sup>

This quote from David J. Skal shows just how important special makeup effects have become for the horror genre in terms of verisimilitude. This plausibility factor is essential for body-horror because the term itself suggests a graphic focus on the body. I have already stated that in this cycle the emphasis is on the body itself as the *site* of horror therefore, because verisimilitude is a major factor in genre movies, body-horror must be able to show bodily changes via surgical procedure or metamorphosis in such a way that disbelief can be suspended. The nature of the effects are also crucial for augmenting body-horror narratives and highlighting their thematic concerns. Steve Neale cites **The Thing** when he describes this movie as being “engaged in a process of persuasion”<sup>64</sup> and this is precisely the point. If body-horror movies are to generate belief in the fictional world they create, they must establish their “own regime of credence”<sup>65</sup> not only narratively but also through the visual representation of, for example, the graphic procedures of cosmetic surgery or a shapeshifting thing.

The special makeup effects created by Joe Blasco for the Cronenberg movie **Shivers** exemplify perfectly this idea of *credence*, despite the fact that in the 1970s this type of effects work was in its infancy. Cronenberg has stated that,

“The very purpose was to show the unshowable, to speak the unspeakable. I was creating certain things that there was no way of suggesting because it was not a common currency of the imagination. It had to be shown or else not done.”<sup>66</sup>

In **Shivers**, the parasite creature is shown moving about beneath the skin and from person to person. The convincing spectacle of parasites moving under character Nicholas Tudor’s chest was created using ‘bladder’ techniques, in other words the use of balloons blown up under a fake chest. It is interesting to note that Blasco had

invented this technique at exactly the same time as Dick Smith. The balloons were blown up one after another to give the effect of the parasites wriggling under the skin, an effect which quite literally makes the skin crawl. The parasites themselves were made of the new wonder material, foam latex. An inner spring made them more elastic and they were manipulated with mono-filament line. Simple techniques which made the parasites extremely convincing and also served to highlight the body-horror narrative. When Cronenberg says that he wanted *to show the unshowable* he was perhaps unwittingly beginning the trend towards more graphic special makeup effects which would become de rigueur in body-horror movies. Clearly, without the effects created by Joe Blasco, **Shivers** would not have achieved its reputation as disgusting and repulsive, but equally it would not have set the standards by which all body-horror imagery would be measured. Although Dick Smith had created the excellent special makeup effects for **The Exorcist** a year earlier, **Shivers** was the movie which truly defined the nature of body-horror. The idea of parasitic creatures living within the body and also moving between hosts was an image far more squirm-inducing than that of being possessed by a demon, despite the extremely shocking and graphic nature of its manifestation. As I mentioned earlier in this thesis, possibly the most frightening aspect of **The Exorcist** are the medical tests which Regan has to undergo, which highlight the nature of medical body-horror. Cronenberg has his own version of gruesome medical procedure in **Rabid**, when the character Rose undergoes extensive skin grafting the removal of a patch of flesh on her thigh is shown in graphic detail.

Most of Cronenberg's movies after **Shivers** have an emphasis on manipulating the flesh in some way, whether it is through the interference of a misguided scientist, a genetic 'disease' or video imagery. And this manipulation of the flesh leads to the creation of ever more outrageous and graphic special makeup effects in order to make the body-

horror as tangible as possible. The famous exploding head effect in **Scanners** was produced by Chris Walas, who also made possible the different stages of Seth Brundle's transformation in **The Fly**. The head sequence was created using an incredibly lifelike fake head filled with various real innards to make the effect very gruesome as it explodes, ostensibly through mind power but in reality with the help of a gun. It is notable that Dick Smith worked as special effects consultant on **Scanners**.

**The Fly** utilized all the contemporary methods which Walas and his effects team had at their disposal and set new standards in the design of creature effects. Cronenberg asked Walas to "adhere to some kind of realism"<sup>67</sup> so that the transformation made some sort of real sense and that the fusion of insect and man would be credible as far as possible. Walas himself says that,

"We wanted the feeling that on a day-to-day basis, you might not even notice very much of a transformation if it was happening in real time. I wanted to draw analogies to the ageing process, losing hair, losing teeth, things like that, as well as being similar to an insect shedding its skin."<sup>68</sup>

In order to achieve the transformation of Seth into 'Brundlefly' many different techniques were used. The early stages were achieved with straightforward makeup and partial foam latex appliances on the face and hands. Later on full body makeup was required using a latex foam suit, dentures, contact lenses and tubes which pumped out fly digestive juices. The final stages in 'Brundlefly's' life were accomplished with the help of several different mechanical puppets. The resulting transformation won an Academy Award for Walas and his crew.<sup>69</sup>

Rick Baker had previously won the Academy Award for his work on **An American Werewolf in London** legitimising the importance of this type of special makeup effects work. Certainly body-horror movies would not look the same or be able to represent metamorphosis on screen without the input of these artists and technicians. It is somehow appropriate that Rick Baker should later choose to work on a Cronenberg movie, considering his innovative effects work in **An American Werewolf in London**. Baker created the surreal makeup effects for **Videodrome** which allowed Max Renn to become the 'New Flesh.'

Other examples of the power of special makeup effects work can be seen in all the movies I have discussed previously. The arm transplant in **Body Parts** and the eye transplants in **Massacre Mansion**, for example, give greater credibility to the narrative premise, but more than that, as I claimed earlier, they define the iconography of body-horror. The effects are able to show the body *out of ones own control*, they emphasize *the showing over the telling* and crucially they work on the body as the site of the horror. This is true of both medical body-horror and non-medical body-horror. And the creation of the shapeshifter by Rob Bottin for **The Thing** highlights perfectly the importance of these special makeup effects in body-horror movies. Although the narrative is crucial for allowing the effects to be present in the first place, the effects themselves are the main focus of the movie. Images of heads being torn apart from inside, chests bursting open and biting off hands and bodies sprouting tentacles all made possible through foam latex and other assorted effects technology. These technologies made it possible to distort the body to such an extent that as David J. Skal says,

“**The Thing** subjected the body to the most surrealistic strain ever seen outside a gallery canvas.”<sup>70</sup>

The special makeup effects industry boomed after the success of horror movies such as **An American Werewolf in London** and **The Fly**. Mainstream movie-going audiences finally witnessed the huge advancement in prosthetic special effects technology within a body-horror narrative. This does not mean that body-horror suddenly became totally mainstream: it didn't. What it did mean was that more people had access to the power of these effects and what they could achieve in narrative terms.

I have argued that this type of bodily distortion presents the obverse of other bodily representations in movies. This is not to say that the oppositional nature of these movies was necessarily intentional on the part of the director, but rather that the discourses surrounding the body are so embedded in Western culture, and the imagery of, for example, cosmetic surgery is so prevalent, that it would be foolish not to consider the impact of such factors in examining why these movies emerged and developed as they did.

Clearly then, the parallel developments of special effects, cultural obsessions about the body and medically invasive procedures helped to create the cycle of body-horror movies and make them generically specific. The most definitive examples of this are the movies of David Cronenberg and I will be examining his work in greater detail in the next chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Lupton, *Medicine as Culture*, p.37.

<sup>2</sup> *Eat Fat*, p. 37/38.

<sup>3</sup> *Decades of Beauty: The Changing Image of Women 1890's to 1990's*, p.166.

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- <sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p.165.
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p.169.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p.169, “Fonda declared that her body was better at 50 than when she had starred in *Barbarella*.”
- <sup>7</sup> Mike Featherstone/Mike Hepworth/Bryan S. Turner (eds.), *The Body, Social Process and Cultural Theory*, p.170.
- <sup>8</sup> *Decades of Beauty*, p.185/186.
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p.183.
- <sup>10</sup> It was reported in 1999 that the first human had been successfully cloned in a laboratory in the US. The embryo was destroyed after several days however, suggesting that even the scientists themselves believed that this was one boundary that shouldn't be crossed.
- <sup>11</sup> Susan Sontag, *Aids and Its Metaphors*, p.66.
- <sup>12</sup> p.36.
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p.36.
- <sup>14</sup> Information from *The Body Victorious*, Lennart Nilson/Jan Lindberg.
- <sup>15</sup> By this I mean that people tend to rank disease on a scale of those which are the most feared, therefore a hierarchy is set up.
- <sup>16</sup> Information from Microsoft ©Encarta, 1995.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, p.186.
- <sup>18</sup> *Aids and Its Metaphors*, p.48.
- <sup>19</sup> In *Medicine as Culture*, Deborah Lupton refers to this as ‘Body McCarthyism’ and that it is “a hysterical new temperance movement which targets the body’s secretions and which expresses anxiety over the invasion of the body by viral agents.” p.35.
- <sup>20</sup> *Death, Dying and Bereavement*, p.179.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Body and Society*, p.167
- <sup>22</sup> Information from Microsoft © Encarta, 1995.
- <sup>23</sup> *Death, Dying and Bereavement*, p.179.
- <sup>24</sup> *Aids and Its Metaphors*, p.48.
- <sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p.41.
- <sup>26</sup> *Eat Fat*, p.5.
- <sup>27</sup> Featherstone/Hepworth and Turner, p.179.
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid*, p.171.

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<sup>29</sup> *Eat Fat*, p.xvi.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, p.5.

<sup>31</sup> Note that anorexia and bulimia are often cited as being to do with control, it is a psychological problem as well as a physical one. Deborah Lupton refers to this notion of control as 'body-work', not necessarily in relation to anorexia or bulimia, but a general attitude to exercise and diet. She says that it is about keeping the body contained and that, "a body is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control." This notion is very important for body-horror narratives because they show the opposite, the eruption of the body.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, p.xvi, Klein argues that "Diets can kill, and yo-yo dieting has specific and long-term health implications that need to be weighed against the risks of being 'overweight'."

<sup>33</sup> BBC TV's Watchdog programme 26<sup>th</sup> July 1999 reported a worrying trend that young boys were becoming increasingly worried about their bodies being muscular enough. Constant pressure from sources such as advertisements using male supermodels were cited, along with male action dolls. These action figures were shown to have changed over the last thirty years from having average male body shapes into something musclebound and unattainable.

<sup>34</sup> Considering the anti-fat attitude, genuine obesity is on the increase. Anorexia and bulimia are treated as eating disorders with a psychological motivation, but more often than not obese people are castigated for having no will power. There is the idea that if they really wanted to lose weight they could do so, thereby levelling blame and the attitude that "it's your own fault". The psychological side of obesity is often ignored.

<sup>35</sup> *The Face of Fashion*, p.80.

<sup>36</sup> *Models Close Up*, Channel 4, 12/6/99. Famous supermodel Cindy Crawford frequently had a prominent facial mole lasered out in early photographs.

<sup>37</sup> *The Face of Fashion*, p.84.

<sup>38</sup> *Models Close Up*, Channel 4, 12/6/99.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> "Nose-reconstruction operations were probably performed in ancient India as early as 2000 BC...some discussion of such surgery also appears in ancient Greek and Roman tracts." Quoted from Microsoft®Encarta, 1995.

<sup>42</sup> *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery*, p.3-4.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid*, p.4.

<sup>44</sup> It is interesting to note here that breast reduction is usually performed in hospitals because it is seen as a health problem. Breast enlargement is mostly perceived as cosmetic.

<sup>45</sup> *Making the Body Beautiful*, p.8.

<sup>46</sup> *The Face of Fashion*, p.80.

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<sup>47</sup> It is interesting to note that an episode of the TV series, **The X-Files**, used liposuction as a novel form of murder committed by a possessed plastic surgeon. This episode was entitled **Sanguinarium**, written by Vivian and Valerie Mayhew, directed by Kim Manners. Original Air Date, 11/10/96. This information from web site, [www.thex-files.com/epi406.htm](http://www.thex-files.com/epi406.htm).

<sup>48</sup> It was recently reported that one famous example with breast enlargement, Pamela Anderson from TV's **Baywatch**, has had the implants removed. Interestingly though it was after she was no longer on the show. **Baywatch** was renowned for many of its female characters undergoing breast enlargement to be on the show. Concerns over breast implants have been highly publicized in the last couple of years due to the number of complaints worldwide from women whose implants had leaked, causing various illnesses.

<sup>49</sup> A news report on 21<sup>st</sup> July, 1999, told of the House of Commons Health Committee's report on private healthcare. The major concern was over cosmetic surgery clinics. They recommended that cosmetic surgeons should have to print a health warning on their advertisements. The report also stated that cosmetic surgery is estimated to be increasing by 10% a year with a particular increase in the number of men undergoing surgery. The report followed complaints from patients whose operations had gone wrong or were not performed correctly by inexperienced surgeons. Also, American doctors have warned that liposuction can be fatal.

<sup>50</sup> *Medicine as Culture*, p.37.

<sup>51</sup> *Medicine and Culture*, p.149.

<sup>52</sup> *Medicine as Culture*, p.38.

<sup>53</sup> See endnote no. 12 Chapter Two.

<sup>54</sup> *The Monster Show*, p.320.

<sup>55</sup> Written by Jean Carper.

<sup>56</sup> *Medicine as Culture*, p.39

<sup>57</sup> *The Monster Show*, p320.

<sup>58</sup> *Medicine as Culture*, 47-48.

<sup>59</sup> This concept of *normality* was highlighted in a news report on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1999. An investigation was taking place into claims that a young girl had been refused a heart transplant on the grounds that she had Downs Syndrome. The parents felt as if the refusal implied that she was already 'abnormal' therefore she didn't somehow deserve a transplant operation. The hospital claimed that it was because she didn't stand much chance of survival so it would have been a pointless operation.

<sup>60</sup> 'Questions of Genre' from *Screen*, No.31, Spring 1990, p.56.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid*, p.56.

<sup>62</sup> Michael F. Mayer, *The Film Industries*, p.135.

<sup>63</sup> *The Monster Show*, p.312.

<sup>64</sup> 'You've Got To Be Fucking Kidding!' Knowledge, Belief and Judgement in Science Fiction', from *Alien Zone*, Annette Kuhn (ed.) p.163.

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<sup>65</sup> *ibid*, p.164.

<sup>66</sup> Chris Rodley (ed.), *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p.43.

<sup>67</sup> Anthony Timpone, *Men, Makeup and Monsters*, p.114.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, p.115.

<sup>69</sup> This information is from *Men, Makeup and Monsters*.

<sup>70</sup> *The Monster Show*, p.313.

## Chapter Five

### The Body as Protean Entity: David Cronenberg's Contribution to Body-Horror.

“Body horror ...is now everywhere. But it starts and ends with Cronenberg.”<sup>1</sup>

In the previous chapters I have discussed how social, medical, commercial, legal and technological forces contributed to the emergence of the body-horror movie and how all these movies, both those belonging to the medical cluster and those belonging to the non-medical cluster exhibit a certain fascination with the graphic destruction of the human body whether as a result of rebirth, mutilation, or transmutation through disease and old age. I have also indicated the central role that modern medicine plays in one cluster, namely the medical body-horror movie.

These two clusters of body-horror come together most effectively and cohesively in the work of Canadian director David Cronenberg. Cronenberg's work has elicited many responses over the last twenty five years, ranging from fascination to outright disgust and condemnation. Film director Martin Scorsese, for example, thinks that “Cronenberg has come up with a vision that is genuinely original.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Robin Wood considers Cronenberg's work to be ‘reactionary’. In *Shivers*, for example, he thinks that sexuality in general is shown as “the object of loathing” and that *The Brood* is about “the projection of horror and evil on to women and their sexuality.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Colin McArthur argues that Cronenberg's work offers nothing “to the critic concerned with drawing attention to constructions alternative to the dominant ideologies

in Western culture.”<sup>4</sup> Because Cronenberg has a penchant for showing the horror rather than cutting away from it and because he deals with issues surrounding the body, his work is clearly problematic for some critics. Further, when it is analysed in any depth, it tends to be analysed from a purely psychoanalytical perspective. As a result there is frequently a concentration on the sexual imagery in his films and because of this a tendency to regard his work as misogynistic.<sup>5</sup> As I do not subscribe to the psychoanalytical perspective because of the contentious nature of much of the work on which it is based and because I do not regard Cronenberg’s films as misogynistic in any straightforward way, I want to examine his films in terms of their relationship to the debates and discourses about the body that I have outlined in the previous chapter, focusing particularly on what they have to say about bodies under attack from disease and disruption and how they say it. As Chris Rodley has said,

“Attitudes to the flesh, and disease, are crucial to the understanding – and misunderstanding – of Cronenberg’s project.”<sup>6</sup>

A view which is also echoed by Steven Shaviro:

“David Cronenberg’s films focus insistently, obsessively, on the body. They relentlessly articulate a politics, a technology, and an aesthetics of the flesh. They are unsparingly visceral; this is what makes them so disturbing.”<sup>7</sup>

To do this, I want to begin with a discussion of Cronenberg’s career and of his ideas about disease and creative diseases in particular. I also want to examine how his films *articulate an aesthetics of the flesh*, how they are located within the cycle of body-

horror movies I have discussed previously, and how they also relate to the Science Fiction genre.

David Cronenberg originally went to the University of Toronto to study biochemistry, and then abandoned this course a year later to study English Language and Literature. However, what becomes evident through viewing his work is that biochemistry is still a major point of reference in his films for, as Chris Rodley has noted, Cronenberg is obsessed by,

“Medical science’s misunderstood endeavours to assist the evolutionary process: [by] the body’s capacity to respond independently with transformation, mutation and its own *creative* [my italics] diseases; [by the] descent into familial, societal or bodily chaos.”<sup>8</sup>

Central to the above is the idea of a disease being ‘creative’ i.e. being able to generate what Cronenberg refers to in **Videodrome** as the ‘New Flesh’ because it reveals a fascination on Cronenberg’s part with the protean character of the body and its capacity to change, to decay and act independently, a subject which Cronenberg has been able to explore in great depth because he has worked for many years within the horror and science fiction genres and because he has written most of his own material as well as directing it. This is perhaps the principal reason why I think his work is more central to and definitive of body-horror than most of the other movies I have discussed. Indeed Cronenberg’s interest in body-horror has evolved in thematic and iconographic terms to such an extent that he can almost be said to have developed his own particular cinematic language, a language which is so highly developed that it might be referred to as Cronenbergian.

The representation of bodily changes in Cronenberg's work is not, of course, always scientifically accurate because the transformations are often used as metaphors for real diseases or the ageing process. For this reason the severe disruption that besets Seth Brundle in *The Fly* for instance, represented by grotesque putrescent lumps, rapid hair growth and vomit, may be read (and has been on several occasions) as a metaphor for AIDS, or cancer, or the ageing process. Nevertheless, at a more general level, the disruption experienced by Seth also signifies what Cronenberg means by 'creative disease', because the body in Cronenberg's work is always, as Shaviro says,

"The site of the most violent alterations and of the most intense affects. It is continuously subjugated and remade...New arrangements of the flesh break down traditional binary oppositions between mind and matter, image and object, self and other, inside and outside, male and female, nature and culture, human and inhuman, organic and mechanical."<sup>9</sup>

It would seem, therefore, to be no mere coincidence that the importance Cronenberg attaches to these features evolves and develops over a period of time during which the popular press and television became increasingly interested in ideas and images of seemingly perfect bodies, diets and fitness regimes, and obsessed with terminal disease (e.g.cancer) and the ageing process, an obsession which in turn triggered debates about the value of such surgical procedures as transplants and cosmetic surgery, genetic engineering and cloning and about the direction medical science and Western society was taking. For this reason, Wayne Drew claims that in Cronenberg's films,

“The health of the body politic is a clear index of the state of society in its broadest sense...” [a state in which] “...disease, old age, sexual failure and inadequacy are posited, anthropomorphised and activated.”<sup>10</sup>

Cronenberg’s work may thus be said to offer both a critique of body-fascism as it has developed in the West over the last twenty five years and a critique of society itself, because as Bryan S. Turner has suggested,

“The body is the most potent metaphor of society” ..[and]..”disease is the most salient metaphor of structural crisis.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, by showing disease as something which has a creative capacity, able to create new forms, his films, one might argue offer us a more positive view of disease than that which is conventionally offered. Disease, in his films, offers us a new life but not as we know it. For this reason, institutions, especially medical ones, often have a dual value in his films for they represent both a means of preserving life and society as we know it, and at the same time a means of changing it irrevocably. For this reason the setting in which the narrative action unfolds is often wintry and cold and suggestive of a world in which conventional humanity has no place and for the same reason his movies have weird or unusual characters’ names. Further, the use of intensely dramatic music scores, which after **Shivers** and **Rabid** were all written by the composer Howard Shore<sup>12</sup>, reinforce this sense of difference and sense of threat to life as we know it.

The first examples in which Cronenberg’s particular brand of body-horror is to be seen would appear to be **Stereo** [1969] and in **Crimes of the Future** [1970] for according to Chris Rodley, they deal with,

“The physical and intellectual implications of genetic mutation and psycho-surgical experimentation.”<sup>13</sup>

However, because these two films are no longer available for viewing, my examination of Cronenberg’s work has to begin with his 1974 feature **Shivers**, a movie also known as **The Parasite Murders** and, perhaps more aptly, as **They Came from Within**. It is also the most infamous creation in Cronenberg’s canon and given its theme and the extremely graphic nature of its imagery it is not difficult to see why the response to this movie should have been one of so much horror when it was first released. The action takes place in a brand new apartment complex near Montreal. This complex, called Starliner Towers, is situated on Starliner Island which is referred to as “an island paradise” because it has all its own facilities, including leisure areas, a dental clinic and a doctor’s clinic. It is therefore an environment which because it is self-sufficient seems almost perfect, a feeling which is reinforced by the fact that at the start of the movie we see a young couple enter the building being welcomed by the manager. There is however something less than perfect about it because in being so self-sufficient it seems also to be very isolated and this feeling that it is something less than a paradise is confirmed when suddenly we cut to a young woman dressed in a school uniform being attacked by an elderly man in one of the apartments. The disorientation we feel is then further reinforced by the intercutting of shots between the couple in the foyer and the violence occurring upstairs, reaching a climax when we see the elderly man strangling the woman, stripping her, laying her on a table, cutting open her abdomen and pouring acid into it and then cutting his own throat and collapsing. The sequence of events is unexplained, but it alerts us to the fact that Starliner Towers is not as wonderful as it is made out to be and that the institution is something to be wary of. It also of course alerts us to the fact that what we are about to see is a body-horror movie because the

bodily destruction of the woman is shown in an extremely graphic way. We might also note the fact that at this point there appear to be no science fiction elements and that the film seems to be situated quite clearly in horror territory. However, as the film unfolds the interconnection between the two genres that Cronenberg habitually makes, becomes much more obvious.

**Shivers** does not have a complex narrative structure and there is minimal character development. Instead the plot progresses via a series of visceral set pieces and, as an early example of body-horror, it is extremely powerful. As the story unfolds it becomes clear that the elderly man in the opening sequence is responsible for much more devastation than just the killing of the young woman. He is Emil Hobbes, a professor of medicine who specializes in venereology and psychopharmacology and is working on a project aimed at finding an alternative to organ transplant by using a parasite to take over the function of a human organ, thereby prolonging life. What becomes apparent quite quickly, however, is that in order to achieve this Hobbes has had to create a parasite, and that this parasite is both an aphrodisiac and a form of venereal disease. This bizarre creation is explained by his partner Dr Linsky who, after reading Hobbes personal files, tells us that Hobbes thought that man was an animal that thought too much, that he was an over-rational animal that had lost touch with its body and its instincts, that had in his words “too much brain and not enough guts!” and that the parasite that he had created would turn the whole world into “one beautiful, mindless orgy” free of the constraints of repression.

However, we are never told why this parasite should both be able to act as an aphrodisiac and pass on venereal disease. Are we to assume that Hobbes was ‘just’ a mad scientist who couldn’t quite bring himself to conceive of a society in which

sexuality was unbounded without there also being some cost, some payback? Certainly some critics, using a psychoanalytic-based approach, would support this view claiming that this attitude is representative of Cronenberg's own psyche namely that he as an individual is disgusted by sex. However, this does not match very easily with the information we are given in the film, because we are told that Hobbes wanted the body to become more in touch with instinct and at no point are we told that Hobbes wanted to destroy the human race. Furthermore, Cronenberg himself has said that, "The parasite bugs came out of my childhood fascination with the microscopic, and with insects"<sup>14</sup> (i.e. not out of a disgust with sexuality) and that those critics who saw **Shivers** as really being an attack on the bourgeois life and bourgeois ideas of morality and sexuality were right because, as he says, "They sensed the glee with which we were tearing them apart."<sup>15</sup>

For all of the above reasons, it may therefore be more productive if we approach **Shivers** from the perspective of body-horror i.e. as an early example of a film which focuses on death and sexuality as something to be shown and not hidden away in order not to offend bourgeois sensibilities. Further, we are encouraged to do so because the explanation that Linsky offers us for Hobbes actions only occurs *after* we have witnessed the suffering endured by a number of other characters from Starliner Towers namely an old man who has lumps in his stomach which, interestingly he attributes to the ageing process which he thinks might be reversible and a person called Nicholas Tudor who appears to be suffering from the same sort of condition (i.e. moving growths in his stomach) the horrific effects of which we witness when we see him first vomiting blood into his bath after returning home ill from the office, and then vomiting a second time over the railing of his balcony, releasing one of Hobbes' parasites out of his stomach which lands on the clear plastic umbrella of an old woman passing below.

Because she thinks a bird has dropped onto it, it is quite a humorous sequence, but because this is the first time that we see the parasite clearly it is something of a shock and because we see it crawling or slithering off into the grass we know that this is not the last time we will see it. Indeed when we do see the parasites later they discharge some sort of acid-like substance from their bodies (this is never explained) as well as somehow attaching themselves to peoples faces and bodies.

Although the 'creature' has varyingly been described as looking like a sort of slug-like penis or a lump of faeces, it in fact looks more like a type of liver fluke or a flatworm. Parasitic flatworms are of two main types, namely flukes and tapeworms, both of which tend to be endoparasites. In other words they live within the host. The liver fluke has a leaf-like shape and its anterior end is drawn out to form a conical projection called the head lobe. This head lobe has a sucker which is perforated by the mouth and its body secretes a non-mucous substance. They are hermaphrodites and their life-cycle involves moving through different hosts until complete, a process that is described in Grove and Newell's book on *Animal Biology*,

"The cyst walls are digested and the young flukes which emerge, bore through the wall of the gut and enter the body cavity of the host. After about one or two days they infect the liver by boring through its outer capsule. They feed on the liver cells but cause bleeding often with serious results to the host. Eventually the flukes enter the bile ducts and grow to maturity, when the life-cycle is complete."<sup>16</sup>

Now this is precisely how Hobbes parasite appears to behave, apart from the fact that it can survive outside the host. Further, the description of the secretion, the sucker at the head, the movement from each host and so on all comply with the image and actions of

the parasite offered us in **Shivers**. For this reason **Shivers** works as a body-horror movie. If the parasites in **Shivers** bore no resemblance to real parasites we would not be repelled or horrified by the sight of them. As it is we are because they have their foundations in fact and this makes them all the more repellent and disgusting. Just as Humphrey Bogart's flesh crawled in **The African Queen** at the sight and feel of leeches, the characters in **Shivers** who encounter the Hobbes parasite first-hand (when it is not hidden within the host that is) are disgusted by it.<sup>17</sup>

However, it is not purely the behaviour of the parasite which produces the body-horror feeling in us, but the emphasis placed on such bodily functions as vomiting, especially the vomiting of blood and Mikhail Bakhtin's work on Rabelais and the grotesque body is particularly useful here. Showing the body being wrenched and disrupted he suggests places the audience in the position of having to see quite clearly our closeness to death and dying, as well as the different ways this can occur. Bakhtin says that,

“Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination, as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body – all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven.”<sup>18</sup>

Further, his characterization of the grotesque as a style which depends fundamentally upon, “Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness”<sup>19</sup> is directly pertinent to Shaviro's notion of an ‘aesthetics of the flesh’ and to Cronenberg's idea of a ‘creative disease’. As Bakhtin says,

“The grotesque body ... is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed: it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.”<sup>20</sup>

**Shivers** may then be said to draw upon the conventions of a long and well established genre, that of the grotesque, and this is further reinforced by the way in which the links between death, renewal and fertility are all imaged. As Bakhtin notes in relation to Rabelais,

“The novel [by Rabelais] presents as its main theme the images of the open mouth, the gullet, the teeth, and the tongue ... this image is organically combined on the one hand with swallowing and devouring, on the other hand with the stomach, the womb and childbirth.”<sup>21</sup>

In **Shivers** we see a similar emphasis: a parasite, for example, entering the bath of a woman by the plug-hole and then moving towards her vagina (not shown graphically); a little girl transferring the parasite to a man by kissing him and Barbara Steele’s lesbian character passing the parasite to Tudor’s wife by kissing her. These events exemplify one of the key features of Cronenberg’s work, namely the tendency to play upon that which engenders distaste or even disgust by using images such as a little girl behaving sexually, an old man who becomes incestuous with his daughter, old people unleashing their sexuality and enjoying it, homosexual encounters etc. This is emphasized in the scene in which Dr St. Luke’s girlfriend, who has been given the parasite, tells him of her ‘dream’ in which she is involved in a sexual encounter with an old man who tells her that “even old flesh is erotic flesh” and that “disease is the love of two alien kinds for each other”. When she attempts to kiss him and pass on the parasite he is repulsed and knocks her unconscious and then runs away. Meanwhile, Rollo Linsky has

encountered Tudor and is attacked by the crawling parasites which are on his stomach. While attempting to pull them off his face, Tudor kills him with a hammer. Dr St. Luke attempts to escape from Starliner Towers only to be confronted by the sex-crazed tenants staggering over the grass outside and towards him. He is pushed into the indoor swimming pool and submerged in the water before finally succumbing to the transference of the parasite.

Ultimately, Hobbes' parasite is a specific manifestation of disease, the parasitic nature of which and the revulsion it engenders being somewhat akin to that associated with cancer or the AIDS virus because of the challenge these diseases present to society, which is obsessed by health and longevity. As Susan Sontag has rightly pointed out ,

“Disease is regularly described as invading the society, and efforts to reduce mortality from a given disease are called a fight, a struggle, a war.”<sup>22</sup>

Further, the discomfort this film induces in the audience is made all the worse by the fact that there is no comfortable resolution. Hobbes' parasites have won the war and we have entered a stage of 'New Flesh' where a transformation makes the old body into something new and different. This is exemplified by the climactic, final sequence where a sort of baptism takes place and the last remaining person is taken into the fold of the 'New Flesh'.

**Shivers** ends on a compelling note as the smiling, satisfied residents of Starliner Towers drive away towards the city of Montreal to continue the life cycle of the parasite. A radio broadcast mentions the reports of violent disturbances on Starliner

Island but passes them off almost without a thought, and the melancholy soundtrack continues to play. As Dr Martyn Steenbeck suggests,

“Mutation and transformation are offered up as possible cures for a mind/body schism which results from the very incomprehensibility of bodily demise. The fact that these alternatives also lead to death and destruction is perhaps less to do with a deep-rooted pessimism or negativity than a need to seek a hard and realistic optimism.”<sup>23</sup>

Cronenberg’s next movie was **Rabid**. Very little has been written about this particular example of body-horror, but it deals with the medical discourses that I mentioned in Chapter Two, namely those of plastic surgery and disease, in a rather more radical way than **Shivers** does.

Cronenberg describes **Rabid** as being about,

“A woman who is a strange kind of modern-day vampiress... nothing to do with the supernatural” but it had “more to do with modern plastic surgery done on her that goes wrong.”<sup>24</sup>

The main protagonist is a woman called Rose. Inevitably, she is also the main focus for the bodily transformation associated with body-horror movies. The setting for at least half the movie is a cosmetic surgery clinic run by Dr Dan Keloid (keloid is a term for a particular type of scar tissue). The building is similar to that of Starliner Towers in **Shivers**, imposing, faceless and seemingly situated in the middle of nowhere i.e. a typically Cronenbergian setting. The opening sequence shows Keloid in conference

with his partner, Murray Cypher.<sup>25</sup> They talk about the possibility of developing a huge chain of cosmetic surgery clinics, but Keloid does not like the idea saying, “I don’t want to become the Colonel Sanders of plastic surgery!”

Images of cosmetic surgery and its effects are everywhere. At the start we see a woman with surgical dressings under her eyes showing that she has had eyebags removed, also a man (Lloyd) who has his whole head bandaged implying a full face lift and who wears a sweatshirt saying ‘Jogging Kills’ although he jogs everywhere. Both these characters witness a road accident which involves the main protagonist, Rose, and her boyfriend, Hart, both of whom are rushed to the Keloid clinic because there is no hospital near enough to deal with the severe injuries that Rose has suffered. When Rose is taken to the operating theatre, Keloid’s wife, Roxanne, is not happy about it. Keloid, it seems, has been experimenting with a new skin grafting technique and wants to try it out but Roxanne is concerned saying that,

“Neutral field grafts have never been used internally. We could end up with a cancer patient on our hands.”

Her concerns turn out to be quite justified but Keloid’s attitude is that she wouldn’t live at all without his surgical interference. So Rose becomes a guinea pig, and using a machine to remove skin from her leg, Keloid implants the tissue inside her body to replace the damaged intestines, claiming that the grafts are “morphogenetically neutral” and will grow into whichever part of the body it is replacing, although he admits that there is always the possibility of carcinomas forming.

At this point the links between the movie and the Science Fiction genre becomes apparent because although no such procedure actually exists, as far as I am aware, the idea of internal grafts does sound perfectly possible and a month later the operation appears to have been successful as the grafts seem to be fusing with the inner tissue, although Rose is still in a comatose condition. Meanwhile the clinic carries on its day to day cosmetic operations. Lloyd returns to the clinic again for phase two of his 'regeneration', "a little eye tuck this time" and he is obviously still obsessed with his health and appearance, constantly jogging and looking at himself in the mirror. However, whilst he is in his private room he hears Rose scream. He goes to her and she asks him to hold her. He lets out a cry thinking something has cut him. He then staggers off to another patient's room, his armpit bleeding profusely. When Keloid checks him there is a puncture wound in his armpit. Keloid is mystified.

Meanwhile, a young woman, Judy, arrives at the clinic. A nurse asks her, "Are you back again?" to which the woman replies, "Daddy didn't think the new nose was different enough, so I'm back for more operations" clearly signalling some of the issues I raised in Chapter Four, in particular the desire to look better or different in order to 'fit in' and the expenditure involved in undertaking such enterprises.

That night Rose pulls out her drip needle, leaves the clinic and goes to a cow shed where she puts her arm over a cow, to suck its blood. She vomits violently. A man arrives and tries to molest her but she stabs him, apparently with something in her armpit. Going back to the clinic she shakes and sweats. She finds

Judy in a jacuzzi and puts her arm around her, Judy then dies drowning. Meanwhile, Lloyd leaves the clinic and, while he is in a taxi, he grabs the driver and bites his neck. The car then crashes, killing them both.

Becoming increasingly frightened by what is happening to her, Rose begins to think she is some sort of monster. When Keloid examines her, he sees a sort of puckered hole in her armpit with something moving inside. She then grabs him and we see for the first time that what is in her armpit is an odd sort of penis shaped hypodermic syringe whose function is to penetrate flesh in order to suck blood from the victim. After seeing the blood being sucked out of Keloid and into Rose, it is evident from this point on that Rose must have human blood to survive. Although never explicitly stated<sup>26</sup> it is clear that the vampiric hypo-penis is the result of Keloid's new grafting technique, and that as his name suggests, he has *scarred* her. The tissue has mutated. It is 'New Flesh' and Rose has become a new Rose, or a Rose very different to the one we saw at the start of the movie. She has in fact become a cancer or cancerous, a possibility recognized by both Keloid and his wife, or at least failing that a new form of creature which, like a vampire, is interstitial, neither human nor non human, but something between the two. As such, she causes all the structures that had previously informed the body, the family and society to collapse and it soon becomes apparent that Rose's vampiric state is causing the onset of a rabies-like disease in those who have been punctured. Her victims become hydrophobic, foam green goo at the mouth and attack anyone who happens to be nearby, biting them violently. Keloid himself becomes 'rabid' and bites the fingers off a nurse following his puncturing by Rose and before Hart can arrive at the clinic to find out what is happening she escapes hitching various rides and infecting others on the way. It seems that Rose has become a latter day 'Typhoid Mary', a disease carrier although not affected by it herself.

Soon the disease has spread to Montreal and has, we are told, assumed epidemic proportions. Also there is no cure available. Because of this a Dr Gentry says that,

“Shooting down the victims is as good a way of handling them as we’ve got.”

Eventually martial law is declared and a biohazard squad is brought in to patrol the city and to shoot the hydrophobic crazies. Meanwhile Rose stays with a friend, called Mindy, in her apartment, and although she tries hard not to kill her, her need for blood is so great that she cannot help herself. When Hart arrives, he shouts at her, saying,

“It’s been you all along. You carry the plague. You’ve killed hundreds of people.”

Rose is horrified and she screams at Hart,

“I’m still me. I’m still Rose.”

to which Hart yells back at her,

“You’re not Rose!”

However, importantly, Hart blames the Keloid clinic, he asks, “What did they do to you at that clinic?”

He knows that she has changed, but it is not her fault.

Rose however cannot believe that she has been the carrier of the disease and to prove Hart wrong she punctures a man and locks herself in an apartment with him, theorizing

that if he doesn't become 'rabid' then she cannot be the cause of all the chaos. She is wrong of course, and the man kills her. At the end of the movie we see Rose's body in an alleyway being picked up by the biohazard squad and then thrown into a garbage truck. They, of course, do not know that she was the carrier, and it is not even important anymore because ultimately the disease is much greater than Rose. Despite the fact that a vaccine has been mentioned and the squad go about their clean-up duties, there is nothing at the end of **Rabid** to suggest that the epidemic is under control or that society will return to *normality*. Rather we are led to believe that Pandora's Box has been opened and that the need for care (in this case medical) and the means of cure (in this case skin transplant) can no longer be reconciled without disastrous effect.

In Cronenberg's next movie, **The Brood**, the notion of a 'creative disease' is taken even further. The entire narrative revolves around the premise that by using a new type of psychotherapy, psychoplastics, patients can recover from psychological trauma/distress. As the inventor of this therapy, Dr Hal Raglan, explains, this therapy involves patients releasing what he calls "the shape of rage". Once this is released the mind can recover.

The setting is typically Cronenbergian. The action takes place in Raglan's clinic called The Somafree Institute of Psychoplastics which seems to be in the middle of nowhere. It is also winter and snow is on the ground. The name of the institute is also significant as 'Soma' means the body as distinct from the soul. Somafree thus literally means 'body free', suggesting that the subject of this movie is about mind/body, mind/matter relationships and the need to change the latter in order to release or free the mind. Equally significant is the name of the school which one of the characters, Candice,

attends, as its name, The Krell School, is a reference to the 1956, Science Fiction movie, **Forbidden Planet**, which Cronenberg suggests has a similar premise:

“I hadn’t realized the film had a similar premise to **Forbidden Planet** until I picked the name for the school. Then I made the connection: creatures from the unconscious, making the mental physical. That’s what **The Brood** and **Forbidden Planet** are all about.”<sup>27</sup>

Once again therefore we see Cronenberg drawing on the genres of both Science Fiction and horror, in part because Science Fiction texts draw on facts, and the fact that “people do get rashes when they’re stressed out”<sup>28</sup> makes the premise on which psychoplasms is based more plausible, and upon body-horror because body-horror allows the horror that comes from within to be witnessed by others as an outer manifestation.

The main focus of the narrative is Nola Carveth. She is both wife to Frank and mother to Candice. She is also a very special patient as far as Raglan is concerned because having been beaten up by her mother as a child, beatings which her father ignored, her rage or psychological distress is much greater than that of Raglan’s other patients. This manifests itself in the fact that not only does she have weals and tumours like the other patients, but that these weals and tumours are also living monstrosities which, if provoked, will commit murder on her behalf. It is not therefore insignificant that the other patients refer to her as ‘the Queen Bee’. Her tumours are in fact her offspring. Thus, each time she is provoked or invited by Raglan to “Go all the way through it, right to the end” as part of her therapy, she gives birth to another member of her Brood. Her tumours thus are placental sacs and have become physical manifestations of her rage. Not surprisingly, this is beyond our comprehension and Frank’s. Thus, when

Frank meets Nola at the institute at Raglan's insistence and Nola tells him that what has been happening to her is too strange for him to comprehend, he says, "Show me. I'm ready now" such that, in order to believe, we and him need to see it. Nola, however, is not convinced, and she asks him, "Are you ready for me Frank? Really ready? I seem to be a very special person. I'm in the middle of a strange adventure." When she reveals the outer placental sac to Frank he is not surprisingly completely horrified. His worst fears are then compounded when she tears open the sac with her teeth and licks the strange foetus lovingly, like a dog licking its new born pups.

Bakhtin has written that,

"The body's central principle (like that of language) is growth and change; by exceeding its limits, the body expresses its essence."<sup>29</sup>

This is what Nola is doing in **The Brood**. She is *exceeding the limits* of her body in conceiving new ones, and doing so in such a way that Frank and we are both disgusted and fascinated by it, disgusted because we are shown a body that is different from our own, one which is able literally to create deformed offspring in order to expel the past, and fascinated because the body is a transformation of what we normally conceive the female body to be, and because she has accepted her body's changed structure. She is, as she herself says, a 'special person' so we are invited to celebrate it also. In this respect, we are given a view of the body which, if we follow Robert Stam, is 'Bakhtinian', for just as his "levelling undoes binarisms and overturns hierarchies" so does Cronenberg's, and just as he, according to Stam, "celebrates, for example, the inner body of the bowels, the

intestines, and the blood as well as the outer body of “apertures and convexities,” with its “various ramifications and offshoots”<sup>30</sup> so does this movie.

Unfortunately however, transformed as she may be, Nola is not able to control her own anger so when she gets mad with Candice, the Brood start hitting her and when she senses that Frank is using Raglan to try and take Candice away from her, Raglan is bitten and beaten to death. Nola says that she will kill Candice rather than let Frank take her away and it is at this point where he strangles her. This is particularly important because although he is disgusted by her change, this isn't what prompts him to kill her. He kills her to stop the Brood killing Candice.

When Frank drives away from Somafree, Candice is so traumatized by what has happened to her that she does not speak and as in Cronenberg's earlier movies there is no sense that normality has been restored. As the movie ends the camera closes in on Candice's arm revealing two small weals on the flesh suggesting that a similar chain of events will recur. This outcome is again significant in terms of Cronenberg's notion of the 'New Flesh', whereby the end result of a 'creative disease' is both provocative and disquieting.

Cronenberg's next movie, **Scanners**, contains, as Chris Rodley says, many of his “trademark obsessions [namely] making thought physical; the misguided scientist; an unexpected physical ability brought about by unorthodox medicine”.<sup>31</sup> It was also the first of Cronenberg's movies to reach a wider audience (**The Brood** despite its healthy budget and two stars in lead roles, was consigned to B movie status and not given the distribution it deserved). **Scanners** is also the most Science Fiction orientated of Cronenberg's movies, yet its body-horror elements are foregrounded through the use of

special effects techniques which enable heads to explode. As Chris Rodley says, **Scanners** is about “a world where minds and bodies literally do battle.”<sup>32</sup>

The movie opens with a shot of a woman in a shopping mall refreshment area complaining to her friend about a young man who looks like a tramp. We then see the young man that she is talking about staring hard at her. We then cut back to the woman who then convulses and falls to the floor. Two men then chase the young man and capture him. We then see him waking up, strapped to a bed, in some sort of warehouse building and a bearded man is saying to him,

“Why are you such a derelict, such a piece of human junk? The answer’s simple. You’re a scanner, but you don’t realize. That’s been the source of all your agony. I will show you now that it can be a source of great power.”

A group of people then arrive and the young man can apparently ‘hear’ their thoughts. The noise disturbs him. So the bearded man gives him an injection to stop the pain. So far we have been given no explanation for any of these events.

We then cut to a high rise concrete building which has the word ConSec written on it. This is followed by another cut to a shot of a lecture theatre in the same building. A man is sitting at a desk, in front of a small audience, talking about performing a “scanning operation” and asks for a volunteer to come forward explaining that what he is about to demonstrate “may be painful”. A man from the audience walks to the desk. The two men then sit next to each other and the operation which appears to be some sort of mind control experiment begins. They both appear to be struggling with each other mentally. Eventually it becomes clear that it is the volunteer who has the most control,

and the experiment ends with the other man's head exploding in a shower of gore. The volunteer is then chased and caught but it now becomes clear that this man has incredible telepathic powers because he is soon able to escape by 'scanning' his captors, making one of them shoot the others and then commit suicide himself. Yet again Cronenberg has privileged the 'showing over the telling' in these opening scenes and yet again the action takes place in cold, intimidating settings, with an unsettling music score provided by Howard Shore and no explanation offered for horrific events or bodily destruction.<sup>33</sup> However it soon becomes evident that the telepathic powers possessed by the volunteer and the young man at the mall are not natural but are a kind of 'creative disease', produced by a drug which we learn at the end of the film was given to mothers during pregnancy. These men, thus, are products of modern science or more precisely victims in some sense of modern medical experiment and as such they are both outcast. In fact the 'derelict' we learn is called Cameron Vale and the bearded man who injected him is Dr Paul Ruth. He is, we are told, "a psychopharmacist by trade". (We also learn at this point that the other scanner is called Daryl Revok and that he works for ConSec.) Ruth explains to Vale that the drug he gave to him is called ephemorol which "prevents the flow of telepathy." This is necessary because, as Ruth explains to him,

"With all those other voices in your head how can you hear your own voice? How can you develop a self, a personality?"

The importance of developing a self does not become apparent until the final scene of the film but the power that Vale possesses as a scanner is made evident early on when Ruth sets up a scanning session between Vale and another highly developed scanner.

Telepathy, Ruth tells him, “is not mind reading, it is the direct linking of two nervous systems separated by space.”

Scanning, in this respect, is not about a showy display of mind reading but the ability to use the mind in order to have physical effects. The scanners, thus, may be seen as the logical progression from the psychoplasmics of **The Brood**, except in this case the power they have can be controlled by the scanners themselves. In this respect, they are a danger to Consec because the members of the institution want to control scanners and use them for the purposes of espionage and assassination. Steven Shaviro has said that, “Corporate power is apparent everywhere in **Scanners**”<sup>34</sup> and this power is clearly seen in the guise of ConSec. However, a small group of scanners have managed to break away from ConSec and Vale finally makes contact with a female scanner called Kim Obrist and they scan together as a group with some others. This scene is also of particular importance for understanding the end of the film. As they scan, we ‘hear’ their minds,

“Scan together and our minds begin to flow into each other until they become one mind, one system, one soul, one experience, beautiful and frightening.”

While they scan, two of Revok’s henchmen burst in and start shooting. Most of the group are killed except for Vale and Kim who scans the infiltrators and then kills them. She and Vale then escape and eventually track down Revok at a huge factory called BioCarbon Amalgamate. This factory had previously been owned by Dr Ruth for the manufacture of ephemorol, but he had sold it to ConSec. This information is not told us until much later. What we do learn though is that ConSec has developed a secret computer program called the RIPE program. Vale, however, cannot find out what it is

for. When he tells Dr Ruth of this it is clear that Ruth does not know either. So he tells Vale to scan it, "You can scan the computer as you would another human being" he says, implying that, as Steven Shaviro suggests, the division between "organic and mechanical" as well as "mind and matter" no longer applies. To do this Vale has to use a telephone. As he scans, we see the telephone wires and the electronic circuits inside the computer. In effect Vale has become a modern day hacker but as he scans/hacks into the computer, the ConSec people realize that it is Vale who is accessing the RIPE program and they try to stop him. But Vale once again is too powerful. The phone line burns up, the telephone melts and the computer explodes in a similar manner to the way in which the head which Revok scanned at the beginning exploded.

However, before this happens, Vale discovers that the RIPE program contains a list of names, amongst them one Dr Frane. Kim and Vale go to see him and it soon becomes evident that the list is made up of names of doctors who are prescribing ephemerol to pregnant mothers. It is now clear that ephemerol is not being used as a drug to calm scanners it is being used instead to create new scanners and the potential this development could have is brought home to us when we realize that the nose bleed that Kim develops as she sits in the waiting room is a consequence of her being scanned by an unborn child, an instance, in this case, not so much of a change caused by a 'creative disease' as a change caused by a mind whose structure has been altered through the use of drugs.

As soon as Vale and Kim leave the doctor's surgery they are captured by Revok and taken to BioCarbon Amalgamate and here we are given the final twist in the tale. Revok tells Vale that they are brothers and that Ruth was their father. Ruth, he says, had developed ephemerol as a tranquilizer for use by pregnant women in the 1940's but

when its side effects were discovered i.e. scanners, the company ran into trouble and ConSec bought it and financed Ruth to investigate ephemorol further, seeing some potential in the scanner side effect. Ruth then tested the drug on his wife with the result that the two sons born to her became scanners. He also discovered that the ephemorol could be used to tranquilize them but ultimately he did not know how to deal with them as people.

Thus, it is clear at this point that Revok, the elder, became driven by power, and Vale the younger, became a wandering derelict, neither brother knowing how to achieve a 'self' because of the constant voices in the head. Because of this Revok seems to come to the conclusion that he can achieve fulfilment by creating more scanners. He speaks of a generation of scanner soldiers saying, "We'll bring the world of normals to their knees!" He believes that Kim and her friends are 'cripples' because they choose not to use scanning for evil. Once Vale recognizes Revok's madness he hits him with a small sculpture and this provokes the final battle between the scanners. "I'm gonna suck you're brain dry" says Revok, "Everything you are is going to become me. After all brothers should be close, don't you think?"

As they scan each other huge pulsating veins appear on both their faces and arms. Their bodies become distorted and transformed, as Steven Shaviro says, "Traumatic shock and emotional ambivalence are entirely materialized and played out on the surface of the flesh".<sup>35</sup> Vale's veins then burst and he starts to burn. As he burns, however, he holds out the palms of his hands and seems to regain control. Then his eyes explode and his body burns up. Revok's eyes turn white and he roars.

We then cut to Kim as she wakes in the next room. She looks around for Vale. Then she sees the charred corpse on the floor. However, as she touches it, she can still feel his presence. Suddenly his voice speaks from the corner of the room. We see a figure hunched up in a jacket. As Kim watches, Revok's face emerges. However he speaks with Vale's voice and his eyes have also changed to the greeny colour of Vale's. He says, "It's okay Kim. We've won." Vale has used the technique which Kim taught him previously to overcome Revok. In scanning Revok, he has made himself and Revok become "one mind, one system, one soul." He has, that is to say, developed a self, but he has only been able to achieve it through literal transmigration into his brother. At the end therefore we see not just the defeat of a power mad Revok, but also a symbiosis which satisfies the premise of the New Flesh.<sup>36</sup>

This concept is developed further in his next two movies, **Videodrome** and **The Fly** where even more potent and disturbing imagery is used. In **Videodrome**, for example, Max Renn becomes "the video word made flesh". As Steven Shaviro notes,

"The body is not erased or evacuated; it is rather so suffused with video technology that it mutates into new forms ... he's transformed into a human video machine."<sup>37</sup>

This 'New Flesh' could be said to be the end result of 'creative cancers'. In **Videodrome** Max has truly become something else by embracing the New Flesh, particularly as the image of Nikki Brand tells him that "death is not the end", and this is also the case in **The Fly** where Seth Brundle eventually accepts his metamorphosis and the fact that he is "stricken by a disease with a purpose." He recognizes the New Flesh as something which is not necessarily bad but just different from what came before and his attempt to preserve his identity from monstrous transformation, as Steven Shaviro

notes, “is a *ludicrously* [my italics] literal endeavour to conform to social norms”<sup>38</sup> and when Seth does finally accept the change he is at the same time rejecting the notion of so called normality. As Cronenberg himself points out,

“It’s very hard to alter our aesthetic sense to accommodate ageing, never mind disease. There’s an impulse to try and accommodate ageing into our aesthetic.”<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, even though the ending to **The Fly** may be tragic, it also works as a confrontation to our aesthetic sense of what the human body should be like. Also, like the unborn scanners, there is the implication that Brundle’s New Flesh will continue in Veronica’s unborn child.

The last example of Cronenberg’s work I want to examine is **Dead Ringers**. This movie we are told is “based on the true story of the Marcus twins, both gynaecologists who died in weird circumstances.”<sup>40</sup> It is thus a tale of brotherly symbiosis that featured as part of the narrative in **Scanners**. Here, however, it is central to the narrative.

We are alerted to this in the opening credits for here not only do we see images of body-horror in the form of drawings of strange medical instruments and operations being performed but also an image which involves siamese twins. This is then followed by a sequence in which we are introduced to the twins, Elliot and Beverly Mantle. They are monozygotic i.e. identical twins and are evidently fascinated with the workings of the human body, particularly women’s bodies, and when they grow up they both become gynaecologists. The story then focuses on their relationship with an actress called Claire Niveaux.

Claire comes to the Mantle brothers because she wants to have children. However, she is infertile. This is because, as they discover, that she is a trifurcate i.e. she has three cervixes and three compartments in the womb. This condition fascinates Elliot and Bev, so much so that Elliot says, "I've often thought there should be beauty contests for the inside of the human body." Both brothers then begin a relationship with her, but she cannot tell them apart, for although they each have different personalities, for example Bev, as the name suggests, is the more female and emotional of the two, to her they are one and the same person because physically they are indistinguishable and mentally and emotionally entirely dependent one on the other, covering up for each other when things go wrong even pretending to be each other, and sharing each others interests (e.g. gynaecology) and even each other's women. As such they represent the New Flesh as Cronenberg says,

"The fact that Elliot and Beverly are identical twins is their evolution into something monstrous. They are creatures as exotic as **The Fly**. So there's a double game there; the mind/body split is still very much on my mind (and possibly my body too), but here the body is separated into two parts."<sup>41</sup>

This is then developed to the point of tragedy, even more so than in **The Fly**.

Inevitably therefore their relationship with Claire puts their own relationship under pressure, for as Cronenberg says, "Elliot and Beverly are a couple, not complete in themselves"<sup>42</sup> and when Claire realizes this, not only does her relationship with Bev start to fall apart, but Bev's relationship with Elliot starts to fall apart as well for he realizes he cannot sustain his relationship with her without becoming independent of his twin brother, which he knows he cannot do. Caught both ways, he starts to become

dependent on pills. Meanwhile Elliot is also having difficulties, for he is as dependent on his brother as his brother is on him, a fact indicated when he brings a set of female twins to his apartment and asks that one call him Elliot and the other call him Bev.

Realizing what is at stake, Elliot then visits Claire and tells her, "You contribute a confusing element to the Mantle saga, perhaps a destructive one." Meanwhile Bev becomes more dependent on drugs and, thinking that Claire is having an affair with another man he phones her up whilst she is on location and in a jealous rage he screams to her personal assistant (a man), "Have you examined her yet? She's a trifurcate, a mutation... basically this means you have been fucking a mutant!"

Unable to cope anymore with his feelings for Claire, he moves back in with Elliot but he has now become quite unbalanced and drug dependent and believing every woman now to be mutant, like Claire, he designs a range of "gynaecological instruments for working on mutant women" which he has made up into surgical instruments. Wanting to put them to use, he takes them to the operating room saying, "We'll use these" but when he tries to use one of them which is sharp and clawlike, he loses control. Elliot tries to smooth things over but he knows he cannot do so for very long for as he himself tells us, "Chang and Eng, the original Siamese twins, could not stand the shock of separation; when one of them died of natural causes, the other in turn died of sheer fright."<sup>43</sup> Although he knows he and Beverley are not Siamese twins, they might just as well be. They are thus, as Shaviro says "relentlessly drawn into a spiral of self-destruction"<sup>44</sup> and when Elliot tries to stop Bev taking drugs he starts to take drugs along with him saying, "Once we're synchronized it'll be easy" for as Elliot is only too aware they can never be separate, "Truth is" he says "nobody can tell us apart. We're perceived as the same person." Importantly though, it is not just the fact that other

people mistake them for each other, they too perceive themselves as one person. Thus as Steven Shaviro suggests,

“Elliot and Beverly’s notion that they are not just identical, but Siamese twins, is something more than a metaphor. What starts out as a fantasy [Bev’s nightmare of separation] has to be literalized and enacted by the end of the film.”<sup>45</sup>

Thus, when Claire returns and tells Bev that he had made a mistake and that she was not having an affair it is all too late, for when he sees his surgical instruments in an art gallery window and tells her, in response to her question, that “They’re for separating Siamese twins” we know that the tale of Chang and Eng’s death will indeed be literalized. This is confirmed when Bev eventually goes back to a room in the Mantle Clinic where he and Elliot have been staying. There is rubbish everywhere and Elliot has become as hooked as Bev on drugs, and neither of them can detox. They then revert to childlike behaviour and eventually use the mutant instruments on themselves. After injecting Elliot, Bev says, “Now we’re going to separate the Siamese twins” whereupon he cuts open Elliot’s stomach and Elliot says, “Why are you crying?” “Separation” says Bev “can be a terrifying thing.” As Shaviro says,

“The incisions that are supposed to separate Elliot and Beverly once and for all similarly succeed in uniting them in the most extreme resemblance there is, that of death.”<sup>46</sup>

Thus, when Bev leaves the building after killing Elliot and phones Claire in a final effort to become a whole person without Elliot he cannot do it because effectively he has committed suicide. Beverley cannot, as Shaviro points out leave Elliot’s body

behind and return to Claire, because as he says, “in killing his brother he has in fact performed a self-cancelling ritual of automutilation.”<sup>47</sup> His self resides in Elliot just as much as Elliot’s self resided in him. Like Chang and Eng, they can never be separate and this is confirmed in the final shot of Bev lying across Elliot’s body, at one with each other again.

Although **Dead Ringers** has moments of visceral body-horror, the main focus in this movie is the mind/body split, previously witnessed in **Scanners**. In the case of this film though the ending is much less positive as Elliot and Beverly are so biologically predetermined that they cannot hope to escape their fate however much they might try. Further, this film, unlike **Scanners**, suggests that mind and body can never be separated out. In **Scanners** this is not the case: the mind can occupy any bodily shell precisely because it can be separated from the body. **Dead Ringers** therefore suggests that New Flesh is not without its problems. However, as I have tried to show throughout this chapter, happy endings and neat resolutions are not characteristics that we associate with Cronenberg’s work. Rather it is the showing of the formation and consequences of the New Flesh whether good, bad, strange or repellent that distinguishes his work from those of other horror filmmakers. In this respect Steven Shaviro is correct when he says of Cronenberg’s work that,

“We are pushed to the limits of vision and of representation, compelled to witness what we cannot bear to see. Exploding and multiplied flesh, the violent insidious violation of bodily integrity, is crucial to Cronenberg’s project formally as well as thematically.”<sup>48</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Chris Rodley (ed.), *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, pxiii.
- <sup>2</sup> *BFI Dossier-David Cronenberg*, p.54.
- <sup>3</sup> *The American Nightmare:Essays on the American Horror Film*, p.24.
- <sup>4</sup> *BFI Dossier 21-David Cronenberg*, p.2.
- <sup>5</sup> In *The American Nightmare*, Robin Wood writes about **The Brood** as a film which shows “the ultimate dread being of women usurping the active, aggressive role that patriarchal ideology assigns to the male”, p.24.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p.80.
- <sup>7</sup> Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, p.126.
- <sup>8</sup> *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p.xx.
- <sup>9</sup> *The Cinematic Body*, p.128/129.
- <sup>10</sup> ‘A Gothic Revival: Obsession and Fascination in the Films of David Cronenberg, BFI booklet, p.17.
- <sup>11</sup> Bryan S.Turner, *The Body and Society*, p.114.
- <sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the scores by Ivan Reitman for **Shivers** and **Rabid**, although not as musically complex as those by Howard Shore, set the tone of intensity and melancholy which Shore continued in his work for Cronenberg.
- <sup>13</sup> ‘*Stereo, Sex and Crimes of the Future*, BFI booklet, p.27.
- <sup>14</sup> *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p.47
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p.50.
- <sup>16</sup> Grove and Newell, *Animal Biology* [6<sup>th</sup> Edition], p.130-131.
- <sup>17</sup> Cronenberg was originally going to use real leeches as the parasites for some scenes in the movie.
- <sup>18</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.317.
- <sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p.303.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid*, p.317. This quote is particularly important when analysing **The Fly** and **Videodrome** in relation to Cronenberg’s concept of the ‘New Flesh’ and the idea of somehow transgressing the body, transformation with a purpose.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid*, p.338. This idea is also pertinent to **The Brood**, **Videodrome**, and **The Fly**.
- <sup>22</sup> Susan Sontag, *Aids and Its Metaphors*, p.10.
- <sup>23</sup> *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p.xiv.
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid*, p.53.

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- <sup>25</sup> Note how quickly characters are introduced with unusual names which is a typical Cronenbergian feature.
- <sup>26</sup> Apparently the explanatory scene explaining what had happened to Rose was edited out.
- <sup>27</sup> *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p.84. Note that in **Forbidden Planet** the creatures from the mind were referred to as monsters from the Id, the Freudian term for the subconscious.
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid*, p.80.
- <sup>29</sup> *ibid*, p.159.
- <sup>30</sup> *Subversive Pleasures*, p.159.
- <sup>31</sup> *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p.88.
- <sup>32</sup> *ibid*, p.xx.
- <sup>33</sup> The exploding head in **Scanners** is one of the most famous special effects from the horror genre, as well as being one of the most convincing.
- <sup>34</sup> *The Cinematic Body*, p.134
- <sup>35</sup> *ibid*, p.135.
- <sup>36</sup> Note that, despite a relatively happy ending for once, there are still the unborn scanners to take account of. Revok's vision of a scanner army could still happen, especially if all the unborn scanners are as powerful as the one which scanned Kim
- <sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p.137/138.
- <sup>38</sup> *ibid*, p.146.
- <sup>39</sup> Interview with David Cronenberg from *Mondo 2000*, Cronenberg Home Page, <http://zappa.users.netlink.co.uk/mond2000.html>
- <sup>40</sup> *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p.135.
- <sup>41</sup> *Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, p.144.
- <sup>42</sup> *ibid*, p.147.
- <sup>43</sup> *ibid*, p.153.
- <sup>44</sup> *The Cinematic Body*, p.153.
- <sup>45</sup> *The Cinematic Body*, p.151/152.
- <sup>46</sup> *ibid*, p.153/154.
- <sup>47</sup> *ibid*, p.154.
- <sup>48</sup> *ibid*, p.154.

## CONCLUSION

As I have tried to indicate at the outset of this thesis, body-horror movies have a set of formal features that enable us to distinguish them from other kinds of horror movie product. Most importantly they concern the body, what we think of it, what we do to it, and what it is capable of doing to us. As such, body-horror movies have an important bearing on and relationship to what we think about health, fitness, beauty and longevity issues that began to gain prominence in the 1970s and which raise questions about lifestyle, consumerism, medical science and the direction it is taking. As many of these questions are questions we might not wish to confront, I thought it important to devote some time and some space to the work of David Cronenberg as his films not only comment on these issues but present a view of them which in certain respects departs from or is critical of the norm. This might also be said of his two most recent movies, **Crash** (1996) and **eXistenZ** (1999).

**Crash** is based on a novel by J.G. Ballard and fuses the idea of New Flesh with a sexual obsession for cars, or more specifically, car wrecks. As such, it is an almost futuristic take on Western culture's love affair with the car as well as a concentration on the flesh, especially flesh which has been transformed after numerous accidents. Just as scars are erotic so are leg braces and crashed cars. As the character Vaughan says, "It's whatever you're into, the reshaping of the human body by modern technology."

Cronenberg's most recent body-horror movie is **eXistenZ**, a movie about virtual-reality and yet again a movie about New Flesh, in this case the organic Game Pod which plugs

into a Bioport socket in the spine. It also features a typically Cronenbergian mise-en scene. As Chris Rodley notes,

“With **eXistenZ** Cronenberg has returned wholeheartedly to his most abiding source of ideas – radical developments in bio-technology, and their often disturbing, but potentially liberating consequences. As in the telekinetic conspiracy tale **Scanners** (1980) and the telepornographic hypnosis conspiracy tale **Videodrome**, the appropriation (or destruction) of these developments by political interests drives the narrative. Indeed, Cronenberg revamps notions of “the new flesh” as technological hardware, confident that some of his seemingly outrageous past imaginings have become reality. For instance, Dr Dan Keloid’s “neutralised” skin grafts in **Rabid** (1976) are now science fact, not fiction.”<sup>1</sup>

Whilst this suggests that David Cronenberg is still producing body-horror, albeit with the greater emphasis on humour I mentioned in Chapter Two, the cycle itself has begun to dissipate, even decline, in spite of the fact that discourses about the body have arguably gained in both strength and credence i.e. health is everywhere, but body-horror is not. Given this, no simple or straightforward relationship should be drawn between popular cultural production and the context in which it is produced. Cultural products (in this case movies) do not reflect in any simple way the conditions under which they were produced. If therefore an explanation is to be given for why the body-horror cycle emerged in the 1970s and why it is less present now, one might suggest that the answer lies in the fact that popular cinema does not simply exploit what is prevalent/dominant, but draws on what is new and controversial. In this respect the emergence of body-horror in the 1970s might be better attributed to the fact that the seventies in the United States were a time of crisis marked by the ongoing Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal

and the aftermath of high profile political assassinations in the 1960s and that concerns emerging about health, fitness, ageing and disease were part of this crisis. Hence the proliferation of these body-horror movies there.

However, just as this crisis has passed, so have concerns about health etc. passed into the mainstream discourse. Body-horror, thus, is no longer attention grabbing or financially profitable and the emergence of new cycles in the horror genre, which are either self-referential 'slasher' movies like the **Scream** series or which are returns to monster movies such as **Deep Blue Sea** (1999), are aimed more specifically at a teenage audience. The fact, however, that Cronenberg still makes movies about the New Flesh suggests that the body-horror movie may at some point return given the right social, political and economic circumstances. In this respect the life of a movie cycle, as Tudor suggests, is intimately connected to the issue of profit. If there is not a return on the latter it is unlikely that there will be a return of the former. The New Flesh, it seems, will stay on ice for a while longer.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sight and Sound*, April 1999, p.9.

## Filmography

*Circus of Horrors* (Anglo Amalgamated; GB; 1959; colour; d. Sidney Hayers)

*Les Yeux sans Visage* aka *Eyes Without a Face* aka *The Horror Chamber of Dr Faustus* (Champs Elysees-Lux; France; 1959; bw; d. Georges Franju)

*Corruption* aka *Carnage* (Titan; GB; 1967; colour; d. Robert Hartford-Davis)

*The Exorcist* (Hoya Productions/WB; US; 1973; colour; d. William Friedkin)

*The Stepford Wives* (Fadsin/Palomar; US; 1974; colour; d. Bryan Forbes)

*Shivers* aka *The Parasite Murders* aka *They Came from Within* (Dal Productions Ltd, with participation of CFDC; Canada; 1974; colour; d. David Cronenberg)

*Rabid* (Cinema Entertainment Enterprises [for Dal Productions Ltd] with participation of CFDC; Canada; 1976; colour; d. David Cronenberg)

*Massacre Mansion* (Charles Band Productions; US; 1976; colour; d. Michael Pataki)

*Coma* (MGM; US; 1977; colour; d. Michael Crichton)

*The Manitou* (Manitou Productions; US; 1977; colour; d. William Girdler)

*The Brood* (Les Productions Mutuelles and Elgin International Productions, with participation of CDFC; Canada; 1979; colour; d. David Cronenberg)

*Alien* (Fox/Brandywine-Ronald Shusett Productions; GB; 1979; colour; d. Ridley Scott)

*Scanners* (Filmlan International Inc. with participation of CFDC; Canada; 1980; colour; d. David Cronenberg)

*The Howling* (Avco Embassy Pictures/International Film Investors/Wescom Productions; US; 1980; colour d. Joe Dante)

*An American Werewolf in London* (Lycanthrope Films; GB; colour; d. John Landis)

*Dead and Buried* (Ronald Shusett Productions; US; 1981; colour; d. Gary A. Sherman)

*The Beast Within* (MGM/UA; US; 1982; colour; d. Philippe Mora)

*The Thing* (Universal; US; 1982; colour; d. John Carpenter)

*Videodrome* (Filmlan International II Inc. with participation of CFDC; Canada; 1982; colour; d. David Cronenberg)

*Re-Animator* (Empire/Re-Animator; US; 1985; colour; d. Stuart Gordon)

*The Fly* (Brooksfilms; Canada; 1986; colour; d. David Cronenberg)

*Dead Ringers* (Mantle Clinic II Ltd, in association with Morgan Creek Productions Inc, with participation of Telefilm Canada; Canada; 1988; colour; d. David Cronenberg)

*Rejuvenator* (Steven Mackler/SVSC Films; US; 1988; colour; d. Brian Thomas Jones)

*Tetsuo* (Kaijyu; Japan; 1989; bw; d. Tsukamoto Shinya)

*Frankenhooker* (Shapiro/Glickenhau; US; 1990; colour; d. Frank Henenlotter)

*Body Parts* (Par; US; 1991; colour; d. Eric Red)

*Tetsuo 2 – Body Hammer* (ICA/Kaijyu Theatre/Toshiba EMI Japan; 1992; colour;

d. Tsukamoto Shinya)

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