

## The Return of the New Flesh: Body Memory in David Cronenberg's *The Fly*

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‘The human body is the best picture of the human soul’  
- Wittgenstein (1991, 152)

### Dismembered Limbs

John Locke presents us with a disturbing thought. In a section from his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* titled ‘Personal identity in change of substance,’ the following remark is made:

Cut off a hand, and thereby separate it from that consciousness he had of its heat, cold, and other affections, and it is then no longer a part of that which is himself, any more than the remotest part of matter. (Locke 1993, 182)

Locke invites us to consider the body as a series of discrete units, ranging from the earlobe to the ankle. Once removed, all relation to the unity of personal identity remains supposedly unaffected, the self now gazing on the inanimate limb, as though it were part of the broader landscape. In such a moment, it appears as though memory is *prima facie* erased along with the materiality of the limb itself. In the place of the fallen limb, consciousness—the glorified entity in Locke—remains on watch, securing the unity of the personal self, as rationality and thought conspire to produce what Locke terms, the ‘sameness of a rational being’ (1993, 180).

Of course, what allows this unity to come about, for Locke, is the temporal structure of consciousness, a structure that is supposedly lacking in the various trajectories of the human body. Consciousness not only attends to modifications in the present, but also arches back to its previous actions

and thoughts, conferring the term ‘personal’ upon identity. As a result, the body, while not wholly overlooked in Locke, is nevertheless relegated to a mass of flesh, kept alive simply through the mind’s occupation of its various cells and limbs.

A critical question descends from this taxidermy of human limbs: must it be the case that the ontological validity of personal identity is taken from the question of whether there can be a mind without a body? A strange question, no doubt. For what it presupposes is that an alternative exists to traditional accounts of personal identity, in which the body becomes not simply a chunk of materiality but an intelligent agency with its own history, biography, and idiosyncrasies. Accordingly, we might even rephrase the question as thus: *can a body exist in a conscious state independently of the mind?* Phrased in this way, the question assumes a spectral quality, seemingly placing us in a realm of ghouls, ghosts, and zombies, as though the same limbs that fell from Locke’s subject suddenly take on a life of their own.

In this paper, I want to suggest that a body *can* exist in a conscious state independently of the mind, and that the films of David Cronenberg provide a rigorous example of the spatio-temporality of this mutation. Unlike any other director before or after him, the films of Cronenberg have gained the honour of being emblematic of a body-centric account of human identity. Time and again, Cronenberg shows the viewer how the body can become a site of independence, developing its own history, habits, and affects, often in conflict with the manner in which consciousness experiences or remembers those affects.

Yet Cronenberg is not a Cartesian dualist, and the much vaunted notion of ‘body horror’ that is often associated with his films depends on the idea that self is an embodied subject, who is now experiencing bodily disturbance. Indeed, what is central to the genre of body horror is the sense of the body dissolving boundaries between inside and out, self and other, and the living and the dead. In each of these dyads, Cronenberg has crafted an account of identity torn asunder by what he terms ‘flesh undergoing revolution’ (Rodley 1997, 80).

By turning to the philosophy of Cronenberg—and I believe we can approach his films as philosophical essays in embodied cognition—traditional accounts of personal identity, as being grounded in cognition, merit reappraisal. Two claims will be made. First, with recourse to Merleau-Ponty’s account of the ‘phantom limb,’ I will suggest that Cronenberg’s account of diseased and mutated bodies attests to the intelligibility of the body in its quest for existential unity, as figured through Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the ‘intentional arc’ (Merleau-Ponty 2006). In turn, this idea will be examined via the motif of the phantom limb both within the context of Merleau-Ponty, but also within the cinema of Cronenberg.

Second, by bringing embodiment together with temporality, I will suggest that Cronenberg's treatment of body horror, especially as it figures in *The Fly* (1986) affords us a special insight into the divergent ways cognition and corporeality recall and re-experience the past through the gesture of 'body memory.' By way of conclusion, I will put forward a logic of absence, which contests Cronenberg's optimistic commitment to the revolution of the flesh.

### The Embodied Self

Let me begin, then, by establishing the phenomenological context for my treatment of Cronenberg's body horror. Two ideas are important here. The first is Merleau-Ponty's account of motor intentionality. The second focuses on his treatment of the phantom limb, which, as I will argue, can be seen as a visible demonstration of motor intentionality.

What does it mean to speak, as phenomenologists do, of an 'embodied subject'? At first sight, the meaning is trivial; namely, that we are in the world not simply as autonomous, Cartesian subjects but as selves who are defined by our bodies. In turn, this elevates the body to more than the contingent vessel in which the 'real self' is placed, but establishes a unitary phenomenon which is not dissectible in terms of 'mind' and 'body' alone. This grand claim gives rise to a gauntlet of complex issues, the majority of which will have to be overlooked presently. However, one issue is unavoidable.

My being an embodied subject does not simply refer to my occupancy of a body in space. My body is not one thing among many. I am not 'embodied' simply in that I am a biological entity that is composed of the materiality of flesh, and that alone. Rather, my embodied being is given its specificity and irreducibility through being the centre of my lived experience. In an essential way, my body is the world in which I experience firsthand. Indeed, when I experience the world, then I do so through my body. It is not that my visual sight touches the world before being processed by my cognitive faculties, but that my body as a perceiving organ asserts itself as the very condition for experience.

All of this, then, is a manner of putting forward the primacy of the body. At the same time, however, the prioritising of the body in Merleau-Ponty does not relegate cognition to a second-order process. Mental and bodily phenomena, to be clear, do not occupy a causal relationship with one another, but present themselves as being identical. Yet the relation is an identity in which perception is inconceivable without the human body. As

Merleau-Ponty has it, 'I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or I rather I am it' (Merleau-Ponty 2006, 173).

The question of how this identity between mental and bodily intentionality is possible leads us to the first trajectory: motor intentionality (2006, 126–127). With this idea, Merleau-Ponty develops an account of agency that is in a sense prior to cognitive intentionality. Such a prepersonal self occupies a transcendental relation to the world, being 'an anticipation of, or arrival at, the objective' (2006, 127). The idea of the body as anticipating movement, flux, and difference prior to cognition places its actions in a broadly autonomous relationship to mental intentionality. The body has a life of its own insofar as it yields a 'prehistory,' enabling it to discern an orientation in the world of its own accord. More than this, the action of the body fulfilling this prehistory presents us with a wholly different mode of the self, as Merleau-Ponty writes in a key passage:

There is, therefore, another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here, and who marks out my place in it. This captive or natural spirit is my body, not that momentary body which is the instrument of my personal choices and which fastens upon this or that world, but the system of anonymous 'functions' which draw every particular focus into a general project. (2006, 296)

At least two things are at stake in this passage. First, despite his anti-dualistic commitments, Merleau-Ponty's embodied subject involves an essential doubling. This doubling is given to appearances in terms of the personal self which inhabits the world of human values and the 'one' who perceives in me and renders those values possible. Second, although Merleau-Ponty appears to assume that the 'general project' that the '[other] subject beneath me' strives for reconciliation with the personal self, this need not be the case. Indeed, if we are to trust in Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'motor intentionality' by taking it as a particular kind of non-cognitive intelligence, then we need to also be open to the idea that one mode of intentionality can become a source of alienation for another. Before moving on to the implications of this in Cronenberg, let me say a quick word about how this dynamic is played out in Merleau-Ponty's illuminating treatment of the phantom limb.

### **Phantom Limbs**

The problem of the phantom limb is formally simple: how do we account for the illusive 'feel' of a limb that is now physically absent? Three options present themselves. One is to assign an error of judgment to the belief that a limb still exists despite the empirical evidence that it is in fact absent. Yet this

is clearly misleading, given that ‘the awareness of the amputated arm as present...is not of the kind: “I think that...”’ (2006, 94). But this does not imply, second, that the feel of the limb is simply a side effect of the body’s raw sensation, a system of ‘blind processes’ (2006, 91). Nor, finally, is the emergence of a phantom limb a case of the imaginary limb ‘substituting’ the missing one in a strictly mechanical manner. In all of these cases, what is missing is the existential meaning of the limb so far as it defines our being-in-the-world. Merleau-Ponty states:

The phantom limb is not the mere outcome of objective causality; no more is it a *cogitatio*. It could be a mixture of the two only if we could find a means of linking the ‘psychic’ and the ‘physiological,’ the ‘for-itself’ and the ‘in-itself,’ to each other to form an articulate whole, and to contrive some meeting-point for them. (2006, 89)

Thus, the persistence of the limb’s presence pushes us in the direction of ‘un-Cartesian terms,’ in the process forming ‘the idea of on an organic thought through which the relation of the ‘psychic’ and the ‘physiological’ becomes conceivable’ (2006, 89.) This organic idea turns out to be the body’s reflexes as being able to ‘adjust themselves to a “direction” of the situation’ (2006, 93). This implication of this immanent direction, is that all our bodily actions turn out as already being involved in a ‘*pre-objective* view which is what we call *being-in-the-world*’ (2006, 92). Far from a chaotic response to random stimuli, bodily movement and orientation is forever with reference to the preservation of any given world. Thus Merleau-Ponty is entitled to declare that: ‘Some subjects can come near to blindness without changing their “world”’ (2006, 92.). This is a telling claim. With it, the objective configuration of the world as yielding a certain number of properties and things is dwarfed by the conduct of the embodied subject. Thanks to this conduct, consistency is established despite the discontinuity of the body itself. In a word, something more than the materiality of the body enables the self to endure through time, asserting a fundamental hybrid between the physiological and the psychological.

This hybrid force enables the world to retain a consistency that is vouchsafed through what Merleau-Ponty terms the ‘intentional arc’ (2006, 157). By this, he refers to the manner in which all bodily action is inherently temporal, at once projecting an orientation toward the world while simultaneously retaining the past. Because of the ‘intentional arc,’ the ‘unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility’ is preserved (2006, 157.). Applied to the phenomenology of the phantom limb, what this means is that the felt experience of an absent limb is to be viewed as a form of knowledge sedimented into the habitual body. Taking the ‘intentional arc’ in a broader sense, as that which gives a particular life its singularity and

meaning, the body's role in achieving this end is unparalleled. Nothing less than a complete mode of intelligence is at stake, enveloping the discontinuous breaks in life with a thread of consistency quite distinct from reflective knowledge.

This distinction between embodied knowledge and reflective knowledge sets in a place an incipient tension between what survives bodily change and what falls from that flux despite retaining a presence in the schema of selfhood. This is viscerally clear in the case of the phantom limb. For what we are contending with is, on the one hand, the cognitive knowledge that a particular article of the human body is missing, and on the other, the retention of a lifeworld that no longer exists, objectively speaking. In the darkness of mutability and mutilation the body clings to a temporal framework established in the past but projected toward the unmapped future. Yet the body is *here, now*.

To summarise, then. As both a 'thing' in the world, but also the locus of all orientation and identity, the body retains an ambiguity which refuses conceptual determination. Neither solely a memory bound in the past nor simply a stimulus-response in the present, the phantom limb establishes itself as a spectral agency working between the psychological and the physiological, overlapping each domain in a confused and complex way. In Merleau-Ponty's words, the realm occupies a 'middle term between presence and absence' (2006, 93). Two implications ensue. One, the emphasis on betweenness is a challenge to the mechanical portrayal of the body, linking the interior of the body to the world, but at the same time falling short of responding objectively to the world. Two, the body's intelligence is both reassuring and potentially a source of otherness. By contending with the notion of a double intentionality, one of which is prior to the other, there emerges the possibility of the intelligence of the human body exceeding its limits. One way in which this excess in intelligence manifests itself can summon estrangement in the self 'viewing' this spectacle unfold. It is at this point, then, that David Cronenberg enters the scene, in the process fleshing out this phenomenological structure.

### **Insect Flesh**

How, then, does Cronenberg contribute to this legacy of embodied cognition? In fact, we are already in a very Cronenbergian territory. Alongside the theme of dissection and mutilated body parts, the issue of the phantom limb has a special relation to Cronenberg, inasmuch as it attests to the non-cognitive independence of the human body, striving toward an end that is initially foreign to the perceiving subject. In other words, what we

discover in Merleau-Ponty is the idea of the body as able to absorb knowledge from the world, where the 'world' in question is the life-world of lived experience. Thus, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the removal of a leg from an insect. The response is neither reflex nor wholly introspective. Rather: 'The insect simply continues to belong to the same world and moves in it with all its powers' (2006, 90).

Retaining the example of insects, we are invariably led to the world of Seth Brundle, the diseased protagonist in *The Fly*. The narrative of this well-known film has a simplicity which belies the complexity of its content. Seth Brundle, an eccentric scientist, who suffers from motion sickness, is building a teleportation system used to transport inanimate matter from one point in space to another. At a party, Brundle meets a journalist, Veronica Quaife, who subsequently becomes his girlfriend. Despite Brundle's success at teleporting inanimate matter from one point to another, what is lacking in his research is the successful teleportation of animate matter. Attempts so far at moving a baboon from one space to another have gone severely wrong, resulting in the animal emerging in the other pod in a disintegrated state, its insides now strewn on the floor. For Brundle, the subject is 'made crazy by the flesh' in the act of teleportation.

Having, successfully reprogrammed the teleportation module, Brundle directs this molecular deconstruction onto his own body. Unbeknown to him, however, a small housefly enters the pod, splicing with his own genetic constitution. The result: an initial surge of post-teleportation empowerment and super-human ability—said to be analogous to the purification of coffee, evidenced by Brundle's rabid desire for sugar—before a slow and gradual disintegration of the human flesh. Beginning with the growth of a few thick hairs on his back, the transformation of Brundle into what is now lightly termed 'Brundlefly' proceeds through a distinct range of stages: blotchy skin, tightening of the muscles, loss of nails, hair, and teeth, decomposition of the flesh, before arriving at a total transformation of his physical structure. Eventually, this deformation of the human body gives rise to a hybrid organism, composed of fragments of both the human and the fly.

Alongside this corporeal drama, Brundle's relationship with Veronica suffers a parallel disintegration. Consistently sympathetic to Brundle's fragmentation, she nonetheless becomes increasingly alienated by his lack of compassion. Shortly after, the alienation turns to horror as Veronica discovers that she is carrying Brundle's child, a child that she fears will be severely deformed. This doomed love story reaches a tragic conclusion, as Brundlefly attempts to unite Veronica and the unborn child into a single entity via the telepods, thus producing the 'ultimate family.' Aghast at the thought, Veronica and Brundlefly get into a physical struggle, with Veronica tearing off Brundlefly's jaw. The tearing of the flesh produces the apotheosis

of Brundle's transformation to Brundlefly: a gross, voiceless entity totally deprived of all human attributes except for a forlorn expression in its dark eyes. Having freed herself from the monster, Veronica watches as Brundlefly makes one final leap into the telepod, arriving at the other end a composite of the telepod and flesh, and manifests as an amorphous sludge crawling on the floor. With all hope ruined, Veronica reluctantly cooperates in the assisted suicide of Brundlefly, a shotgun to the head concluding the film.

Throughout this metamorphosis, both Brundle and Brundlefly co-inhabit the same mutating body, each self striving for independence from the other, yet each remaining dependent upon the other for their respective self-unity. A series of paradoxes thus unfolds. Far from being obscured by Brundlefly, Brundle remains present all along. Only now, the presence is a quasi-presence, caught in the lens of self-doubt, melancholy, and transformation. Binding this ambiguous collision of materiality and identity is the intelligence of the body. In the darkness of selfhood, the identity of Brundle and Brundlefly is thus taken up through the teleology of the body, in both its healthy and diseased manifestations.

The complexity of this relationship between Brundle and Brundlefly is informed by Cronenberg's insistence that we consider how the disease perceives *us*, the human subject, rather than how the human subject pathologises the disease. As Brundle says when discovering his new ability to climb walls, 'I seem to be stricken by a disease with a purpose, wouldn't you say?' Given Cronenberg's commitment to the independent identity of the body, the question would emerge: where is the 'I' in this purposeful disease? This reversal of perception leads not only the viewer, but also Brundle, to become voyeur of the process of this transformation.

Key here is the scene of Brundle looking into the bathroom mirror only to find the future Brundlefly glancing back. As Brundle's nails begin to fall out, the reaction is less horror and more anxiety. The anxiety is inextricably bound with Brundle's discovery of his body as a physical thing in the world, armed with the potential to mutate and readapt itself of its own accord. As Cronenberg writes with this scene in mind: 'How many times have you heard stories about someone who just discovers a lump or a blemish or a blotch or something, and it's the beginning of the end?' (Cronenberg 2006, 87). Phenomenologically, what appears to be unfolding in this body anxiety is the subordination of the lived body to the physical body, a structural distinction originally made by Husserl though now fleshed out in Cronenberg.

Through becoming radically thematized, Brundle literally catches sight of his body as anterior to his identity—an anteriority that is independent of, and to some extent in conflict with, Brundle's experience of himself. Thus he asks himself: 'What's happening to me? Am I dying?' In one sense, the answer is clearly: yes. Yet the death is ambiguous. While the empirical body



of Brundle has begun to detach itself from the world, the 'I' of Brundle remains in place. *Some*-thing is dying, and that death is caught in the anxious face of Brundle gazing at his body, as though it was being colonised by an alien agency.

This intersection between the empirical body and the 'I' gazing at the body returns us the 'intentional arc' of Merleau-Ponty. By bringing Merleau-Ponty together with Cronenberg, what can be demonstrated in an especially visceral way is the fundamental ambiguity of the human body. As the source of all being, the body's intelligence is at once the origin of orientation and estrangement. While this tension between unity and disunity has been tacit in the overview of Merleau-Ponty's account of the lived subject, only by bringing Cronenberg into this scene are the implications of the tension clear. After all, the process of transformation in Cronenberg concerns less the rational self, and more the body dissenting from the rational approbation of selfhood. It is as though the body has *exceeded* its intelligence and, like an exotic variant of an auto-immune disorder, is now producing a body which is no longer 'mine.' Such is the dynamic we witness on a structural level in Cronenberg's account of metamorphosis: it is a world in which the body becomes a strange fusion of *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*, both alien materiality and centre of lived experience.

Yet the horror emblematic of this fusion is there in the ambiguity of the human body, an ambiguity that resists the limitation of both inside and out, as Merleau-Ponty phrases it: 'The body catches itself from the outside engaged in a cognitive process' (Merleau-Ponty 2006, 107). At such times, the body enters into a dialectic with cognitive thought, and in doing so, instigates a different experience of being an embodied subject. Seen in this way, by revisiting the scene of Brundle looking at himself in the mirror, the gesture of catching oneself is presented as a moment of self-discovery, yet a discovery of oneself as giving birth to a self is incommensurable with the body in transition.

### Brundle Museum of Natural History

So, where does memory fit into all of this? Cronenberg's philosophy, as it has so far been characterised, places the independence of the body at odds with the subject's—in this case Brundle's—cognitive understanding of self. The principle implication being that 'horror' in Cronenberg is the horror of the body dissenting from the rational appropriation of self-identity. As the disease perceives *us*, so that reason-centred perspective is undermined. Yet neither the dissent of the body nor the ambiguity of identity would be possible without the self as a being placed in time. The history of Brundlefly

is the history Brundle. Accordingly, I want to conclude with some broad remarks on how memory and flesh structure the identity of Brundlefly. We already know that the threshold marking the transformation of Brundle to Brundlefly is established in *space*. From one teleport to another, a division is cast, where the extinction of Brundle is met with the genesis of Brundlefly. Space divides these identities and space is purported to once again unite them. Accordingly, once it becomes clear that Brundle is mutating into an abject life form, the reversal of this process is taken up spatially. Yet repeating the teleportation does not lead to a reversal of time but to an even more grotesque deformation, whose relationship with Brundle the scientist is only visible through the suicidal and climatic gesture of levelling a shotgun against his—better, *its*—own head.

This focus on the spatiality of Brundle's metamorphosis to Brundlefly is reinforced by the fact that having been transported nothing initially seems to have changed for Brundle. We are viewing the same man. That the change then becomes one of deferment and retroactivity, to invoke Freud's account of traumatic neurosis, suggests that indeed we are dealing with a strange temporality in the development of Brundlefly. This is evident in that the change is less a case of linear disintegration and more a dynamic ebbing and flowing of physical alterations.

Throughout this mutation, however, *some-thing* of Brundle, albeit a fragmented and decaying thing, remains. The question is: how is this relation between the decay of the flesh and the persistence of Brundle possible? Having focused earlier on Brundle's relation to Brundlefly, we must now reverse this formula and consider how Brundlefly experiences the materiality of Brundle.

Initially, this experience seems to be one of detached curiosity, a trace no doubt of Brundle the scientist. And so we see Brundlefly documenting his new method of digestion by vomiting on rotten food before consuming it. But one scene is especially notable in this shedding of Brundle flesh. Standing over a command hub, the viewer observes Brundlefly programming his computer in order to purify himself of the fly. Yet the work is thwarted. As Brundlefly gives a spoken order to the computer, an error message flashes on the screen: 'pattern mismatch, voice not recognised.' The loss of voice instigates a profound shift in Brundle's metamorphosis. The reason for this is twofold. First, a singular contribution to Seth Brundle's character as a whole is his highly idiosyncratic manner of phrasing sentences, which is at once sporadic and erratic, a tightly pulsating chain of words and silences. In human terms, without his characteristic voice, Brundle is a partial entity, devoid of a mode of expression singular to Brundle the man.

But alongside this deprivation of the personal aspect of Brundle, there is a more troubling implication to be drawn from this loss of the voice. Not

only is Brundle's particular mode of phrasing speech peculiar to him as a person, but without the very function of speech—irrespective of its idiosyncratic tone—the embodied subject as a whole is experienced in an altogether different light. This difference is realised if we take the voice as being between the biological and cultural body. On the one hand, the human voice ascends from the materiality of its biology. The voice expresses and depends upon the body which houses it. On the other hand, the voice is more than a constituent of the human body, establishing a 'depth' which exceeds all manner of communication. And this depth is not only personal but cultural, too, thus conferring a complexity upon the human body that prevents it from appearing as an automaton.

The voice that is returned to us when we look another person in their eyes gives us reassurance that beyond the screen of the iris, a depth of emotion and desire prevails. Once suspended, this same screen of vision leaves nothing more than a surface with a dark void lurking beneath the flesh. The mute horror that a body without speech invokes is not only the repulsion of something being trapped in the body, but it is a more elemental dread of the human body as an anonymous thing, no different from inanimate matter. And it is precisely this metamorphosis into anonymity that we witness in this key moment.

'Pattern mismatch, voice not recognised.' With this indictment, Brundlefly places a pencil in his mouth, apparently surveying his lack of options. The stance is broken, however, as contact between the pencil and his mouth dislodges the remaining teeth from his mouth, leaving the white fragments to fall on the matt black keyboard. Disarmed, Brundlefly proceeds to examine himself. In a reverse of an earlier scene, we are now back in the bathroom—clearly a pivotal site of transformation in the film. Now, however, the bathroom is strewn with empty boxes of Cap'n Crunch, a sweet breakfast cereal, discarded in the washing basin. Hunched over, Brundlefly once more confronts the mirror. 'You're relics... residual, archaeological, redundant. Of historical interest only,' he proclaims, holding his teeth in the palm of his hand. As he opens the cabinet, the viewer catches sight of another relic: his ear, held in a white, plastic tray. The camera slowly sweeps to the right and we see yet more of Brundle's discarded flesh, unidentifiable body parts archived for posterity. The scene is interrupted with arrival of Ronnie. 'You missed some good moments,' Brundlefly remarks, 'the medicine cabinet is now the Brundle Museum of Natural History.'

### The Absent Body of Memory

Two implications can be drawn from this cinematic revelation. First: Brundlefly's relationship to his body parts reunites us with John Locke's view on dismemberment. Initially, we appear to be surveying nothing more than 'the remotest part of matter,' to repeat Locke. Divested of consciousness, these body parts become detached from the subject they once belonged to, and so relegated to ironic ruins of a former colony. This mechanical perspective on the previous incarnation of the body fulfils Merleau-Ponty's critical characterisation of the empiricist take on the body as a 'highly polished machine' (2006, 87). Once damaged, the limbs are discarded as new ones are substituted.

Yet this position of archiving the physical remains of Brundle before the insertion of new parts is strangely at odds with the phenomenology of Brundlefly more broadly. After all, what we are witnessing is not so much the embodiment of Cronenberg's slogan—'Long Live the New Flesh'—but a modification of flesh in the process of transformation, folding back on itself before returning to the present.

A question transpires in the midst of this folding. What kind of a self is Brundlefly: united in his spatio-temporal being or fragmented at the core of that being? Merleau-Ponty gives us a clue: 'The consciousness of the body,' he writes, 'invades the body, the soul spreads over all its parts and behaviour overflows its central sector' (2006, 87). Spreading, spilling, and invading, an invisible force joins these two disparate selves in the same body, meaning that something *more* than the materiality of the flesh brings Brundle and Brundlefly together as one. This some-thing-more-than-materiality is neither reducible to the physical site of the body nor solely identifiable with the faculty of cognition. Rather, what I want to claim is bridging Brundle and Brundlefly, despite the mutilation and metamorphosis forming a cleavage in this relation, is the affective hold of *body memory*.

In using the term 'body memory,' I want to draw a distinction between the manner in which experience is appropriated rationally and the manner in which the same experience is recollected through the primacy of the body. Already we have considered this distinction in Merleau-Ponty's account of motor and mental intentionality. Taking Merleau-Ponty's account to its limit, what emerges is the possibility of cognitively experiencing an event quite independently from how that same experience is recollected through the body. But this recollection is all together a different issue from that of the body's ability to retain and apply information for future use, such as being able to drive without having to think how to do so. At stake is not the question of habit and retention but the very absorption of the world that occurs apart from cognition.

The question of how Brundlefly absorbs the memory of Brundle is demonstrable with what I would term a *logic of absence*, and this logic can be mapped out in three stages. First, Brundle's initial transformation into Brundlefly is met with faux enthusiasm. Central to this affirmation is the desire to become a new self, thus fulfilling Cronenberg's optimistic reading of the 'New Flesh' as an expansion of the self. As Brundle states: '[The disease] wants to turn me into something else. That's not too terrible is it? Most people would give anything to be turned into something else.' The 'rebirth' of Brundle is thus initially an invitation to revalue existing values, marking a Nietzschean overcoming of being 'human, all too human.' Emblematic of this movement is Brundle's celebration of his new sexual prowess and physical strength, as though such processes were symptoms of a refined self.

If we take this first movement as being structured as much around physical prowess as it is the desire to reinterpret loss as a gain, then by the time this phase concludes, the yawning depression into reality is all the more amplified. Thus, from the glorified self, we are then thrown into an ambiguous realm, in which the original source of empowerment—strength and sexuality—become agencies of alienation. Against the backdrop of a desire to fulfil one's embodied destiny, reality bleeds in. Such a reality is a sedimented history impregnated in the flesh of Brundlefly, despite the instantiation of a new form. Central to this second phase is a brief but telling moment in the film. Having not seen him for a month, when Veronica is finally reunited with Brundle, his appearance has now become deformed. Veronica is aghast with literal horror while Brundle sounds a warning, 'Every time I look in the mirror, there's someone different, someone hideous, repulsive.' As Veronica gestures toward him, Brundle flinches, before muttering, 'You look so pretty.' As a moment of incongruence, the scene carries with it a potency matched by Brundle's grotesqueness. Yet more than a desperate grasp at intimacy, the confession can be read as a manifestation of Brundle coming to light in the body of the incipient Brundlefly. By including this line in the script, Cronenberg draws our attention to a device bridging two selves converging in the same body. The passing remark, 'You look so pretty,' attests to the turning point, an intertwining of the intimate and the abject, a fusion of presence and absence before Brundle becomes the being without compassion, as manifest in the 'fly politics' speech.

The disclosure of vulnerability in Brundle, as he senses the 'someone hideous, repulsive' becoming a defining feature of his being, points to the finale of this logical movement. Even here, however, with Brundlefly as the misshapen entity bearing only the slightest resemblance to Seth Brundle the scientist, the attempt to affirm the 'new flesh' comes to the fore: 'I'm an insect who dreamt he was a man and loved it. But now the dream is over and the insect is awake.' Once more, this rational declaration of a desired self is

met with a series of corporeal counterclaims lurking beneath the construction of desire. Most notably, when he discovers that Veronica is planning on aborting their baby, Brundlefly remarks, 'Why did you want to kill Brundle? The baby might be all that's left of the real me. Please don't kill me.' Here, then, we have the whole of Brundlefly's project of self-transformation laid bare. Far from a linear unfolding of either progressive decline or empowerment, the emergence of Brundlefly the monster at all times plays off the wounded remains of Brundle shimmering beneath the flesh. Moving beneath the veil of the flesh, Cronenberg presents us with a kind of 'ontonecology': that is, a corporeal movement in space and time, the impetus of which is sourced in the realm of death and disintegration. Such a movement is basically oscillating in character, forever lurching between two separate worlds. That Brundlefly is now referring to his 'past' self in the third-person before aligning that person with the 'real me' testifies to the fragmented continuity of Brundle embedded in the body of the monster.

This ambiguous reversibility between Brundle and Brundlefly is only possible thanks to the body's ability to seize past experience, irrespective of the physical mutilation of that past. And so, operating our own oscillating movement, we return to Merleau-Ponty. In particular, we can, I think, phrase the mutation of Brundle as an extended example of the phantom limb at work. If, as Merleau-Ponty claims, the intelligence of the body is guided by an 'intentional arc,' the purpose of which is to confer constancy on the world, then in the case of Brundle's slow metamorphosis into otherness, is it not the case that what we the viewers are witnessing in this transformation is nothing less than *the whole body adopting the form of a phantom limb*? Consider how Brundle's new body, although giving him special skills, does nothing to undermine the personal self which survives that mutilation. Only now, there is a body memory of an experienced life-world, but no body as such to articulate it. Thus the horror of Seth Brundle is the horror of the survival of the self, a self that proves itself as departing from the lived experience of the body. Brundle is like a ghost in the body of Brundlefly, whose diseased, deformed, and dissolving presence is carved in the appearance of Brundle receding from view. Indeed, the disappearance of Brundle the scientist is taken up so gradually that by the end of the film we have to remind ourselves that there was such a scientist in the first place. This gradual dissolution attests not only to the overlapping of Brundle and Brundlefly, but also to the fact that Brundlefly's material presence is only possible through the absent presence of Brundle.

The body memory of Brundle is not, then, manifest in terms of tics and gestures latent in the body of Brundlefly. To be clear, we are not in the Proustean territory of the diseased flesh involuntarily coming into contact with a rarefied world through a chance encounter with an external stimulus.

Rather, what we witness is an uncanny embodiment of Merleau-Ponty's claim that 'The insect simply continues to belong to the same world and moves in it with all its powers' (2006, 90). Only now, the obstinacy of the body's retentional grip on the past is thwarted of all avenues of expression. What instead materialises is a set of limbs, whose powers have become a source of alienation rather than constancy. Not only the limb, but the *whole* body has become a spectral presence touching a once familiar world which now sends the body memory of Brundle into a vacuum. About this materialisation of absence, Merleau-Ponty writes movingly:

We do not understand the absence or death of a friend until the time comes when we expect a reply from him and when we realise that we shall never again receive one... we turn aside from those areas of our life in which we might meet this nothingness, but this very fact necessitates that we intuit them (2006, 93).

The encounter with memory is thus realised as an absence, and an absence that is disclosed in the light of a damaged expectation; namely, of 'belong[ing] to the same world and mov[ing] in it with all its powers' (2006, 90). Emblematic of the transformation in *The Fly*, the ambiguous reversibility of Brundle and Brundlefly attests to Merleau-Ponty's claim that turning away from absence is already a turning toward that void. This is clear, in that the failure of Brundle to fuse successfully with Brundlefly is less a question of genetic and molecular malfunction, and more an issue concerning the conflict of identities placed in time. Undergoing revolution, Brundlefly nevertheless detects a hint of himself as Brundle, with memory coming to the surface of the diseased body.

### **Conclusion: The Return of the New Flesh**

Considered within the broad spectrum of Cronenberg's work, *The Fly* presents us with an account of memory and embodiment that is strikingly at odds with the temporality of the director's other works. In such works, there is a tendency to privilege becoming and the future, as evident in the anonymous dystopia of *Scanners* (1981) as it is in the alternate reality of *eXistenZ* (1999). Nowhere is this emphasis on becoming more prevalent, however, than in the figure of Max Renn from *Videodrome* (1983), whose self-proclaimed philosophy is the famous slogan: 'Long live the New Flesh!' For Cronenberg, the phrase signifies the possibility, 'that you can actually change what it means to be a human being in a physical way....that you could grow another arm, that you could actually physically change the way you look—mutate' (Rodley 1997, 80–81). All of which conspires to produce an affirmative, optimistic account of the body in Cronenberg's films despite

the incursion of disease intervening in this metamorphosis, as he puts it: '[Human existence] is monstrous but it's exciting too' (Cronenberg 2006, 91). Underpinning this excitement is Cronenberg's broadly existentialist outlook, which assigns a *de facto* importance to contingency and value. The implication of this commitment is that our aesthetic values in particular are always subject to modification alongside our own bodies, remarking that:

Here we have a rebirth. A transformation into something that, if I change my sense of aesthetics, and I change my sense of morality, I can see that what I'm becoming is a superior thing, or at least an equally good thing. So that's the play that's going on in [*The Fly*]. [Brundle] by force of will not accepting himself at face value, because the face is too hideous too accept at face value (Cronenberg 2006, 92).

By not only adopting a 'bodily point of view,' but going so far as to adopt the view of the disease inhabiting the body, Cronenberg's vision crystallises in the form of a Nietzschean hero, 'stricken by a disease with a purpose' and thus compelled to explore the uncharted landscape this mutation carves. For Cronenberg, the horror at the kernel of Brundle's transformation is the horror of failing to transcend the face—a horror set in place by the sediment of fixed values. Seen in this way, Seth Brundle is a truly tragic hero, insofar as he fails to embrace the necessary conditions for change, despite his body exceeding those sedimented values. Indeed, placed against his counterpart—Max Renn—then Brundle is not only tragic but also *pathetic*. Overburdened with pathos, Brundle succumbs to a peculiar mode of regret which stands in total contrast to the willed embrace of 'flesh undergoing revolution' in *Videodrome* (cf. Rodley 1997, 80).

But is this division between Seth Brundle as the tragic hero and Max Renn as the Dionysian hero really so simple? After all, given the themes of reversibility and ambiguity running through both Brundle and Brundlefly, assigning a nominal category to the character risks prematurely constructing a fixed identity. Indeed, considered retrospectively, the desire at the heart of the film—to *become a self*—is forever overridden by the prior ambiguity of being a body. This incursion of ambiguity as a reality can be read as the *horror of becoming no-one*: a mute, anonymous, and *prepersonal* self manifest simply as an aggregate of limbs and tissue.

*The horror of becoming no-one*: it is with this formula that we can conclude the paper. As a 'card-carrying existentialist,' Cronenberg is all too aware of the contingency of human identity and its susceptibility to the nausea of becoming a formless, abject 'thing' no different from the table upon which I write. As I have sought to show in this paper, the nothingness at the core of Cronenberg's vision finds a special expression in *The Fly*. And



this ambiguous nothingness, at once a source of potential and closure, has been evident in two ways.

First, we witnessed the birth of ambiguity through Merleau-Ponty's account of the lived body. There, the body showed itself as being a site of renewal and horror. Applied to Seth Brundle, the ambiguity places the subject in an anterior relation to the body, in the process disarming the unity of the autonomous 'I,' so far privileged by cognition and evident via the perspective from Brundle to Brundlefly.

Second, by reversing the perspective, the glance from Brundlefly to Brundle reveals a self-conscious relation to the history of one's lived experience of the body. As both archival and anonymous, Brundlefly's attempt to sift through his former body parts in a naturalistic way was offset by the fact that the genesis of his transformation is framed by a memory which is both anonymous and absent. Far from generating unity, then, Cronenberg's vision of embodiment and identity is diseased by a memory that cannot be assimilated by cognition. The result of this failure to assimilate body memory, is that memory itself occupies the role of the anonymous monster within.

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