

Humanity's Primal Fears

—Interpreting *The Fly*

Introduction

The Fly is a remarkable horror film concerning science gone wrong; after a failed experiment, the protagonist slowly and painfully transforms into a half-human, half-fly monster. Widely acclaimed and popular with audiences, the selling points of 1986's *The Fly* might be the grisly scenes coupled with the pushing of the boundaries of imagination, which helped the film win The Academy Award for Best Makeup and Hairstyling.

However, upon closer inspection, there is more than just visual effects to this masterpiece. The film dedicates extensive significance to the scientist Seth Brundle's miserable transition into a fly-hybrid, emphasising his helplessness and fear when confronting his physical and psychological transformation. Within the field of Psychology, there are five primal fears: extinction, mutilation, loss of autonomy, separation, and ego-death, which is the loss of self-identity (Albrecht, 2012; Beckert 2015). Instead of probing into the visual spectre of this film, this essay will focus on how *The Fly* and other such works can be perceived as a reflection of mankind's primal fears. Furthermore, it will analyse how Seth Brundle's plight is reflected in the struggles of those with degenerative diseases, both in film, and in the real world.

Analyzing Fear in *The Fly*

The essence of *The Fly* is its portrayal of Brundle's resistance to the gradual loss of his human nature. While working as a scientist, Brundle invents a telepod which allows teleportation of animate matter. However, during a trial run with himself as the guinea pig, a lone fly enters the pod, which results in the combination of their genes.

Brundle's metamorphosis into a fly is a progressive and significant process. Indeed, the scriptwriter and producer of the 1986 remake both emphasise the process of Brundle's gradual alteration rather than merely present to the audience the abrupt mutation as the original version did in 1958. Instead, the later film devotes significant time to capture Brundle's physical and mental changes. It is during these changes that the primal fears start to emerge.

His metamorphosis first presents itself as a few stray bristly hairs growing out of his back, followed by his teeth and fingernails dropping off. Realizing his fate, and facing the first primal fear of mutilation (loss of bodily parts), he endeavors to seek out a solution to bring a halt to

the gruesome process. Then, with his human reasoning gradually fading away, he slowly comes to terms with his new identity as “Brundlefly”. At the eleventh hour, with the remaining vestiges of his humanity, he begs his girlfriend to end his life.

Brundle’s fear of losing himself, his fear of ego-death, is shown in his resistance to becoming a hybrid. This fear is demonstrated in his dialogue with Veronica Quaife,: “Insects don’t have policies. They’re very brutal, no compassion, no compromise,” Perhaps as a reflection of his confusion about his self-identity, he exclaims “I’d like to become the first insect politician.” “But, I’m afraid...”, he adds crucially. While becoming less human-like in both appearance and behaviour, he appears to accommodate to his new fate, but with subconscious resistance. His criticism of insects’ barbarism indicates his animosity towards this idea of joining them and his trembling voice bespeaks the agonising battle being waged against his humanity. Knowing that his incarnation as “Brundlefly” will possibly urge him to harm his loved ones, he thus chooses death instead of accepting a new identity.

Chronic fear of ego-death and mutilation can be observed in other popular works of literature and screen, for example, in the recent global hit from Korea, Yeon Sang-ho’s *Train to Busan*. Seok-Woo is a father who tries to escape the ravages of a zombie apocalypse while trapped on a train with his daughter. Ultimately he is bitten by a zombie and faces assimilation, which would render him undead and clear his memory. Entrusting his daughter to others, he takes his own life in order to protect his loved one from being hurt. Like Brundle, Seok-Woo prefers actual death over the alternative, his loss of identity or ego-death.

The fear of ego-death establishes itself as a common theme in other international horror works. These films capitalise on what they believe to be the audience’s capacity to empathise with such loss. The 2009 science fiction action horror film *District 9* depicts a South African society that discriminates against its alien residents. A reporter accidentally infects himself and becomes an alien, losing his humanity and turning into the very creature which he used to despise. It is not only in works of horror that these primal fears surface. In the recent independent drama film *Still Alice*, Academy Award winner Julianne Moore vividly portrays Alzheimer’s patient Alice Howland’s struggle against her loss of memory and ability to care for herself. It is another noteworthy example of how man’s primal fear of uncontrollable change or confusion of identity resonates with a mainstream audience.

These various characters - Brundle, Seok-Woo, *District 9*’s reporter and Alice Howland - each encounter the impasse of changing into someone or something completely different before their loved ones. Facing their fear of identity loss (ego-death), the shame of troubling others (loss of autonomy), fear of losing loved ones or loved ones losing them (separation), and the fear of death itself (extinction), their journeys tap into and explore humanity’s primal fears.

The Fly and Human Suffering

Brundle’s suffering in *The Fly* can be seen to mirror the experience of patients with certain

degenerative disorders. Parkinson's disease (PD), for example, is a long-term progressive disorder characterised by changes in both physical and mental realities. Like Brundle, sufferers may ignore the initial symptoms or be misdiagnosed at the beginning, for the symptoms are inconspicuous. Nonetheless, as the condition worsens, just as with Brundle, the issue of whether to yield to the changes comes into sharp repose.

Brundle's plight shares further characteristics with this particular debilitation. A notable clinical feature of PD is its two motor subclasses, tremor-dominant and postural instability and gait difficulty-dominant (Bohnen et al., 2011, p.2359). Both types lead patients to exhibit abnormal and involuntary movements which can occur unexpectedly; hence, patients may suffer seizures in public or in front of family and suffer a sense of awkwardness or embarrassment (Nijhof, 1995). For PD sufferers, a separation may form between their minds and movements, causing delay or invalidation of the bodily instructions. In a sense, sufferers are 'losing their limbs' and facing another primal fear: the fear of mutilation. This is also Brundle's fate. While realising the terrible somatic ramifications of his 'experiment-gone-wrong' he tries to hide himself from others, especially his girlfriend, in an attempt to conceal what he views as a disgrace. The film audience watches in horror as he scratches and shakes his body uncontrollably, showing the same behavior habits as flies. These scenes may symbolise humankind's potential loss of control of their behaviors, their loss of autonomy. Brundle's struggle to control his body and embarrassment has parallels in the experiences of PD sufferers.

The gradual degeneration of patients' mental function is another significant feature of PD. The probability of PD patients developing dementia is five times higher than average (Aarsland, Anderson, Larsen, Nielsen & Kragh-Sørensen, 2001). Those who suffer dementia may lose the memories of their past experiences and be trapped in a dilemma of how to handle their daily life (Torpy, Lynn & Glass, 2010). While Brundle loses his human reasoning and self-identity, PD sufferers will often yield to a gradual and painful loss of memory and, thus identity (ego death).

Identity loss, or ego-death, then, might be the most salient of the primal fears. There is evidence to suggest that a fear of dementia is positively related to a weakening of self-cognition (Fujita, Sasaki, Kaneko, Eboshida & Motohashi, 2015). As the condition deepens, PD sufferers become less aware of their original identities. Man is thought to be a social animal with attendant primal demands for social identity and self-identification. The decline of self-cognition awareness may contribute to a rejection of themselves and yield terrifying consequences. In *The Fly*, Brundle's tragedy can be attributed to the confusion of his identity, trying to overcome the fear of adaption in self-identification. In real life, the people living under chronic fear may go to extremes, for instance, committing suicide. Research data indicate that the rate of suicidal ideation among PD sufferers is nearly 25% (Kostić et al., 2010). Such sobering data may bespeak the depression that PD can bring to patients. At the end of *The Fly*, Brundle decides to end his life and panic, which would seem to mirror the way that some PD patients cope with the fear of losing themselves.

Ego-death and the other primal fears are also related to some other diseases such as epilepsy and Alzheimer's. Epilepsy is a brain disorder characterised by unforeseeable dysfunction (Fisher et al., 2005). Patients can lose control of their bodily movements, which usually manifests in spontaneous convulsions or seizures. The sense of loss of autonomy, and "quasi-mutilation" is similar to Brundle and PD patients. With Alzheimer's disease, a chronic neurodegenerative disease, loss of memory and cognitive abilities can result in wildly changed characteristics (Whitehouse et al., 1982). Like Brundle in *The Fly*, the post-illness individual can appear to loved ones as someone completely unknown.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of Brundle's struggle against accepting his new identity, this essay has explored the idea that *The Fly* might portray several of mankind's primal fears: ego-death, mutilation, loss of autonomy, separation, and, ultimately, extinction. It has made reference to other works of screen in various genres and cultures that have similarly appalled yet enthralled moviegoers. Drawing on the real-life example of debilitating diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, and epilepsy, the essay has attempted to illustrate that this sense of dread is by no means confined to the realm of fiction.

Although there is no certain correlation between the significance of fear in *The Fly* and the thesis put forward in this essay, the striking similarities between Brundle's metamorphosis and the plight of diseases that exhibit both somatic and mental degeneration in the real world is difficult to ignore. Such disorders force sufferers to adjust to an unfamiliar and unusually adverse situation without concession, upsetting their security and peace.

While Brundle's journey in *The Fly*, and other such tales of man facing his primal fears, might appear to be a reflection of the fears of the sufferers of degenerative illnesses in the real world, this on-screen masterpiece, through its depiction of selfless compassion shown by both its victims and those closest to them, leaves us with the hopeful notion that love, after all, may be the ultimate antidote to fear.

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