Desire, Disease, Death, and David Cronenberg: The Operatic Anxieties of *The Fly*

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Introduction

In 1996, Linda and Michael Hutcheon released their groundbreaking book, *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death*, a work that analyses operatic representations of tuberculosis, syphilis, cholera, and AIDS. They followed this up in 2000 with *Bodily Charm*, a discussion of the corporeal in opera; and, in 2004, they published *Opera: The Art of Dying*, in which they argue that opera has historically provided a metaphorical space for the ritualistic contemplation of mortality, whether the effect is cathartic, meditative, spiritual, or therapeutic.

This paper is based on a Hutcheonite reading of the *Fly* saga, which to date is made up of seven distinct incarnations: George Langelaan published the original short story in 1957; Neumann and Clavell's 1958 film adaptation was followed by two sequels in 1959 and 1965; David Cronenberg re-made the Neumann film in 1986, which generated yet another sequel in 1989; and, most recently in 2008, Howard Shore and David Henry Hwang adapted Cronenberg's film into an opera. If the Hutcheons are correct that opera engenders a ritualistic contemplation of mortality by sexualising disease, how does this practice influence composers and librettists' choice of source material? Historically, opera has drawn on the anxieties of its time and, congruently, *The Fly*:

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The Opera draws on distinctly 21st-century fears. Shore and Hwang's operatic adaptation of *The Fly* is a testament to our collective anxieties over nuclear proliferation, the spread of cancer, and the unknown risks of genetic modification that lurk at the experimental boundaries of stem-cell research.

Proceeding chronologically through all seven incarnations of the story, I illustrate how each new interpretation adds to the saga's on-going preoccupation with illness, love, and mortality. At every stage, the story taps into a long and rich history of the representation of disease in art, resurrecting clichés that can be traced back to those three operatic favourites—tuberculosis, syphilis, and cholera. The operatic anxieties of the *Fly* saga are not explicitly present in the source texts and films; rather, they emerge incrementally through the adaptation process, which culminates in Shore and Hwang's 2008 opera. In retrospect, then, and in the knowledge that Langelaan's story was in fact destined for the operatic stage, the *Fly* saga's preoccupation with desire, disease, and death may logically be read from the point of view of opera theory. This is not to say that Langelaan or his subsequent film adapters necessarily had opera in mind, but rather that Shore and Hwang may have instinctively recognised *The Fly*'s operatic potential, due to its sexualising of modern medical and technological anxieties.

First Incarnation: Playboy [Bunny] Fly

"The Fly," a short story by George Langelaan, was first published in the 1957 June issue of *Playboy* magazine, certainly a publication dedicated to the contemplation of "bodily charms." This seems fitting, considering the preoccupation of future adapters with the image of the diseased body as not only horrific, but also sexual. According to Peter Brooks, the body is a nexus of pleasure, pain, and mortality (*Body Work* 1); and, like the "singing bodies" discussed by the Hutcheons, the protagonists in the *Fly* saga embody both pleasure and pain, desire and desiring, sickness and suffering (*Desire, Disease, Death* 10). The story opens with an expression of anxiety about technology, in particular the telephone, a detail that recalls Langelaan's work as a British undercover agent in World War II (Harrison 157). This may account for the narrator's intense dislike of telephones as sources of intrusion and surveillance.[1] Appropriately, André Delambre suffers his transformation in a teleportation device made from two telephone booths. During the Second World War, Langelaan underwent plastic surgery in order to move freely through Nazi-occupied France (Harrison 157), a transformation that influenced the title of his memoirs, *The Masks of War*. The changing faces of the protagonists in the *Fly* saga represent the horrific playing out of this identity crisis.

The story takes place in Paris and follows the investigation of André's death in a hydraulic press, seemingly at the hands of his loving wife, Hélène. The investigation, which is carried out by Commissaire Charas and the narrator, André's brother

François, leads to a written confession by Hélène, in which she describes how her husband's accidental teleportation accident created two monsters: a human with a fly's head and arm, and a fly with a human head and arm. In killing the human-fly monster her husband had become, Hélène claims she was carrying out his last wishes. Much of the debate between François and Charas revolves around the question of Hélène's sanity, an issue that is raised at least five times during the story (179, 180, 184, 185, 202).[2] Hélène confesses that if she had looked at her husband much longer, she would have gone on screaming for the rest of her life; however, she also declares that she would "prefer the guillotine to the living death of [the] lunatic asylum" (199, 186).

André and Hélène's son Henri (whose name is changed to Philippe in the 1958 film) is said by François to be "the very image of his father" (180). As if trying to shield him from his shameful inheritance, Hélène maintains that Henri is not her son, a pretence that contributes to the theory that she is insane. But what precisely is the legacy that Hélène wishes to keep from her son? It cannot be an inherited genetic mutation (as it is in later film adaptations), since Henri was conceived years before his father's accident. Rather, if one scratches beneath the surface of Hélène's fear of shaming her son, the true inherited disease is revealed: the disease of scientific curiosity. Hélène describes her husband's experiments as "forbidden" (187) and claims that killing him is not difficult because "André had gone long ago, years ago" (201), suggesting that the real disease is not the mutation at all, but the forbidden obsessions that ultimately led to it. Here, Langelaan raises the spectre of Faust, an archetypal character that has been the subject of multiple opera adaptations in the 19th and 20th centuries. André's Faustian experiments, which play on 1950s anxieties concerning nuclear technology, ultimately create a being composed of human, fly, and cat physiology (200). This triune hybrid is an interstitial creature that "exist[s] across multiple categories of being, but conform[s] to none of them" (*Art of Dying* 147).

Second, Third, & Fourth Incarnations: B-Movie Monsters

Langelaan's short story was adapted into a film in 1958, directed by Kurt Neumann and written by James Clavell, with Vincent Price in the role of narrator François Delambre. The screenplay is remarkably faithful to the original, except for several minor but significant changes. In addition to changes catering to a North American audience (for example, the change of location from Paris to Montreal), two of the story's themes are dramatically enhanced: love and mental illness. François now confesses that he is secretly in love with his sister-in-law, while the romance between Hélène (Patricia Owens) and André (Al Hedison) is more developed, thus creating a love triangle. The question of Hélène's sanity also becomes more pivotal to the plot. In the original, Hélène writes her confession long after she has been committed; in

the film, she tells her story to François and Inspector Charas (Herbert Marshall) in order to *avoid* being committed: "Don't let them lock me up!" she screams as she is taken away on a stretcher. Just as the Hutcheons argue that "[r]ecent medical thinking about suffering suggests that [suffering occurs] when one's personal identity is threatened or disrupted" (*Desire, Disease, Death* 12), so does Neumann's film place more emphasis on the splitting of André's mind, depicting him as an individual at war with himself. Similarly, the diseased protagonists throughout the *Fly* saga suffer because their personal integrity is threatened on physical, psychological, and social levels (see also *Desire, Disease, Death* 65).

The Hutcheons write that "[w]hen a society does not understand—and cannot control—a disease, ground seems to open up for mythologizing and mystifying it" (*Desire, Disease, Death* 38-39). This dynamic is also at work in Neumann's film, except that it is science and technology that is not understood and cannot be controlled, and which in turn leads to the spread of disease. All modern scientific progress is thus swept up into Hélène's anxiety over her husband's experiments when she says: "It's like playing God.[...]I get so scared sometimes. The suddenness of our age. Electronics, rockets, Earth satellites, supersonic flight, and now this. It's not so much who invents them, it's the fact they exist." The film's attitude toward forbidden science, however, is complicated by François' speech to Philippe (Charles Herbert) at the end concerning the nobility of the search for scientific truth. Whereas Langelaan's story is a horrific tragedy, the film attempts to counter-balance its cautionary tone by adding a moralistic monologue in support of science and technology. Clavell's screenplay thus posthumously re-casts André from the role of hubristic Faustian scientist into that of noble truth-seeker and paragon of the utopian scientific age that lies just around the corner. While this pro-technology message does come across as rather artificial, it is certainly worth noting that the Faustian archetype has always walked a fine line between hubris and nobility, damnation and salvation. In spite of this dichotomy the *Fly* saga remains a fundamentally tragic narrative. As in so many Romantic operas, the only true redemption lies in self-sacrifice.

With the tremendous success of the first *Fly* film, 20th Century Fox green-lighted a sequel the very next year. *Return of the Fly* (1959) continues the story of the Delambre family, this time focusing on Philippe (Brett Halsey), now grown up into a bright young scientist like his father. The real villain of the story, however, is not the curious scientist or the forbidden technology he creates, but his double-crossing assistant, Allan Hinds, a.k.a. Ronnie Holmes (David Frankham). The film thus splits the good and evil aspects of science into two separate characters. Consequently, it is Ronnie alone who is responsible for deliberately mutating Philippe into a human-fly monster. This time, in addition to the head and arm of a fly, Philippe also receives the leg and foot of a fly and experiences that classic sci-fi B-movie effect, giantism. Also of interest is Ronnie's accomplice, Max Berthold (Dan Seymour), a mortician whose office is decorated with death masks and exotic African artefacts. As in so many operas, it seems the evil forces that spread disease are still being associated with the dual image

of death and cultural exoticism.

Inexplicably, in *The Curse of the Fly* (1965) Philippe's name is changed back to Henri, as he was called in the original short story. As the title suggests, the third *Fly* film features an inherited family disease—just as, in the 19th century, heredity was considered an important factor in the predisposition to various diseases (*Desire, Disease, and Death* 36). Despite François' success in unscrambling his nephew at the end of *Return*, we learn in *Curse* that Henri (Brian Donlevy) was left with a chronic aging condition, which he passes on to his own son Martin (George Baker). Like the *Ring Cycle*'s Norse Gods deprived of the golden apples, by the end we will see Martin withering and greying. Degenerative disease is even more prevalent in this film than it was in previous incarnations, as the Delambre teleporter claims more and more victims—including Martin's first wife Judith (Mary Manson), who is not only mutated but also driven insane.

The film begins with a shattering window. We then see a woman wearing only bra and underwear emerge from the window and run off through a pastoral parkland, accompanied by a rich piano and orchestral score reminiscent of an operatic overture. As she passes a sign, we see that the place from which she is escaping is a mental hospital. It is as if Hélène Delambre (who in the original story hangs herself in a mental hospital) has been resurrected before our eyes. We learn eventually that her name is Patricia Stanley (Carole Gray) and that she is a concert pianist, a profession that in the words of Ivan Raykoff can act as "a nostalgic symbol of the Western cultural traditions threatened, damaged, or even destroyed in [the] battles [of World War II]" (*Piano Roles* 266). As a fictional extension of the technological nightmares that emerged from WWII, the Delambre teleporter thus comes to threaten not only Patricia herself, but also the idyllic pre-war culture she represents. On the other hand, Raykoff also argues that the piano can function as "a symptom of cultural change" (*Piano Roles* 266), due to its adaptability and its ever-changing design throughout its history. Clearly, the images of the piano and the pianist are multivalent and can connote a wide range of meanings depending on context. In *The Curse of the Fly*, the piano's role is no less flexible: Patricia plays Chopin's Nocturne No. 18 in E, Op. 62, at the Delambre mansion; later we will hear the same piece played by Judith, whose mutated hands can only produce a grotesque parody of the music.

After meeting, falling in love with, and marrying Martin Delambre all in the on-screen space of about ten minutes, Patricia is whisked off to the exotic Delambre mansion outside of Montreal, where Martin and Henri are carrying out secret teleportation experiments. Throughout the film, every character is concealing a secret illness: Patricia has concealed her escape from the mental hospital, Martin and Henri conceal their rapid aging condition, Henri attempts to conceal his radiation burns from Martin, and everyone conspires to hide the mutants from Patricia. The film's climax plays out as Patricia discovers the mutants created by the experiments and as father and son go to greater and greater lengths to perfect their teleporter. Disease and death are the inevitable outcomes and, in the end, Patricia comes full circle by

returning to the asylum from which she escaped at the beginning of the film.

Like that paradigmatic character from Victorian gothic fiction, Jane Eyre, Patricia soon discovers that her true love's first wife Judith is very much alive, completely mad, and conveniently locked-up close-by. If this overt similarity to Charlotte Brontë's classic seems to add to the operatic undertones of the story, it should: *Jane Eyre* was itself adapted into an opera in 2000 by British composer Michael Berkeley, with a libretto by Australian novelist David Malouf and a score that, according to *New York Times* critic Paul Griffiths, quotes liberally from the famous "mad scene" in Gaetano Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor*. When dealing with opera, the mechanics of adaptation and the anxiety of influence seem to be omnipresent. The fact that Patricia and Judith's respective renditions of Chopin's Nocturne No. 18 sound so different is a testament to the piano's inherent adaptability and its role as "a cultural go-between" (*Piano Roles* 4, see also 288). Throughout its history, the piano has been used to imitate other instruments, such as strings and the human voice, even a whole orchestra. As if evoking the image of the teleporter itself, James Parakilas argues that the piano "has always been a transplanting instrument, capturing in its own terms the sounds of one musical site in order to carry them to another site" (*Piano Roles* 296).

The Curse of the Fly is replete with cultural exoticism and death. Like Max Berthold's office in the second film, not only is the Delambre mansion sumptuously decorated in an romanticized Eastern style, but it is also staffed by a mysterious Chinese couple (Burt Kwouk and Yvette Rees), one of whom is played by a Western actress in yellow-face. This exoticized setting acts as a framing device for Martin and Patricia's surprisingly overt sexual relationship. It is a relationship, however, that can lead only to disease and death. The ending of the film, like so many operatic stages, is littered with dead bodies. Even the telepods themselves, which started life as phone booths, have been turned onto their sides and now resemble glass coffins. Like a dark parody of Snow White, Patricia awakes inside a glass coffin just as her Prince Charming tries to dematerialize her. Before they die, Martin asks his father, "Will I become like you?", to which Henri answers: "We're scientists. We have to do things we hate, that even sicken us."

Fifth & Sixth Incarnations: The Cronenberg Legacy

The idea that science is evil is one of the elements that David Cronenberg said he wanted to eliminate when he remade *The Fly* in 1986. Nevertheless, I would argue that he does not manage to obliterate fully the Faustian undertones of his source material, for it is present in the menacing new design of the telepods, which now resemble futuristic beehives. As a tip-of-the-hat to the earlier design, Veronica (Geena Davis) refers to them as "designer phone booths." Besides this reference, and despite Langelaan's mention in the opening credits, not many elements of the original story

remain in Cronenberg's film. Like André Delambre, Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) gets his DNA scrambled with that of a housefly. Instead of creating two mutant creatures, however, Seth's telepods fuse him and the fly into a single diseased individual (whom Seth christens "Brundle-fly"). Another significant difference is that, instead of undergoing an instant transformation (like André, et al.), Seth's condition develops gradually. Faced with his inability to teleport anything living, Seth concludes: "I must not know enough about the flesh myself. I'm going to have to learn." Seth and Veronica duly start up a sexual relationship, during which she playfully says to him, "I just want to eat you up." This carnal knowledge is what leads him to a key insight: "I haven't taught the computer to be made crazy by the flesh, [by] the poetry in a steak." Upon emerging from the telepod, Seth's initial symptoms are positive: more defined muscles, enhanced reflexes and energy. His secondary symptoms include a hunger for sugar, coarse hair growth, a dramatic increase in libido, emotional instability, skin rash, sweating, and body odour. His tertiary symptoms include oozing pustules, loss of teeth and fingernails, skin lesions, tumour-like inflammations, and necrosis of the tissue. Like cholera and syphilis, death from this disease is not pretty and is thus hard to romanticize (see *Desire, Disease, Death* 24). This could be why his *spes phthisica*, his feeling that he is bursting with vitality, comes during the primary rather than the tertiary stages of his illness. During this time, he displays many features of the 19th-century coding of tuberculosis, including disappointed hopes and affections, depressing mental emotions, and excessive sexual indulgence (see *Desire, Disease, Death* 38). Ultimately, Seth comes to resemble the syphilitic Pangloss from Voltaire's *Candide*, with his lifeless eyes, rotting features, sepulchral voice, and violent cough that causes him to spit out teeth. Like Janácek's three-hundred-year-old Elena Makropulos, he becomes "a scientific perversion of nature" who "can only destroy others and what remains of [his] own humanity" (*Art of Dying* 180, 183). Evoking the ritual of the *contemplatio mortis*, he asks: "Am I dying? Is this how it starts when you die?" Cronenberg allows audiences to participate in a ritual of grieving and suffering, perhaps allowing them to experience their own mortality or fear of illness by proxy (see *Art of Dying* 11, 24, 25). Like Amfortas in *Parsifal*, in the end Brundle-fly begs to be killed. When he places the shotgun against his head, he is in the words of Wagner accepting "his necessary death, the logical sequel to his actions, the last fulfilment of his being" (qtd. in *Art of Dying* 94, Wagner's emphasis). As the Hutcheons say of the operatic diva, it is death that grants Brundle-fly his humanity (*Art of Dying* 182).

As if evoking the liminal dream-state of Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis," Seth concludes that he is "an insect who dreamt he was a man, and loved it. But now the dream is over, and the insect is awake." Like so many operatic characters before him, it is as if his disease has rendered him poetic (see *Desire, Disease, Death* 56). It is also a dream—a nightmare—that re-introduces the element of heredity: upon discovering that she is pregnant with Seth's baby, Veronica has a nightmare of giving birth to a giant larva (the gynaecologist in the nightmare is played by Cronenberg himself).

The next day, Veronica shouts: “I don’t want it in my body!”

The sequel to Cronenberg’s film, *The Fly II* (1989), recapitulates the major themes of the *Fly* saga: father/son conflict, scientific hubris, sexuality, surveillance, and of course degenerative inherited disease. Predictably, Seth’s disease has been passed on to his son Martin (the same name as the grandson of the original André Delambre); it seems that, for Seth as for Baudelaire, “faire l’amour, c’est faire le mal” (qtd. in *Desire, Disease, Death* 77). The young Martin Brundle (Eric Stoltz) is being raised by Bartok Industry,[3] the scientific research company that funded his father in the previous film. Isolated within the laboratory, Martin experiences rapid aging, like Henri and Martin Delambre in *The Curse of the Fly*. We see him grow from a new-born into a young man in the first half of the film. In the second half, just as he is taking up his father’s work, Martin mutates into a human-fly monster and runs amok. Martin’s disease is humanised by his two most significant relationships: his sexual affair with lab technician Beth Logan (Daphne Zuniga) and his father/son relationship with Anton Bartok (Lee Richardson).

When Bartok secretly video-tapes Martin’s first sexual encounter with Beth, he is identifying Martin’s sexuality as “potentially pathological or aberrant, and certainly in need of regulation” (*Desire, Disease, Death* 13). Bartok’s ultimate betrayal of Martin is epitomised by his disastrous experimentation on Martin’s golden retriever, which he subsequently fails to euthanize. As in *Return of the Fly*, the film’s morality is thus split into the “good” scientist (Martin Brundle) and the “bad” scientist (Anton Bartok). The one who must ultimately pay the price for science’s forbidden transgressions is therefore the father figure, leaving the son to represent the element of redemption. At the end of the film’s climax, the human-fly monster forces Bartok into one of the telepods, then enters the other as Beth activates a program that purifies Martin’s human DNA, while transferring the fly DNA into Bartok. The disease brought about by genetic mutation is thus inflicted on the character that represents science’s most malign aspect: Faustian hubris. As Bartok says to his staff: “I[...]will answer to nobody but God. From God’s mouth to your ears: that is the chain of command.” In fact, his stated ambition is for Bartok Industry to “control the form and function of all life on Earth.” It is as if he is evoking the accusation made by Martin Delambre’s brother, Albert (Michael Graham), when the latter says to their father: “You’re not God. You’re not even human.” The film’s closing image is of the mutant Bartok, ironically imprisoned in his own lab—the same lab in which he had previously kept Martin’s long-suffering golden retriever.

Seventh Incarnation: *The Fly* Sings!

As the Hutcheons demonstrate, opera lures audiences into the theatre by appealing to their “anxieties as well as their desires” (*Art of Dying* 7). *The Fly: The Opera* (2008) is certainly no exception—and no wonder: the *Fly* saga had been playing on

those same two emotions in film and print for over fifty years. This dual thematic focus may be why composer Howard Shore first conceived of *The Fly* as good subject matter for an opera while working on the score for Cronenberg's film back in 1986. Joining the team as librettist was playwright David Henry Hwang, who also wrote the operatically-titled play "M. Butterfly" (1988), which was adapted into a film by Cronenberg in 1993. Shore invited Cronenberg to direct the opera—his first—and Placido Domingo was hired to conduct.

The Fly seems to have been crying out for musical accompaniment for years: Patricia is a concert pianist, as is Judith, the mad wife; Seth Brundle introduces Veronica to the telepods while playing the piano; and, in the opera, there is a piano keyboard imbedded directly into the computer console. Blurring even further the boundary between scientific instrument and musical instrument, in the opera the computer itself is voiced by a singing chorus, whose musical line is an impersonal monotone listing the constituent elements of the object or organism being teleported. Here, the musical keyboard is right at home; for, as James Parakilas notes, the piano is more machine-like than most other musical instruments, more like a "piece of hardware from which poetry [can] be drawn" (*Piano Roles* 4, 196). In fact, the invention of the piano at the beginning of the 18th century coincides with what historian of technology John Rae calls the "invention of invention" (see *Technology in Western Civilization*, vol. 1, chapter 19). Similarly, as Michael Chanan says of the live piano accompaniments of the early silent films, Seth Brundle uses his piano to "tame the uncanny nature of [his] new invention" (*Piano Roles* 262). Ivan Raykoff goes even further when he portrays the piano as a "politicized weapon" (*Piano Roles* 272), a characterisation that recalls the link between the Delambre/Brundle teleporter and the destructive technologies of World War II. By building a piano directly into the teleporter controls, the opera makes this association even more explicit. When Seth Brundle sits at the controls of his teleporter in the opera, his hands have access to both computer and piano keyboards, thus reinforcing jazz historian Mark Tucker's argument that pianists "resemble engineers behind a console board or flight controllers operating a complicated series of switches, levers, and buttons" (*Piano Roles* 299).

The Hutcheons observe that, "by the time a story makes it to the operatic stage, chances are it is [...] a 'cultural cliché'" (*Desire, Disease, Death* 11). Given *The Fly*'s status both as a cult- and pop-culture icon, its adaptation into an opera seems to follow this general principle; for science-fiction and horror are also genres that draw heavily on established clichés. While the diminished-seventh chord may have first come to be associated with evil on the operatic stage, this association became a full-fledged cliché in the soundtracks of 20th-century horror films. Furthermore, the prominence of piano imagery in the *Fly* saga recalls many of the clichés associated with piano music itself, which according to Raykoff "accompanies and enacts narratives of idealized love and unattainable desire" (*Piano Roles* 268). Just as Seth idealizes his love for Veronica, so too does their mutual desire prove to be ultimately unattainable, since it is tainted by the horror and stigma of degenerative disease.

During the post-coital "Flesh Duet," Veronica (Ruxandra Donose) sings "Your flesh can conquer time," to which Seth (Daniel Okulitch) answers: "Your flesh can be my guide." The musical phrases are a-tonal and the accompaniment is dissonant, perhaps in order to make the audience uncomfortable with Seth and Veronica's lust on a musical level. After all, Seth's desire to understand the flesh is motivated not by love, but by a desire to disassemble it, to rent asunder the divine unity of the flesh. It is not long before the opera's desired and desiring flesh becomes diseased flesh, monstrous flesh, and ultimately dying flesh. After recounting her nightmare of giving birth to a larva, Veronica sings, "I'm going to die!" She then sings in a minor key: "I know an old lady who swallowed a fly. Perhaps she'll die, perhaps she'll die," echoing one of Seth's lines from the Cronenberg film. The pitch rises throughout this jarring and chromatically tense phrase, reaching its highest points on the words "die." The association between Veronica's anxiety and the image of death is thus musically emphasised, evoking the link between sexual desire, disease, and death not only through the libretto, but also through the structure of the score itself. Implicit by association in this phrase is also the traditional melody of the nursery rhyme about the old lady who swallowed a fly, creating a disturbing contrast between major and minor, as well as tonal and a-tonal, relationships in the musical imagination of the audience.

Interestingly, it was Cronenberg's idea to return the story to its original setting in the 1950s, thus tapping into the post-World War II fear of technology that he previously claimed he wanted to eliminate from the narrative. Even the Faustian element is re-introduced: in the bar scene, a character asks Brundle, "Who the devil are you?", to which he answers: "I'm the Devil in disguise." Thus, we find ourselves once more in the midst of an operatic story in which sexuality and Faustian hubris combine to produce an evil yet sexually irresistible illness.

Conclusion

Both the longevity and adaptability of the *Fly* saga illustrate that, in the words of Sherwin B. Nuland, "[w]e are irresistibly attracted by the very anxieties we find most terrifying" (xv). Every protagonist in *The Fly* saga—from André, Henri, and Martin Delambre to Seth and Martin Brundle—is a carrier of disease and insanity and, like AIDS victims, their blood is polluted (see *Desire, Disease, Death* 214). The Hutcheons argue that "the way a society explains and represents illness—especially in an emotionally powerful art form like opera—can tell us much about its values and about how value is assigned in that particular culture" (*Disease, Desire, Death* 2). Given the current debate over such controversial issues as genetically modified foods, nuclear power, and stem-cell research, we must remember Sander Gilman's argument that there is a reciprocal relationship between culture and medicine (*Disease and Representation* 7), that just as medicine and science shape cultural representa-

tions of disease, so do arts and culture "help to frame scientific theories" (*Desire, Disease, Death* 18).

The Fly saga represents disease as "human-created and degenerative" (*Desire, Disease, Death* 19, 161); moreover, every variation of the story plays on late-20th-century anxieties over liminal states (see *Art of Dying* 149), delving into the boundaries between the human and the non-human, sanity and insanity, health and disease, sexuality and suffering, reality and nightmare. Just as Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* (2001) transposes the consumptive *femme fragile* from the operatic stage of the nineteenth century into the "material world" of the MTV generation, so does *The Fly* recapitulate historical anxieties about disease and sexual transgression in a fundamentally modern context. Society's fears may have evolved over time; however, it seems that the ways in which we articulate them in art has remained consistent.

Notes

1. By way of analogy, anxiety about communication technology is also played out in Francis Poulenc's 1959 solo opera "La voix humaine" (based on Jean Cocteau's 1932 play), in which a suicidal woman carries out an agonising conversation with her lover over Paris' notoriously unreliable telephone system.

2. All page references for Langelaan's "The Fly" are taken from its re-printing in Stephanie Harrison's *Adaptations: From Short Story to Big Screen* (see bibliography).

3. Given the many instances of piano and musical imagery in the *Fly* saga, one wonders whether this name could be a reference to Béla Bartók (1881-1945), one of Hungary's greatest pianists and composers.

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