The Thing at Forty

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On June 25, 1982, John Carpenter's *The Thing* opened to critical censure and underwhelming ticket sales, the latter driven partly by the competition (*E. T. the Extra-Terrestrial* had opened just two weeks before and *Blade Runner* shared its release date) and the former driven primarily by Rob Bottin's gory special make-up effects. In the ensuing years, it has been precisely those practical effects—which repulsed critics and overwhelmed the characters, some argued—combined with the traumas they aim to represent that continue to bring audiences back for more.

Carpenter's film is a remake of the Howard Hawks-produced, Christian Nyby-directed *The Thing from Another World* (1951), and like it, is based on John W. Campbell's 1938 novella *Who Goes There?* Since its 1982 release, *The Thing* has been remade and critically rehabilitated as a 1991 Dark Horse comic book series; as a 2002 video game sequel produced by Konami and Vivendi Universal Games; and as a 2011 film prequel of the same name, directed by Matthijs van Heijningen Jr. It seems that we cannot stop retelling this story.

Since its early critical and box-office failures, *The Thing* has gone on to be recognized as a horror classic, and Carpenter himself has said it may be his favourite among his films ("John Carpenter"). The film's story is straightforward: a Norwegian research team working in the Antarctic excavates an alien being from the ice. After destroying their camp and killing all but two of the Norwegians, the shape-shifting alien escapes as a malamute and finds its next victims in a nearby American research station's twelve inhabitants. Tension builds slowly as the audience and the men realize that the dog can perfectly imitate any creature it infects. As paranoia drives the station workers to hysteria, no one is sure who is human and who is alien in the series of huts that comprise the station. In the first on-screen infection, the juxtaposition of the malamute with the human shadow indicates that someone will be infected, but the audience cannot know who. Viewers are invited to share the camp's uncertainty and fear (Fig. 1). The second half of the film builds to an unnerving and ambiguous conclusion that sees just two of the men—if both are indeed still human—left alive.

The acting is strong, with stars Kurt Russell (scotch-drinking chopper pilot MacReady), Wilford Brimley (senior biologist Dr. Blair), and Keith David (station mechanic Childs) all turning in fine performances. The one-location setting, the small all-male cast, and the muted colours of the sets (coldly dominated by Antarctic blue-white and institutional concrete grey, broken by the red, orange, and pink of the alien emergency) saturate the atmosphere with tension. The Ennio Morricone soundtrack (tastefully overlaid with Carpenter's own synths) traces the film's energy with a building pulse, and Carpenter's direction paces the film so that the blood test scene, near the conclusion, is still shocking today. The practical effects render gory transformations in the harsh light of the research station in a way that makes most of today's CGI effects look unconvincing.

The Thing marks an important moment in the long dialectic between film as narrative and film as spectacle. But what is it that draws us back to *The Thing* after forty years? Sigmund Freud recognized pathology in the compulsion to repeat: *Wiederholungszwang*, in German. The sufferers of repetition compulsion (*zwang*) are dragged back (*holen*) to live their traumas again (*wieder*), chewing over and over what cannot be assimilated, sifting meaning from trauma, just as we return again to *The Thing*, as much to ask ourselves why we are returning as anything else. Even if the immediate metaphorical and cultural contexts of the film have shifted over forty years (the film's comment on the AIDS crisis, for instance, is less obvious now than it was in 1982), the sheer trauma it exhibits (the cinematic spectacle of the make-up effects) keeps bringing us back.

Fig. 1 | The first human at US Outpost 31 is infected. *The Thing*, 00:15:37. Universal Pictures, 1982.

Fig. 2 | In the final stage of his Thing transformation, Vance Norris's (Charles Hallahan) head grows legs and crawls out of the room. *The Thing*, 01:17:06. Universal Pictures, 1982.

Beyond the signification of plot lies the response of the flesh. In *The Horror Film*, Stephen Prince writes that "The horror film is the equivalent of a cultural nightmare, processing material that is simultaneously attractive and repellent, displayed and obfuscated, desired and repressed" (107). *The Thing* presents the material to be processed (the destruction of identity and bodily limits), but its narrative does not exhaust its libidinal energy, its *jouissance*. Just as we cannot be sure whether Childs is human or alien at the end of the film, the horror of bodily transformation exceeds the formal constraints imposed by the film, and we are pulled back (*holen*) to start the process over (*wieder*). That is the trick of repetition: the "*fort-da*" game—a child's attempt to use language to master trauma—must be repeated, with pleasure (Akhtar and O'Neil 15).

The Thing enacts another kind of return: a return to the "cinema of attractions," a term developed by Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault to describe early non-narrative film. Gunning writes that the cinema of attractions "bases itself on the quality that Léger celebrated: its ability to *show* something" (382). That power to show is opposed to cinema's other great power: the ability to tell a story. Gunning calls the cinema of attraction an exhibitionist cinema, and we can see that reflected in the critical response to *The Thing* (particularly the critics who labeled the film pornography). The theory of film as attraction starts with

> Eisenstein and his attempt to find a new model and mode of analysis for the theater. In his search for the "unit of impression" of theatrical art, the foundation of an analysis which would undermine realistic representation theater, Eisenstein hit upon the term "attraction." An attraction aggressively subjected the spectator to "sensual or psychological impact." According to Eisenstein, theater should consist of a montage of such attractions, creating a relation to the spectator entirely different from his absorption in "illusory [depictions]." (384)

So, on one hand we have narrative: *The Thing* provides viewers meaning, which I identify with the chain of signifiers that hauls us along the path of repetition, the "*fort*" and "*da*" that give Freud's exemplary child control over trauma. On the other hand, we have the encounter that creates sensual or psychological impact by exceeding the capacity of the signifier to represent. For instance, the head crab transformation challenges our understanding of biological category and function and disrupts our habitual plot-like schemes for reading bodies, but it creates a psychological impact on viewers, one registered in the scene by Palmer (David Clennon), who exclaims "You've got to be fucking kidding me" (Fig. 2). The Thing itself is not representable, but the attempt to put it on screen creates that sensual or psychological impact. That impact is where *The Thing* does its work, and its continued impact is the reason we keep repeating it as creators in several media, as viewers of the film, and as commentators on the entire phenomena. Indeed, the review itself is another go at treading the path laid before to glean something that we have missed.

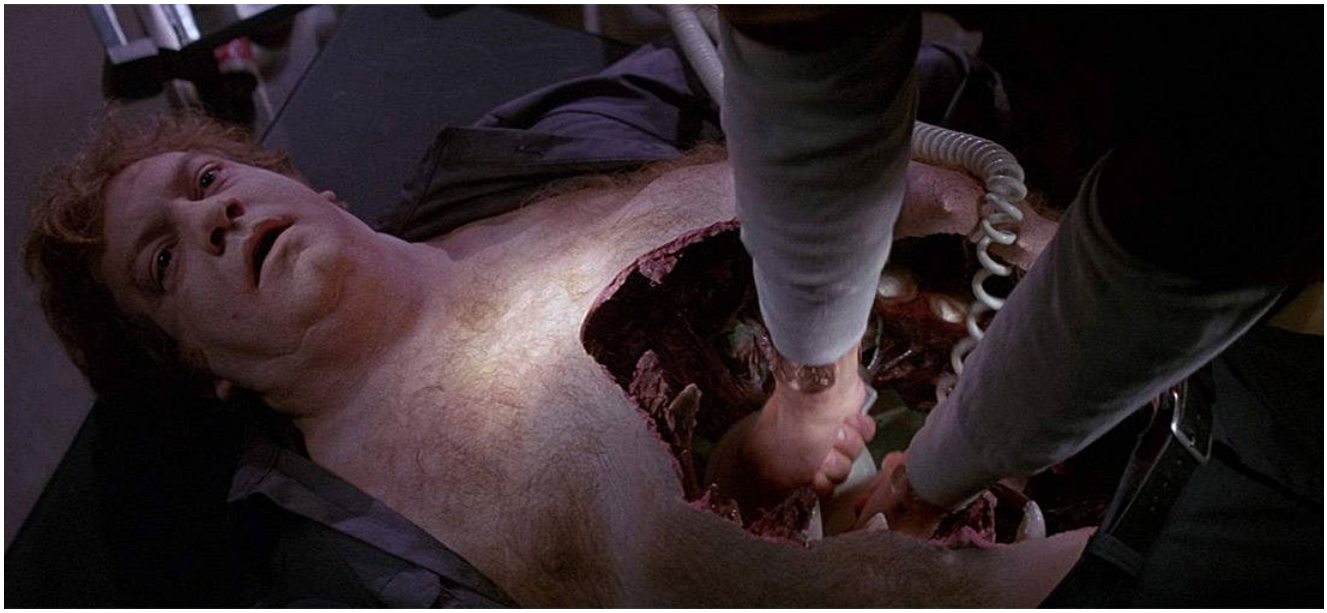

Fig. 3 | Norris's transformation begins. *The Thing*, 01:15:15. Universal Pictures, 1982.

I am not arguing that *The Thing* participates in a Vaudeville-like series of disconnected stimulations paraded before audiences. I am saying that its special effects and makeup place the mise-en-scène of the film in a dialectical relationship with its narrative such that the attractions threaten to take on their own lives. For evidence of that, consider how many views any of the single set pieces of the film receives when excerpted on YouTube. *The Thing*'s post-theatrical viewership emphasizes the way viewers value discrete scenes of particular horror. One clip of Norris's transformation has nearly thirteen million views since it was posted to YouTube in 2016. Removed from the story, this scene becomes pure impact that keeps viewers coming back for more (Fig. 3); fans relive those moments with pleasure.

The necessary and impossible demand to exhibit the Thing itself is why Carpenter had to avoid the "guy in a suit" look of the 1951 film (*Terror Takes Shape*, 54:00). An actor in a suit represents two things at once. At the narrative level, he is an alien. To the extent that the narrative function exhausts the rubber suit creature, viewers can ignore the second representation, that he is also a human actor. The actor in a rubber suit is never the Thing, and the viewers always know it. An audience's laughter at a rubber-suited actor is their relief at a reassuring human presence. Carpenter's Thing, on the other hand, has no actor in a rubber suit behind it. We never see the Thing's own form, only its grotesque imitations of other creatures. The Thing itself is never exhausted by its specular representation on film. That is the paradox that drives our repetition: at once we have seen the Thing, but we know we have not seen the Thing in itself. I posit that we watch *The Thing* because it gets us close to the Thing itself, and we watch it again because it does not get us all the way there.

Doubtless, the need to see it again is one reason nostalgic images of *The Thing* echo in media today. *Stranger Things's*

Fig. 4 | The transforming mouth of the Kennel-Thing. *The Thing*, 00:32:19. Universal Pictures, 1982.

Demogorgon, with its corpse flower mouth, closely resembles the transforming Kennel-Thing (Fig. 4). The synth-heavy soundtrack of Carpenter's film is an object of homage for the Netflix series, as well. The fragility of humanity and the vulnerability of identity returns us over and over to *The Thing*'s wild frontier. We return for dramatic tightness but also the thrill of attractions cinema. That combination may speak to eras of political uncertainty, in which micro-narratives focus our lives intensely between moments of horror that cannot be incorporated into an overarching narrative. Our invisible fears warp even beyond their real threat levels. COVID-19 keeps mutating beyond the narratives imposed on it. *The Thing* still works for us because it turns on the dialectical effect of violence on the plot—at the same time the gory set piece interrupts the plot, it binds us to it, requiring us to follow its next turn to its next encounter, even though we know it will not give us the real thing we keep looking for. ▪

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