

An In-Depth Analysis of John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982)

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One element of horror that has taken on a wide variety of forms in order to create fear is the theme of isolation. The characters in stories such as *Get Out*, *The Shining*, or *You're Next* find themselves facing off against the monster in remote locations where any help that might be on the way isn't going to arrive in time. Taking isolation to its most extreme, the crew of the *Nostromo* finds themselves stuck in the middle of space with the monster, literally isolated from everything else in the universe in the movie *Alien*. Isolation does not have to be solely through distance, however. In *Child's Play*, for example, child Andy Barclay finds himself isolated despite being among those that are supposed to take care of him. No one believes him due to his age, and the monster is able to cause more death as a result.

In John Carpenter's *The Thing*, the isolation the characters experience is twofold. The film takes place on a research station in Antarctica, unable to make contact with the outside world. The isolation is only increased, however, as the characters find that they are unable to trust any of their own crew, leading to each crewmember turning on each other as the shapeless "Thing" wreaks havoc throughout the base. The monster of *The Thing*, while primarily being the Thing itself, is equally the paranoia the crew experiences during the situation, if not more so.

For most of the first act of the movie, neither the characters nor the audience get to see the Thing in its true form. Instead, it takes the form of a husky that, while it has some uncanny qualities, appears to be normal. It isn't until the husky is finally left alone with the other dogs in the base that it finally starts to show its true self, revealing to be the shapeshifting monster that it is, attempting to consume the dogs in order to imitate them. Despite the initial absence of the Thing, the tension in the crew is on the rise well before even a hint of the abject manifests in the story. When two Norwegian scientists die trying to stop the dog as it arrives on the base, a couple of crewmembers go to the Norwegian research station to investigate, and find that the

crew was violently killed by an unknown assailant. They find mangled bodies that seem warped and mutilated, the first hint that there is something at work here that they are not equipped to handle. So when the Thing reveals itself in the dog kennel, the crew is already on edge but are able to respond to the threat as a team, driving the monster back. As the movie progresses though, the trust between the team begins to erode. Almost as soon as the crew discovers that the Thing is able to imitate other creatures, suspicion begins to rise that the Thing they believe they defeated is actually amongst them.

The meaning of the thing itself is as amorphous as its physical form. It is a creature that could serve to represent a wide number of things, from a general fear of “the other”, to more specific topics such as a representation of the AIDS epidemic. The latter theory tends to hold water in a substantial way due to a scene that takes place in the third act. This takes place after several men have already been killed, with one of them having been completely human but simply killed as tensions were rising. The remaining crew are tied down to a bench, save for two men, MacReady and Windows. MacReady, who has been the de facto leader of the group, collects blood samples from each crew member, with the reasoning that since each cell of an infected person is an individual creature, infected blood would react to heat. What follows is a scene where each crew member’s blood is tested by MacReady, with the infected members being singled out and eliminated. It doesn’t take much of a leap from there to see how this could be tied to the AIDS epidemic that was still on everyone’s mind when the movie was released. While it may not have necessarily been John Carpenter’s original intent, the parallels between the movie and real life events would be difficult to ignore when considering the time period it was released in.

Realistically though, the monster in *The Thing*, while being a representational antagonist, is not meant to capture any one specific theme. A few iconic horror monsters serve to be monsters that, rather than represent any one specific meaning, can mean anything that they need to mean in a given era. Zombies are the most significant of these, where they can be

used to represent anything from human greed, to the fear of disease, to a commentary on the emptiness of modern human society. The Thing fills the same role. While it could be used to represent the AIDS crisis as I mentioned previously, the monster is much more broadly serving as a fear of the outsider. The other. Were this movie to be shown to an audience in the 50s they might characterize the Thing as representing the threat of communism. Showing the same movie to an audience in the 70s might lead to them seeing the Thing as a manifestation of the drugs “flooding” their neighborhoods. This amorphous quality is what helps make *The Thing* a movie that is still capable of feeling terrifying today. The audience projects whatever “other” they fear onto the monster, rather than the monster clearly representing one specific fear.

It is interesting to note the role fire plays in this film largely about tribalism and mob mentality. It is one of mankind’s oldest tools and oldest weapons and it is capable of consuming entire forests if not kept under control. To have it be the primary weapon the crew uses against the Thing is incredibly substantial in what it says about the mob mentality and paranoia pervasive throughout the film. Just as an angry mob might carry torches, the crew carries flamethrowers. Purification by fire. The use of flame against an inhuman enemy is something often seen in the horror genre, particularly sci-fi horror, wielded against monsters ranging between the xenomorphs of the *Alien* franchise all the way back to the aliens from *Them!* (1954). This is largely due to the same reason they are present in *The Thing*. Flames are all consuming, a manifestation of primal human fear. Fire is an indiscriminate force, capable of consuming enemy and ally alike, and its use in a story about mistrust and paranoia is not an accident. (1)

The goriness of the Thing’s shapeshifting helps to bring out several different aspects of horror that all combine into one of the most terrifyingly effective uses of practical effects in cinema, virtually unrivaled until the release of *Jurassic Park* eleven years later. Each time the Thing fully “unmasks”, it is in an entirely different form than it previously was, and yet each time it contains what is recognizably human or canine. It takes forms which pervert the human body,

twisting and shaping it into grotesque masses of viscera. In doing so, it forces the defamiliarization of the human form. Yet it does this in such a way that the audience cannot look away. It reveals something sublime in the way it contorts its victims, violating the audience's security in their own being.

The Macabre, and more specifically the *Danse Macabre* becomes incredibly prominent as the story progresses. It does so in multiple ways. There is of course the very real and imminent situation the characters find themselves in, facing a monster that not only is trying to kill them, but then effectively replaces you in the living world. On top of that, however, is the gradual acceptance of the remaining crew that defeating the monster is going to lead to their own deaths. We see this early on in the movie. Blair, a crew member, discovers that if the Thing makes it into a populated area, it would effectively destroy the planet in weeks. Almost immediately, Blair makes the decision that no one on the base is going to survive, and so sabotages the vehicles and radios to effectively contain both the monster and the crew to the base, hopefully preventing the Thing from making it off Antarctica. Blair is locked away by the rest of the crew in a cabin separate from the base because of this, but by the third act, the crew has accepted that they aren't going to be leaving the base alive. The movie culminates in the last surviving members burning the base, as fire seems to be the only effective way to kill the Thing. As the monster approaches MacCready, the last surviving crew member, MacCready detonates charges of dynamite they had planted throughout the basement, destroying the last of the base. In the final scene, we see MacCready sitting injured against the remains of a destroyed radio tower, watching the base burn. Childs, a crew member that had gone missing shortly before the final confrontation, hobbles over to him, claiming he had gotten lost in the storm. When Childs asks how they are going to survive the winter now that the base has been destroyed, MacCready suggests that they shouldn't- either one of them could still be the Thing and there isn't anything they can do about it except hope that it was destroyed along with the base. Even after all their efforts, there is an understanding that the best way they can hope to

keep the monster contained is by accepting their own deaths to the winter storm. There is an understanding on the part of the audience that this story was not going to have a happy ending. Even if it isn't spoken aloud until the third act, the crew seems to have an implicit understanding that they likely aren't going to survive either. In this way, the *Danse Macabre* takes center stage, with the crew and the monster engaging in this gory ballet, with the crew making their best effort to burn out the monster yet having the monster return each time, seemingly on the verge of death yet never quite getting there. Even by the end of the movie, neither the audience nor the crew know whether or not the monster was finally defeated. In this way, having the danse fade out rather than ending in a satisfying action movie ending, the movie is capable of haunting the audience long after the movie ends.

It is interesting to see the role that gender plays in the film. It is often noted that the cast is all male, which reflects the characters in *Who Goes There?*, the 1938 novella it is based on. In contrast, the 1951 adaptation of that same novella, titled *The Thing From Another World*, adds in a female character for the sole purpose of having a damsel in distress. It also abandons the themes of isolation and suspicion of the story, instead opting to have the alien remain one consistent figure for the protagonists to fight directly. Returning to gender, however, it is interesting to see the way an all-male cast then plays out some of the tropes common in the horror genre, particularly that of the "final girl". To properly examine that trope in *The Thing*, it is also important to take a look at its role in the two movies that are naturally compared to this film. That is 1979's *Alien* and John Carpenter's most prominent movie, *Halloween* (1978). *Halloween* serves as the *Doom* of the slasher genre, which is to say it wasn't the first of its kind, but it became one of the biggest touchstones of the genre, with everything that came after it naturally drawing comparisons. The same is true for its final girl, Laurie Strode, who has become emblematic of the trope. She managed to distinguish herself from many of the other final girls that preceded her in the way she confronts the monster. The proto-slashers of the 70s would usually either have the final girl escape through sheer luck such as in *Texas Chainsaw*

Massacre (1974) or have her fail to ultimately escape the monster altogether. By contrast, Laurie Strode not only survives her confrontation with the killer Michael Myers, but actually has a prolonged conflict with him in the third act, leading to Michael Myers being substantially wounded and Laurie succeeding in protecting the children in her care. *Alien*'s Ellen Ripley is even more competent in her role as the film's final girl, managing to outright kill the titular alien that had been killing off the members of her spaceship's crew. It is also interesting to note the way the ship is intentionally self-destructed in an attempt to kill the alien, and the way *The Thing* parallels this self destruction in its own climax. With the subversion of the final girl trope present in both John Carpenter's previous movie and in the movie that played a big role in getting *The Thing* greenlit, it is not surprising to see that *The Thing* also has its own subversion of the trope. Rather than having a "traditional" final girl or even a final girl that manages to defeat the monster, *The Thing* opts to have Final Boy RJ MacCready, who, while exuding masculinity, ultimately is only ambiguously successful in his fight against the monster and is still subject to the terror and fear that a given Final Girl experiences. While a given Final Girl is often depicted as a woman with masculine or androgynous qualities (2), *The Thing* takes an approach not many other horror movies take. In doing so, it helps solidify the feeling of a strong in-group that the Thing is attempting to "invade". *Alien*'s Ellen Ripley is undoubtedly independent and stands out from the rest of the crew and the other female crewmember. However MacCready is simply a member of a team, meaning the gradual breakdown of that team significantly hinders MacCready's own ability to combat the monster. *The Thing* is a movie just as much about putting faith in each other as it is about isolation and distrust. Because it is only through teamwork that the crew is able to confront the Thing. Despite the suspicion amongst the crew, it is through trusting each other that the remaining survivors are able to destroy the base and hopefully the Thing along with it.

In a 2011 interview with *Vulture* magazine, director John Carpenter said that, "there are two different stories in horror: internal and external. In external horror films, the evil comes from

the outside, the other tribe, this thing in the darkness that we don't understand. Internal is the human heart". Most alien invasion movies land firmly in the external. The alien antagonist is firmly an "other", an outsider that could not hope to be considered an insider. *The Thing*, however, manages to straddle between those two narratives in an interstitial way. The Thing itself is of course the outsider, the external evil. However at the same time there is the internal evil present in the way the crew begin to lose their trust in each other and the fact that the outsider is lurking somewhere amongst their ranks. In this way, the monster is approaching both as an external and internal evil, as the alien outsider and as the conflict and paranoia that spreads within the crew, wearing them down as they try to confront a creature far out of the scope of anything they could have imagined. To quote MacCready as he records his last audio log, "*Nobody trusts anybody now, and we're all very tired*".

The Thing is a film of in-betweens. A monster both internal and external. Horror that is as much psychological as it is physical. In telling a story about fear of the outsider and paranoid mob mentality at the same time, the movie becomes an effective commentary on tribalism and the way it can actually end up hurting the group as a whole as the members of an in-group begin to suspect each other of being an outsider. There is a scene in the second act where MacCready becomes the target of the rest of the crew after one of them finds a torn scrap of a shirt with his name on it hidden away, similar to what they had seen with previously infected crew members. So they lock MacCready out of the base and when he manages to break back in, the only thing that stops them from lynching him outright is the threat that he will detonate sticks of dynamite in his hand, killing everyone else with him. This leads into the blood testing scene described earlier, wherein one of the crew members gets killed trying to stab MacCready because he still believes him to be infected, an outsider. These sorts of situations play out throughout the movie, and it is that mob mentality that allows the Thing to run its course through the crew as effectively as it does. Meanwhile in the climax of the film, the remaining crew trust

each other enough to carry out the self-destruction of the base, and their faith that their crew will work together is what allows them to see this through.

This was one of the first horror movies I saw growing up, and it set the standard for me on what a horror movie should be. Returning to the film for this class has allowed me to understand why that is. Though it is not John Carpenter's most famous work, it is in my opinion one of the most compelling horror movies he ever directed, and it captures the abject present in so many horror monsters with a powerful and direct form. *The Thing* is a film that removes any sense of security or solace that other horror movies might provide. With any character potentially being a threat, even scenes where the characters are simply talking feel tense, the threat of the Thing always looming and ever-present. In this way, the audience is swept into the same paranoia the crew falls victim to, and find themselves captivated to the bittersweet end.

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3. Abrams, Simon. "The Soft-Spoken John Carpenter on How He Chooses Projects and His Box-Office Failures." *Vulture*, 6 July 2011,
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