



Peripherals

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Reading the Shapeshifting Monster in Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) Through Layers of Divulged Distrust

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Abstract

This article presents a critical reading of John Carpenter's film *The Thing* (1982), arguing that its narrative of distrust offers an extension to conventional monster theory. The author proposes a "beyond the body" approach, positing that monstrosity is located not in the alien's physical form, but in the atmosphere of suspicion its presence engenders. Drawing on theorists including Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Sarah Juliet Lauro, the analysis examines how the shapeshifting antagonist acts as a catalyst, exposing dormant layers of distrust at personal, social, and societal levels. The article investigates how Carpenter's formal techniques, including characterization and mise-en-scene, depict the characters' descent into paranoia, leading to violence that blurs the line between human and monster. At a societal level, the film is interpreted as a microcosm of its contemporary context—a post-Watergate era marked by skepticism towards institutions such as science and government. The author concludes that by decoupling monstrosity from a visible, physical body, *The Thing* suggests that true monstrosity is a latent and fundamental aspect of human interaction, revealed only under pressure.

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When you can't trust anyone, can you even trust yourself? This timeless conundrum is explored in John Carpenter's 1982 box office flop turned cult classic. *The Thing* features a shapeshifting monster which infiltrates an isolated community with something more than genre-anticipated gore and death. The monstrous presence infects the 109-minute movie with rife distrust. At the time of its release, the idea of the 'universal mass', loss of autonomy, and rampant technology were (and still are) consuming. The ensuing distrust in organizations and social structures are mirrored in *The Thing*, as the narrative centers on a group of researchers in an Antarctic base who are beset by a thawed-out extraterrestrial parasite that shapeshifts into other life forms. Once understood, this creates a situation in which any of the characters could be the 'Thing'. This community-busting premise leads to the collapse of not only social structures, but interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. The deterioration of trust amongst the group ironically causes the characters to behave just as monstrously as the parasite they fear. Drawing on zombie and monster theory, I argue for an extension of these theories: that it is not only the monsters in film and television that represent societal and cultural fears, but rather the mere presence of a monster uncovers layers of distrust within humanity that, in times of peace and certainty, lay dormant. In the following sections I expand upon this perception of monstrosity from the visible to the conceptual, to uncover deeper levels of monstrous distrust. By drawing parallels between the real and the fictional, we can unearth what the extraterrestrial reveals about earth, and how the invisible and ever-changing monster provides commentary and criticism of static earth-bound systems. For the context of this paper, the personal will be defined as the relationship to one's own identity; the social as the dynamics between humans; and the societal as the wider governmental structures in modern society. By analyzing the formal elements Carpenter uses to imply the presence of the monster in *The Thing*, distrust is divulged at the personal, social, and societal level. By situating this research in zombie and monster theory and *The Thing*'s cultural context, each subsection (personal, social, societal) will analyze how the distrust narrative is created – ultimately arguing for an extension of how we study monstrosity in media.

1 Beyond the monster's body

In *Monster Theory: A Reader*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that the monster itself is an embodiment of societal and cultural fears, often dealing with our relationships to the world, each other, and ourselves. Where Cohen argues that "[t]he monster's body is a cultural body" (Cohen 1996, 4), I argue for a 'beyond the

body' approach – where it's not the visible, physical monster that directly represents cultural fears, but the distrustful atmosphere surrounding it. If "[t]o consider our current monsters is to reflect on how we think about ourselves and our connection to the world..." then the invisible or shape-shifting monster speaks directly to the culture of skepticism that has only intensified since the digital revolution (Weinstock 2013, 75). The 1980's saw the collapse of 'traditional' communism, an acceleration of globalization, and the end of the Cold War. As the digital revolution also gained momentum, fears about technology spawned a raft of sci-fi and horror films, such as *E.T. (1982)*, *Little Shop of Horrors (1986)*, and *Predator (1987)*. Filmmakers took advantage of the prevailing zeitgeist to amplify fear in their audiences through the body genre of horror. The alien Thing's fluidity calls to mind what Sarah Juliet Lauro in *Zombie Theory: A Reader* coins as "semiotic fecundity" – its ability to bear a variety of cultural concerns (2017, 6). Unlike a zombie, the Thing's monstrosity is not always overtly visible, therefore it is representative of contemporary anxieties while also manifesting them in the human characters. The monster achieves this symbolic power by summoning distrust due to its hidden and ever-changing nature.

2 From failure to classic

In an active and vibrant horror film decade, one would think that *The Thing* would have been commercially successful, but this was not the case. In fact, *The Thing* took several decades to reach the screen in the first place. Originating as a 1938 short story by John W. Campbell, the rights to *Who Goes There?* were acquired by Universal Studios. Carpenter accepted Universal's offer of a director's position on the *Who Goes There?* adaptation entitled *The Thing* (Addison 2013, 155). His "technique of terror", with gory special effects and tension in distrust, can be viewed as part of a tradition of surrealist art (Conrich and Woods 2004, 97). Despite its cinematic brilliance, the film was badly received, grossing just over 19 million US dollars during its time in theaters (Addison 2013, 154). The brutally honest view of the distrustful human condition fell short in comparison to the family-friendly box-office favourite *E.T.*, which offered a reassuringly hopeful view of humanity (Conrich and Woods 2004, 97). The pessimistic stance of *The Thing* also stood in stark contrast with the "Reagan-style masculinity and optimism" of 1980's America (Addison 2013, 157). I would venture that *The Thing* suffered by comparison, because it 'hit too close to home' for audience sensibilities on issues such as distrust in social systems and relationships. Similarly to the zombie's ability to function as a cultural signifier, *The Thing*'s monster represents a "...mostly unmapped territory of the collective unconscious" (Lauro 2017, 7). *The Thing* was ill-suited to the cultural climate of the 80's, but twenty years later viewers began to reevaluate it, and the film's popularity benefitted from online fan culture. This grounded *The Thing* and its shape-shifting villain as not merely a monster but "...a mode for theoretical work itself" (14).

3 Up close and personal

Monstrosity in humans is revealed through the ways in which distrust prompts them to act, elucidated through Carpenter's characters and his gruesome visual effects. In *The Thing*, Carpenter's characters are "...outsiders, rebels, distrustful of society and its systems" (Conrich and Woods 2004, 103). The audience is encouraged to find a piece of themselves in the characters, leading them to draw parallels to their own lives and question what they would do in this extreme situation. At the same time, the audience is invited to judge the characters for the severity of their actions, albeit prompted by distrust and distress. This is particularly noteworthy, given that seven of the eleven deaths are not directly caused by the Thing, but rather the human characters' purposeful killings enacted out of fear. In the interests of their own safety and survival, the group determines that they must kill one of their own, when they believe that individual is infected. Clark tries to kill MacReady, shortly after a medium-long shot of Clark holding a knife behind his back – symbolic of distrust. Clark is prompted to do so, not because he believes MacReady is the Thing, but rather because he is frustrated by MacReady's leadership tactics. Before Clark gets the chance to act on his pent-up anger, MacReady shoots him in the head. As the Thing is not only invisible (hidden in the bodies it inhabits) but also ever-changing, it doesn't directly manifest distrust, however the monster brings to light pre-existing distrust ordinarily hidden under the surface.

Monstrosity can be defined as an entity or act that is outrageously evil, an "...invisible disease that eats away at the body... and manifests visibly through symptomatic behavior" (Weinstock 2013, 276). In *The Thing*, because the monster is shapeshifting, monstrosity manifests differently in each of its victims. Each time the Thing assimilates one of the crew members, it not only looks different, but acts differently. The Thing is first shown as a distorted human face, then as an octopus-like creature, as jaws bursting out of Palmer's stomach, as a head with spider legs, a human that splits in two, and finally as a gruesome dinosaur-esque entity. The only thing that visually connects these 'Things' is the excess of gore which Carpenter employs.

Gushing blood, oozing from the bodies of the infected, speaks to the idea of the 'collective mass', characteristic of zombie studies (Lauro 2017). From the inside out, we are all human and all capable of succumbing to our darkest desires and our inner beast. The many different re-creations of the same monster represent different types of personal monstrosity. Monsters feed on the innate monstrosity of the human condition, further reinforcing the importance of decoupling monstrosity from appearance as a "...cultural shift that aligns monstrosity not with physical difference, but with antithetical moral values" (Weinstock 2013, 276). Suspicion within the crew, further heightened by the presence of the monster, takes a toll on the characters' mental states and leads to unnecessary deaths. Even MacReady – the headstrong, overly confident, self-proclaimed leader – is shown lacking confidence and being distrustful of himself. He can't truly prove to the other crew members that he isn't the Thing, leading him to doubt himself. He puts on a tough exterior, but his lips and hands shake as he commands the others,

and this is not only due to the sub-zero temperatures. The distrust in oneself connects to "...what existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre refers to as our monstrous freedom", in that we alone are responsible for our actions (Weinstock 2013, 277-278). Our dormant inner monster is awakened, and as such, the audience is entreated to reevaluate their definition of what a monster is, and to question if there is a difference between a human and a monster at all. Ultimately, this lessening of trust in the 'true order' of things leads to a lack of confidence and trust in the only one we can ever 'truly' rely on – ourselves.

4 Sociality of skepticism

The palpable distrust, created by the presence of the monster, leads to the breakdown of relationships and social structures. It's not just monster theorists or horror filmmakers who have shown such social issues through film. 'Social problem films' – those that integrate larger social conflict into the individual conflict of their characters – were popular in the 80's. The genre of horror became focused on a post-structuralist vision of who we are as humans (Yang 2013, 11). As a presence from another planet shakes up societal structures (often centering around authority), underlying problems on earth are exposed. In alien invasion films "...distrust is portrayed as valuable for survival", and skepticism is key in not only surviving alien attacks, but living in our highly surveilled society (63). This distrust is represented in the social dynamics of the characters in *The Thing*. As Bennings burns to his death after being assimilated by the Thing, the remaining characters form a circle around him. Carpenter positions the actors in this manner to represent their simultaneously equal, yet separate state. In the presence of a common enemy they are united by default, however their inability to trust one another divides them in their fight against it. As Heather Addison notes in *Cinema's Darkest Vision* notes, "[t]he film argues that unlimited individualism is destructive and may lead to humanity perishing from the earth" (2013, 162).

In an effort to find out who among the remaining members is infected, MacReady devises a blood test. As he draws samples from the members, a tight shot focuses on each character's face, as Carpenter slowly pans the camera to the next crew member. This allows the audience to witness the characters' anxious anticipation, as their eyes move from side to side, ready to act if a crewmate suddenly turns. Carpenter holds his nerve, retaining the slow pan, so his audience is not only fixed on each face, but also on the space between them. The empty space in the frame combines with the eerie soundtrack to infer the monster's presence. This dead space is also representative of, despite their literal proximity, the distance and distrust they have in one another. The Thing lurks between them *and* within them, even though it cannot be seen. This suspicion, or intuition, prompts MacReady to utter phrases such as "not too close" and "you stay there" while conducting the test. But even before the alien divulges distrust, the men keep their distance, making it easier for them to "...dispense with one another – and

for the viewers to register little sympathy when they do” (Katovich and Kinkade 1993, 628). Where Robert Cumhow argues that

“the creature is a metaphor for the already deteriorated condition of human interaction” (Addison 2013, 161), I argue that it is not simply the creature that represents this deterioration. It is rather the creature’s *presence* that exposes these hidden layers of distrust and suspicion in human interactions and relationships.

5 Society and the self

The distrust at the micro-level of Carpenter’s on-screen characters represents public distrust at the macro-level within society. *The Thing* shares elements of zombie outbreak narratives, in that there is governmental, political, and scientific distrust at work – through infection and spread (Lauro 2017). Media scholars have argued that zombies are not a singular cultural figure, but are representative of larger world issues, commonly centered around capitalism and commodification (Lauro 2017). In Micheal Katovich and Patrick Kinkade’s reading of *The Thing* through a social and political science perspective, they state that “[i]nstitutional trust had been shattered with Watergate and Vietnam, and paranoia as a national zeitgeist had taken hold” (Katovich and Kinkade 1993, 621). This distrust in organizations and social structures can be deduced in *The Thing*, and are as equally relevant now as they were in the 80’s. Particularly in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and uncanny-valley Artificial Intelligence, we have seen resistance to forces of governmental control and technological advancement.

The distrust narrative in *The Thing* is created not through the collective mass’ distrust of systems, but rather of the individual’s distrust of everyone, including the societal structures they operate in. Zombies are often used as a cultural signifier, as their bodies literally represent decay and distrust through the monstrous visible. They are “...a figure that grapples with the fundamental irreconcilability of capitalism and humanism” (Lauro 2017, 4). Unlike a zombie, where monstrosity is overt, in *The Thing*, infection is unseen until the monster has completely taken hold from within. This reinforces the idea that we are all the same, all capable of decay and monstrous behaviour. It only makes sense that a society created by those who are capable of monstrosity, create – and therefore operate in – monstrous systems. Carpenter suggests that the leading forces of American society; science, military, government, and politics can’t help in a life or death situation. The scientist, Blair, goes insane, the crew’s weapons are rendered almost useless, and the politics of leadership drives the men further apart rather than closer together. The characters’ “...attempts to deal with this creature involve more subtle metaphorical constructions of social groups’ faith (or lack thereof) in humanity and its destructive devices” (Katovich and Kinkade 1993, 628). An example of this lack of faith is the motif of gaze, which implies the monster’s presence and embodies distrust within one another and society. Due to the heightened stress, the characters’ motions are jittery and their eyes dart stealthily. Despite the low-key lighting and flickering lamps used to convey the presence of something otherworldly, the characters’ eyes remain visible and telling. By making sure that

the eyes are always sharp, and instructing the actors to emote through their eyes, Carpenter conveys the presence of a monster that can only be seen through the distress apparent in his characters’ gaze.

The setting of Antarctica also lends itself to a cold, sterile, impersonal micro-representation of our current reality. “Media and popular culture have worked together to create an ‘outbreak narrative’, where the spread of an epidemic moves... from marginalized, deviant or underdeveloped groups to native, mainstream, or developed society, and accordingly play on common stereotypes connected to concepts of othering” (Curtis and Han 2020, 2). With this in mind, it is interesting to note the order of deaths in *The Thing*. Initially infecting a dog, the Thing gradually makes its way up the chain of command in what would seem as intellectual order,

leaving the 'leader' (Childs) and the 'lone wolf' (MacReady) as the only known survivors. However, the film ends on a somber note. Even though two men have survived so far, they are doomed to either die of hypothermia, or to be killed at the hands of their teammate since one – or both – could yet be the Thing. Carpenter's ambiguous ending conveys the idea that existing capitalist, neoliberal, and self-serving societal structures have ultimately failed in the face of a real threat, calling for a change in the way we communicate and organize ourselves to foster trust.

6 Conclusion

The presence of the shapeshifting monster in *The Thing* exhibits various layers of distrust, through Carpenter's genre-specific mise-en-scene, lighting, camerawork, and characterization. In the development of a distrust narrative, monstrosity is not always visible, and it can be ever-changing. This further reinforces the importance of extending monster (and zombie) theory and decoupling monstrosity from appearance to what I call a 'beyond the body' approach. *The Thing* is a work that exposes "...the fragility of our bodies, our identities, our relationships, and our systems of meaning" (Addison 2013, 157). In *The Thing*, monstrosity goes beyond the physical monster itself, as the mere presence of the monster manifests distrust, and it is this distrust that wreaks havoc in human relationships and societal systems. Layers of distrust are made visible, ironically through the presence of an invisible, shapeshifting monster. Distrust is a necessary evil in contemporary society, to operate within it we must set our default disposition to be suspicious – often at the cost of mental and social health. It's not simply the monsters in our media that represent collective fears, how the monster's presence is implied and how the human characters react, reveal innate monstrosity within society and the self. Through an alien presence and the distrust that it manifests, monstrosity is exposed in our midst, revealing that on-screen beasts aren't uniquely monstrous, at least not while us humans are watching.

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