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JOHN CARPENTER'S  
**THE  
THING**

## CAST

**KURT RUSSELL** as R.J. MacReady  
**A. WILFORD BRIMLEY** as Blair  
**T.K. CARTER** as Nauls  
**DAVID CLENNON** as Palmer  
**KEITH DAVID** as Childs  
**RICHARD DYSART** as Dr Copper  
**CHARLES HALLAHAN** as Norris  
**PETER MALONEY** as Bennings  
**RICHARD MASUR** as Clark  
**DONALD MOFFAT** as Garry  
**JOEL POLIS** as Fuchs  
**THOMAS WAITES** as Windows

## CREW

Directed by **JOHN CARPENTER**  
Produced by **DAVID FOSTER** and **LAWRENCE TURMAN**  
Screenplay by **BILL LANCASTER**  
Based on the story 'Who Goes There?' by **JOHN W. CAMPBELL, JR.**  
Director of Photography **DEAN CUNDEY**  
Edited by **TODD RAMSAY**  
Music by **ENNIO MORRICONE**  
Special Make-Up Effects Created by **ROB BOTTIN**  
Production Designer **JOHN L. LLOYD**







# SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES...

by Violet Lucca

*"Why don't we just wait here a little while...? See what happens."*

To be a cinephile is to chase after that particular rush that comes with seeing an amazing movie for the first time. *The Thing* is among the few films to deliver that feeling upon repeat viewings. Adapted from John W. Campbell, Jr.'s pulp novella "Who Goes There?" and infused with elements of Howard Hawks and H.P. Lovecraft, John Carpenter's 1982 masterpiece is a kaleidoscopic and uniquely American view of the apocalypse. Like its star – a malevolent alien that can assume the form of any living creature – *The Thing* scurries between taunted existential terror, paranoia, and eye-popping Grand Guignol gore (courtesy of special makeup effects master Rob Bottin), sustaining a deep unease that extends far beyond the final frame.

In this tale of impersonation – set to Ennio Morricone music that intentionally imitates Carpenter's signature synth sound – visual parallels and pairs abound: the flying saucer crashing to Earth from the starry blackness of space is followed by the Norwegians' helicopter rising above the white expanse of snow, chasing the dog-thing; MacReady and Dr Copper explore the Norwegian station just like the dog-thing wanders around US Outpost 31 gathering intel; the red fire axe buried in a door at the Norwegians' is the same kind Blair uses to destroy his camp's computers and communications systems; the two-headed remains found at the Norwegians', which hastens the spread of the alien amongst the Americans; the circle around the Bennings-thing when MacReady burns him is like the circle the Norwegians form around the ice-buried ship, which is itself a reference to Hawks' *The Thing from Another World*. There are many more subtle instances of reversed angles and repeated actions, but the most genius (and economical) duplication is barely perceptible: the set used for the Norwegians' camp is the remnants of the Americans' camp after MacReady dynamited it. The rooms inside the outpost – particularly the rec room (which, in the Norwegian camp, houses the block of ice the thing emerged from) – carry a strange sense of déjà vu afterward. Given that Carpenter provides no clearly defined layout of the outpost's main building (even as the alien roams the camp in gliding POV shots), the only time it's possible to truly gain a firm footing is in the barren outdoors. Yet that's not always the case, either: when the big storm comes in, the blowing snow and ice obscures all natural light for 48 hours, forcing them to grope around outside with guidelines.

And how many days elapse between first contact and the final showdown? This spatial-temporal confusion is disarming, and reflects how little control the men have over this situation. They are always one or two steps behind something that has several, substantial advantages over them. By imitating other life forms, the alien erases its own characteristics and becomes a featureless force, its only definable trait a relentless desire to conquer. Does it retain the knowledge of everything it's been before? Is the dog monster a distraction from the fact it has absorbed Palmer? (In another clever bit of misdirection, in the scene where the dog-thing enters a dorm room and a crewman turns around, it's stunt coordinator Dick Warlock casting the silhouette – a foreign body, if you will.) Does it have discreet

consciences, or is it a connected whole? Is it limited to the senses of its host, or can it perceive things we can't even conceive of? These men – who have the training and equipment to survive living in extreme cold temperatures for months at a time – don't have any time to ask these sorts of questions. Over the course of the film, the unrelenting threat the alien poses strips away their civilised qualities, reducing them to a primal state and their camp to embers. Yet they are already out of step with the rest of humanity when the film begins: their only tether seems to be a few VHS tapes of game shows (previously viewed), because Windows hasn't been able to reach anyone on the radio for weeks. At the end, MacReady and Childs – who didn't trust each other even before paranoia swept the camp, and have arrived at an uneasy Mexican standoff – do what ancient man once did: they sit beside a fire, which provides them with light and heat. Whatever the source of their tension is, they have been drained of any energy to act upon it – assuming that one or both of them are still human.

By being fundamentally unknowable, the alien is our instinctual fear of the strange made flesh, a vaguely sentient abyss ready to consume everything. In the years following its release, many critics and fans have argued that *The Thing* represents the then-nascent AIDS crisis, as blood testing proves the only way to know if someone within the film's all-male environment is "infected". (The computer simulation that shows Blair how the alien cells take over other organisms' is not unlike what HIV does to white blood cells.) However, cataclysmic invasions and viruses are particularly flexible metaphors – the durability is part of their appeal. From the vantage point of 2017, *The Thing* seems to foreshadow climate change: a doomsday catastrophe begins when a group of unwitting humans melt Antarctic ice; by the time others realise its full consequences, there's no reversing or stopping it, and the world we know is destroyed.

Regardless of what it means or what it *can* mean, Carpenter's commitment to an ambiguous – but definitely not triumphant – conclusion is another significant part of *The Thing's* enduring appeal, and connects it to another American horror master, H.P. Lovecraft. (The director did film an "upbeat" ending where MacReady was rescued, but only at the suggestion of editor Todd Ramsay.) Following a break in the shooting, Carpenter excised many lines of dialogue and unnecessary character development, such as MacReady's blow-up doll and obsession with chess (it's more fun to see someone who *isn't* established as a tactical genius deal with this extraterrestrial threat). He also significantly altered the second act of Bill Lancaster's screenplay, changing the deaths of Fuchs and Bennings from more conventional slasher/giallo-type murders of being stalked and stabbed to the supernatural ends in the final cut. (The fake hands actor Peter Maloney wears were reused from Palmer's transformation scene; the production didn't have the time or money to engineer new effects.) What emerges from this streamlining is not merely clarifying "the mechanics of assimilation" (per producer Stuart Cohen), but something distinctly Lovecraftian.<sup>1</sup> Again, this has much to do with the restricting narrative information and creating uncertainties about where things are (human, alien, or physical location), but is about diving deeper into the madness that comes with facing a thing so powerful and uncanny. As in Campbell's original story, Blair goes berserk when he comprehends how quickly this alien could assimilate all of humanity. However, he does it by watching a computer simulation, which allows him to "see" the thing in a way he did not when performing the autopsies on the dog monster and Norwegian's remains. Similarly, the men have a tendency to freeze when looking at the monster as it threatens and transforms, temporarily overwhelmed (or maddened): Childs hesitates before torching it in the kennel, but survives; Windows does too, but gets partially assimilated and is left sadly bloating in the corner of the rec room. Their desire to look, to try and comprehend the gargantuan monstrosity before them overwhelms their senses and leaves them vulnerable, a defining trait of Lovecraft's "Great Old Ones".

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<sup>1</sup> - Many of the elements of Campbell's original story resemble Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, which was serialised two years before: an Arctic setting, remains that don't stay dead, and explorers who accidentally unleash an unspeakably horrible creature that's thousands of years old, and, in Clark's words, "weird and pissed off". Throughout the 1930s, there were many explorers who went (or tried to go) to the poles, such as Admiral Bird, who no doubt influenced these similarities.



Crucially, Bottin's special makeup effects follow the Lovecraftian aesthetic of seething masses of tentacles and flesh, something both organic and wholly unnatural. These effects are the perfect counterpoint to the beautiful blue and purple hues of the outdoors, a silent reminder of nature's majesty – but also recall the colour of bruises and veins that carry deoxygenated blood. It's impossible to imagine the film without Bottin's superb craftsmanship and ingenuity, for it simply wouldn't work. Although Bottin was notoriously sensitive about having too much light on his creations, unlike the leper-ghosts in his previous collaboration with Carpenter, *The Fog*, most of the alien's appearances occur in well-lit rooms. (It's amusing to imagine that Windows kicking the light bulbs in the rec room as he's being consumed was at Bottin's request.) Aided by some equally chilling sound design – the cracking that accompanies the emergence of spider-like legs, the chattering hiss of tentacles, a howl that far outsizes Benning's mouth and chest – these effects carry emotional resonance beyond scares. As the skin breathes and stretches and rips and bites, it provides a tactility and movement that's missing from many horror films, particularly those that use computer VFX. (This isn't a slight to the profession, for it has more to do with the ability of VFX artists to endlessly heighten their effects at the behest of directors or producers – look to the season three finale of *Twin Peaks* to see how believable a young Laura Palmer appears as Cooper tries to lead her out of the woods.) Bottin's creations, like all great art, endure.

Beyond the level of craft, another type of technology played a large role in ensuring *The Thing*'s legacy: the advent of home video. A box-office failure in 1982, the film was released at the tail-end of the midnight movie phenomenon and at the start of the VHS revolution. Rather than being consigned to (re) discovery at repertory houses in big cities or as special events, it was available on shelves across the country. Like the men in the film, you too can be totally alone while watching *The Thing* (perhaps inside an Antarctic science outpost), something that only serves to amplify its extant atmosphere. In front of the glow of your screen, you can have a one-to-one relationship with the film that becomes deeply personal, enhanced by reviewing. You can stop, rewind, and re-watch the tiny elements of genius that would otherwise pass you by – or just fast-forward to the gory bits to show your friends. (Roger Ebert's withering review states that *The Thing* is nothing but a series of juvenile gross-out contests; this was neither the first nor the last time he would be very, very wrong about a film.) Such capabilities are more than a laundry list of the button on a remote. The very different elements of the film – coolly suspenseful action picture, "Me-Generation" huis-clos, Keith David's raspy baritone, the inherent goofiness of Wilfred Brimley's pleas to be let out of solitary confinement with a noose hanging next to him – can be enjoyed in parts or as a whole, liberated from the finite temporality of a theatre experience.

In the context of Carpenter's work, it's easy to locate this as the high point of his genius – a reimagining of his first feature, 1974's *Dark Star* (a darkly comic riff on an all-male, Hawksian intergalactic bomber crew that also includes someone secretly noting that "nobody trusts anyone anymore" onto a recording), but with the luxuries of proper financing, time, and skill to make it a modern classic. The subsequent entries in his apocalypse trilogy – 1987's *Prince of Darkness* and 1994's *In the Mouth of Madness* – have more in common with each other than *The Thing*, located in cities and eerie small towns, without a snowflake in sight. That sense of newness and discovery courses throughout the film, for director and viewer alike.

*Violet Lucca is the Digital Producer of Film Comment magazine and host of The Film Comment Podcast. In addition to creating content for the online and print versions of the magazine – interviews, reviews, features, and multimedia pieces – she regularly contributes writing to Sight & Sound.*









# IN DEFENSE OF JOHN CARPENTER'S *THE THING*

by Kevin Alexander Boon

For the past six months I have been thinking about three *Things*: Howard Hawks' *The Thing from Another World* (1951), John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), and John W. Campbell's short story, 'Who Goes There?' (*Astounding Science Fiction*, 1938), on which both films are based. I've reread the novella, viewed the films, and read the screenplays over and over again. I appreciate all three for different reasons, but far and away, the most interesting of the three in my estimation is Carpenter's film. For this reason I am troubled by claims that the film is a "failure"<sup>1</sup> and "a bore."<sup>2</sup> Even more disconcerting are reviews which assert that "Carpenter blows it."<sup>3</sup> Contrasting these scathing critiques of Carpenter's *Thing* is a blizzard of effusive praise for Hawks' earlier version. No one has anything bad to say about Hawks, and almost no one has anything good to say about Carpenter (Archer Winsten of the *New York Post* is the only reviewer I know who gave Carpenter's *Thing* high marks<sup>4</sup>). What stuns me is that neither position is well argued.

This isn't the first time my take on a film has gone against the popular current. I'm frequently at odds with film critics and mass media about what constitutes quality filmmaking, particularly when it comes to science fiction and horror. But this is the first time I've been quite this far removed from critical opinion. When Carpenter's remake was released, nearly every reviewer thrashed it mercilessly, making caustic and brutal attacks on both the film and the filmmaker. I, on the other hand, place it on a par with films such as *Alien*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

Critical objections to *The Thing* fall loosely into three categories. The first, and the most untenable of the three, is criticism of what Linda Gross at the *Los Angeles Times* refers to as the "visceral and vicious special makeup effects."<sup>5</sup> Apparently, Rob Bottin's graphic effects disturb many critics. They claim, as Carrie Rickey does, that the film is "programmed to gross out its audience with its technical savvy, but forgets to develop a story."<sup>6</sup> There are two problems with this argument. Firstly, condemning a sci-fi/horror film for its graphic effects is a bit like condemning a pizza for its cheese. Graphic special effects have been the lifeblood of sci-fi/horror films for 25 years, ever since *The Exorcist* (1973) redefined gore. The only valid criteria for judging the visceral qualities of a film are to question their relationship to the narrative. If graphic effects are integral to the subject matter, if they help advance the story, then they

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1 - Steve Jenkins. *Monthly Film Bulletin* (3/82) p. 158.

2 - Alex Keneas. *Newsday* (6/25/82) Part II, p. 4.

3 - David Ansen. *Newsweek* (6/28/82) Review, p. 73.

4 - Archer Winsten. *New York Post* (6/25/82) Review, p. 42.

5 - Linda Gross. *Los Angeles Times*. (6/25/82) Review, p. 15.

6 - Carrie Rickey. *The Village Voice* (7/6/82) Review, p. 50.



are warranted. Someone's susceptibility to them is a matter of personal preference, not an authoritative basis for an objective appraisal of the overall quality of a film.

Also, Bill Lancaster's script does deliver a story. True, it is not a boilerplate sci-fi story about some young buck hotrodding across the universe with a phallic light saber, and it does not duplicate the hero-antics audiences have come to expect from films, but these, I would argue, are strengths, not weaknesses. They speak to the film's originality, and they help to protect the genre from vapid replication.

*The Thing* recounts a man's struggle to maintain his individualism in the presence of malicious and chaotic forces. Not unlike Terry Gilliam, Charles McKeown, and Tom Stoppard's *Brazil*, or W.D. Richter's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. At the center of *The Thing* are questions as old as the Athenian scholars: *Who am I?* And *What makes me me?* It is a story rooted in Existentialism. That may explain why some people feel it doesn't have a story. Howard Hawks' 1951 version of *The Thing*, like most contemporary American films, foregrounds Platonic ideals: familiar notions of community, teamwork, and patriotism. All ideas that Existentialism denounces, as Nietzsche notes:

*Basic error:* to place the goal in the herd and not in single individuals! The herd is a means, no more! But now one is attempting to understand the herd as an individual and to ascribe to it a higher rank than to the individual—profound misunderstanding!<sup>7</sup>

For Nietzsche, the individual is the source of everything new, the wellspring of creativity, and the individual "derives the values of his acts from himself,"<sup>8</sup> not from communal initiatives or social outcomes. Captain Henry in Hawks' *Thing* is an American soldier whose loyalty to his country, his military, his gender, and his species, come before his loyalty to self, and Hawks sentimentalizes Henry's self-sacrificial attachment to the herd. MacReady in Carpenter's *Thing* is an existential hero, whose loyalty to self supercedes all other concerns. Thus, the two films are ideologically opposed. Hawks values community, while Carpenter venerates the individual. Hawks pits human race against an alien race in a battle for species superiority, while Carpenter pits MacReady against the Thing in a clash of individual wills.

Nietzsche argues that "every living thing reaches out as far from itself with its force as it can, and overwhelms what is weaker: thus it takes pleasure in itself."<sup>9</sup> This impulse is central to what he considers the primary driving force in a person – the will to power. The Thing in Lancaster's script personifies this will to power. Its sole objective is the assumption of weaker life forms. It has no goal other than the expansion of self. Its drive to reach out and overwhelm all other life forms is unadulterated, and it functions in the script as a foil against which we measure the force of MacReady's will.

MacReady qualifies as a heroic character, because, through the strength of his will, he manages to maintain his individuality. He resists appropriation into the communality of the Thing.

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7 - Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage, 1968. p. 403.

8 - Friedrich Nietzsche, p. 403.

9 - Friedrich Nietzsche, p. 403-404.

Nietzsche says of the self:

Active, successful natures act, not according to the dictum "know thyself," but as if there hovered before them the commandment: *will a self and thou shalt become a self.*<sup>10</sup>

This is precisely what MacReady does. The strength of his individualism is the manifestation of the strength of his will. He asserts his individuality without hesitation. For example, during the blood test he has no doubt that the test will come out in his favor.

He cuts himself with the scalpel and begins collecting his  
own blood.

MAC READY

(continuing)

Now I'll show you what I already know.

He heats the wire and puts it to his plate. The same harmless hissing. All eyes continue to watch as he tries again. The same result.<sup>11</sup>

MacReady's certainty in his self is his most heroic characteristic. When the other characters are tested, they all betray a lack of confidence in who they are.

MAC READY

perspiring profusely, his hand trembling slightly, prepares to continue the test. He heats the wire.

The men are pouring sweat, white-knuckled.

One of the smaller torches is pointed at Nauls. He closes his eyes. MacReady places the heated wire into his plate. Hiss. MacReady exhales. Nauls opens his eyes.

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10 - Friedrich Nietzsche, *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*. (1879). 366.

11 - Bill Lancaster, *The Thing* (Script, Second Draft), 102.

MAC READY

unties Nauls with one hand, while the torch stays glued to the others.

MAC READY

heats the wire once again. Both he and Nauls have torches aimed at Sanchez. Sanchez is near tears.

The wire is dipped into the plate ... Hissssss.

Sanchez breaks down and sobs.

CHILDS

sits stoicly [sic], while he watches the preparations for his turn.

CHILDS

Let's do it, Bwana.

Nauls and Sanchez take aim five yards away. Fierce, determined. The wire comes off the flame into the plate ... the harmless hissing.

The muscles in Childs' face melt into a sigh.

CHILDS

(continuing)

Muthafu ....<sup>12</sup>

Nauls, Sanchez [Windows in the film], and Childs are all uncertain about their own essential selves. Nauls closes his eyes, unable to face the possible truth. Sanchez sobs with relief when he discovers he has not been taken over. Even Childs, for all his macho bravado, is relieved when the test shows him to be human. These three men need the test to reassure them that they are still themselves. Their need for external validation distinguishes them from MacReady. Only MacReady faces the test without flinching.

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<sup>12</sup> - Ibid. 104.

Only he is certain of the fidelity of his self. The test he performs on himself is not for him, it is for the others. He is already sure of who he is, and the strength of his conviction frames the story and propels the action. Any claim that *The Thing* lacks a story, overlooks this point.

The second type of objections to Carpenter's *Thing* involves attacks against Carpenter and gratuitous comparisons of the film to Hawks' version. John Preston goes so far as to claim that Carpenter is "patently no Hawks."<sup>13</sup> Strangely, when critics criticize Carpenter, the very elements they argue are weak in Carpenter's film are all doubly present in Hawks' version. For example, when Linda Gross complains about a "notable ... lack of female characters,"<sup>14</sup> she forgets that the only female in Hawks' *Thing* is Nikki, whose primary function is as a foil to accent Henry's virility. In Charles Lederer's script, when Nikki tries to keep Henry from Carrington's notes, Henry "puts an end to it by sending a short right into her stomach." Even more horrifying, Nikki does not resent the physical assault. She says to Henry, "I'm glad you – did what you did. I'm very glad."<sup>15</sup> Thus, Hawks' film not only presents women as objects of desire for men, it subjugates them to male dominance, and presents them as physical targets for male aggression. It is surely better to have no women characters, than to have women characters that promote dangerous and deleterious stereotypes.

On another front, Steve Jenkins takes offense at Carpenter's treatment of scientists. He compares Carpenter's scientist Blair to Hawks' Carrington. Jenkins cites Robin Wood's claim that "Professor Carrington is . . . 'never made absurd; [that] he is ... consistently presented as intelligent, dedicated and courageous,'" and he blindly accepts Wood's argument that Carrington's portrayal allows us to "sense Hawks' respect for professionalism in whatever cause."<sup>16</sup> Jenkins' objective is to, by comparison, criticize the portrayal of Blair, and by extension, Carpenter; however, he overlooks the fact that Carrington's character is a stereo-type, a sci-fi cliché – the scientist so blinded by his own lust for knowledge that he foolishly jeopardizes lives. The film clearly sets Carrington up as an object of ridicule. It does not praise his actions; it condemns them. Carrington's assessment of the Thing is presented as naive and dangerous. This is most apparent near the end of the film when Carrington tries to communicate with the Thing and it strikes him dead. This scene demonstrates the fallibility of Carrington's methodology and the foolishness of his scientific rationale. Hawks' film doesn't present scientists as pantheons of professionalism. It presents them as children, "six-year old Einsteins,"<sup>17</sup> mucking around in matters better left to men. Notice how the soldiers' dialogue derides the scientists.

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13 - John Preston. *New Statesman* (8/27/82), p. 24.

14 - Linda Gross. p. 15.

15 - Charles Lederer, *The Thing*, 104.

16 - Steve Jenkins. *Monthly Film Bulletin* (8/82) p. 158.

17 - *Ibid.* p. 61.

EDDIE

I'm just wondering if the professors will try to rush us, Pat.

HENRY

(grimly)

Might relieve the monotony if they did.

EDDIE

I'd hate to have to shoot down seventeen of the world's greatest geniuses. You know somethin'?

HENRY

What?

EDDIE

They're kids, all of them. Nine year olds drooling over a new fire engine. Scientists! Did you ever notice those two double domes who starting crying – when we left the table?<sup>18</sup>

Nowhere in the script is this position subverted. From fade-in to fade-out, the message is that scientists are boys and soldiers are men. The film does not glorify scientific professionalism; it glorifies brutish, militaristic masculinity.

Furthermore, John Preston's claim that Carpenter is "no Hawks"<sup>19</sup> is a baffling pejorative. Carpenter demonstrated his competence to direct material previously handled by Hawks with *Assault on Precinct 13*, an updated adaptation of *Rio Bravo*, another Hawks' film. Yes, Carpenter's canon has its misses, and some of his films are too heavily weighted with left-wing dogma (e.g. *They Live*). But Carpenter deserves recognition for the best of his work: films such as *Halloween*, which helped to launch an entire genre, *Starman*, which brings together romance and sci-fi, *Dark Star*, a witty sci-fi parody, and the much underrated, but wonderfully self-reflexive, *In the Mouth of Madness*. We have to wonder if attacks on Carpenter aren't, at least partially, the result of the blanket disdain for science fiction and horror that so many film critics exhibit. If Carpenter had chosen to work with realism rather than sci-fi/horror, I suspect his directorial vision might have found the critical respect it deserves.

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18 - *Ibid.*, p. 47.

19 - John Preston. *New Statesman* (8/27/82), p. 24.



The third type of objections to *The Thing* addresses the film's dark quality, and is, ironically, the most enlightening. Not for what it illuminates in Carpenter's film, but for what it shows us about audience expectation. *The Thing* disheartens a number of reviewers, because it "traffics in paranoia,"<sup>20</sup> and "misses many positive qualities of the 1951 version."<sup>21</sup> Gross sums these objections well when she says, "Instead of providing us with love, wonder, and delight, *The Thing* is bereft, despairing and nihilistic."<sup>22</sup> Apparently for Gross, and critics who share her views, movies are obliged to uplift and instill optimism in audiences. The problem with this notion should be obvious. If the function of quality story telling is to provide us with "love, wonder, and delight," what do we do with Kafka's *Metamorphosis*? Nabokov's *Lolita*? Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*? Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*? For that matter, what do we do with films such as Polanski's *Repulsion* and *Chinatown*? Pasolini's *Salò*? Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*?

Many of the most well-written stories in literature are ripe with despair. Check the body count at the end of *Hamlet*. Does that tragic ending lessen the quality of the storytelling? Would Shakespeare have done better to have a sodden, but very much alive, Ophelia race in at the end with an antidote for Laertes' poison?

American audiences, in general, want their expectations fulfilled, and Hollywood goes to great lengths to make movies that fulfill those expectations, because it wants to attract those audiences. The problem with this paradigm is that those movies then go on to shape audience expectation. It's a cycle. A snake eating its own tail. After a while, it's impossible to tell where the snake begins and where it ends. All you know is you have considerably less snake. If we judge the quality of films based on their adherence to formulaic optimism, we end up stifling narrative innovation. This is one of the points Robert Altman makes in *The Player*, that cliché is the backbone of the Hollywood blockbuster, and that's not conducive to creativity.

The people who grease Hollywood's wheels often don't believe audiences can handle the poignantly tragic conclusion of films such as *El Mariachi*. So when they put big money behind films like *Desperado* (*El Mariachi*'s big budget sequel), they make sure that audiences got the happy ending they've been programmed to expect. This is precisely what happened with *Desperado*. As a result, the film lacks the mythic qualities of its predecessor. Instead of Odysseus, we get Clark Kent. Instead of innovation, we get repetition. Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* faced a similar fate. The initial release in 1982 contained a voiceover, apparently added because the studio felt audiences were too limited to follow the story without it, and a happy ending wherein Deckard and Rachael literally ride off together toward a blue horizon. When Ridley Scott released his director's cut ten years later, he pulled out the voiceover and cut the cheery ending, allowing us to finally glimpse his original vision, one that is much darker and more powerful than the altered first release allowed us to see.<sup>23</sup>

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20 - Linda Gross, p. 15.

21 - David Sterritt. *Christian Science Monitor* (6/24/82) p. 18.

22 - Linda Gross, p. 15.

23 - It is interesting to note that Scott intentionally shot *Blade Runner* so that the only moment of brightness in the entire film would be when Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) releases the dove on top of the roof at the moment of his death. This plan was completely destroyed by the addition of a bright, sunny conclusion. A good example of why Harlan Ellison calls the TV/Film arena "an art-form by committee, a cobbled-up Frankenstein's Monster of arbitrary rules, imbecile decisions, cowardly rationalizations, and tasteless pandering to the lowest possible common denominators of public mass taste" ("Seeing the Fantastic as a Visual Image," *Creative Screenwriting*, July/August 1998, p. 23).

I suspect that critics pan Carpenter's version of *The Thing* because it is not a rehash of stale ideological predispositions. It does not reaffirm sacred notions of human superiority or valorize communal values, and MacReady does not rise up in defense of all that is holy about traditional Western thought. The film is dark. It is tragic. And it raises uncomfortable philosophical questions about the nature of human existence.

Critics vehemently dislike Carpenter's film because it lacks Spielbergesque sentimentality (as David Sterritt notes, it is "a far cry from *E.T.*"<sup>24</sup>), and it is a tragic appraisal of the human condition.

The major change Lancaster made to Campbell's novella is the failure of the Antarctica team to clearly defeat the Thing. In Campbell's story, the research team locates the 14 duplicates via a blood test and disposes of them. As Norris explains, they win

"by the grace of God, who evidently does hear very well, even down here, and the margin of half an hour, we keep our world, and the planets of the system, too."<sup>25</sup>

There is no such divine providence in Lancaster's script. No reestablishment of order. No clear victory for the hero. It is not even certain that the world has been protected from the Thing, or that the efforts of the team in Carpenter's film have done anything more than delay the creature's assimilation of the human race. At the end, two members of the team are left alive: MacReady and Childs. But we do not know if Childs has been taken over. Thus we, like MacReady, cannot get closure.

The final dialogue between MacReady and Childs is marvelously open-ended.

CHILDS

Are you the only one who made it?

MAC READY

I'm not the only one.

CHILDS

Did you kill it?

MAC READY

Where were you, Childs?

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24 - David Sterritt. *Christian Science Monitor* (6/24/82) p. 18.

25 - John W. Campbell. "Who Goes There?" p. 353.

CHILDS

I thought I saw Blair. I went out after him. Got lost in the storm. (beat) Fire's got the temperature up all over the camp. Won't last long, though.

MAC READY

Neither will we.

CHILDS

How will we make it?

MAC READY

Maybe we shouldn't.

CHILDS

If you're worried about me—

MAC READY

If we've got any surprises for each other, I don't think we're in much shape to do anything about it.

CHILDS

Well, what'll we do?

MAC READY

Why don't we just ... wait here for a little while. See what happens.<sup>26</sup>

After all the destruction and death, we are still left wondering if anything was accomplished. MacReady is still uncertain about whom, other than himself, he can trust, and the outlook for humanity is still bleak. Thus Lancaster's script narrates a descent into chaos from which there is no return.

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26 - Bill Lancaster, *The Thing* (Transcribed from film).

Early in the script, MacReady records a message in his quarters, foreshadowing the end of the screenplay. In the message, he notes the loss of trust among his companions.

MAC READY

I'm gonna hide this tape when I'm finished. If none of us make it, at least there'll be some kind of record. The storm's been hitting us hard now for 48 hours. We still have nothing to go on. One other thing, I think it rips through your clothes when it takes you over. Windows found some shredded long johns, but the name was missing. They could be anybody's. Nobody ... nobody trusts anybody now. We're all very tired. Nothing else I can do. Just wait. R. J. MacReady, helicopter pilot, US outpost number 31.<sup>27</sup>

Carpenter's film questions the prudence of trust, and characterizes an age in which suspicion is rampant and trust is rare, as MacReady explains to Blair.

Blair's droopy-eyed, heavily drugged features loom up at MacReady through the window.

MAC READY

How you doin', old boy?

BLAIR

(softly)

I don't know who to trust.

MAC READY

(humoring)

Know what you mean, Blair. Trust is a tough thing to come by these days.<sup>28</sup>

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27 - Bill Lancaster, *The Thing* (Transcribed from film).

28 - *Ibid.* 53-54.

The implication is that trust is illusory. It's an existentialist perspective. In existentialism you can never actually know what goes on inside someone else's psyche, therefore, to trust someone else is to delude oneself. Furthermore, because the will to power is the primary force in everyone, everyone possesses a drive to overwhelm everyone else. Thus, everyone is potentially a threat. This is the paranoid existential atmosphere that Lancaster creates in his screenplay, and Carpenter skillfully renders to film.

In Lederer's script for *Hawks*, trust is assumed, and the characters work communally against the Thing. Each man is merely part of the collective. However, in Lancaster's script the possibility of successful communal effort is thwarted. The individual characters fail to establish effective bonds with one another, as indicated by Palmer's refusal to form a search party with Sanchez.

He [MacReady] tosses torches to Sanchez and Palmer.

MAC READY

(continuing)

Sanchez, you and Palmer search the inside....

PALMER

I ain't going with Sanchez.

Sanchez snaps his head toward Palmer. Palmer looks at the others.

PALMER

(continuing)

I ain't going with him. I'll go with Childs....

SANCHEZ

Well, screw you, man!

PALMER

I ain't going with you!



CHILDS

Well, who says I want you going with me?!

MAC READY

Cut the bullshit ... Okay, Sanchez, you come with us.  
Norris ... you stay here....<sup>29</sup>

You cannot work as a team if you cannot trust the men next to you, and if you can never truly know them, you can never trust them.

Unlike Henry's status as a hero, MacReady's is not contingent on him winning the battle with the Thing, but on his refusal to abnegate his self regardless of how inevitable failure may be. Lancaster sets this up beautifully in the scene that introduces MacReady's character.

INT. MAC READY'S SHACK — CLOSE ON ICE CUBES

being dumped into a glass, followed by the pouring of whiskey. An electronic Voice is heard.

VOICE

Bishop to knight four.

MacReady takes a sip of his drink; makes his way over to his electronic chess game. A large Mexican sombrero hangs on his back. He is tall; about thirty-five. His shack is sparse but unkempt. A few centerfolds on the wall are interspersed by an occasional poster of some Mediterranean or South American paradise.

The chess game is of larger than normal size. The pieces move automatically with the press of a button. He sits down and chuckles over his opponent's bad move.

MAC READY

Poor little son of a bitch. You're starting to lose it, aren't you?

---

29 - Bill Lancaster, *The Thing* (Script, Second Draft), 82.

He confidently taps out his move. His companion's response is immediate.

VOICE

Pawn takes queen at knight four.

MacReady's grin slowly fades as he examines the board. There is a pounding at his door. MacReady broods for a bit, heedless of his visitor and makes his next move.

VOICE

(continuing)

Rook to knight six. Check.

More impatient pounding. MacReady glares at his opponent for a beat. He bends forward, opens up a flap containing the chess game's circuitry and pours in his drink. There ensues a snapping, popping sound as smoke and sparks rise from the machine; followed by a flush of chess gibberish.

MacReady gets up from his seat, mumbling on his way to the door.

MAC READY

... Cheating bastard ....<sup>30</sup>

MacReady may lose the game, but he would rather destroy the machine than concede that victory. This is the unflinching strength of will that shapes his character. The scene with the chess game foreshadows the climax of the film. It helps us to understand that MacReady does not destroy the entire camp in a last-ditch effort to save humanity. He does it because death is preferable to concession. What the Thing threatens to take from him is the one thing that holds value: his self-determination. MacReady would rather die than lose that. What is left of the camp is a ruin that resembles the charred insides of MacReady's chess machine.

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30 - Bill Lancaster, *The Thing* (Script, Second Draft), 9-10.

## INT. CAMP

A ruin. One half of it burnt almost to the ground. MacReady wears a thick blanket which covers him like a shroud, from his shoulders to the floor.

He walks bent over and in much pain, trying to blunt patches of fire with an extinguisher. It is futile. He gives up.<sup>31</sup>

When faced with a battle he cannot win, he has only two possible options – total destruction or surrender – and MacReady will not surrender his individuality. It is the only thing on which he can rely.

MacReady has no lofty notions about saving the world. He is involved in a struggle for his own survival. Significantly, he is characterized as the most levelheaded member of the expedition. Blair, on the other hand, is obsessed with saving the world. He sees himself as the savior of mankind, and he is driven insane by his loyalty to the herd. Lancaster's script is consistently clear on this point: You are the only one you can trust. No one else.

Campbell's novella takes lack of trust to terrifying dimensions. Like the 12 characters in Lancaster's screenplay, the 37 men in Campbell's story are infiltrated by a Thing that appropriates their physical and mental identities. The Antarctic team has difficulty locating the Thing, because it could be in any one or more of them, could, in fact, *be* any one of them. The result is the same pervasive lack of trust we find in Lancaster's script. Campbell writes,

The group tensed abruptly. An air of crushing menace entered into every man's body, sharply they looked at each other. More keenly than ever before—*is that man next to me an inhuman monster?*<sup>32</sup>

But Campbell points out that the threat is even closer than the man next to you. The threat in his novella and Carpenter's film is invasive. In both, victims are not merely transformed into vampires or zombies, they are taken over *completely*. They are *wholly* appropriated. This forces the characters to confront serious ontological questions. Kinner, the company's cook, articulates the problem when he asks MacReady the following question:

Kinner shuddered violently. "Hey. Hey, Mac. Mac, would I know if I was a monster? Would I know if the monster had already got me? Oh Lord, I may be a monster already."<sup>33</sup>

Kinner's question helps us understand how MacReady in Lancaster's script differs from the other men. If the Thing assimilates all characteristics of a person, including his consciousness, then a person cannot subjectively know he hasn't already been taken over. If the Thing takes him over completely – adopts his physical appearance, his mannerisms, and his thoughts – what criteria can he use to determine if he has already been assimilated? This conundrum is laid out most fully in Campbell's story. When the Thing

31 - Ibid. 118-119.

32 - John W. Campbell. "Who Goes There?" *The Best of John W. Campbell*. Ed. Lester Del Rey. (New York: Ballantine, 1976), p. 343.

33 - Ibid. p. 331.

takes over someone in the novella, it thinks and makes decisions as that person would. It manages to fool so thoroughly, because there is no observable behavioral difference. This same characteristic of the Thing is implied in Carpenter's film in the scene where Garry offers his command to Norris.

GARRY

I don't know about Copper, but I give you my word, I did not go near that blood. I guess you'll all feel a little easier if somebody else was in charge. Norris, I can't see anybody objecting to you.

NORRIS

I'm sorry fellas, but I'm not up to it.<sup>34</sup>

We learn later that Norris has already been taken over. Nevertheless, he doesn't accept command, even though he could accomplish the Thing's objectives more efficaciously if he were in charge. This is because, when it took him over, the Thing assumed all of Norris' emotional reservations. It makes decisions that Norris would have made, leaving us to wonder how the Thing differs from Norris. What essential characteristic of Norris has been lost? In *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* that essential human characteristic is the ability to experience emotion, but Lancaster's script is subtler than that. Lancaster avoids an obvious explanation, leaving open the possibility that there is nothing unique to distinguish us from an exact copy. That is, nothing except the force of our individual wills. Thus, not only is the primary threat in the screenplay internal, but the characters only defense against it is also internal.

Stephen King claims that there are only two types of monsters: ones that pose an external threat, and ones that pose an internal threat. The first type is found in films such as *Mimic*, *Alien*, and *Independence Day*, in which the threat is "out there" lurking, stalking the characters. The primary motivation for the characters is physical survival. If the creature gets them, they die. If they get it, it dies. It's a simple equation, and one that is duplicated in film after film. It employs the most basic principle of scripting conflict – place your character in a life-threatening position from which there is no apparent escape, then, after a series of failures, have him extract himself from the situation through the use of his physical or mental prowess. The threat embodied in Hawks' *Thing* is external. Hawks and the studio even intensified the externality of the creature by keeping photos of the creature out of publicity stills and posters, and by keeping the creature out of frame throughout most of the film. Their motivation was to clearly establish the Thing's otherness.

Like all science fiction and horror films in which the threat is external, the resolution in Hawks' *Thing* involves a standoff between human and other. The humans represent good; the Thing represents evil. When the human side emerges victorious, human superiority in the universe is reaffirmed, and the expectations of the audience are satisfied.

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34 - Bill Lancaster, *The Thing* (Transcribed from film).

An external threat simplifies all elements of a story. To survive the creature, one stays alive. To locate it, one finds its lair or hiding place. To defeat it, one merely figures out how to kill it. But an internal threat, such as we find in Lancaster's *Thing*, is much more insidious and complicated. A heartbeat is no longer indicative of survival. An internal change may have occurred, one that is not even accessible to human consciousness. Therefore, it is difficult for a character to determine if he's escaped the threat, and virtually impossible for him to locate it. To locate the threat, he must first be able to separate himself from its source. But how do you determine where Mr. Hyde ends and Dr. Jekyll begins? How do you separate David Banner from the Hulk?

You can't destroy what you can't locate, and an internal threat is hard to locate. It haunts the unfathomed shadows of the unconscious. Furthermore, when the threat is internal, there is no place to run, no place to hide, and no way to get away from it. You carry it with you wherever you go, and any attempt to destroy it also threatens to destroy self.

Because the threat is primarily internal in Campbell's original story, the novella, as Lancaster notes, contains "mostly talk." One of the problems confronting Lancaster when he was writing the screenplay was how "to turn it [the story] into physical action as well as verbal action."<sup>35</sup> He solves this problem by inserting scenes that establish an external POV, as the kennel sequence does.

INT. TUNNEL

Clark, sleepy, irritated, makes his way down the freezing corridor. The wind howling loudly overhead.

CLARK

Reaches the kennel door. The savage outpouring of noise from within baffles and angers him. He unlatches the door.

CLARK

What's got into....

Smack! Just as he opens the door, two dogs, as if jettisoned from a cannon, knock him off his feet. Growls, barks, snarls. And a screeching from within.

INT. KITCHEN

MacReady is fetching himself a beer. The sound of the far-off screeching. He freezes. A Beat. He turns and sprints.

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<sup>35</sup> - Bill Lancaster, interview. *Starlog* (May, 1982).

HIS BEER CAN

as it smashes the glass of the fire alarm. He pulls the lever.

INT. TUNNEL

The alarm is blaring throughout the camp. MacReady, Garry, Norris run through the narrow tunnel led by Clark. MacReady carries a shotgun. Garry, half-dressed, has his .44. Clark, a fire ax.

CLARK

I don't know what the hell's in there, but it's weird and pissed off, whatever it is.

INT. HALLWAY

Chaos. Men, half-naked, bounce from their cubicles. Pulling on their pants, digging into shoes.

INT. CHILDS' CUBICLE

Childs is grappling with his belt buckle.

CHILDS

Mac wants the what??

BENNINGS

(at the doorway)

That's what he said. Now! Move!

Bennings is off.

INT. TUNNEL

as the men approach the locked kennel door. The two dogs, thrown into Clark, bark ferociously and scratch at the door trying to get back in. One is badly bloodied.



The fight inside rages on. MacReady and Clark brace themselves by the narrow door. Norris and Garry hold back the two hysterical dogs. Clark undoes the latch and he and MacReady enter the kennel.

The light has been broken and it is pitch black. MacReady snaps on his flashlight. Norris and Garry can't contain their animals and the dogs burst into the room. They smash into MacReady and send him sprawling. Total confusion: the dogs; the men; the screeching; the blackness.

CLARK

Mac, where are you?

MacReady gropes for his flashlight and rights himself. He finds Clark. Then shines it around the cramped room trying to get his bearings.

The light finds a mass of dogs in a wild melee in the corner.

Barking mixed with hissing, a gurgling, a screeching. Dogs being hurled about and then charging back into the fray with a vengeance.

The flashlight illuminates parts of some "thing." A dog. But not quite. Impossible to tell. It struggles powerfully. Garry pokes his head into the blackness.

GARRY

What's going on, damn it?

MacReady aims his shotgun at the entire pack.

MAC READY

I'm going to shoot.

CLARK

No! Wait!!

Clark wades into the pack, grabs at dogs' hides and throws them back. He then wields his ax into the fray, chopping and hacking away at the gurgling, hissing silhouette.

From out of nowhere, a large, bristly, arachnid-like leg springs up and wraps around Clark's ax. It sends Clark smashing violently into the wall.<sup>36</sup>

Action sequences such as this are made possible by Lancaster's use of an external POV. The Thing's assimilation of the dogs in the kennel is set in opposition to the men, thus establishing a visual metaphor for what we later learn is primarily an internal conflict. What occurs physically to the dogs, occurs psychologically to the men.

Lancaster, to his credit, does not abandon or subvert the internal threat. He sets up chaotic battle sequences in order to generate motion on the screen, but the real threat of the Thing is still the threat to the individual. The farther we get into the screenplay, the more frequently the dialogue contains questions of identity. People disappear and reappear, and throughout, Lancaster seasons the dialogue with double entendres that throw identity into question. All the following, for example, occur in a span of only four pages.

"What's taking you?!" (Childs asks Nauls)

"Where are you Garry?" (Childs)

"Where's . . . Where's Garry?" (Childs)

"Garry's missing!" (Childs)

"MacReady, that you?" (Norris)

"Where's Sanchez?" (MacReady)

"Who . . . Who is that?" and "Hey, who . . . ." (MacReady)

"Where the hell were you?" (MacReady to Sanchez)

"Anybody see Fuchs . . . or hear him? . . . Huh?" (MacReady)

"We've got to find Fuchs." (MacReady)<sup>37</sup>

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36 - Bill Lancaster, *The Thing* (Script, Second Draft), 31-33.

37 - Bill Lancaster, *The Thing* (Script, Second Draft), 76-80.

As the story accelerates toward its climax, Lancaster establishes a psychological sense of misplaced identities, precisely what the Thing threatens.

An internal threat jeopardizes identity itself. Not just life, but the essential value of life – an individual's ability to be the one living it. Lancaster's script in Carpenter's able hands succeeds, without kowtowing to narrative clichés, to map a paranoia of self-doubt. The film doesn't promote communal values, and doesn't contain the starry-eyed optimism of movies such as *Independence Day* and *Star Wars*. But it works (and works well) as a story of a man's struggle to maintain his individualism and hold on to the one quality that separates him from the herd – the strength of his will.

*The Thing*, like all good tragedies, forces us to question sacrosanct beliefs; therefore, it makes us uncomfortable. Unlike films such as *Scream*, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* and *Alien*, *The Thing* does not let us off the hook at the end. It does not validate our expectation that everything will turn out for the best. It shows us that order is not always restored, and the monster is not always vanquished. But what is particularly brilliant about Carpenter's version of *The Thing* is that it drags us into the nightmare. It raises the same questions in us that its characters face:

*Who am I? Who are you? Who can I trust?*

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# ABOUT THE RESTORATION

*The Thing* has been exclusively restored for this release by Arrow Films. The film is presented in its original theatrical aspect ratio of 2.35:1. The audio is presented in a 4.1 mix from original Dolby 6-Track Dolby Stereo mix (DTS-HD), a 5.1 mix (DTS-HD) and in a 2.0 stereo mix (DTS-HD). All materials for this restoration were made available by NBC Universal.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution on a pin-registered Arriscan at NBC Universal Studio Post, Universal City, CA.

Primary grading and picture restoration was completed at Silver Salt Restoration in London.

Director John Carpenter and director of photography Dean Cundey supervised and approved final grading at Deluxe, Culver City.

Audio mixes were produced and delivered by **NBC Universal**

Restoration supervised by **James White/Arrow Films**

Silver Salt Restoration: **Mark Bonnici, Stephen Bearman, Anthony Badger**



NBC Universal Studio Post: **Kristen Andrews, Kathy Ochse**

Deluxe/Culver City: **Sheri Eisenberg, Anna Slaughter**

Special thanks to **Peter Schade (NBC Universal)**

# PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**  
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**  
Technical Producer **James White**  
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**  
Blu-ray/DVD Mastering **David Mackenzie**  
Artist **Gary Pullin**  
Design **Obviously Creative**

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