

Informed Practice Essay

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The Thing is a film directed by John Carpenter and released in 1982 based on John Campbell's novella Who Goes There? It is about an American scientific camp isolated in the depths of Antarctica who are attacked by an alien being that can exactly replicate any living creature it comes across; the focus of the film is how quickly life can fall apart when people stop trusting one another.

The predominant source of fear is the paranoia and distrust that appears quickly between the men, unlike other horror films there's no friendly comradery or ganging together to defeat the evil. Carpenter uses his films to expose how quickly society can break down when trust is destroyed. Uncertainty for both the audience and the characters is used to build suspense and fear, the film ends on a cliff-hanger with Macready and Childs sat in the burnt remains of the camp, neither of them knowing if the other has been assimilated. Childs asks Macready "You the only one who made it?" yet it is not clear whether he means as a human or as a Thing. There is evidence throughout the film that the Thing has won, and humanity is doomed. In the beginning the Thing that emerges out of the dog escapes through the ceiling and isn't accounted for again, in the blood test scene Palmer's blood leaps out of the plate and disappears. As the audience are told repeatedly it only takes one cell of the Thing to infect somebody. The question of who is a Thing is a continuous theme for the duration of the film, both the characters and the audience are unaware who has been infected. There is a scene where the dog goes into someone's room yet only the shadow of the man is visible, this is where the paranoia starts as it is evident at least one camp member has been taken over. Later both Fuchs and Nauls find Macready's jumpsuit hidden outside leading them to believe he is a Thing; this blindsides the audience as Macready is the unofficial hero of the film so for him to be assimilated heralds certain doom for the rest of the cast. During the blood test scene Windows visibly sighs with relief when his blood is normal, this implies that even the humans do not know for certain whether they have been infected. It is never made clear whether the infected humans are aware they are infected, reinforcing the idea that evil is lurking just beneath the surface. Another question that is never answered is why the Thing is doing this; is it mindless animalistic violence, the will to survive or, worse of all, for pleasure? This is an effective way to build fear as if there was a reason for the Thing's actions the audience could potentially rationalise its behaviour. Yet by never revealing the Thing's purpose it strengthens the feeling of paranoia and distrust.

The American frontier was the name given to the parts of land between the invading European settlers and the native Americans. It was seen, wrongly, as wild swathes of land that were full of 'savages', as the American historian Frederick Jackson Turner said it was "*the meeting point between savagery and civilisation*". This idea of a meeting point between normalcy and the complete breakdown of society is something that greatly inspired the work of John Carpenter. However, unlike the usual version of this trope Carpenter switches it around, with humanity being the 'savages' on the brink of collapse. The Thing starts with a long distance shot of snow and the massive cliffs surrounding the camp then the audience is told that the radios have been down for weeks. So, from the beginning of this film the audience have been told and shown just how isolated and alone these men are, when

something undoubtedly goes wrong there is no help coming. The first time the audience see Macready he is drinking whisky and calling a computer a "cheating bitch", this is an isolated society not at the forefront of a frontier but rather at the edge of collapse.

Carpenter creates fear by blurring the lines between human and monster, good and evil. When the Americans first come across the body of the Thing at the Norwegian camp it has two human faces melted together, foreshadowing the similarities between man and monster. There are many instances in the film where the inherent goodness of the human characters is brought into question; "No! let him freeze outside." "Childs, what if were wrong?" "Why then, were wrong!" This is a conversation between Windows and Childs where Childs is suggesting leaving Macready outside to die even if he is still human. The audience are left wondering if it is for the greater good or whether good and evil have become indistinguishable in this frozen wasteland. At the start of the film Clark the dog handler becomes enraged at Macready for shooting a dog before it has become infected, grim comparisons can be drawn between this scene and the eventual demise of Clark as Macready shoots him in head as he believes Clarke has been infected. However, in juxtaposition between these two scenes there is more anger shown at McCready for shooting the dog then there is for him shooting Clark, suggesting any compassion and goodness that was shown at the beginning of this ordeal was destroyed by violent self-preservation. When they test Clarks blood it turns out he was human all along, "Clark was human which makes you a murderer.". This scene raises the question of the difference between Macready and the Thing now as they have both killed humans and how far can self-preservation go before it becomes murder?

Special effects are used to manipulate the feelings of the audience, there is a lot of gore used in the Thing. Within the first ten minutes we see a Norwegian being shot in the head then a close up of a bullet hole being stitched, this shows the frailty of humanity and how easily a body can be destroyed. The first time the audience see the Thing alive it is transforming from a dog; this is an extremely graphic scene with a huge amount of blood. To emphasise the goriness further the red of the blood is one of the only colours used in the film. The first version of the Thing looks like a skinned dog, this is another example of carpenter using a dog to manipulate the audience's emotions as 'man's best friend' has become an evil monster. The flying saucer the Americans find at the Norwegians camp seems incongruous with the way the Thing portrays itself as it does not seem like a smart life form but rather animalistic and mindless, this suggests we never see the Things 'true form' and it chooses to appear in a way to cause the most fear within the Americans. There was no CGI used in the Thing, Rob Bottin, the special effects artist, created everything using puppets and stop motion animation. My favourite scene is when Dr. Copper is using the defibrillator on Norris and Norris' whole stomach opens to become a mouth and bites Dr. Coppers arms off. To make this scene Bottin made fake arms out of jello, fake blood bags and wax bones then attached them to a double arm amputee who was wearing a mask of Dr. Coppers face, the mouth had a hydraulic system so when it snapped shut it bit the fake arms off completely.

When the Thing was released, America was going through turbulent political and social times, as the main antagonist of the film is a shapeshifting alien that can manipulate human flesh to appear complete normal it can be interpreted as many different American fears. The film was made a few years after the Vietnam war, America was going through the biggest economic

depression since the Great Depression, there was an oil crisis and right-wing politics was growing stronger. These issues created an American fear of otherness and suspicion of anything that was different to them.

Even though the AIDs epidemic in America was still in its early days in 1982 it is difficult to not see the similarities between the disease and the Thing, the characters use a blood test to see who has been assimilated by the alien similar to how blood tests are used to check for AIDs. Even if not comparing to AIDs specifically it's easy to see how the Thing can be representative of disease in general and the frailty of the human body. Throughout the film human skin is seen to be easily manipulated, ripped and destroyed. In one scene Blair who has been taken over by the Thing puts his whole hand through Gary's face and pulls it apart.

When the film came out in cinemas it had very negative reviews with magazine Cinefantastique labelling it as "the most hated film of all time" yet it is now seen as one the greatest sci-fi horrors of the eighties, this directly relates to the social and political climate of the 1980s. The nihilistic ending was one of the reasons it flopped at the cinema as Americans were going through a tough time already so did not want to go and see a film about humanity ultimately losing. The Thing also came out a week after ET which had a much more upbeat message of space friendship where Americans were the good guys, the Thing with its dark hopeless ending just could not compete. The Things portray humans as ultimately flawed with the lines blurred between man and monster, this goes against the belief in American exceptional and was not received well by critics. It is scary how the messages put across by the Thing are still relevant in today's society, Carpenter said in a recent interview that "*The Thing is a film about an alien—but it can be read as a metaphor for this pandemic, this disease*" in reference to the coronavirus. The Thing is such a celebrated horror movie not just for the amazing special effects which were way beyond other films from the same era but also for how Carpenter twists and manipulates the audience's expectations so when the screen fades to black you are still left questioning.

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