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The Evolution of ‘The Thing’ in Regards to its’ Contributions to the Sub-genre of Sci-Fi Horror

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Introduction

During a speech at the UN in 1987, President Reagan said "I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world." Referring to the Cold War, Reagan's speech also turned heads in the academic world of film studies, where we acknowledge the political metaphor in science-fiction alien invasion films. Alien invasion films from the 1950s through the 1980s mirrored Cold War fears as an outside infiltrator from another world invades the US and threatens the American way of life.

In 1938 a short story was published, entitled "Who Goes There?", written by John Campbell Jr. under the pen name Don Stuart. In 1973, the Science Fiction Writers of America voted the story one of the most influential science fiction stories that has ever been written. This story has been adapted into film three times, officially, in 1951, 1982 and 2011 as *The Thing from Another World!, The Thing,* and *The Thing*, respectively. There have been three non-official adaptations as well, in 2015, 2021 and one rumored to be in production. These are titled *Harbinger Down* (Gillis, 2015)*, The Thing Returns*(Constantino, 2021) and *Frozen Hell* (Unverified)*,* respectively. The story of "The Thing" from "Who Goes

There?" has been largely responsible for creating the science-fiction horror subgenre as we know it.

In addition to science fiction films such as *The Terminator* (Cameron, 1984) and *Alien*(Scott, 1979), John Carpenter's *The Thing* from 1982 was one of the most influential films in the development of science fiction and sci-fi horror. From the musical score and the practical effects, to the character development, comedic relief and smooth pacing, John Carpenter made the most critically successful adaptation of one of the most important science fiction stories of all time.

The Thing is a layered and nuanced work. While it received negative reviews at its' time of release and did not meet expectations for box office sales, this film has been recently reevaluated as a foundational pillar in sci-fi history. The 1951 film *The Thing from Another World!* and the 2011 film *The Thing* tell the story of a group of researchers stationed in Antarctica who come upon an alien body frozen in the ice. The alien then breaks through the ice and awakens, terrorizing the researchers. John Carpenters' 1982 film *The Thing* can be considered a sequel where the monster is already awake when the story starts.

According to Keith Johnson, author of "Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction", a lot of science fiction coming out of the 1950s and 1960s had appeal to youthful audiences, while certain texts attempted to canonize themselves as adult sci-fi. Also among "adult" science fiction were the likes of *Blade Runner*(Scott, 1982) and *2001: A Space Odyssey*(Kubrick, 1968) as a couple examples. According to Johnson, there was a

lack of academic interest in connecting science fiction to deeper mythologies, most likely because a lot of these films were blurry as to what genre they specifically belonged to, with *The Thing from Another World!* being equal parts horror and science fiction. After establishing itself as a genre, primarily through recurring symbols such as robots, aliens and the frontier of space, science-fiction really opened up to genre criticism after the 1970s, but was absent from the first moment of theory.

The creation of the science fiction genre as we know it, in the 1950s through the 80s, was spurred on by two separate factors. One was the Cold War and the US governments' fear of communist infiltrators from the Soviet Union. The other factor was public fears and anxieties about new and changing technologies. Of course the American moon landing wasn't until 1969, but it did nothing but help fuel public interest in science fiction even further in the following decades. Not to jump too much further in time, but President Reagan announced the "Star Wars Program" in 1983, a program intended to study the possibility of creating space laser satellites to shoot down nuclear weapons. The program went dormant and wouldn't reemerge until 2019 as the "Strategic Defense Initiative".

Science Fiction was a result of public interest in the possibilities of the future of human technology and vice versa. When researching the history of science fiction, the most seminal period was that of the mid-twentieth century. From television series such as *Star Trek*(Roddenberry, 1966) to blockbuster movies like *Predator*(1987), the trajectory of science fiction, has traces all the way to *Voyage to the Moon*(1902, Melies). But the creation of consistent thematic elements didn't cement until some very influential auteurs

created consistency and identity in science fiction as a genre, such as George Lucas, James Cameron and Ridley Scott, to name a few.

We are going to explore the trajectory and film history of science fiction as a genre, with most focus on the iterations of "The Thing", as one of the most recurring and influential contributions to sci-fi and sci-fi horror. It has a timeless appeal, but why, and we will explore the original 1938 science fiction pulp that it stems from. We will also explore other landmark films in the history of science fiction horror. While most scholarly conversation revolves around science fiction development in the 1950s, I posit that science fiction horror was created primarily through a handful of thematically consistent films during this time period.

We will be exploring the original 1951 film in the first chapter. We will be exploring the 1982 Carpenter film in the second chapter, and the 2011 prequel in the third chapter. The final chapter, or conclusion, will be tying together all of the facts to fully synthesize the thesis, that these iterations of the *The Thing* and the story of *The Thing* itself, have largely contributed to the creation of sci-fi horror as genre.

Chapter 1: The Thing from Another World!(1951)

The Thing from Another World! is one of the first science-fiction horror films, released in 1951 by Howard Hawks and Christian Nyby. While earlier films might be thought of as mystery adventure or scientific romance, there were many shots at the sci-fi genre, but this was the first film to be classified as a science-fiction horror film. According to Keith

Johnson of Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction, sci-fi horror blockbusters emerged in the 1970's but their roots can be traced back to the early 50's.

Howard Hawks was a flexible and legendary Hollywood director that made westerns, noir, drama, gangster films, sci-fi, war films and comedy. While he wasn't a rags to riches story, his family wealth allowed him to jump into Hollywood rather easily, as he started by loaning Jack Warner money for films, the head of what would become Warner Bros. After this, Jack Warner paid him back and signed him up as producer for a number of new films. After transitioning to sound film, he made a few instant classics. The two most memorable films of his sound era, arguably include: *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* (1953) and *Scarface* (1932).

Known as a realist director, he craved to imitate many aspects and genres of life, and often had an affinity for tough-talking female characters, later known as Hawksian Women. I consider Hawks to be a realist director because of his affinity for telling grounded and authentic stories. While other films scholars may disagree with this classification, we agree that he has genre flexibility as a director and made his mark with many different types of film. His last film would be *Rio Lobo,* a classic western released in 1970 and starring John Wayne. He died in 1977, before getting the chance to finish his last projects. Perhaps he was most well-known for his contribution to the Western genre, but as time goes on, he is retroactively honored for his contribution to science-fiction as a genre.

Hawks' film *The Thing from Another World!* , officially directed by Christian Nyby, was influenced by Hawks' earlier work. The camaraderie of the main characters echoes his

film *Air Force*(1943), according to Tony Williams, writing for Cineaction. According to Williams, this film is by no means a Marxist text, however it does show a group of professionals who must band and work together to defeat a common threat. The film synthesizes many Hawkian themes, and the tension building to the climactic battle echoes his earlier work in *Rio Bravo*(1953). The film doesn't have a single rugged-male protagonist, but rather a team of competent individuals whose only hope is to work together, utilizing all of their respective expertise and skillsets.

Regarding the threat of communism, the US government was fearful in the 1950's of communist ideology spreading and held hearings to blacklist suspected communist directors, producers and actors. Thusly, during this time period there were very real ongoing fears of communism and of being perceived as supporting it. This film is discussed by Williams as a non-communist film, though it has later been viewed by some as actually a pro-communist film. Williams writes that the film is "relevant to an ideal conception of Marxism which is what Hawks unconsciously offers as a Utopian community".

I posit that this film is a vastly layered and nuanced work that is considered landmark science-fiction horror and contains themes relevant from the time period it was released, such as anti-communist allegory, rugged masculine heroes reinforcing gender roles and political humor aimed at then President Truman. The Thing from Another World! is a composite film itself, defying genre at the time of it's release. Before science fiction was a commonplace term, RKO pictures, the distributor of the film, debated how to advertise this as it was trying to reach new groups of audiences.

Hawks film was scored by world renowned Russian-American composer Dimitri Tiomkin. Wailing female voices and shrill string sounds punctuate an eerie atmosphere and ambience throughout the film. This is reminiscent of the theremin, and was first used for a film called Spellbound, a Hitchcock thriller released six years prior. The eerie Tiomkin score would be used many times in following psychological thrillers and sci-fi film following the release of The Thing from Another World! The score is appropriately upbeat for dialogue scenes and punchy for the action, while pop tunes underscore the scenes of romantic tension between Captain Pat Henry and his attractive receptionist and love interest, Nikki.

Shifting from the musical score to the characters, Captain Pat Henry, the sort of protagonist of the film, played by Kenneth Tobey, was the hero of this film. Far from the rugged John T. Chance from Rio Bravo, Captain Pat symbolizes a progressive male hero, who does not succeed individually as a lone gunman, but rather depends on his teammates and the strength of the group to overcome the enemy. With a comedic edge, Captain Pat also draws parallels to comedic characters from Hawks other work, such as Bringing Up Baby(1938) and Monkey Business(1952). He is a likeable hero and a funny one, he also can't foot it on his own and, often foiled, has to rely on others.

We find soon in the film that Captain Pat's interest is the attractive, yet capable and intelligent, Nikki, played by Hawks' protégé Margaret Sheridan. She is the first one in the station to notice Arctic temperatures rising and is the one who admonishes how to the kill the monster. This is a subtle acknowledgment of this characters' capability and importance to the story, as another character had previously declared that the alien was "our superior in every way". The first scene with Nikki and Pat having a humorous and flirty

exchange in the office brings a sense of levity and warmth to the film. The chemistry between the two characters is at the core of the film, as any good hero has a love interest to make a good story. The character of Nikki isn't as empowered or independent as we like to see in films today, but for the time she was certainly a more progressive female character than that of female characters in Hawks earlier works.

Besides the characters and music, lastly is the special effects of the monster. Famous actor James Arness portrays the monster who gets electrocuted in the climax. As George Turner writes for American Cinematographer: "When complete with lighting, smoke, and a soundtrack that has to be heard to be believed, the scene convincingly depicts the giant alien being cooked away by 1.6 million volts of electricity." After describing all the effort that went into the special effects to show the heroes electrocuting the monster at the end of the film, Turner praises the special effects but notes a key mistake in the re-release of the film that is apparent in the version I viewed. In the theatrical release of this film, they ordered that the scenes with the monster be printed dark so as to obscure our view of the Thing. Newer re-releases aren't aware of this and re-printed the film as is, leaving viewers like myself to clearly see the monster, well-lit. As Turner points out, to my agreement, the best monster movies show just a little bit here or there of monster and never give you a full view, to leave viewers "a little hungry". So the newer version that is available now has a well-lit and clearly seen monster, which can negatively affect the horror aspect of the film. Regardless, the rest of the film holds up well, and other than a few minor changes, the version today is largely the same as the theatrical version that was released in 1951.

Lastly, my primary addition to the scholarly conversation is that this film is a mixture of all the right elements that constitute today what we see as a good science fiction film. This film has comedy, a little romance, a likable hero, an interesting villain, a great score, and a likable and funny group of characters that must band together and use all their respective skills and strengths to defeat the villain. As Keith Johnson writes in Science Fiction Film, "This time period is part of a "genre-fication", where the recurring use of particular symbols both in films and culture, suggests core elements of generic identity". Although the political allegory of these "Reaganite" films cannot be ignored, and the time periods' fears and culture would inevitably be reflected in 1950s film, I posit that this film stands as the science fiction film that laid groundwork for sci-fi as a genre today. Conclusively, The Thing from Another World! is a foundational pillar of contemporary science fiction and as instrumental to the creation of the genre as any of the other films discussed in scholarly conversation.

Chapter 2: A Brief Overview of 'The Thing'(1982)

Widely regarded as the best iteration of *The Thing*, John Carpenter's 1982 adaptation has become considered a cult classic. While the critical reception to the 2011 version wasn't entirely negative, the controversy over the special effects has had a lasting effect on fans of the series. The two recent adaptations didn't make as big of an impact as they had hoped either. After rewatching all the film adaptations, the 1982 version is the best. The 2011 version is good as a prequel and "companion piece" to the original, but something

about the tone and boldness of John Carpenter's vision still holds up as near-perfect. Kurt Russell and Keith David lead the story with classic hero machismo and the musical score punctuates the tension and dread in every scene.

A prequel was never wholly necessary either, because the beginning of the 1982 film shows a UFO crash landing in the arctic, setting up most of the context a viewer would need. The only unanswered questions are where did the Norwegian come from and why is he shooting at a dog? It is almost better to leave some questions unanswered, adding a layer of mystery and unknown. Much like showing the monster only a little, not knowing and not seeing, can be a powerful tension factor. What makes the original so immersive is much like the original *Alien* film, being dropped into a situation and not knowing many details, is part of the experience. The audience never knows what to expect and can only rely on the hardiness and competence of its' relatable heroes. The heroes are human in these films, and far from invincible, have little knowledge or expertise in their unknown situation, but must rely on their intuition and their teammates to stand a chance.

I posit that the practical monster effects in the 1982 film were the best, comparable to those of *Alien* and other big sci-fi films of the era. According to Vincent Barnett of "Horror Studies Volume 9, Number 1", "Rob Bottin's special creature effects are regarded as a pinnacle of achievement in the physical make-up and design fields that, since CGI effects now dominate the industry, will probably never be surpassed in terms of their revolutionary impact at the time of the film's release."

It is important to note that the film was not successful critically or financially in 1982, it has only received praise since being reevaluated in the twenty-first century. Even Roger Ebert gave the film two and a half stars when it was released. Let's look at the critical reception in 1982 before moving to its' current reappraisal. Roger Ebert pointed out that the short story "Who Goes There?" inspired at least four films, including *Alien, The Thing From Another World!, Invasion of the Body Snatchers*(1956,Siegel) and now *The Thing* (1982). Tossing political allegory aside, the 1982 film was less obvious about political metaphor and just makes for a tense film made by someone who Ebert calls "the master of suspense" (Carpenter). Ebert commends the special effects and says that this film has some of the best special effects "achieved by this new generation of visual magicians". To survive encounters with the monster, Ebert humorously recommends "an airtight buddy system. But time and time again, Carpenter lets his characters wander off alone and come back with silly grins." While not specifically denigrating the film, Ebert sort of recommends it as a good "gross out movie for teenagers." I would say that is a bit reductive, but it is hard to argue with one of the most well-respected film critics of the past 50 years.

The 1982 film has been reappraised since its' release and was not beloved by critics when it was released in 1982. In the November/December issue of *Cinefantastique* David J. Hogans' in-depth article about Rob Bottin and the special effects concluded with "sadly, *The Thing* may be the most unloved monster movie in history". In the book The Thing, by Annie Billson, she writes that while the social and media landscape of the world has changed immensely since 1982, the film still "seems as pertinent as ever". Her book acts as a reappraisal of the film which had a negative critical reception at the time of its' release

but is likely due for a critical redressing. Her book was originally released in 1997 and re-released in 2021after the internet revolution, and the niche fan community online for sci-fi horror had time to develop. According to Billson: "To say *The Thing* has undergone critical reassessment since 1982 is an understatement."

Star Wars(1977, Lucas), later retitled *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope,* had ground-breaking hybrid special effects, utilizing older techniques such as costumes, miniatures and Claymation, while also embracing new computer-enhanced possibilities. The hybridity aspect of Lucas' vision was never-before-seen and the cutting edge (at the time) special effects provided an uncanny element to this new sci-fi frontier. Similarly, the 1982 film *The Thing* built off previous tried-and-true methods such as the practical monster and slime effects from *Alien*. Carpenter also embraced possibilities with CGI, such as the UFO crash landing shown in the beginning of the film. While most of the effects were practical, what could not be achieved with this method was done with computer-generated imagery, but with a modicum of restraint. This dyad of technology helped to immerse the viewer and provide an experience he or she never had before at the theater.

In addition to the practical effects, the film was scored by legendary Italian composer Ennio Morricone, who also scored films for Sergio Leone. John Carpenter usually scores his own films, but this time he invited in a renowned composer. After the film was finished, Carpenter collaborated with Ennio to ensure the score matched the films' tone. Rumor has it that Carpenter actually asked Ennio to compose multiple scores and in the end, he picked his favorite one. The final score perfectly captures the eerie tension of the desolate, Antarctic atmosphere.

Dean Cundey provided brilliant cinematography with slow pans and dollies, which is accompanied by the excellent editing of Todd Ramsey. Annie Billson, author of The Thing (the book), calls John Carpenter the "master of blocking." In commentary Carpenter said "as a director this was one of my biggest challenges." The arrangement of the actors in a scene can come across as awkward or artificial, if done poorly. This film has many scenes and camera shots where 11 or 12 characters are all standing beside each other in the frame, looking at something. This is tricky to get all the characters standing near each other to look natural and unintentional. Billson points out that the arrangement of characters within a frame might not be something you notice at first, but is essential to the overall quality of the film. Billson observes that "there is much pleasure to be had in observing Carpenters' use of space."

Although the film has been reappraised as one of the most influential sci-fi horror films of all time, it was a financial and critical flop in 1982. The studio was of course, disappointed, when the film flopped, especially since Carpenter had been so successful thus far. He made *Assault on Precinct 13 (1976), Halloween (1978), The Fog (1980) and Escape from New York (1981),* also starring Kurt Russell.

According to Vincent Barnett of 'Horror Studies Volume 9', prior to the 1970's there were no A-list horror films. Horror Studies, Volume 9, Number one, is an article written by Vincent Barnett. Studios saw horror as barely profitable, B-movie material. There were three horror films that changed that: *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975), and *Alien* (Scott, 1979). While *The Exorcist* spawned multiple satanic-themed imitations, *Jaws* pioneered the summer horror blockbuster. According to Barnett, *Alien* had a budget of

$8 million, which was very high at the time. After its' massive success, horror had been established as a big-budget, mainstream genre. I would add to Barnett's assessment that *Halloween*, directed by Carpenter and released in '78, was also a big contributor. This film was one of the most successful indie horror films of all time, and is currently the third most successful slasher film of all time, behind *Scream and Scream 2* (1996-97, Craven).

Regarding the traces of allegory in the film, political and otherwise, Katovich and Kinkade, writing for *The Stories Told in Science Fiction and Social Science: Reading The Thing and Other Remakes From Two Eras*, point out that while there was obvious political metaphor in the 1951 film, in the 1970s and 1980s, public fears "were not nearly as clearly delineated." According to Katovich and Kinkade, "Institutional trust had been shattered with Watergate and Vietnam and paranoia as a national zeitgeist had taken hold." The nation that was emerging in the 1970s post-Vietnam was much different from the 1950s post-WWII society. The tragedy at Three Mile Island in 1979 is a good example for the beginning of the distrust in science. This incident can be thought of as "the beginning of the end of the nuclear industry." Society became more hopelessly reliant on science and its' institutions in the coming decades and were aware of it. This distrust of science and technology but our helpless dependence on it created a contradiction. According to Katovich and Kinkade, technological advances from micro-chips to automation, started to displace thousands of workers. In the minds of Americans, science had abandoned the individual in favor of the overall human population and its' betterment. While in the 1951 film, we can clearly see reflected the public faith in science, by the 1970s, American faith in

science and military institutions had dropped significantly. In the 1951 film, the conclusion was that our approach to science must be tempered with caution.

The 1982 film is called "a touchstone for a growing number of followers either nostalgic for the type of visceral pre-computer generated on-set practical effects that it boasts or younger generations suffering from 'pixel fatigue'." Jez Connolly, writing in his book "The Thing" (different book than Billson's with the same name), also points out that in Time Magazines' 2006 list of the 100 best horror films of all time, The Thing was ranked number six. Connolly writes that one of his favorite things about The Thing is renting it to watch with friends and observe their reactions to what he calls "the money shots". While Connolly writes with clear affection in his discussion of the 1982 film, he cites this film as Carpenters' best, calling it his "Apotheosis."

Barnett writes that the 1982 film "it is now regarded as a horror masterpiece and one of the most gripping and atmospheric horror films ever made." Agreeing with Barnett's assessment in *Horror Studies, Volume Nine,* I add that this film helped influence the next generation of science-fiction horror. Barnett asserts that "his directorial career never recovered from this apparent fall." Some scholars disagree, as Carpenter went on to make *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986), as well as *Escape from L.A.* (1996), both starring Russell as well. He then went on to executive produce the reboot *Halloween* trilogy (Green, 2018-2022).

In investigating the possibilities for the financial failure of the film in 1982, Barnett acknowledges Carpenters' difficulties working with the studio. Carpenter stated that the

overinflated budget was partly due to the studios outdated “dinosaur” methods, including giving the filmmaker excessive props, which he didn’t like or use, that were overpriced. According to Barnett, the studio ended up inflating the budget so much that they would have needed to make $40 million at the box office “as a minimum” and $50 million dollars to make the studio happy and give Carpenter free reign to do another horror film.

Lastly, Jonatan Soderstrom of Karlstad University, writes a sixteen-page paper entitled “The Uncanny Thing: Paranoia and Claustrophobia in The Thing and “Who Goes There?”. He echoes this point that “the film has been revalued by critics and fans alike, and is now seen as one of the best and most important horror-films of all time.” Soderstrom calls the 1982 film “the most faithful adaptation of the source material”, with a few key exclusions, like the monsters’ telepathic abilities. While the 1951 film was a clear metaphor for fears of communism, the 1982 film and the 2011 one are more straightforward sci-fi horror. The film has more action than the novella, which is based more on suspense and paranoia than straightforward action. Soderstrom posits that the film succeeds due to its use of the uncanny. The uncanny is something that feels familiar but different, in a disturbing or unsettling way.

In *Grimaces of the Real,* written in the MIT Press by Slavoj Zizek, he talks about the uncanny as being the basis of horror in film. Monsters that look slightly different but have a deformity or some sort of warped physicality that disturbs us. The thing of nightmares, humanoid monsters that appear as an imitation of us, but with hellish distortions. An example Zizek gives is Frankenstein’s monster, or the elephant man. He also cites the 1893 painting *The Scream.* Zizek attempts to psychoanalyze horror films and what it is about

them that grips us and affects us. The uncanny, or the familiar, yet disturbing, is something that holds our psyche like a nightmare, as we cannot seem to process this disturbing reality. This same psychological disturbance is what makes The Thing or the Alien films so disturbing or scary. The quality of the special effects done by Rob Bottin for Carpenters' film can also not be understated as the selling point of The Thing.

Chapter 3: The Latest Thing (2011)

While the *Alien* franchise is alive and well, *The Thing* franchise has had a more nuanced history as of late. John Carpenter's 1982 classic finally got a prequel green-lit around 2009. This film, directed by Matthijs van Heijningen Jr., hit theaters in 2011. The sad story with the 2011 The Thing is that it was dedicated to honoring the practical effects of the John Carpenter film, but after some studio meddling, it was demanded that much of the film be reshot. Although the original premise was to use practical effects, after test screenings, the studio executives deemed the response to the practical effects to be negative. They demanded that scenes be reshot and reworked with computer-generated imagery, which ended up being more disappointing to many fans.

The founders of the special effects company, Alec Gillis and Tom Woodruff Jr., were disappointed that most all of their practical effects had been painted over with CGI. Fans alike were disappointed and a public funding campaign was created on the Kickstarter website. After a successful fundraising campaign, Alec Gillis made an unofficial remake of The Thing called *Harbinger Down*, which was released in 2015 with one-hundred percent

practical effects. And now we are going back to the original source material. An expanded novel-length version of “Who Goes There?” by John Campbell Jr. is the basis for the latest adaptation, entitled “Frozen Hell”, which is currently in production. According to Andrew Whalen of Newsweek, this is more of a rumor and not completely substantiated as of today. John Carpenter himself also hinted that he might be working with Blumhouse Productions on a related film. So there is a bit of uncertainty about the future of the franchise, but fans haven’t given up yet and neither has Carpenter.

The bottom line is that the 2011 film was just as big a bomb as the 1982 film. The reasons for the failure of the 1982 film was analyzed in Chapter 2, and the 2011 version doesn’t have a whole lot of scholarly analysis I’ve found. The film was largely forgotten about by the filmgoing public and despite not being a profitable film, in my expert opinion, the film is one of the best monster movies of the twenty-first century. While this film is a prequel and “companion piece” to the original, it adds a dimension to the original film, much like the *Star Wars* prequels added weight to the original films. I posit to academic discussion that this film bombed partly due to the fact it has less name recognition than the *Alien* films. If the *Alien* franchise can keep cranking out hit or miss films with no financial worries, this film could have done better if it was marketed more heavily or perhaps if it was released at a different time. The 1951 film still stands as the most financially successful of the three films.

In Annie Billsons’ analysis of the 2011 film, “the filmmakers approach their task with admirable seriousness and evident affection for carpenters’ film.” Some of the creative decisions in the 2011 version supplement the original film and retroactively enhance and

expand its' story. Billson humorously points out that the 1982 film had a distinct team of characters while the 2011 version is "largely populated by interchangeable men with beards". She points out that while the original film was an all-male cast, the 2011 film has two female characters, so it gets diversity points.

While the film aims to be progressive with gender roles, Billson argues it seems unrealistic that a female character can give orders to a bunch of men with no kickback (considering the setting of 1982). Gender roles aside, Billson argues that the wonky special effects don't compare to the practical effects of the 1982 version. She argues that the 2011 computer effects ended up "resulting in that oddly weightless impression characteristic of CGI."

Roger Ebert gave the 2011 film the same exact rating he gave the 1982 film, two and a half stars out of four. This is barely passable, with two and a half out of four being equivalent to a rating of sixty-three percent. While his review doesn't completely decimate the film, it doesn't have the same optimism as his reviews of other big sci-fi horror films. While Ebert commended the 1951 film calling it "the most terrifying experience I have ever had in a movie theater", he doesn't have the same love for the 2011 film. Promoting the theory that the less you see of a monster, the better, Ebert criticizes the 2011 film for showing way too much of the monster, ruining the suspense and giving the audience too much time to pick apart the CGI. Ebert ended his review by incorrectly predicting that the film would do okay at the box office.

If Ebert was the arbiter of film critique for the past 50 years, up until his passing in 2013, who is the new voice of film reviews? Curiously, while movie commercials would always reference Ebert giving one or two thumbs up, film commercials now often cite the "Rotten Tomatoes" score. Rotten Tomatoes is the go-to film review, whether you like it or not. And you probably don't and I don't either, not only because of the silly name, but because of the idea that you can mash together a bunch of film reviews for a "consensus" of the film. Film, as any form of art, is entirely subjective. Not partly, but wholly, and anyone that thinks art can be subjected to a general consensus opinion is perhaps a bit foolhardy. Everyone has their own tastes and their own criteria for what makes a quality film. Also the genuine measure of a films' success is its' profit or box office sales. But like it or not, the current arbiter of film review for the masses is Rotten Tomatoes and their critical consensus for the 2011 film is: "It serves the bare serviceable minimum for a horror flick, but The Thing is all boo-scares and a slave to the far superior John Carpenter version."

Let's turn to a more respectable film critique. Emma Anne James, writing a brilliant article for *Science Fiction Film & Television,* (Vol.6, Issue 2), asserts that "Since Carpenter's film was made during the so-called Second Cold War, it could be argued that it reflects the fear of communism suggested in Nyby's film, but I would argue that if it does play out any particular social or cultural issue, it is the 1980s' crisis of masculinity." What does James mean by "crisis of masculinity"? James explains that in the 1980s, many films decided to absorb and erode the concept of male identity. She posits that Carpenter decided to omit female characters from the 1982 film, which was a statement in itself. James asserts that the 2011 prequel/remake reflected on identity, not through gender, but through the

advancement of technology in the internet age. There is a scene where the characters test each other to determine who is human (in all three films). The 1982 version was a bit more gruesome, but all of these denote pagan rituals, according to James. This has violent, masculine connotations, according to James.

The 2011 film fails to replicate the subtlety of the 1982 film, according to James. The 1982 plot works more subtly and the 2011 film has more of a predictable story, with the final monster emerging from a mad scientist trope. The 1982 version had a twist on the mad-scientist trope, where the scientist destroyed science equipment in a frenzy to try and destroy The Thing to save his fellow researchers. While the intentionality of an all-male cast was the premise for the 1982 version, the 2011 had a female lead, played by Mary Elizabeth Winstead. The 2011 female led film was still set in 1982 though, so the concept of a female leader at a desolate Antarctic base in the 1980s was a bit derided as an aggressively progressive decision that came off as unrealistic and forced, from the feminist readings I've studied. The 2011 version according to James, also had an odd sense of nationalism, at one point a Norwegian character turns against the Americans. Why the Norwegians would have a grudge against Americans in 1982 is inexplicable, according to James. James concludes that the CGI is the icing on the bad cake, and the 2011 film has CGI that feels weightless and unsurprising. She claims that the 1982 version is "richer" and has a deeper exploration of the theme of identity.

Some scholars discuss the 2011 version as being even better than the 1951 iteration. The point of this essay isn't to discuss which film is "good" and which ones are "bad" however, but to take a deeper analysis on what made the films important to the

overall history of science fiction horror, as a genre. While the 1982 film does have most of the critical affection, as technology evolves, who is to say that at some point we can't have a better version that actually uses CGI to enhance, rather than replace, the tried-and-true special effects?

A valid point of critique for the newer film, Rob Nelson, writing for Variety, Los Angeles, notes that Van Heijningen does not recreate the paranoia and claustrophobia of the older two films. A valid point, the characters are no longer trapped at the research base in the 2011 version, they have gas-powered vehicles, they just choose to not leave the base for some reason. The protagonist just demands they "not leave until they get a good blood sample", which is as naïve and silly as it sounds. Nelsons' review of Heijningen's film is lucid yet humorous. Echoing previous assessments discussed, Nelson concludes that the CGI of Heijningens' film doesn't hold a candle (or flamethrower) to the effects of Carpenters'.

Enduring Legacy and the Future

On the fan website Outpost#31, Annie Billson, author of *The Thing*, contemplates the negative reaction The Thing got from critics: "flippant dismissal, with or without sneering, allows critics to demonstrate in public not only that the film hasn't got to them, but that they're regular human beings and NOT AT ALL sick or twisted or frightened".

Annie Billson wrote the book The Thing, an expansive and exhaustive piece of literary admiration for The Thing story, with special recognition of Carpenters' iteration. Outpost#31 is The Thing fan website, which opened in 2001.

For true fans of sci-fi horror, there is also a great novelization of The Thing, as pointed out by Billson, written by Alan Dean Foster. A film adaptation of a novella which had then in turn, been adapted into a full-length novel. In her book The Thing, Billson points out that even in the futuristic time we are living in, with rapidly evolving technologies and cultural landscapes, The Thing seems as "pertinent as ever." Billson writes the forward for her revised book from lockdown, in a time where a rapidly spreading virus caused the American Public to shut down and quarantine at home. Ironically, the story of The Thing is about paranoia, intolerance and a distrust of science, according to Billson. The melting polar ice caps continue to turn up previously undiscovered organisms from millenia ago. The parallels between the modern world and the themes in "The Thing" continue to run as deep as ever.

Billson writes about how this film found its' audience on TV re-runs and at-home VHS, because the 1982 film wasn't recommended by who she calls the "gatekeepers of popular culture". These gatekeepers sneered at science fiction, fantasy and horror. In the 1980s, an era of sequels and remakes, few films probed the underbelly of society like John Carpenters' The Thing. Viewed in retrospect, however, Billson writes that the 1980s were the years of burgeoning science fiction. As these sci-fi films crept into the mainstream consciousness, they also started to develop a loyal fanbase. While these films like *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* appealed to younger audiences, *The Thing* was in the same realm as *Alien,* appealing to a more mature fan base. I posit that science fiction and horror both took off during this time period and their inevitable merger formed in films like Carpenter's.

While it isn't possible to summarize accurately all film reviews, it seems a bit relevant with this film. As the critics really did all agree that the film was "boring" and "disgusting". It is curious why everyone liked *Alien* for the same reasons they all hated *The Thing*. These films are very similar, with the only key difference being that the alien is in a spaceship in one film, and comes to earth in the other. Also one film is led by Sigourney Weaver and one by Kurt Russell. I suppose people appreciated the "happy" ending to *Alien*, whereas the bleak ending in *The Thing* was not well-liked, and also didn't leave the possibility for a sequel. But there is something to say for the value of an ending where we watch it all burn to the ground and the characters are doomed when the credits roll. It is very bold, like other Carpenter films, and takes horror to the maximum, with no glimmer of hope remaining at the end. The idea of humans being unable to best an alien is not a popular idea with American audiences, we like to see the human somehow succeed in whatever situation they are in. Fighting an unknown enemy and failing whole-heartedly with no survivors is as bleak an ending as one could imagine. But part of this take is what makes it so interesting and satisfying. There aren't 40 million sequels and Kurt Russell never comes back to life or has a secret son who picks up where his father left off. They all just die and the story is completely over. Upon reflection, as film culture moves forward, this type of ending seems more and more original and bold, as a creative decision by Carpenter. This boldness also defines Carpenter's career.

Fortunately, Carpenter is reappraised as the "master of horror", as now we look back and have a certain appreciation for horror and science fiction that we never had back in the 80s. While most films reflected some aspect of the human condition, he worked

artistically, exploring darker and scarier themes than mainstream Hollywood veered away from. After Eli Roth and Quentin Tarantino, it is hard to imagine that John Carpenter's films can still be considered gross or offensive. By modern sensibilities, his films actually come off as rather tame. His villains and monsters have cemented themselves into popular culture and have come to retroactively define the era. From video games to Netflix series like *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers, 2016), it is overly apparent that Carpenter had a huge influence on modern sci-fi horror. Upon a rewatch of *Stranger Things* , you'll have to clear the fog off your glasses, because Carpenters monster itself was in the end of episode 2 as the creature that appears behind the pool for a split second and kidnaps the character Barbara. Online fan forums list the creature as "the Demogorgon"....but it looks exactly like the monster from *The Thing,* which couldn't have been an accident. The shows creators, the Duffer brothers, even admitted in an interview that they were inspired by Carpenter for their first season.

After the success of *Halloween,* and its recent resurgence, fans started to look back on Carpenter's other films with an open mind. From *Assault on Precinct 13 to Escape from L.A.,* fans critically reevaluated his films. Twenty first century redressing has given Carpenter legendary status and some call him the father of modern horror. He was asked to lead a Masterclass at the Cannes Film Festival in 2019. This is interesting and paradoxical because one might assume that if your films aren't financially successful, then you are not a successful director. But ironically, in the age of streaming, if older movies retroactively find post-release success with re-watches, then the director can be considered successful in a different way. If one wants to rewatch the film, they probably

will have to fork over $29.99 to Fandango or Amazon, or perhaps purchase a Blu-ray or DVD if they want a physical copy to own. So someone is making money off these films, even if they have long since been released in theaters, they are just now starting to really gain traction. Also in the age of the internet, we can all research and learn about great films we missed and then re-watch these older films on big, at-home theater systems. So the immediacy of profiting at the box office may be less of a factor than it used to be.

Reflecting on his career, in an interview with Variety Magazine, Carpenter stated that the only movie that was *more* successful than he hoped for was *Christine,* the 1983 adaptation of a Stephen King novel about a car that kills people. Interestingly, this movie, as silly as it sounds, was praised by critics and made 20 million over a budget of 10. Carpenter stated that no one would hire him after the devastating premiere of *The Thing*, so he took whatever he could get and ended up doing *Christine,* which sort of was a blessing and got him back in the good graces of the industry.

When asked what scares him personally, he had a funny answer. “I find real life terrifying. I find what Bashar al-Assad is doing in Syria terrifying. I find some elements of our country terrifying.” A remarkably down to earth man, when asked about his status as a “king of cultural phenomenon”, he humbly said he doesn’t know what that term means. Carpenter concludes the interview expressing gratitude for his ability to make films and get them released, but also for “surviving Hollywood”. He iterates that if one is lucky enough to make films, they must also stay in touch with themselves because they will experience success and failure and must learn to deal with both.

Another master of horror deserves recognition as well when it comes to the history of horror films. David Cronenberg was a talented director who is nicknamed the godfather of the "body-horror" genre. Along with *Alien* and *The Thing,* Cronenberg released *Shivers, Scanners, Videodrome and The Fly* in 1973, 1981, 1983 and 1986, respectively. He also directed dramas and has ranged a bit as a director but has maintained success up to today, with his most recent film, *The Shrouds,* released last year.

Cronenberg has been a polarizing director, but no one can disagree that he helped contribute substantially to the evolution of the horror genre becoming mainstream. His earlier films in the 1970s and 1980s can be considered sci-fi horror or supernatural horror, and his more recent works lean into action, thriller and drama. *Scanners* was his breakthrough hit, which released in theaters in 1981 and arguably was one of the first films produced in Canada that competed with American films at the box office.

It's impossible to conclude my analysis of the impact of The Thing without mentioning it's competitor, *Alien*. *Alien* was far more successful and as I've discussed in the previous chapters, the exact reasons for the financial failure of Carpenter's film, is up for debate. But the films share overwhelming similarities. Roger Ebert claimed that both films were inspired by the same short story, *Who Goes There?,* by Joseph Campbell Jr. The "desert island" trope is common in science fiction. The characters are marooned on an uninhabited planet or a desolate spaceship, in the case of *Alien*. While in Carpenter's film, the scientists are marooned at a remote research station in Antarctica, the "desert island" trope remains the same, where the characters are stuck alone in a space they cannot escape, trapped with a monster. This makes for good suspense, and Ridley Scott did a

great job in 1979 with a film that couldn't have been this successful without the powerful performance of Sigourney Weaver as Ellen Ripley. Scott and Weaver have both gone on to have very successful careers with Scott being one of the most profitable directors in history, with his films earning over 5 billion dollars worldwide, cumulatively. The film had a budget somewhere around 10 million dollars, roughly and grossed somewhere around 188 million worldwide, being a smash success, and drowning out Carpenter's film. This film is one of the most well-known early sci-fi horror films that was widely well received and made a lot of money. There isn't much more to be said about these films as much has been written about them and their impact and influence are well documented and well known. The franchise's most recent entry was *Alien: Romulus*, released last year and directed by Fede Alvarez. The film acts as a sequel to the original and uses the most expensive and high-tech technology for the film's special effects, taking part in the modern experiment to bring dead actors back to life. There is currently an Alien TV show in production.

It's clear how much John Carpenter's film influenced the Duffer Brothers, who created *Stranger Things* in 2016. The first season is an eerie mystery regarding missing citizens whose disappearance may or may not be related to "the upside down". There are different monsters who somehow relate to this mystery as well. One of these monsters looks and sounds almost exactly like the monster from Carpenter's film. The characters name this thing "the Demogorgon", after a monster from one of their games. But it is realistically a nameless, faceless creature that hails from some other dimension to prey on human victims. The similarities between this monster from season one, and the monster

from Carpenter's film are very close. The Duffer brothers even cited John Carpenter as one of their biggest influence. The show itself is an homage to sci-fi horror of the 1980s.

The impact of *The Thing* is apparent in modern culture from *Stranger Things to Alien: Romulus,* this film clearly has made an impact. Science fiction horror wouldn't even be a genre if it weren't for the game-changing films that emerged from 1980s that blended horror elements with science fiction tropes and themes. While horror started off as B-movie side-dish, it grew from the roots of these early films to become a mainstream, money-making venture for film studios. Sci-fi horror films now feature A-list actors and big-budget special effects. While The Thing lies dormant as of now, contemporary sci-fi horror clearly is inspired by the story and its' various iterations, most namely John Carpenter's. His 1982 masterpiece was bleak, disturbing and hopeless, with it's bloody and freezing cold ambience that sent a shiver through the theater auditoriums. While it received lukewarm review at the time of it's release, it has been critically reappraised and reevaluated as one of the best classic monster movies that only gains traction with time. In an age where CGI was yet to fully synthesize, this film's knowledge of the boundary of it's practical effects were recognized perfectly and used to it's fullest effectiveness. The film adaptations consequently add value to the original short story, and much like Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, gains value and prestige over the years to come as one of the most influential monster stories of all time.