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Film Studies 380

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Reading Response 6: *The Thing* (1982)

There are three elements in John Carpenter's remake of *The Thing* (1982) which are pulled off brilliantly. The first element is the setting and landscape used in the film, as Carpenter immediately transports viewers in extremely treacherous weather conditions, as our heroes are required to wear thick coats, masks and gloves to protect them from their hazardous subzero environment. Since our heroes are forced to be shut inside a small research station together and among several other colleagues who might or might not be who they say they are, it perfectly adds to the claustrophobic and isolated tension of the story.

The second element is the idea of identity and the monster's ability to expose and exploit these themes on its enemy. Every creature in a monster movie needs to have a unique attribute, and for the Thing it has the ability to create paranoia, fear and distrust within the unity of human relationships. Once it is able to successfully tear down all the walls of security and trust within the inside of that unit, then it is able to make its attack and infect until it is successfully spread throughout the entire population. Isn't one of our basic primordial fears deception and distrust by either a friend, family member or work colleague, and not knowing if someone is really who they say they are?

The third element is obviously the practical special effects which I feel in *The Thing* look much better than most of the overdone CGI used in most movies today. Another one of our many

human fears is the shut down or failure of our very own bodies. Knowing that our bodies are vulnerable to either some form of infection, disease or biological deformity is terrifying, mostly because it is out of our control. Interesting how the Aid's virus was just becoming a public epidemic throughout the US during the 1980's, because *The Thing* and another iconic horror remake titled *The Fly* (1986) were both two very frightening films which seemed to explore the similar anxieties and fears on disease and infection that the American public were presently fearing within society at the time.

The Thing is obviously a horror classic but I also feel it is not a flawless film. The one issue I find with *The Thing* is that I feel Carpenter at times relied too much on the special effects to take over, and placed the more important elements for a horror film like mood, tension and suspense to take a backseat to shock, disgust, and gore. I also feel that the true nature of *The Thing* is revealed much too quickly in the story. Carpenter could have easily took more time in delaying the reveal of the monster, but since he immediately reveals the *Thing* and what it is capable of doing much too early on, it pretty much takes away most of the creepy tension and mysteries of the creature throughout the rest of its story.

As creepingly effective as that dog's acting was throughout that beginning of the film, I wouldn't mind giving the dog a little more screen time. To simply observe the dog oddly wander from room to room, and to have me constantly paranoid if the dog did or did not infect any of the other crew members would have been for me much more terrifying than watching the *Thing* in full special effects action mode. For example, Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) is the quintessential monster story which perfectly gives itself enough time to build up the frightening scenario, and when it is decided to finally let loose with the special effects (I'm talking about the chest bursting dinner sequence), the audience has already invested an hour into the picture.

And yet the early-on reveal of *The Thing* in the iconic dog pen sequence is an immediate and shocking full-frontal assault on our cinematic senses. We find ourselves watching in disbelief as a dog's face splits apart and snake-like tentacles extrude out of the body and latch themselves on several other dogs, while slowly sucking the organic life out of them. To watch these metamorphic transformations occur all throughout *The Thing* give us a conflicted reaction to feel both horrified at the images and absolute admiration in the artistic craftsmanship that was brilliantly taken to design and achieve such impressive effects. Because beyond all the ooze, gore, burst rip cages and torn apart limbs, (most famously a head which immediately grows a pair of crab legs and quietly tries to sneak its way out of the room); one can find a disturbing artistic beauty within all the twisted and structural designs and shapes, all mysteriously revealed under deep layers of dead skin and deformities of bone, organs and tissue.

In Heather Addison's article "Cinema's Darkest Vision: Looking into the Void in John Carpenter's *The Thing*" she presents some interesting theories on why John Carpenter's *The Thing*, like Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), suffered severely at the box-office and with critics at the time of its release. She states: "Essentially, *The Thing* was the wrong kind of film for the era of Reagan-style masculinity and optimism" (Addison 156). John Carpenter also noted, "Steven Spielberg felt that Americans were hungry for an uplifting cry and responded with *E.T.*" (Addison 156). I agree that *The Thing*, like *Blade Runner*, was probably released one decade too late. Such pessimistic themes of nihilism, hopelessness and feelings of apocalyptic despair felt much more in sync with the era of the 70's which explored the distrust, paranoia and fear of the government, than the more optimistic and sweet conservatism of the Reagan era.