

The Thing in the Ice: The Weird in John Carpenter's *The Thing*

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Upon its original release, John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) was subject to notoriously scathing reviews.¹ It was spurned by audiences, while critics almost universally rejected what they saw as excessive gore; as one commentator put it, the film was 'overpowered by Rob Bottin's visceral and vicious special make-up effects'.² Others were quick to dismiss the film as '*Alien* on ice'.³ Vincent Canby, writing for the *New York Times*, declared it 'instant junk', attributing its supposed failure to a lack of a central monster, insisting that '[o]ne of the film's major problems is that the creature has no identifiable shape of its own. It's simply a mass of bloody protoplasm.'⁴ The impulse to characterise *The Thing* as a monster movie that somehow failed because there was either too much or too little monster is crucial. That the creature that gives the film its title (or non-title, given the elusive nature of the entity it seeks to name) confounds recognition, and even lacks discernible mass, is precisely what distinguishes it from 'creature features' like Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), which displace human anxieties and concerns onto an anthropomorphised, vaguely humanoid Other.

Rather than offering yet another metaphor for 'Otherness' (whereby characters contend with the familiar 'category confusion' of traditional horror and the gothic, testing and reaffirming the category of the human self against a threatening 'outside' located somewhere along a vector of difference), Carpenter's *The Thing*, I demonstrate in this article, has much more in common with the cosmic horror of early twentieth-century weird fiction, whose chief proponent was arguably H. P. Lovecraft. The 'weird' (with its propensity for narratives that emphasise the incomprehensibility of a universe largely indifferent to human concerns) can be identified in Carpenter's film precisely because the Thing's paradoxical absence and excess of form, which early critics found so troubling, challenges human comprehension and categories of knowledge. Paired with an Antarctic imaginary that has, at least since early European exploration, been

¹ *The Thing*, dir. by John Carpenter (Universal Pictures, 1982) [on DVD].

² Linda Gross, cited in Heather Addison, 'Cinema's Darkest Vision: Looking into the Void in John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982)', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 41.3 (2013), 154-66 (p. 154).

³ Anne Billson, *The Thing* (London: British Film Institute, 1997), p. 8.

⁴ Vincent Canby, 'The Thing, Horror, and Science Fiction,' *New York Times*, 25 June 1982, <<https://www.nytimes.com/1982/06/25/movies/the-thing-horror-and-science-fiction.html>> [accessed 9 July 2019].

conceived of as an ‘alien’, unhuman space, Carpenter’s *The Thing* invites us, this article argues, to consider the coexistence of human and nonhuman agency within a universe that is immanently ‘weird’, a stance shared by contemporary strands of philosophy known as ‘speculative realism’.

Despite a general acknowledgement of Lovecraft’s influence on Carpenter, commentators persist in interpreting *The Thing* simply as an alien film, a genre that invariably tends to manifest as displaced parables about humans themselves. For Ziauddin Sardar, ‘[a]liens demonstrate what is not human the better to exemplify that which is human’.⁵ Anne Billson, often credited as among the first to give serious critical attention to *The Thing* in her well-regarded volume for the British Film Institute Modern Classics series, situates the film within this tradition of an alien/human binary, so that ‘what it means to be human’ is put in stark opposition to the ‘alien from outer space’, though she does concede that Carpenter’s version doesn’t necessarily ‘play fair’ with such clear-cut distinctions.⁶ Commentators who follow this assumption are thus likely to devalue the importance of the creature itself, inviting social readings such as Stephen Prince’s, for whom the appearance of the Thing as an alien other serves only to illustrate ‘the breakdown of the team’s networks of authority, friendship, and trust as the social order is infiltrated by the ambiguous “thing”’.⁷ Much the same could be said of the Season 1 (1993) *X-Files* episode called ‘Ice’ (itself an homage to Carpenter’s film), in which an extraterrestrial parasite takes over members of a crew in an isolated Alaskan research facility, leading to paranoia and fear among the group.⁸ However, approaching the film within the framework of ‘the weird’ provides an alternative to those readings that emphasise human or social concerns, refocusing instead on a consideration of the ‘thingness’ of the Thing, that, in turn, forces us to reconcile our relationship to the unknowable that surrounds us.

For Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, traditional weird fiction ‘utilises elements of horror, science fiction and fantasy to showcase the impotence and insignificance of human beings within a much larger universe populated by often malign powers and forces that greatly exceed the

⁵ Ziauddin Sardar, ‘Introduction’, in *Aliens R Us: The Other in Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. by Sardar and Sean Cubitt (London: Pluto Press, 2002), p. 6.

⁶ Billson, *The Thing*, pp. 59, 64.

⁷ Stephen Prince, ‘Dread, Taboo, and *The Thing*: Toward a Social Theory of the Horror Film’, in *The Horror Film*, ed. by Prince (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), pp. 118-30 (p. 123).

⁸ ‘Ice’, *The X-Files*, Season One (Twentieth-Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007) [on DVD].

human capacities to understand or control them'.⁹ In tales of the weird, human drama and human characters may be sidelined or recede to the margins of the narrative. In *The Thing*, characters disappear from the story altogether, or return belatedly to the point of action. The question they frequently ask of each other – 'where were you?' – projects mistrust and paranoia but also a more general feeling that their involvement in proceedings simply ceases to matter. These tendencies occur throughout early-twentieth-century weird fiction in the work of writers such as Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, and William Hope Hodgson, but are perhaps most recognisable in Lovecraft. Most overtly throughout his treatise, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), as well as in the so-called 'great texts' of his oeuvre such as 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1926) (which introduced his 'Cthulhu mythos'), 'The Dunwich Horror' (1928), 'The Whisperer in Darkness' (1930), and 'At the Mountains of Madness' (1931), Lovecraft arguably helped formalise the weird.¹⁰ In particular, for my purposes here, for those Lovecraft protagonists who encounter the 'unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces' and the 'defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space', the failure of reason that this precipitates usually ends in a swift descent into madness.¹¹ The question of what it is to be human raised by traditional alien-contact narratives is of little consequence in Lovecraft's tales; instead, it is summarily swept into oblivion, and the self-important human minds that could sustain such questions along with it. To put it simply, unlike traditional tales of aliens or monsters, in which the human species is tested in some way but ultimately reaffirmed, the weird is not invested in returning its human characters to a state of normalcy; rather, their understandings of the world, if not their minds, are usually permanently unravelled. *The Thing* follows just such a pattern. The dissonance and uncertainty that remain at the end of the film acknowledges the 'defeat' of human thought and humanity itself.

Despite being ignored in critical circles for much of the twentieth century, Lovecraft has more recently been taken up by contemporary theorists, most especially those aligned with the

⁹ Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 'The New Weird', in *New Directions in Popular Fiction*, ed. by Ken Gelder (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 177-99 (p. 183).

¹⁰ Michel Houellebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (London: Gollancz, 2008), p. 41.

¹¹ H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (Toronto: Dover, 1973), p. 15.

so-called ‘speculative realism’ movement in philosophy.¹² In fact, the day before the April 2007 conference held at Goldsmiths College, University of London, that gave speculative realism its name, the college also hosted a symposium on the works of Lovecraft, prompting an admiration for the writer among those philosophers in attendance, including Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux.¹³ For Harman – one of the movement’s figureheads, who once declared Lovecraft their ‘poet laureate’ – Lovecraft provides a way to rethink humanity’s relationship to the world via a ‘weird realism’, which posits that ‘[r]eality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it’.¹⁴ This sentiment among contemporary philosophers challenges previous human-centric assumptions that the world can only be said to exist because we are there to ‘think’ it – to measure it through science, experience it through sensual engagement, catalogue it through epistemology – such that reality is only ever available ‘for us’.¹⁵ In response to this anthropocentric bent, Meillassoux has called for a renewed philosophic attention to the ‘*great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside [...] not relative to us’.¹⁶

Taking up this challenge set out by ‘weird’ and ‘speculative’ realism, this article examines how Carpenter’s film works against the customary alien-threat and paranoia narratives with which it is usually linked, and instead can be read as prioritising the weird. By briefly tracing Carpenter’s debt to Lovecraft, I explore how the unknowability of the universe is privileged in the film via two adjacent but interrelated cinematic strategies. Firstly, I demonstrate how the setting of the film in the Antarctic recalls an established tradition in polar narratives that imagine the continent as an ‘alien’ planet. This impression helps establish this space, by virtue of its forbidding geological, geographic, and temporal characteristics, as emblematic of a ‘negative knowledge’. This is communicated visually by voids, blankness, and holes, but also through the narrative’s preoccupation with the failure of its scientist protagonists to sufficiently ‘think’ the Thing – to measure it or provide answers through scientific means. Somewhat paradoxically, the second major strand of this argument focuses on how through the special effects, scenes of

¹² Graham Harman, *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (Winchester and Washington: Zer0 Books, 2012); *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development IV*, ed. by Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2009); and Carl H. Sederholm and Weinstock, *The Age of Lovecraft* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

¹³ Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), p. 91.

¹⁴ Harman, *Weird Realism*, pp. 32, 51.

¹⁵ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 5.

¹⁶ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 7, emphasis in original.

bodily transformation, autopsy, and species hybridity emphasise an excess of materiality. While physically announcing the presence of the Thing, this materiality nevertheless, due to the shape-shifting, metamorphic nature of the creature, fails to embody it. This paradox – there is too little and too much creature – distinguishes the film as ‘weird’, in the sense discussed above. As the characters in the film are confronted with the all-too-porous boundaries that separate them from the ‘outside’, what is revealed through the images of contamination, assimilation, and shared bodily fluid, along with the strategic use of sound and colour schemes, is a ‘weird immanence’ already present within the world itself that precipitates a flattening out of human exceptionalism.

In *The Thing*, an extra-terrestrial biological agent is discovered hidden deep within the ice of the Antarctic. Once released upon the crew members of an American research station, ‘US Outpost 31’, it is able to imitate other life forms, absorbing organisms from within and assuming their qualities.¹⁷ Mark Fisher, in attempting to define the feeling of the weird, draws attention to the ‘sensation of *wrongness*’ when

a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object *is* here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid.¹⁸

When the crew, along with the audience, are confronted with the spectacle of one of the creature’s elaborate and mangled transformations – a grotesquery of canine snouts, human torsos, and flailing tentacles, for example – this ‘wrongness’ manifests as horror, the horror of the thought that those categories by which they have thus far organised the world have collapsed. While Brian R. Hauser has advocated for the recognition of a category that he calls ‘weird cinema’, based around the experience of dread, there has been insufficient attention paid to *The Thing* as a weird film.¹⁹ Therefore, this article reads Carpenter’s film not purely as a monster movie, with its attendant themes of otherness or alterity that serve to re-affirm the uniqueness of humanity, but rather as an exercise in cosmic horror that can and should be positioned within the

¹⁷ Although visually identified on a wooden sign outside the facility as ‘United States National Science Institute Station 4’, radio transmissions from the station’s crew designate it ‘Outpost 31’, as do the film’s fan community, such as the website *Outpost #31*.

¹⁸ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), p. 15, emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Brian R Hauser, ‘Weird Cinema and the Aesthetics of Dread’, in *New Directions in Supernatural Horror Literature*, ed. by Sean Moreland (Cham: Springer, 2018), pp. 235-52.

category of ‘the weird’, whereby the incapacity to ‘think’ the Thing is marked, somewhat paradoxically, by a ‘negative knowledge’, and an excess of materiality.

This negation is represented through an absence of knowledge – a ‘thing’ that cannot be named – but also visually through an Antarctic emptiness that has, since early European explorations, been imagined as ‘the alien planet – the antihuman, the monstrous’.²⁰ Rather than simply an ‘alien (or *Alien*) on ice’, in Carpenter’s film, the Thing and the blank landmass out of which it emerges are figured as excessive absences that go beyond the designation ‘alien’, approaching instead the unknowable. In so doing, the absence of human knowledge, like the void of the Antarctic, when paired with the material excess of the Thing, suggests a ‘weird immanence’, implicating the world around us as already containing Lovecraftian ‘unknown [or unknowable] forces’. By gesturing towards Harman’s ‘weird realism’ as indicative of contemporary strands of anti-anthropocentric thought (in writers such as Eugene Thacker, Timothy Morton, and Ben Woodward, among others) that align early-twentieth-century weird fiction with speculative theory in order to propose new ways of thinking about the world, this article examines how *The Thing* foregoes customary horror techniques of building and releasing suspense and terror in response to a threatening Other. Instead, it privileges conspicuous special effects, multiple scientific examinations, and displays of human incomprehension, as a means of producing an aesthetics of ‘wrongness’.

While Carpenter’s film is ostensibly a remake of director Christian Nyby and producer Howard Hawks’s *The Thing from Another World* (1951), it more faithfully draws on the literary source material, the 1938 novella ‘Who Goes There?’ by John W. Campbell, which first appeared in *Astounding Science Fiction*. Campbell was a contemporary of Lovecraft’s, whose 1936 novella ‘At the Mountains of Madness’ had featured in the same magazine just two years earlier and which, like *The Thing*, involves an Antarctic expedition and the discovery of unearthly life-forms. A third film version appeared in 2011 – Matthijs van Heijningen Jr’s *The Thing* – which served as a prequel to Carpenter’s version (although the screen time given to spaceship interiors and an over-reliance on CGI effects make for a more run-of-the-mill alien-threat film). Robert Latham makes the claim that Campbell ‘basically rewrote’ Lovecraft’s tale, delivering a ‘revisionist’ take on Lovecraft’s cosmic pessimism. According to Latham,

²⁰ Eric G. Wilson, *The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Science, and the Imagination* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 145.

Campbell's optimistic view of science at a 'privileged institution', in which 'reason never fails', was reflective of the 'essential differences' between horror and science fiction that were in the process of being codified within the pulp magazines of the time.²¹ While such a sentiment might be difficult to defend in light of sci-fi's many later dystopian futures, it does prompt a closer look at Carpenter's more nihilistic interpretation of Campbell's technocratic fantasy. Critics have noted Lovecraft's considerable influence on Carpenter's films, particularly his 'Apocalypse Trilogy': *The Thing*, *The Prince of Darkness* (1987) and, finally, *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994), the title of which references the 1931 Lovecraft story.²² These works, beginning with *The Thing*, are deeply engaged with Lovecraft's 'cosmic horror', his term for the fear induced by an encounter with a 'shadow-haunted *Outside*' that confirms human concerns as 'negligible'.²³

According to Vivian Ralickas, as a mode of the weird, cosmic horror is the 'fear and awe we feel when confronted by phenomena beyond our comprehension, whose scope extends beyond the narrow field of human affairs and boasts of cosmic significance', often expressed in such stories via a focus on 'the limits of language to represent adequately both the awe-inspiring spectacle and the subject's experience of the violation of the limits of being'.²⁴ Similarly, I argue here that *The Thing* is a weird film that operates in the cosmic-horror mode, foregrounding the fear, awe, and 'wrongness' of the incomprehensible Thing. Rather than simply functioning as a study in paranoia, a critical throwback to Hawks/Nyby's Arctic-set, Cold-War allegory, or an ode to triumphant human reason and resourcefulness, as in Campbell's story, Carpenter's version reinstates the cosmic horror of weird fiction's rejection of human exceptionalism, a rejection exemplified in the plight of Lovecraftian characters who succumb to madness and defeat. In particular, the lack of trust in the motivations of others that typifies paranoia narratives, such as the classic sci-fi of *It Came From Outer Space* (Jack Arnold, 1954) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956), and reinvigorated in the conspiracy thrillers of Watergate-era America such as *All the President's Men* (Alan J. Pakula, 1976) and *Marathon Man* (John Schlesinger, 1976), is scaled up in Carpenter's film to a lack of trust in the very assumption of

²¹ Rob Latham, 'SF Intertextuality: Lovecraft and Campbell', *Science Fiction Studies*, 28.3 (2001), 468-70 (p. 468).

²² Anna Powell, 'Something Came Leaking Out: Carpenter's Unholy Abominations', in *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror*, ed. by Ian Conrich and David Woods (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), pp. 140-54 (p. 142).

²³ Lovecraft, letter to Farnsworth Wright (5 July 1927), in Lovecraft, *Selected Letters: 1925-1929*, ed. by August Derleth and Donald Wandrei (Sauk City: Arkham House, 1968), p. 150.

²⁴ Vivian Ralickas, "'Cosmic Horror' and the Question of the Sublime in Lovecraft", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 18.3 (2007), 364-98 (p. 364).

the presence of an ‘us’ that could be positioned against a ‘them’. Carpenter’s oeuvre is often typified as ‘siege films’, as in *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), *Escape from New York* (1980), and *The Fog* (1980); however, the director himself has differentiated *The Thing* from his earlier work because of the way it operates as a ‘siege from within’.²⁵ This ‘siege from within’ is thematised in the film via the parasitic appropriation of human bodies and identities by the Thing, thus opening up the subject to the infiltration of an alien creature and an ‘alien’ Antarctic space as a signifier for the ‘weirding’ of the planet and ultimately ourselves.

In *The Thing*, the setting – a research facility in the midst of an Antarctic expanse – is consistent with the horror genre’s spatialisation of thresholds and borders in its many haunted castles, secluded cabins, unexplored frontiers, or, as Vivian Carol Sobchack notes of 1950s sci-fi creature features, spaces of ‘civilization’ relegated to a ‘small town on the edge of the abyss’.²⁶ By looking briefly at the how the film conveys, and undermines, these spatial thresholds, I propose that the setting, rather than simply incidental, is in fact instrumental to creating a weird realism, whereby the imagining of the Antarctic as already an ‘alien space’ invites us to consider the world around us as ultimately beyond human comprehension. The opening shots of the film make clear the camp’s envelopment by polar landscape. Cinemaphotographer Dean Cundey’s daylit, sweeping long shots of frozen peaks and endless ice give us a sense of the vastness and isolation of the Antarctic, aided by the aerial point-of-view shot of a Norwegian helicopter, from a nearby settlement, circling the surrounds of ‘US Outpost 31’, presumably a research station, though what kind is never clearly established. In contrast, the accompanying interior tracking shots through the cramped, utilitarian space of sleeping quarters and service areas help to visually demarcate a clear threshold of familiar/unfamiliar and inner/outer worlds, at least superficially.²⁷

One way of understanding the ‘space’ of the Antarctic outside the compound is to turn to cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s study of human responses to isolated landscapes. Differentiating between three categories of ‘space’, Tuan suggests that a ‘homeplace’ (a

²⁵ Steve Smith, ‘A Siege Mentality? Form and Ideology in Carpenter’s Early Siege Films’, in *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), pp.35-48; and Erik Bauer, ‘John Carpenter on *The Thing*’, *Creative Screenwriting*, 22 July 2014 <<https://creativescreenwriting.com/the-thing/>> [accessed 8 June 2018].

²⁶ Vivian Carol Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science-Fiction Film* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 113.

²⁷ Roger B. Salomon, *Mazes of the Serpent: An Anatomy of Horror Narrative* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 9.

protective enclave for human habitation, such as a hut or station) is surrounded by ‘home space’ (less protected but familiar), which acts as buffer zone against the outer ‘alien space’ (which is always perceived as a source of threat). Understandably, in the case of polar environments like the Antarctic, the buffer zone vanishes, so that ‘homeplace is the hut and immediately beyond is alien space, an expanse of whiteness reaching out in all directions to seemingly nowhere’.²⁸ Elizabeth Leane applies Tuan’s ideas insightfully to Campbell’s ‘Who Goes There?’, stressing the pronounced vulnerability of the story’s research station as ‘homeplace’ or to the threatening ‘alien space’ of Antarctica beyond.²⁹ The differentiation between ‘homeplace’ and ‘alien space’ is useful in understanding *The Thing*, and is in line with Carpenter’s films more generally, which use space to exemplify the ‘the fear of personal endangerment that comes when the places in which [we] feel safest are somehow opened up and the unknown let in’.³⁰

More broadly, the construction of arctic regions as an alien space can be traced back to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European expedition accounts that emphasised the sublime experience of the frozen waters, glacial peaks, and endless white expanses of ice and snow, fuelling what Katherine Bowers calls the ‘polar gothic’ of literary productions such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ (1798), Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), and Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838).³¹ However, Bowers makes the distinction between Arctic-set tales that allow the all-to-human ‘subconscious anxieties to come to the surface’ and those that find in Antarctica the ‘antihuman’.³² In formalising the idea of a polar gothic, she recounts Captain Cook’s 1775 visit to Antarctic coastlines and the abortive efforts to breach extreme weather in order to reach the frozen wastelands beyond. Echoing Stephen J. Pyne’s sentiments, Bowers calls this failed attempt ‘an anti-discovery, a “negative discovery”’, which dampened the Enlightenment-era pursuit of knowledge and conquest over the natural world by deflecting both physical and interpretive possession, becoming for the European mind what Siobhan Carroll calls ‘an

²⁸ Yi-Fu Tuan, ‘Desert and Ice: Ambivalent Aesthetics’, in *Landscape, Natural Beauty, and the Arts*, ed. by Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 139-57 (pp. 139-40, 154).

²⁹ Elizabeth Leane, ‘Locating the Thing: The Antarctic as Alien Space in John W. Campbell’s “Who Goes There?”’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 32.2 (July 2005), 225-39 (p. 229).

³⁰ Robert E Ziegler, ‘Killing Space: The Dialectic in John Carpenter’s Films’, *The Georgia Review*, 37.4 (1983), 770-86 (p. 772).

³¹ Katherine Bowers, ‘Haunted Ice, Fearful Sounds, and the Arctic Sublime: Exploring Nineteenth-Century Polar Gothic Space’, *Gothic Studies*, 19.2 (2017), 71-84.

³² Bowers, ‘Haunted Ice’, p. 69.

uncolonizable space'.³³ For Bowers, this produced a sense in Western culture of the Antarctic as somehow impenetrable to human designs, a sense that persisted until Lovecraft and Campbell's time. The race to the South Pole by explorers such as Robert Scott, Roald Amundsen, and Ernest Shackleton again encouraged a flourishing of fantastic fiction set in the Antarctic, by which time the polar gothic of earlier tales was superseded by the interplanetary scale of new modes such as cosmic horror and the weird.

Leane argues that, in Campbell's 'Who Goes There?', the confusing, continually morphing topography of the Antarctic is personified by the Thing.³⁴ However, I would go further and propose that the Antarctic space in Carpenter's *The Thing* can be read metonymically as the 'great outdoors' of cosmic space. Carpenter intimates as much when he states that '[w]hat's scary about the movie is not that it's big and action-filled, but it's small and there's nothing out there but this blowing blackness and storm and cold and right next to you maybe a creature. That's the creepiness of the story.'³⁵ In the film, this spatialisation of boundaries extends ultimately to the human body itself. For Kathleen M. Kirby, the Enlightenment individual is projected as a form of space, such that 'the "individual" expresses a coherent, consistent, rational space paired with a consistent, stable, organized environment'. This clear distinction not only establishes an 'inside and outside space', but guarantees 'the order of each, and the elevation of the former over the latter'.³⁶ Throughout the film, the assimilation and substitution of characters by the Thing breaches and, finally, dissolves this rational coherent space of the human and its presumed 'elevation'. In this way, the unhuman space of the Antarctic in Carpenter's *The Thing* can be read as presenting a weird realism that is malignant but also largely indifferent to the human, whether expressed as an individual, a species, or a human 'world'. The 'blowing blackness' of the Antarctic setting therefore rehearses humankind's confrontation with the black depths of an unhuman universe.

If Campbell's original tale, and the Hawks/Nyby adaptation that followed, can be said to adhere to these spatial boundaries, such that the protagonists vanquish the threatening other and

³³ Bowers, p. 72; Stephen J. Pyne, *The Ice: A Journey to Antarctica* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1998), p. 66; and Siobhan Carroll, *An Empire of Air and Water: Uncolonizable Space in the British Imagination, 1750-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), p. 6.

³⁴ Leane, 'Locating the Thing', p. 225.

³⁵ Bauer, 'John Carpenter on *The Thing*', n. p.

³⁶ Kathleen M. Kirby, *Indifferent Boundaries: Spatial Concepts of Human Subjectivity* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), p. 40.

uphold the integrity and dominance of humanness, the projection of Outpost 31 as a ‘homeplace’ is far less certain in Carpenter’s version. Commentators such as John Kenneth Muir have interpreted the camera’s wandering point-of-view shots of common areas, labs, and hallways in the initial sequences as conveying a sense of place.³⁷ However, the personal interactions we witness by way of introduction to the characters, both through dialogue and non-verbal cues, imply a group whose social cohesion has already worn thin, frayed by seclusion, cramped quarters, and personal dysfunction. The loner helicopter pilot, R. J. MacReady (Kurt Russell), the first time we meet him, is holed up in a separate cabin, steadily drinking his way through a bottle of J&Bs while losing against a computer chess game (which he summarily short-circuits with his beverage). Elsewhere, Nauls (T. K. Carter), the cook, refuses to turn down a radio at the request of his injured colleague, Bennings (Peter Maloney). Meanwhile we see the frustrated harassments of radio operator Windows (Thomas Waites) by both station chief Garry (Donald Moffat) and senior biologist Blair (Wilford Brimley) on separate occasions. These moments do little to impart an impression of human space as ordered, rational, or a ‘homeplace’. That these men are mostly scientists, ‘men of reason’, only adds to a picture of human pre-eminence as suspect. Prince, in reading the film as an example of the fracturing of social bonds and structures of authority, sees these early interactions as setting the stage for the intrusion of ‘formlessness’ that the Thing represents.³⁸ While it is possible to interpret the film in this way, this argument is in some ways an extension of the paranoia reading. An alternative is to view these establishing sequences as having already played out this paranoia scenario. Mistrust and over-familiarity have effectively dissolved the sanctuary of the station by this time, without the need for an outside agent. Carpenter’s film marks an important point of departure in this regard. The ‘siege from within’ that the remainder of the film charts is not limited to the breakdown of group dynamics, but extends to the ‘individual’ itself, as a space for the Enlightenment virtues of reason and selfhood, but also as a material body that becomes unknowable to itself, becomes weird.

The first intrusion upon this tenuous human space comes from something deceptively mundane. The arrival of a husky into the camp, evading the pursuit of a Norwegian chopper, whose occupants are attempting to shoot the dog for as-yet-unknown reasons, provides a fitting cover for the Thing’s arrival. Allowed to roam freely around the base, the husky is only revealed

³⁷ John Kenneth Muir, *The Films of John Carpenter* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2000), p. 109.

³⁸ Prince, ‘Dread, Taboo, and *The Thing*’, pp. 123-25.

for what it really is when it is banished to the kennels along with the other sled dogs. There the dog-Thing sprouts tentacle-like appendages, gushing some variety of digestive liquid and assimilating part of another dog. Soon it passes from the dog to an unknown number of crew members. The ability of the Thing faithfully and completely to absorb and reproduce both human and animal bodily matter further refashions the station into a space of uncertainty, in which who is human and who is a Thing is continually called into question. Leane and Guinevere Narraway do well to stress the importance of the canine intruder to the story's overall themes. By situating the husky as an already-hybrid creature – part domestic dog, part wild wolf – they demonstrate the collapse of binaries (nature and culture, wild and tame, inside and outside) that the dog's metamorphosis represents.³⁹ This troubling of previously fixed categories also carries with it an inversion of the usual species hierarchy (human/animal), as the 'dog/wolf/Thing literally *incorporates* first the dogs and then the human[s]'.⁴⁰ Drawing attention in this way to the dissolution of material bodies and boundaries, the film produces an ever-wider series of species entanglements, upending the seeming distinctiveness of human subjects or agency.

By turning to how station personnel react to the discovery of the Thing, via recourse to scientific discovery and material examination, what becomes clear is how the film announces the presence of the creature as a lack, an absence that frustrates human schemas of reason and knowledge, producing only incomplete data and speculation. This exposure of the shortcomings of human thought serves as an entry point to locating the weird. Drawn by the disturbance from the kennels, the dog handler, Clark (Richard Masur), is joined by MacReady, the helicopter pilot, who, having already raised the alarm, pragmatically sets out to destroy the creature and contain the menace. The scene shifts to the medical bay as the group gather around the biologist, Blair. Challenged with conducting an autopsy of sorts, Blair proceeds to 'break down' the dog-Thing, removing excess limbs and slicing into layers of skin with his scalpel. Interposed with shots of the dissected viscera and gnarled skeletal mutations, close-ups of a groaning, visibly repulsed Blair convey a profound disgust. 'He says nothing', Heather Addison points out; 'words are inadequate to express the monstrosity of the Thing [...]. Yet even a presumably experienced

³⁹ Leane and Guinevere Narraway, 'Things from Another World: Dogs, Aliens, and Antarctic Cinema', in *Cinematic Canines: Dogs and Their Work in the Fiction Film*, ed. by Adrienne L. McLean (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2014), pp. 181-98.

⁴⁰ Leane and Narraway, p. 184, emphasis in original.

scientist like himself is ill-equipped to handle this situation.’⁴¹ Blair’s abhorrence turns to intellectual defeat when he humbly bows his head as the screen dissolves to black, a moment not of illumination but darkness.

This is not the only time the incomprehensibility of the Thing will make a crew member speechless. Jez Conolly draws attention to numerous instances where the Thing covers, fills, or obstructs the mouth of the men, literally silencing them, such as during the climax when the Blair-Thing places a hand over Garry’s mouth, its fingers morphing into the flesh of his face.⁴² As a device, the stoppage of voice, speech, and language, showing characters at a loss for words or left dumbstruck, helps demonstrate the feeling of incomprehensibility that the Thing produces, a wrongness that stupefies human thought. This wrongness is visually and thematically expressed most forcefully in scenes involving dissection and discussion of the material reality of the Thing, scenes that likewise expose gaps in understanding. Hypothesising on the constitution of the Thing to the rest of the group, Blair draws attention to a furry, canine-like appendage, stating, ‘[t]hat’s not dog. It’s imitation.’ In attempting to satisfactorily identify the Thing, by pointing to an object and placing it within a familiar schema, Blair’s encounter with the material, bodily object fails to produce certainty; he can only gesture to what it is not. The assertion of ‘not dog’ but ‘imitation’ also relies on an assumption of what a dog ‘is’, an essentialism projected onto the dog by human denotations. The ability of the Thing to take any form renders such distinctions, and those with presumed authority to make them, meaningless. As Eugene Thacker argues,

[t]his thing is really a ‘*no-thing*’, insubstantial and without determinant form [...] it cannot be identified by simply pointing to it or even by naming it [...]. When the ‘thing’ does manifest itself, it does so not through an un-veiling or un-masking [...] [it] only indicates its presence by un-doing the body.⁴³

The Thing as a ‘no-thing’, like the ‘anti-discovery’ or ‘negative discovery’ of the Antarctic by early explorers, suggests the way in which the world resists our ability to experience it through our limited senses or our technological extensions. As speculative realists would infer, objects

⁴¹ Addison, ‘Cinema’s Darkest Vision’, pp. 158-59.

⁴² Jez Conolly, *The Thing* (Leighton Buzzard: Auteur Publishing, 2014), p. 60.

⁴³ Eugene Thacker, ‘Thing and No-Thing’, in *And They Were Two In One And One In Two*, ed. by Nicola Masciandaro and Thacker (London: Schism Press, 2014), cited in Edia Connole, ‘Black Metal Theory: Speculating with Bataille’s *Unfinished System* – “Mystical Vomit” from Neoplatonism to Neroplatonism’, in *Georges Bataille and Contemporary Thought*, ed. by Will Stronge (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), pp. 173-216 (p. 186).

such as the Thing ‘withdraw from knowing’.⁴⁴ The Thing is Lovecraft’s unnameable, the ‘thing that should not be’, but is.⁴⁵ For Thacker, whereas ‘the monster [is] an aberration of nature, the unnameable creature is an aberration of thought’.⁴⁶ Blair’s sounds of disgust and facial grimaces exhibit the apparent failure of language and reason to account for the Thing; they image the limits of language when faced with the violation of the limits of being in cosmic horror. The horror of the moment, as suggested by the lingering camera, is not a product of an immediate, temporary repulsion, but rather of the contemplation of a ‘world’ beyond our knowing.

Somewhat paradoxically then for a horror film packed with a number of memorable sequences focused on the Thing – in an increasingly elaborate spectacle of wildly mutated, contorted semblances – we never actually see its true form, if indeed it can be said to possess one. Unlike the creature described as an ‘intellectual carrot’ in the Hawks/Nyby’s 1951 version – a vaguely humanoid form and therefore a more distinct, anthropomorphised, and conventional alien threat – Carpenter’s Thing reveals itself (or rather fails to do so) as an absence.⁴⁷ Seeking some clarity regarding their circumstances, MacReady twice flies out into abominable weather with various members of the team. The first time is a scouting mission accompanied by Copper (Richard Dysart), the station physician, to the Norwegian base; they surmise that those in the neighbouring research station on the internationally governed Antarctic landmass might have gone ‘stir crazy’, leading to the erratic behaviour of their helicopter in pursuing the husky in the film’s opening. The second outing occurs after the revelation of the dog-Thing and the subsequent viewing of a videotape from the Norwegian team that appears to document some form of excavation. This time it is the geologist Norris (Charles Hallahan) who also makes the trip. In both instances, their explorations are framed in terms of gaps and absences, negative discoveries that withhold knowledge. At the Norwegian camp, MacReady and Copper are confronted with a large rectangular block of ice with an open cavity, where presumably some iteration of the Thing once lay. On closer inspection, the site excavated by the Norwegians and visited by MacReady and Norris is revealed to have uncovered a crashed object. A circular spaceship lies exposed by thawing ice and explosive charges. As if something has been thrown

⁴⁴ Sederholm and Weinstock, ‘Introduction’, in *The Age of Lovecraft*, pp. 1-43 (p. 5).

⁴⁵ Lovecraft, ‘At the Mountains of Madness’, in *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 246-340 (p. 335).

⁴⁶ Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet* (Winchester and Washington: Zer0 Books, 2011), p. 130.

⁴⁷ *The Thing from Another World*, dir. by Christian Nyby (Winchester Pictures Corporation, 1951) [on DVD].

from the impact of the craft, there is a secondary void in the ice not far from the ship itself that matches the recovered rectangular block of ice back at camp. A wide shot emphasises this void, with the men peering down into it, against the larger void of the Antarctic icescape itself. Maria Beville's astute analysis of this scene also positions the Thing in terms of the negative and is worth quoting at length:

The representation of the void as a sign of simultaneous presence and absence is characteristic of much horror and science-fiction cinema, whereby the cinematography relies on absence [...] because [it] effectively presents the unrepresentable through the suggestion of a lack or deficiency in the remaining tangible outline of the 'Thing' [...]. The mould that is left behind in the ice signifies both excess, in that it is massive, but also emptiness: a void of both reality and knowledge. This places the 'Thing' in relation to its very essence of negativity.⁴⁸

Beville's argument astutely situates the Thing within an array of unrepresentable and unnameable forms in horror and sci-fi cinema. This representational void, Beville concludes, elicits a 'doubling of reality', where we as viewers seek to fill in the gaps and omissions of knowledge but are prevented from doing so when confronted by a nothing that refuses to coalesce into a something.⁴⁹ Tom Whalen's identification of Carpenter's 'characteristic ominous use of empty space' is doubly relevant if we consider the void as set against the Antarctic tundra. We as viewers, like the crew, are propelled to look into it, via a close-up shot, but are met only with a blank.⁵⁰ This peering into blankness echoes Drew Struzan's iconic film poster for the movie, which depicts a human figure in snow gear against an icy backdrop; substituting the face is a negative space – a white nothingness emanating outwards. By the end of the film, humans themselves will be just such an empty vessel, their 'being' equally vacuous.

The significance of looking into this emptied space in the ice is not limited, however, to a filmic strategy for depicting the unrepresentable. The act of excavation and digging, as well as the thawing of ice, invites us to consider not just the space of the Antarctic, but also its relation to time. The radical exteriority accredited to Antarctica spatially by virtue of its geographical distance and forbidding environment also extends to its temporality. Leane notes 'the inseparability of the sense of time and place in Antarctic narratives', which frequently turn time

⁴⁸ Maria Beville, *The Unnameable Monster in Literature and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 132.

⁴⁹ Beville, *The Unnameable Monster*, p. 132.

⁵⁰ Tom Whalen, "'This Is About One Thing – Dominion": John Carpenter's *Ghosts of Mars*', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 30.4 (2002), 304-07 (p. 305).

itself into a theme or motif, depicting time as ‘anomalous’ or having its own ‘inertia’, likening the motif to Mikhail Bakhtin’s contention that castles in gothic novels are ‘saturated’ with their historical past.⁵¹ Leane traces this motif from the ‘lost-world’ romances of the late nineteenth century to accounts of Douglas Mawson’s expedition, through to contemporary fictions such as Marie Darrieussecq’s *White* (2003). In *The Thing*, producer Stuart Cohen has recounted how the claustrophobic set design and muted colour schemes used for the interiors and costuming were purposefully employed to convey what he called the ‘glacial passage of time’.⁵² Far from being inundated with a historical past, however, the landscape of Antarctica implies the opposite. Largely untouched by human history until recently, the feeling of inertia expressed in such narratives is akin to the feeling of time as ‘frozen’, as outside human time. Consequently, portrayals of digging and excavation beneath the glacial surface cannot help but infer a *geological* past, on a scale outside of human space *and* human time.

Benjamin Noys has referred to this measurement of time as *horror temporis*, the horror of time – ‘cosmic timescales that proceed and exceed the existence of humanity’.⁵³ Just as Lovecraft’s unnameable creatures and ‘blasphemous’ entities are described as emerging from forgotten eons, or what has come to be known as ‘deep time’, the intimation of geological and cosmic timescales is evoked in the film during the examination of the crash site and the discussion of the age of the spacecraft between MacReady and the geologist Norris. As Gerry Carlin and Nicola Allen have noted, Lovecraft regularly featured deep time in his stories for the way it ‘renders human values meaningless, exceeds all comprehension and measurement, and produces intense existential dread’.⁵⁴ It is for this very reason that the archaeologist character became something of a cliché in Lovecraft’s work, as a device to ‘dig up’ the horror of deep time.⁵⁵ The British science-fiction horror film *Quatermass and the Pit* (dir. by Roy Ward Baker, 1967) uses this same trope to uncover life forms buried deep beneath the streets of contemporary

⁵¹ Leane, *Antarctica in Fiction: Imaginative Narratives of the Far South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 21, 154, 158.

⁵² Stuart Cohen, ‘A Producer’s Guide to the Evolution and Production of John Carpenter’s *The Thing*’, 31 January 2013 <<http://movie-memorabilia-emporium.blogspot.com/2013/01/a-producers-guide-to-evolution-and.html>>, p. 20 [accessed 14 June 2019].

⁵³ Benjamin Noys, ‘*Horror Temporis*’, in *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*, 4, ed. by Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2009), pp. 277-85 (p. 277).

⁵⁴ Gerry Carlin and Nicola Allen, ‘Slime and Western Man: H. P. Lovecraft in the Time of Modernism’, in *New Critical Essays on H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. by David Simmons (New York: Springer, 2013), pp. 73-90 (p. 74).

⁵⁵ Jeb J. Card, *Spooky Archaeology: Myth and the Science of the Past* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018), p. 230.

London. Both the spacecraft and the Thing in Carpenter's film allude to this Lovecraftian engagement in deep time, resembling as they do Meillassoux's concept to the 'arché-fossil', which he defines as 'a reality or event [...] that is anterior to terrestrial life'.⁵⁶

Edia Connole makes just such a claim in relation to the Thing, because of the way it implies 'the state of the world prior to "the world" – that is, the world as experienced "for us"'.⁵⁷ We need only look to the continually shifting age of the Thing across its various textual incarnations to see this premise at work. The geologist Norris estimates its age to be 'a hundred thousand years old. At least.' In Campbell's original tale, he places the age at 'twenty million years'.⁵⁸ While Carpenter's slightly more conservative aging of the craft does place it within the period of human existence, the evocation of such barely conceivable time scales nevertheless supports the argument that the Thing represents a kind of deep time. If we are to accept this, then we need to rethink the opening shot of the film, a shot that is 'impossible', at least from a human vantage point. From out of the starry expanses of the universe, rendered with knowingly low-budget effects, a spaceship topples and flares into Earth's orbit. 'Among the ironies of this self-conscious (re)opening scene', Elene Glasberg remarks, 'is that the sky needed to have been watched 10,000,000 years ago, before humans existed'.⁵⁹ Glasberg's comment is telling in two ways: not only does her inflation of a hundred thousand to ten million years perhaps demonstrate how cosmic timescales can become abstractions, stretching our capacity to understand them, but her observation that the view of Earth offered in this shot cannot be a human one hints at how Carpenter's film shifts the 'story' of the universe away from us toward agencies other than our own.

The question of the age of the Thing is also a question of origins, and with it, implicitly, the question of its relation to 'us' as the organising principle around which we orientate knowledge. The temptation here might therefore be to equate the Thing with Lovecraft's 'Great Old Ones', the fictional original inhabitants of Earth that went into slumber long before the arrival of humans. However, Carpenter has on a number of occasions voiced enthusiasm for

⁵⁶ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p. 10.

⁵⁷ Connole, 'Black Metal Theory', p. 186.

⁵⁸ John W. Campbell, 'Who Goes There?', in *Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, ed. Ben Bova, 2 vols (Devon: Reader's Union Group, 1973), II, pp. 31-80 (p. 38). The age of the spaceship is never given in the Hawks/Nyby 1951 version, perhaps to accentuate the immediacy of the threat of alien (implicitly Communist) invasion.

⁵⁹ Elene Glasberg, *Antarctica as Cultural Critique: The Gendered Politics of Scientific Exploration and Climate Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 66.

another type of Lovecraft story, one without a particular entity or antagonist, called 'The Colour Out of Space' (1927), in which a fallen meteorite begins transforming the vegetation and animals around it, including humans.⁶⁰ Both the weird and speculative realism effectively argue in favour of recognising the agency of the material world, be it animate or inanimate. However, when non-human agency is acknowledged in weird tales, its origins and motivations are often left obscured precisely because they serve as a reminder of the limits of the powers of human observation and understanding. Instead, as Fisher notes, these tales emphasise 'that "we" "ourselves" are caught up in the rhythms, pulsions and patternings of non-human forces'.⁶¹ That is, we may find ourselves entangled in or harmed by non-human processes, drives, actions, or logics of which we are largely ignorant, which are seemingly indifferent to their effect on us, and which ultimately compel us to rethink our assumptions concerning what 'we' are.

In *The Thing*, the creature's similarity to a parasite further complicates these related concepts of agency, origin, and inside/outside. In the case of the parasite, the intertwined destinies of it and its host leave such questions contingent and deferred. Reflecting on the similar parasitic qualities of Scott's *Alien*, Stephen Mulhall situates the monstrosity in the 'alien's form of life' as simply *life* itself: 'not so much a particular species but the essence of what it means to be a species [...] a nightmare embodiment of the [...] Darwinian drives to survive and reproduce'.⁶² Arguably, the propagation of life as a 'nightmare embodiment' finds its clearest expression in the entity at the centre of *The Thing*. At least in *Alien* there is the ability to determine particular stages in the life cycle of the xenomorph; in *The Thing*, we are never certain if what the station is dealing with is a parasite, something cellular, a creature, a biological mimic, an alien capable of flying an aircraft, or simply an organism hitching a ride. What we can gather is that to consider the life of the Thing as motivated solely by organic imperatives, within a non-terrestrial context, troubles Earth-bound Darwinism and its consoling fantasy that human beings are the apotheosis or privileged beneficiary of a biological endgame spanning billions of years. If non-human agents can adopt human qualities (speech, thought, personality, personal memory)

⁶⁰ Bauer, 'John Carpenter on *The Thing*', n. p.; and David Portner, 'Don't Call John Carpenter a Horror-Movie Director, Says John Carpenter', *Interview*, 2 February 2015 <<https://www.interviewmagazine.com/film/john-carpenter>> [accessed 10 April 2018].

⁶¹ Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, p. 12.

⁶² Stephen Mulhall, *On Film* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 18.

such that they go for the most part undetected among other humans, then what is the special privilege of humans?

The series of blanks in knowledge that assail the characters in the film therefore exemplify the ‘weirding of the world’ integral to both the weird and speculative realism, by showing the world to be beyond our capabilities to comprehend it.⁶³ In the wake of the film’s various discoveries, or anti-discoveries – an autopsy that fails to locate the Thing in itself, a void in the ice, a crash site from which something unidentified has escaped – what the crew of the base are forced to confront is a kind of negative knowledge, the world ‘withdraw[n] from knowing’. In spite of the epistemological and rationalist authority conferred by the group’s scientific credentials, their efforts fail to secure knowledge and hence fail to secure the place of humans as rarefied beings capable of understanding the universe. What is more, the fact that the men are progressively assimilated by the Thing means that, as Marie Mulvey-Roberts puts it, ‘the observers are being taken over by that which they are observing’.⁶⁴ Aside from the literal colonisation of their bodies by the Thing, the crew must also contend with an intrusion that is ontological, one that denies their privileged status as an individual self or even as human. By staging the encounter with the Thing within a research station, staffed by a meteorologist, biologist, geologist, and physician, who appear unable to come up with sufficient answers, the film would seem to be unequivocal about the limits of rationalism and scientific authority. Blaring out of Naul’s kitchen radio in the film’s early scenes, the lyrics of Stevie Wonder’s ‘Superstition’ (1982) and Billie Holiday’s ‘Don’t Explain’ (1944) help foreshadow the point that satisfactory explanations will not be forthcoming.⁶⁵

Consequently, while many horror texts (including the earlier film version, *The Thing from Another World*) revolve around a group under threat pulling together to expel the dangerous outsider, thus reaffirming the social bonds and the primacy of humanity, Carpenter’s version dispenses with such reassurances. Despite their collective scientific expertise, the station crew is unable to define, isolate, or contain the Thing. Whatever information they do gather about it is fragmented and incomplete, and does not further their interests in maintaining a secure sense of self or their own survival. So-called advanced intelligence and human achievement therefore

⁶³ Weinstock, ‘The New Weird’, p. 181.

⁶⁴ Marie Mulvey-Roberts, ‘“A Spook Ride on Film”: Carpenter and the Gothic’, in *The Cinema of John Carpenter: The Technique of Terror*, ed. by Ian Conrich and David Woods (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), pp. 78-90 (p. 81).

⁶⁵ Glasberg, *Antarctica as Cultural Critique*, p. 67.

become less assured. Instead, as in the case of the senior biologist Blair (who we are encouraged to view as the epitome of reasoned thought), as he fails to categorise the unnameable dog-Thing, scientific methods prove insufficient. Later faced with the outcome of a computer simulation that tracks the progress of the Thing's infection rate, Blair's reason falters, and he descends first into sabotage, and then murderous rage, madness, and suicidal thought. It is a disintegration that is writ large onto the fortunes of the camp; hierarchies of command and social structures collapse. The crew turn to the heavy-drinking helicopter pilot MacReady for answers. As systems of social authority break down and science fails to provide solutions, MacReady, whose preference for military green and an oversized cowboy hat would seem to identify him as a Vietnam veteran, comes to signify the pure drive for Darwinian survival. When pressed for answers, MacReady can only haltingly reply, 'I don't know. Because it's different from us, see [...]. Ask him' – motioning to a distinctly mute Blair. The mental collapse of Blair (positioned here as the ultimate authority) at the half-way point of the film echoes the fate of Lovecraftian protagonists undone by contact with an unthinkable reality. Blair's inability to answer the concerns of the team here and his subsequent breakdown impart a strong sense of the 'impotence and insignificance' (as Weinstock puts it) of human beings dwarfed by a malignant or indifferent universe.⁶⁶

Indeed, more broadly, as Addison points out, the Thing's transgression of boundaries 'relentlessly exposes the fragility of our bodies, our identities, our relationships, and our system[s] of meaning', in effect undoing the human 'world'.⁶⁷ Along with the inability of these men of reason to remain guarantors of knowledge or overcome species threat, they also become incapable even of asserting their own identities. As station mechanic Childs (Keith David) asks, '[s]o, how do we know who's human? If I was an imitation, a perfect imitation, how would you know if it was really me?' More than a mere physical imitation, a biological doubling, the Thing's apparent ability to replicate the speech and thought of those it absorbs erodes the very privilege of those attributes as markers of human pre-eminence. Prince's assertion that the Thing's 'very existence challenges the ontology separating human from nonhuman, solid from liquid, edible from inedible' registers the film's own fascination with the materiality of the Thing.⁶⁸ As it turns out, it is not, as we might expect, any displays of superior intelligence, emotion, or heroism that differentiates an individual from the Thing, but rather it is in the realm

⁶⁶ Weinstock, 'The New Weird', p. 183.

⁶⁷ Addison, 'Cinema's Darkest Vision', p. 157.

⁶⁸ Prince, 'Dread, Taboo, and *The Thing*', p. 126.

of flesh itself, via a scientific test, that the question of the human is reduced to mere degrees of matter, via tissue and blood samples. It is on the level of matter and materiality that the weird – what ought not to be, an absence that reveals itself as a presence – vividly manifests in the film.

The flattening out of ontologies in the film (dog/human/Thing) reaches its highpoint in those set pieces where characters begin to engage with their own bodies as weird. It also marks the film's second strategy for imagining the weird, as I have been tracing it, in the transition from a negative knowledge to an excess of materiality. Child's question as to who is human and who is not occasions MacReady's improvisation on Dr Copper's proposed blood-serum test and the belief that '[m]aybe every part of it is a whole' – that even the smallest material traces of the Thing are a complete organism unto themselves. This leads to the assumption that it would reflexively attempt to defend itself if it came under attack – in this case, by MacReady plunging heated electrical wire into blood samples. By this point in the film, the paranoia over who may be a Thing has desiccated the already tenuous social bonds in the group. Apart from the scene's function as a point of drama, causing an escalation of the suspicions and mistrust within the group, it becomes clear at this juncture that the crew themselves are less certain of their own individuality and humanity. As MacReady begins his tests, Windows lowers his head in anticipation of his result. When it comes back negative, the camera is quick to register the relief visible on Windows's face and in his slackening shoulders. 'It is as though', Shelagh Rowan-Legg points out, 'the scientists themselves do not trust their own [identities] [...] that they might not be themselves'.⁶⁹ When the contents of the Petri dish spectacularly come to life, it is clear that even human bodily fluids are potentially alien. The startling loss of their ontological privilege is shown here as a loss of the crew's own materiality, their own bodies, an attack launched within what Prince refers to as the 'epidermal boundary of the self'.⁷⁰

The confluence of the human and the Thing at the level of fluid recalls Jean-Paul Sartre's discussion of slime. Sartre states that 'at the very moment when I believe I possess it, behold [...] it possesses me [...]. That sucking of the slimy which I feel on my hands outlines a kind of continuity of the slimy substance in myself.'⁷¹ Visually, by far the most frequent depictions of

⁶⁹ Shelagh Rowan-Legg, "'The Hollow the Image Leaves Empty: Das Ding and *The Thing*', (n. d.) <http://www.academia.edu/download/36729591/THE_HOLLOW_THE_IMAGE_LEAVES_EMPTY-DAS_DING__THE_THING_Rowan-Legg.pdf>, p. 8 [accessed 2 June 2018].

⁷⁰ Prince, 'Dread, Taboo, and *The Thing*', p. 128.

⁷¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 608-09.

the Thing entail slime; oozing layers of pulpy flesh are the focus of the multiple biological examinations and autopsies, and of the scenes of interrupted, incomplete transformations between dog and Thing or man and Thing. The resultant entities are depicted as glistening with secretions and discharge, and erupting with tentacular organs. The excessive morphology and bodily viscera in scenes such as these turn the inside of the body out, graphically demonstrating a continuity between blood, slime, flesh, and Thing, reducing humans to an equally anonymous material state, as ‘things’ within an ecology of things. The paradoxical presence of the Thing as a negative knowledge teratologically transforms the very matter of the crew’s bodies into something weird.

Those critics that glibly branded the creature a ‘mass of bloody protoplasm’, or who have expressed displeasure over Rob Bottin’s practical effects, have failed to appreciate the role of those effects in creating a link between materiality and the film’s more philosophical concerns. Instead, I argue, the excess of materiality on display signifies in ways that exceed the ‘gross-out’ factor, suggesting in particular a window into a previously hidden Lovecraftian weird ‘reality’ that overwhelms human epistemological categories. Here, the evocation of a concealed reality is commensurate with our own limited account of reality outside the text, such that both can be thought of as ‘speculative’. It is the dilemma of a ‘double reality’: the reality we thought we knew and the reality we once thought was impossible, but isn’t. This unthinkable reality provokes a feeling of wrongness that proclaims itself in the film through an aberrant materiality. This excess of materiality is what Kelly Hurley refers to as the ‘gothicity of matter’; the blood serum that shrieks with life and autopsies that ooze with slime point towards the idea that ‘[m]atter is not mute and stolid, but rather clamorous and active’.⁷² Likewise, the excess of materiality on display is a visceral reminder that the material world need not be inert simply because we fail to acknowledge its agency. Dale Kuipers’s original concept for the creature during pre-production envisioned a reptilian alien that induced various nightmarish hallucinations among the characters. After Kuipers left production due to a personal injury, Carpenter turned to Bottin, whom he had worked with on *The Fog*. Bottin took over as make-up effects supervisor on the basis of his insight, as recalled in an interview with *Cinefantastique*, that since the creature ‘had been all over the galaxy, it could call upon anything it needed

⁷² Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 33; see also Mulvey-Roberts, “‘A Spook Ride on Film’”, p. 84.

whenever it needed it'.⁷³ Impressed by Bottin's initial concepts, Carpenter gave him and storyboard artist Mike Ploog free rein over the creature's visual effects, as long as they were practical. This license to create whatever conceivable effects came to mind effectively highlights the representational absence of the Thing; being everything, it is also nothing.

This inherent difficulty in representing the unrepresentable, given that human beings cannot conceive of a reality beyond their own limited experience of it, is what Harman positions as the centre of weird realism – the idea that that '[n]o reality can be immediately translated into representations of any sort'.⁷⁴ That is, our representations of reality, whether in our cultural productions or our philosophical thinking, cannot surmount our own intellectual, imaginative, and sensual limitations. The problem, in terms of speculative thought and the weird, is being able to envision what Harman calls 'the strangeness in reality that is not projected onto reality by us', but that nevertheless remains whether we acknowledge it or not.⁷⁵ In the place of this representational difficulty, Harman admires Lovecraft's famously verbose writing style for the way his 'language is overloaded by a gluttonous excess of surfaces and aspects of the thing'.⁷⁶ In the presence of an elusive, unknowable reality, representations must compensate with a likewise elusive, oblique, dizzying, 'cubist' approximation of its effect.⁷⁷ In a similar sense, when faced with the problem of showing on film an unthinkable thing, Bottin's own aesthetic of gluttonous excess in practical effects eschews a literal manifestation of the creature, despite a wealth of visual detail and ample lighting. The result is a creature that is spectacular but vague and ungraspable. Whereas its objecthood as special effect is only limited by the imagination of the mind, it is this limit, in a philosophical sense, that is the subtext of the film. Enabled by Bottin's special effects, bodies, whether dog, human, or other, are turned inside-out and exhibited, most strikingly in the autopsy sequences. The revelation that the insides of bodies appear 'normal' (that is, biologically identical to dogs or humans, even as at the same time they are also Things) tests the interpretive abilities of the crew.

As Fisher points out, the 'very existence of "philosophy" – the orderly contemplation of phenomena, even, perhaps especially, matter – entails – indeed constitutes – a commitment to

⁷³ David J. Hogan, Michael Mayo, and Alan Jones, "I Don't Know What It Is, but It's Weird and Pissed Off," *Cinefantastique*, 13.2-3 (1982), p. 54.

⁷⁴ Harman, *Weird Realism*, p. 51.

⁷⁵ Harman, *Speculative Realism*, p. 91.

⁷⁶ Harman, *Weird Realism*, p. 25.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

idealism'.⁷⁸ That idealism is the human-centric belief that we possess sufficient capabilities to understand the world. If, as S. T. Joshi remarks, the 'distinguishing feature' of the weird is 'the refashioning of the reader's view of the world', then *The Thing* is surely weird.⁷⁹ An excess of material reality, imagined in an excess of representation, precipitates a feeling of 'wrongness'. Much of the horror of the film, I would argue, its fear and awe, is relayed to the audience via the members of the crew, who embody the process of thought approaching its limit. Whether it is Blair puzzling over his computer's calculations or the pot-smoking, assistant mechanic Palmer's (David Clennon) disbelieving 'you've gotta be fucking kidding', it is thought *as* horror that distinguishes the film as weird.

One of Bottin's most memorable effects, leading to Palmer's exclamation, is particularly noteworthy in its humorous denial of the privileging of human thought. When Norris, after suffering an apparent heart attack, is revealed as a Thing, MacReady acts swiftly to incinerate it, but does not manage to do so before what was Norris separates its own head from the burning body, creating a new Thing that sprouts arachnid-like legs and scuttles away. Thacker reminds us of the symbolic function of such decapitations in fiction, where 'the decapitated body is, arguably, one of the most precise allegories of philosophy. The head, bearer of the brain and the seat of reason, is detached from a body that it can no longer govern.'⁸⁰ Gary J. Shipley applies this idea to the scene, suggesting that 'the head's former claim to transcendence is suddenly contradicted from within: an antinomy of form, an all too human unhumaness, a debasement of the divine in man'.⁸¹ The divine aspect, or its secular humanist equivalent of the rational Cartesian individual, is what is at stake in Carpenter's film.

With the collapse of the human body and human reason as rarefied spaces, as containers of human privilege, the Thing's dissolution of species and spatial boundaries indicates a weird immanence within the planet itself, an outsidersness that becomes suspect, that becomes always already an inside. For Prince, the Thing is a kind of 'cosmic pollution' that erases the boundaries between human and other.⁸² The fear of contamination, viscerally present in our aversion to

⁷⁸ Fisher, 'Gothic Materialism', *Pli: The Warwick Philosophy Journal*, 12 (2001), 230-43 (p. 232).

⁷⁹ Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 118.

⁸⁰ Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2015), p. 96.

⁸¹ Gary J. Shipley, 'Remote Viewing: Observations Inspired or Furthered by "And They Were Two in One and One in Two"', *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 30 April 2013 <<https://brightlightsfilm.com/remote-viewing-observations-inspired-or-furthered-by-and-they-were-two-in-one-and-one-in-two/#.XScdz-gza00>> [accessed 4 June 2018].

⁸² Prince, 'Dread, Taboo, and *The Thing*', p. 126.

slime, Ben Woodward suggests, is prompted by the distasteful reminder of our beginnings in primordial ooze.⁸³ Similarly, philosopher Dylan Trigg, in his study of phenomenology in horror, insists that cosmic pollution can be read as the very precondition to the formation of life on Earth. For Trigg, our own bodies are made other if we reflect on their ‘alien materiality’, a consequence of the ‘possibility that life on Earth may have had its origins elsewhere in the universe’, so that we in a sense already ‘share’ our bodies with the alien.⁸⁴ Trigg even goes so far as to conclude that, in regard to *The Thing*, ‘the abject creature in the film is an expression of the origin of life itself’.⁸⁵

There is certainly something to be said for such a reading. It posits a horror of the body that traces its origins to a primordial life anterior to the earth. But this runs the risk of reducing the Thing simply to new knowledge that in time can be comfortably absorbed back into human epistemological structures. While no doubt a horrific prospect for some, in *The Thing*, the encounter with the unhuman, as I have been describing it, leaves no room for the human; the Thing itself is neither against the human nor does it ‘share’ the human, other than perhaps as protein and tissue. That is, just as in the film, the Thing absorbs us; we cannot absorb or assimilate it into some revised notion of ourselves. Nor, if Blair’s computer calculations are correct, would there be time enough for humans to survive its incursions, let alone understand it at some point in the future. As indicated by the equivocation over the age of the Thing discussed above, when it comes to the film, origins recede from knowing, are continually beyond knowing. We should remind ourselves that Carpenter’s *The Thing* is itself an origin retold, a remake of a previous film, which in turn is an adaptation of a story, possibly influenced by yet another novella. The recycling of origins is playfully acknowledged by both the plot and structure of the film. The Norwegian subplot in Carpenter’s film, in which a group of researchers uncover the Thing and are subsequently decimated, foretells the end of the very film that we are watching, a subplot that in turn becomes a prequel in 2011’s *The Thing*. Additionally, the recorded footage of the Norwegian discovery as watched by the American crew is itself an intertextual nod to the original 1951 version. In it, the Norwegian team form a circle around the craft still encased in ice to indicate its shape. Shot in black and white, the image explicitly recalls a corresponding shot in

⁸³ Ben Woodward, *Slime Dynamics* (Winchester and Washington: Zero Books, 2012), p. 1.

⁸⁴ Dylan Trigg, *The Thing: A Phenomenology of Horror* (Winchester and Washington: Zer0 Books, 2014), p. 10.

⁸⁵ Trigg, *The Thing*, p. 12.

the Hawks/Nyby original.⁸⁶ This ‘remake of a remake of a remake’, where ‘origins are thus multiplied’, is fitting for a film that takes as its subject the duplication of bodily forms.⁸⁷ As with the crew of Outpost 31, the Thing evades interpretive frameworks, cannot be integrated fully into human thought as anything other than false resemblances; like the creature itself with its ever-changing forms, it refuses to be contained by either (diegetic) scientific knowledge or (extra-diegetic) storytelling. It remains an expression of negative knowledge. What the Thing requires of us is not new categories, not a readjustment or reshaping of boundaries; rather, as in the filmic depictions of the Thing mid-transformation, with its assemblages of dog/human/plant, it is always in process, a remake, a continual ‘becoming’. We don’t absorb the Thing; it absorbs us. We become ‘things’ in an undifferentiated universe of things.

The themes of absorption, imitation, and immanence drive Carpenter’s production decisions throughout the film. The score by legendary composer Ennio Morricone is memorable for its minimalist heartbeat motif. For Conolly, ‘the music often lapses into a fixed landscape of fundamental tones, frequently centring on a monotone that can be felt as much as heard’.⁸⁸ This fixity of the soundscape, significantly, often means that the heartbeat we hear seems to bear no relation to what is on screen – that is, it is not limited to the screen time of the creature. Rather, as when we first hear it, over the establishing shots of the Antarctic terrain, it acts as an aural cue for immanence. It suggests an ontology, present during the entire film, that is independent of human agents – a state of being or presence that is ‘felt’ by us as audience throughout, but not necessarily seen or acknowledged by the crew until they come upon the Thing. Trace Reddell posits that *The Thing*’s exploitation of the new frontiers of surround-sound technologies, and Carpenter’s predilection for synthesisers on his soundtracks, contribute to the uncertainty or violation of ontological space within the film, diffusing the Thing’s ‘synthetic presence’ across the ‘multichannel carrier wave of the Dolby system’.⁸⁹ This simultaneous diffusion of and immersion in sound, created by new technology, recreates the Thing’s presence, but also our inability to ‘locate’ or differentiate it.

⁸⁶ Anne Billson also notes how this image reappears on a TV screen in the background of Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) (Billson, *The Thing*, p. 21).

⁸⁷ Glasberg, *Antarctica as Cultural Critique*, p. 68.

⁸⁸ Conolly, *The Thing*, p. 60.

⁸⁹ Trace Reddell, *The Sound of Things to Come: An Audible History of the Science-Fiction Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p. 378.

Likewise, just as the soundtrack hints at an immanence through monotone, the visual palette renders absorption stylistically via monochrome and an intentional neutralising of colour. Cinematographer Dean Cundey's use of shades of grey for the set design, along with the muted dark blues and browns for the wardrobe, means that the Thing is usually the most colourful aspect of the film.⁹⁰ Aside from contributing to the sense of temporal inertia that producer Stuart Cohen has noted, this colour scheme fits in with a more general movement in the film as a whole from white to black, from illumination to its negation.⁹¹ The sweeping vistas of daylit Antarctic whiteness give way to an ever-increasing number of dim interiors or night-time shots. Throughout this transition, we also witness the image of flame as a reoccurring motif, one that culminates in the fiery conclusion. Whether using flamethrowers, lit gasoline, or flares, the crew attempts to 'shine a light' on the Thing, using that most ubiquitous symbol of human knowledge, fire, to combat the creature. After MacReady's last-ditch effort to purge the camp through fire, the dwindling flames are all that are left in the 'blowing blackness' into which they will almost assuredly soon be absorbed.⁹² Much like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which similarly ends in the Arctic as the creature walks off 'lost in darkness and distance', Carpenter's *The Thing* is a cautionary tale aimed not only at science but at all contingencies of thought that presume to elevate us over the world, and the cosmos, of which we are a part.⁹³

Perhaps it should not be surprising then that, in the final climatic appearance of the Thing, we see it as a monstrous assemblage of forms, emerging from beneath the snow-packed basement floor of the facility, literally demolishing the very ground on which the human 'world' is situated. As in the beginning of the film, the Thing surfaces from the ice of the Antarctic. Amongst the obliterated ruins, MacReady and Childs are now all that remain of the crew, watching on as the last flames slowly darken. Trigg may well detect in the film's final scene an 'impasse' between human and Thing.⁹⁴ However, this scene strongly implies that, while the Thing may again slumber in the ice, any humans left on the compound will not be as fortunate. In opposition to the conventional closure of mainstream horror narratives, which are conventionally read as ideologically serving rational and cultural authority, Addison insists that

⁹⁰ Steve Swires, 'An Interview with Cinemaphotographer Dean Cundey', *Starlog Magazine*, June 1982, p. 38.

⁹¹ Cohen, 'A Producer's Guide', p. 20.

⁹² Bauer, 'John Carpenter on *The Thing*', n. p.

⁹³ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 1993), p. 170.

⁹⁴ Trigg, *The Thing*, p. 145.

Carpenter's ending to *The Thing* "conserves" nothing'.⁹⁵ MacReady's exhausted entreaty to Childs that they 'just wait here for a little while. See what happens' suggests a vestigial glimmer of hope that their facial expressions deny. We the audience, like them, are only too aware that all contact with the outside has been cut off, first by winter blizzards and then decisively by Blair's rampage. The finality of their situation is made bleaker by the ambiguity as to which, if either, of them remains human, a question that appears to be answered as the screen fades to black and we hear once again the heartbeat of the Thing in the score.

In Alan Dean Foster's novelisation of the film, this final scene is altered slightly, alluding back to MacReady's affection for chess. In this rewriting, MacReady sets up a chess table that has survived the camp explosion, and advances a pawn piece against Childs.⁹⁶ The battle of wits implied by this game is left significantly underdeveloped in the finished film, and those involved in the production are quick to point out that Foster was not in contact with the filmmakers and added embellishments of his own.⁹⁷ In Carpenter's film, MacReady's loss to the computer at the start of the film, if anything, paints him as a flawed strategist. Billson, in drawing attention to the predominance of the chess-like black-and-white colour scheme throughout, dismisses the possibility that MacReady and the Thing might be considered evenly matched, insisting that the game is stacked heavily in favour of the Thing.⁹⁸ Just as MacReady pours his drink into the chess simulator at the start of film, by the end he is content to blow it all up. It is an unwinnable game and he knows it. Despite his counterpart in Campbell's story maintaining that humans will fight and triumph because '[w]e're human. We're real. You're imitations, false to the core of your every cell', Carpenter's weird cinematic vision strips away such anthropocentric assurances.⁹⁹ As this article has shown, the film version problematises the distinction between real and imitation, and asks us to consider the notion that, if humans are manifest as a set of false presumptions, illusory spatial boundaries, and ill-earned exceptionalism, then any claims to be authorities on reality are specious and baseless.

Despite its bleak ending and initially chilly reception among critics and viewers, the film has in the ensuing years earned an appreciative following, frequently making it into the top ten of

⁹⁵ Addison, 'Cinema's Darkest Vision', p. 156.

⁹⁶ Alan Dean Foster, *The Thing* (Toronto and New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 196.

⁹⁷ Cohen, 'A Producer's Guide', p. 44.

⁹⁸ Billson, *The Thing*, p. 23.

⁹⁹ Campbell, 'Who Goes There?', p. 73.

Best Horror Film lists and spawning a number of cross-media adaptations in video games, comic-book sequels, film prequels, and inter-textual homages.¹⁰⁰ This growing acceptance and influence within popular culture is mirrored by numerous critical re-evaluations such as those discussed throughout this article. As with Foster's novelisation, however, expansions of Carpenter's story tend to rewrite, reclaim, or revoke the nihilistic ending. As evidenced by a number of Reddit boards, YouTube videos, and web pages, the film's fan community continually express a desire to recuperate this ending by advancing theories or deciphering clues as to the 'truth' of whether MacReady or Childs remain human or have become Things.¹⁰¹ Such pursuits are perhaps an understandable, although misguided, effort to restore order to the narrative, excising the ending's grimmer overtones. For example, 'The Things', a 2010 award-winning short story from Peter Watts, is a point-of-view account of the events of the film from the perspective of the Thing. In this story, the Thing's narration slips between the various characters it has assimilated, thus offering a plurality of ontology, producing a 'hive mind' or networked approximation of the alien's 'being'. While admirable for its experimental take on the film, turning the characters' 'selves' into something like interconnected nodes, Watts's story is yet another recuperative strategy, becoming yet another metaphor for human concerns, reframing alien psychology as religious zeal. While such exercises make for fun reading, it presumes an empathetic human insight into the Thing, whereas the Thing, as I have argued here, derives its fictional and philosophical appeal precisely from its unknowability.

Another of Carpenter films, *Ghosts of Mars* (2001), again features an invasive entity, this time ancient Martians. In this film, however, Carpenter chooses to insert perspective shots for the alien intruder. In so doing, the film renders the Martians a far more conventional threat than does *The Thing*, in which the nameless creature is kept unknowable. As humans, the tendency is always to construct the universe outward from the centre principle of ourselves. Despite the effort to inhabit a different centre imaginatively, through various 'distortions' of an alien

¹⁰⁰ See for example Owen Williams, 'The 50 Best Horror Movies', *Empire*, 31 October 2019 <<https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/best-horror-movies/>>[accessed 20 October 2019]; Tom Huddleston, 'The 100 Best Horror Films – The Scariest Movies Ranked by Experts', *TimeOut*, 1 October 2019 <https://www.timeout.com/london/film/best-horror-films> [accessed 20 October 2019]; *The Thing* videogame by Universal Interactive, 2002; and *The Thing From Another World*, Dark Horse Comics, 1991.

¹⁰¹ See for example 'John Carpenter's *The Thing*: Who Is The Thing? Scene with Keith David | SYFY WIRE', *YouTube* video, 3:57, SYFY WIRE, 31 July 2017; and lhbruen, 'I Know Who the Thing is in the 1982 Classic THE THING, Finally Solving the Mystery Ending. [spoilers, of course]', *Reddit* <https://www.reddit.com/r/movies/comments/73gulr/i_know_who_the_thing_is_in_the_1982_classic_the/> [accessed 9 February 2019].

perspective, we, as humans, cannot escape the distortion inherent in our own intellectual limits by simply trading one perspective for another. The weird does away with such presumptions, as does *The Thing*. Thus, the decentring of the human species within a 'weird' or speculative realism framework (displacing it from atop a presumed hierarchy fuelled by Enlightenment appropriations of Darwinian evolution) helps us to re-conceive it as perhaps as ontologically interchangeable as any of the store of biological forms through which the creature in the film manifests. In doing so, the film figures the coexistence of human and unhuman realities in the world and, by extension, the cosmos, as immanently 'weird'.

For the crew of Outpost 31, the encounter with the Thing diverges considerably from familiar horror and science-fiction tropes of alien contact and species threat, whether in *It Came From Outer Space* or in recent updates like the *Alien* franchise. Rather than a vaguely anthropomorphised creature that expresses human anxieties of a menacing other, the inaccessibility of the Thing produces a horror that is defined by a lack, a negative knowledge that radically decentres the human. Confronted with the weird realism of the unthinkable Thing, our identities, our bodies, and our notion of human exceptionalism are subsumed, like the camp members, into a cosmic incomprehensibility. The paradoxical absence and presence of the Thing, arriving from beyond the farthest reaches of time and the cosmos, serves as epistemological and ontological trauma, intimating a world, however we wish to define it, that has never been 'for us'. Like the dwindling flames of the camp, the film reminds us that any warmth or illumination afforded by human thought is always contingent, is always on the edge of a 'great outdoors' like the Antarctic, an 'alien space' that recalls an even greater alien space, the unending abyss of a black universe.