



SCALA: SEX, DRUGS AND ROCK AND ROLL CINEMA

The Thing

The Thing

Directed by: John Carpenter
©: Universal City Studios, Inc.
a Turman-Foster Company production
a Universal picture
Executive Producer: Wilbur Stark
Produced by: David Foster, Lawrence Turman
Co-producer: Stuart Cohen
Associate Producer: Larry Franco
Production Manager: Robert Latham Brown
Production Accountant: Karen Miller
Production Secretary: Debbie Collier
1st Assistant Director: Larry Franco
2nd Assistant Director: Jeffrey Chernov
Assistant to John Carpenter: Ellen Benjamin
Script Supervisor: Candy Marcellino
Casting by: Anita Dann
Screenplay by: Bill Lancaster
Based on the story 'Who Goes There?' by:
John W. Campbell Jr
Director of Photography: Dean Cundey
Camera Operator: Raymond Stella
First Assistant Cameraman: Clyde Bryan
Second Assistant Cameraman: Steve Tate
Gaffers: Mark Walthour, Tom Marshall
Electric Best Boy: Charles E. Nippell
Key Grip: Ronald T. Woodward
Best Boy Grip: Laszlo Horvath
Grip: Ray Kinzer
Dolly Grip: Kriss Krosskove
Special Visual Effects by: Albert Whitlock
Matte Photography by: Bill Taylor
Special Effects: Roy Arbogast
Special Effects Assistants: William D. Lee,
Hans Metz, John Stirber
Special Effects Foreman: Hal Bigger
Computer Graphics: Motion Graphics
Dimensional Animation Effects Created by:
Randall William Cook
Dimensional Animation Effects Crews:
James Aupperle, James Belohovek,
Ernest D. Farino, Carl Surges
Edited by: Todd Ramsay
Assistant Film Editors: Jan Wesley, Kim Ray
Production Designer: John J. Lloyd
Art Director: Henry Larrecq
Set Decorator: John Dwyer
Leadman: Bart Susman
Property Master: John Zemansky
Propmaker Foreman: Bob Nohles
Painter: James Callan
Costume Supervisors: Ronald I. Caplan,
Gilbert Loe
Make-up: Kenneth Chase
Special Make-up Effects Created and Designed by:
Rob Bottin
Special Make-up Effects Unit Line Producer:
Eric Jensen
Special Make-up Effects Unit Coordinator
Mechanical Animation: David Kelsey
Special Make-up Effects Unit Coordinator Special
Make-up Effects: Ken Diaz
Special Make-up Effects Unit Production Special
Make-up Effects Unit Special Technicians: Gunnar
Ferdinansen, Margaret Beserra
Special Wigs: Vivienne Walker, Josephine Turner
End Titles & Optical Effects: Universal Title
Main Title Sequence Visual Effects Designed by:
Visual Concept Engineering, Peter Kuran
Visual Concept Engineering Miniature Supervisor:
Susan K. Turner
Visual Concept Engineering Animators:
Katherine Kean, Keith Tucker

When John Carpenter's *The Thing* was unleashed into cinemas in 1982, it received an almost unanimous critical drubbing on both sides of the Atlantic. Critic after critic griped about weak characterisation, lack of tension, and sacrifice of the film's mood and structure to the stomach-turning special effects. More than one reviewer dismissed it glibly but not very accurately as 'Alien on ice'. The consensus was that Carpenter's *The Thing* couldn't – as *Rolling Stone* put it – 'hold a candle to Howard Hawks' trailblazing 1951 classic *The Thing from Another World*.

One or two brave souls swam against the critical tide. Alan Frank in the *Daily Star* maintained 'You won't find a better spine-chiller than *The Thing*,' while Richard Cook in *New Musical Express* remarked on its 'sense of fatality', praised Carpenter's 'manipulation of the *confining* qualities of film', and declared that it set 'the standard by which all creature thrillers will have to be judged'.

But *The Thing* went belly-up at the box-office, and not just because of the overwhelming blanket of negative criticism. Just as likely to have been a factor was the prevailing mood of the times. In 1982, the political philosophies of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were filtering through to the masses, resulting in an overall feeling a long way from John Carpenter's ironic, subversive, anti-authoritarian tone. Even in the 80s, Carpenter's films evinced a cynical sensibility more in tune with the innovative, iconoclastic 70s, with their conspiracy theories and downbeat endings, than with the Mammon-worshipping workaholicism of the yuppie decade.

Even more damaging, from *The Thing's* point of view, was the arrival on the scene of a small, prune-like creature with an elongated neck, enormous eyes and magic finger. Audiences weren't keen on the idea of a space monster which did unpleasant things to the human body. They preferred an alien equivalent of the teddy-bear and wanted reassurance that, if there *were* something out there, it would be benign. They also wanted the promise of life after death, the comfort of religious undertones, and a heartwarming love story with a sob-into-your-hanky sentimental ending. 'You must remember the time it [*The Thing*] was released was the summer of *E.T.*,' says John Carpenter. 'And it was a very bleak and hopeless film. There were no women in the movie, and people thought I went too far.'

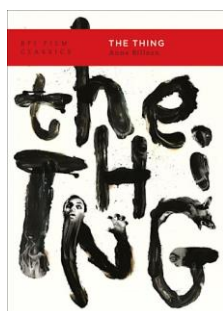
When *The Thing* first came out, I was bowled over by it. I was transfixed by the tension all the critics had maintained was non-existent; the build-up made me so nervous that I thought I would have to leave the cinema even before the first hint of tentacle. I was knocked out by Dean Cundey's spare yet elegant widescreen cinematography. And I was impressed by the economical but effective performances from a cleverly chosen cast which, together with Bill Lancaster's deft screenplay, never for one moment left you stranded in limbo, trying to work out which character was which.

I have since watched this film so many times, both on video and on the big screen, that I now know virtually every syllable of Lancaster's dialogue, every last beat of Ennio Morricone's haunting music, every conjuring trick of Carpenter's direction. And yet I can still watch it with pleasure, its tension unimpaired by familiarity. *The Thing* has carved itself a niche in that small pantheon of films that need to be revisited at regular intervals if I am to

Opticals: RGB Opticals, James Hagedorn,
George Lockwood
Filmed in: Panavision
Colour by: Technicolor
Music by: Ennio Morricone
Synthesizer Sound: Craig Harris
Music Editor: Clif Kohlweck
Production Sound: Thomas Causey
Boom Operator: Joe Brennan
Sound Re-recording: Bill Varney, Steve Maslow,
Gregg Landaker
Supervising Sound Editors: David Lewis Yewdall,
Colin C. Mouat
Sound Editor: Kendrick P. Sweet
Sound Effects Editor: Warren Hamilton Jr
Foley Supervisor: John K. Adams
Stunt Co-ordinator: Dick Warlock
Juneau Technical Adviser: Dr Maynard M. Miller
Animal Trainer: Bob Weatherwax
Cast:
Kurt Russell (*R.J. MacReady*)
A. Wilford Brimley (*Blair*)
T.K. Carter (*Nauls*)
David Clennon (*Palmer*)
Keith David (*Childs*)
Richard Dysart (*Dr Copper*)
Charles Hallahan (*Norris*)
Peter Maloney (*Bennings*)
Richard Masur (*Clark*)
Donald Moffat (*Captain Garry*)
Joel Polis (*Fuchs*)
Thomas Waites (*Windows*)
Norbert Weisser (*Norwegian*)
Larry Franco (*Norwegian passenger with rifle*)
Nate Irwin (*helicopter pilot*)
William Zeman (*pilot*)
John Carpenter (*Norwegian in video footage*)*
Adrienne Barbeau (*voice of computer*)*
USA 1982©
109 mins
Digital 4K

* Uncredited

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preserve my faith in the movies and keep myself sane. It goes on waving its repulsive yet fascinating tentacles in my face. I continue to mull over plot details, wondering which characters have been infected, and when; I brood about the maddening, ambiguous, magnificent ending; and I ponder the philosophical questions: at what point does a human being cease to be a human being and become a Thing? And what would be so awful about being a Thing anyway?

It starts off as it means to go on – a Technicolor film with a predominantly monochrome colour scheme. Later on, there will be vivid eruptions of red, green and yellow gloop, but in the beginning *The Thing* consists of plain white credits against a black background: black and white – the predominant colour scheme of the film. It's not so much the black and white of good and evil, as a chess game between two unevenly matched players: a beginner versus a Grandmaster or man versus the Thing, with the Thing making all the best and most unexpected moves.

There's a single ominous chord on the soundtrack – a chord which gains in intensity.

The black background becomes outer space, sprinkled with the pinpricks of millions of stars. This is the Outer Space Prologue, and though we don't yet know it, it's set hundreds of thousands of years ago. Flying past us, hurtling past the camera with frightening force and speed, comes what is unmistakably a flying saucer, apparently out of control. It breaches the earth's atmosphere with a brief flare-up of brightness, and the title of the film is seared white-hot into the screen with a scorching, rending sound. The logo is identical to that used in *The Thing from Another World*. The aliens, once again, have landed.

Carpenter was to use another Outer Space Prologue two years later in *Starman*, a sci-fi love story featuring Jeff Bridges as a benign alien about as far as one could get from the impersonal malevolence of the Thing: the Voyager II space probe, laden with messages of goodwill and launched in 1977, is shown hurtling through space, belting out 'I Can't Get No Satisfaction' by the Rolling Stones. As befits what might be described as Carpenter's own *E.T.*, the tone here is upbeat and positive, totally lacking in the ominousness of *The Thing's* beginning, which was to be echoed more closely in the Outer Space Prologue to the 1996 box-office smash *Independence Day*, in which the surface of the moon is rippled by the passing of a colossal space craft.

Next, *The Thing* takes a mighty leap forward in time, to the present – or at least to the present as it was in the year of the film's release. A subtitle identifies the time and location as 'ANTARCTIC, WINTER 1982'. The single ominous chord now gives way to the main theme of Ennio Morricone's simple but insidiously effective soundtrack – a tonic heartbeat overlaid with a repeating two-note figure rising from the dominant 5th to an unsettled and unsettling minor 6th, with a falling sequence beneath it. Carpenter wrote his own synthesizer themes for many of his films, and it's almost as though Morricone had studied the scores for *Assault on Precinct 13*, *Halloween*, *The Fog*, and so on, and had determined to outdo them in minimalism and menace. *The Thing* is among his least typical scores – very different from his usual plaintive lyricism – but one of his most effective. The heartbeat at its centre suggests life – but not necessarily life as we would want to know it.

Extracted from *The Thing* by Anne Billson (BFI Film Classics, 1997).

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