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Sick Puppies and Other Unbecoming Things

Lovecraft applies the term “Outsider” to this thing or entity, the Thing, which arrives and passes at the edge, which is linear yet multiple, “teeming, seething, swelling, foaming, spreading like an infectious disease, this nameless horror.”

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,
A Thousand Plateaus (1987, 245)

In the opening sequence to John Carpenter’s *The Thing* ([Universal Pictures, 1982](#)), a lone husky flees a Norwegian gunman across the Antarctic tundra. The dog is rescued by an American scientific team and the gunman is killed, leaving no explanation for the hunt. Later, when the dog is caged along with the American husky pack, it mutates violently, attacking the other dogs and members of the expedition. It becomes apparent that what the Americans have taken into their isolated community is an alien lifeform capable of adopting the form of creatures it kills, and the team have no way of knowing who has been replicated/replaced already.

Given that Carpenter unashamedly borrows images and dialogue from Howard Hawks in so many of his other films, it is ironic that this film should self-consciously avoid borrowing from Hawks’s *The Thing From Another World* ([RKO, 1951 \[Dir: Christian Nyby\]](#)), of which it is ostensibly a remake. Hawks’s Arctic Cold War story is replaced by an Antarctic horror tale—the two films are literally poles apart. The obvious key to this difference is that Rob Bottin’s special effects wizardry enables Carpenter (through Bill Lancaster’s screenplay) to adhere more closely to the plot of John W. Campbell’s 1938 novella (“Who Goes There?”) about a shape-shifting menace generating paranoia among inhabitants of a small community.

Hawks’s film (screenplay by Charles Lederer) also hinges on a sense of paranoia, but its source is unequivocal: Hawks’s alien is little more than a blood-sucking vegetable from space. Paranoia in Carpenter’s film has something to do with the fear of being killed, but is also as much a matter of not knowing what form the enemy is taking at any point in time. Of course, the special effects do not contribute to this uncertainty—the paranoia is at its most intense when things appear to be normal. Yet this intensity is fed in the first instance by knowing the excesses of which “the thing” is capable when forced to reveal itself.

The irony of this remake not being made in the image of its original is compounded by the fact that Carpenter’s film was panned by critics and failed badly at the box office on its release in 1982—by contrast, the 1951 version is widely considered to be a classic, credited with starting the alien SF film boom of the 1950s. More recently, Carpenter’s film has acquired something of a cult status. Indeed, a 1999 poll by British *Total Film* magazine rated *The Thing* as the [eleventh scariest film of all time](#). Yet clearly the “gore factor” which gives to such a film its cult status was a contributing factor in its initial failure, although I think it is necessary to be sure of what we mean when we say this. The timing of the release of *The Thing* is generally thought to have been a major factor,

based on the assumption that a filmgoing public still enamoured with Spielberg's E.T. was always going to be unreceptive to Carpenter's shapeshifting horror. What may be even more pertinent was that Carpenter's horror was released onto the big screen about the time that this same filmgoing public was coming to terms with a new "horror": the advent of AIDS.

I recently read a [commentary](#) on the resurgence of interest in *The Thing*, in which the author claims that Carpenter's film functioned in 1982 as a cold war metaphor after the manner of the 1951 original, and that it is the potential AIDS resonances in the film—in as much as "the only way to detect alien infection is a 'blood test'"—which strike a chord with newer audiences. To my way of thinking, Bryant Frazer's [review for Deep Focus](#) provides a more appropriate assessment of the immediate context for *The Thing* when he categorises it "as part of a movement in genre film that dealt with biological horror" along with films like Ridley Scott's *Alien* and David Cronenberg's *Scanners* and *Videodrome*. As Frazer observes, these films provide "unsettling visions of anxiety over the physical nature of our bodies, and of the possibility that our essential natures may be changed by alien entities, by pollutants and disease".

Yet Carpenter's film sits uneasily alongside other biohorror films, perhaps because it is such an extreme product of this movement. Scott's virtually indestructible xenomorph literally burst (through John Hurt's chest) onto cinema screens to terrorise audiences by its capacity to turn human beings into expendable commodities (mere links on the food chain or hosts along the creature's parasitic life cycle). Yet this alien's capacity for the spectacular kill is dwarfed by Carpenter's outrageous shapeshifter, sprouting tentacles, serpentine heads, razor-sharp teeth, and other amorphous extensions from what would seem to be normal bodies.

Mainstream cinema audiences may have loved Spielberg's tubby, telecommunicating extraterrestrial enough to shun Carpenter's killer, but it may be that even fans of Scott's space monster might have failed to share in the spirit of Carpenter's knowing wink at excess—recall the response of Windows (Thomas Waites) when a severed head sprouts legs and scuttles away: "You've got to be fucking kidding." The irony is that, in spite of its obvious excesses, Carpenter's alien is still closer to home than Scott's: the latter occupies the human body by infestation, the former by infection. Frazer makes explicit the particular resonance of this difference in the biohorror film: "*The Thing* can be read as a parable of the self-destructive 'witch-hunt' mentality, or of the ravages that an insidious killer like AIDS (just blossoming as *The Thing* was being shot) can wreak on the survivors, as well as those infected."

The point to be made here is that the excesses of Carpenter's film may not, in and of themselves, be sufficient to explain its capacity to unnerve its potential audience at the time of its release. In 1982, the syndrome formerly identified as GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) was renamed AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) as it was discovered that the agent, "possibly a virus that could be spread through blood," could affect people other than just gay men: the first recipient by blood transfusion was identified in the United States as were the first affected infants ([Avert: AIDS History](#)).

Perhaps unwittingly, Carpenter's film mirrors the spread of discourses about the AIDS syndrome, as much as its monster mirrors the virus itself. The fact that the protagonists in the film are all men living in isolation provides a none too subtle reference to the gay

male community to which it was initially thought that GRID could be solely attributed. In the film, as in society, the potential for the menace to spread beyond this immediate community is identified with the knowledge that it spreads through blood, a knowledge that translates into moral panic. When Copper (Richard A. Dysart) discovers through a computer simulation—closely resembling a simulation called “life,” which I remember playing in the 1980s—that “the thing” could consume the human race within days, he determines to stop the spread, and when Copper dies, Blair (Wilfrid Grimley) responds even more violently by trying to cut the team off from its external contacts and supplies.

Thus, what the film reflects back to its audience is a recognition that the spread of panic associated with AIDS is every bit as insidious as the spread of the virus associated with the same syndrome. This panic operates by isolating and targeting the victims as though they are the infection themselves, potential killers. Initially, this could be done at group levels—for example, the gay male community at first, then drug users, and so on—yet it ultimately proceeds by reducing the limits of the abject, until all that is left is to isolate the individual in each instance. To have been infected is in itself enough to be identified as having the characteristics of any number of the social evils associated with the spread of the virus, but it is nevertheless enough also to be characterised as a threat of infection to the rest of the human race. In this sense, the victim *becomes* the virus.

The reader may now sense the relevance of the reference to Deleuze and Guattari with which I framed this essay at the outset. The epigraph is taken from “1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible . . .” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987, 232-309), an essay that remains the duo’s most sustained elaboration of the processes of “becoming.” Borrowing the concept for my purposes here, it can be said that *The Thing* represents in spectacular form the process of victim becoming virus via mechanisms of social isolation: *alienation* is literalised in the *becoming-alien* of members of an already isolated community.

Central to an understanding of becoming as a process is the relationship between single and multiple phenomena; “between the pack and the loner; between mass contagion and preferential alliance; between pure multiplicity and the exceptional individual” (244). In *The Thing*, we may recall, the first inclination we have that something is amiss is that a lone husky (nominally a pack animal) is fleeing a crazed gunman. Deleuze and Guattari enable the concept of the pack to fade into the process of contagion. When the isolated animal is restored to a pack existence, contagion is immediately literalised in the film: it first seems to act as though it is sick, and then we are introduced to the spectacle of this shapeshifter *in extremis*, spreading itself out into the pack, and then into the community.

From this early point in the film, we can no longer be in any doubt that becoming-alien through the mechanism of contagion has nothing to do with the coming into reality of a higher order of being, or of the realisation of potential states, etcetera. Commenting on becoming, Catherine Malabou points out that the Deleuzo-Guattarian understanding is a removal of the concept from “the Hegelian definition of an intermediate state between being and nothingness,” as it is “not a hesitation between the abyssal vertigo of absence of form and the security of a particular incarnation” (“Who’s Afraid,” 1996, 125). For it is precisely at the moment that the animal is ushered towards its apparent destiny at the border of the pack that it lashes out against the security of the pack existence.

Instead, *The Thing* offers a representation of the imposition of the molecular onto the incarnate. For this reason, I consider the film to be a neat container for what remains one of Deleuze and Guattari's more elusive concepts. It demonstrates that "becoming" includes processes at every level from the microbial to the communal, leading us to conclude that the spread of the contagion is inseparable from the panic that consumes the community: they are precisely one and the same process of becoming-alien. For a film to visually represent this relation, of course, what must be rendered visible are the *intensities* that characterise all becomings, hence the visual excesses to which it goes.

It is to these intensities, more so than just the "gore factor" alone, that I think audiences react when they view *The Thing*, cognisant of the spectre of AIDS. The shapeshifter's metamorphoses are not merely excessive, they are *intense*, which is to say that they are tenuous (and yet tenable) threads in the process of becoming-alien, which we have seen cuts across the molecular and the communal to unite the social with the physiological. Clifford M. Skoog observes that Deleuze's use of biological terminology with reference to social phenomena and their effects is not strictly referential, nor is not metaphorical: "His work in any case powerfully evokes the kinds of processes we observe in life at its cellular and molecular levels, and is especially provocative concerning the extent to which we might look at language and social life as incorporating a 're-incarnation' of life's most elemental processes" ([Thinking's Legacy and the Evolution of Experience, 1998](#)).

Carpenter's film, I suggest, evokes much the same connection between discursive and social realities and the elemental stuff of which we are made, all of which is fleeting. In reflecting back to us the social context for the "witch-hunt" mentality, or by literalising the process by which the victim becomes the contagion in the eyes of the witch-hunters, *The Thing* also provides a stark reminder of the physical limits by which we are bound. Held in the grip of contagion, as our bodies succumb at the cellular level to infection, do we somehow cease to be ourselves? Yet the question is not one of physical essences, as our "selves" are defined as much in the social extensions of the body, in the eye of the beholder, as it were, a Deleuzian point brought home to the audience with intensity by *The Thing*. Becoming, in this sense, is an unbecoming thing, for it is the very opposite of belonging. It turns away from well-being, from being well, or perhaps from being *per se*. Do we therefore turn away from becoming? Or, as the resurgence in interest in *The Thing* in the last few years might prompt us to ask, have we begun at last to look back at the unbecoming things from which we have averted our gaze for so long?

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