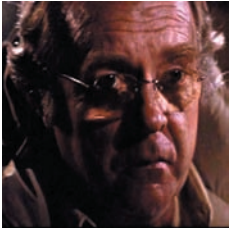


Bennings



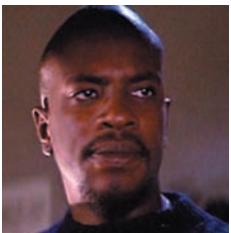
Garry



Blair



MacReady



Childs



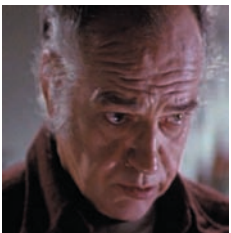
Nauls



Clark



Norris



Copper



Palmer



Fuchs



Windows

All About

THE THING

ROBERT MEAKIN

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First published on www.outpost31.com, 2006, website run by Todd Cameron.

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Dedicated to

Pam Morris
&
Marcia King

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Introduction

The Thing is a terrific monster movie, and in some ways that's all it is and all it needs to be. But it's also a classic, and that means we can go back and watch it again and again.

How can we keep on returning to a film when we know what is going to happen? It seems to have something to do with the way it breathes. Movies have personality, they have a heartbeat, an attitude. Some films can be great fun but only for short term relationships, one night stands or brief flings. We don't realise how fleeting their charm is until we see them again and notice that it just isn't the same. Those films are good but we can't watch them very often¹.

The Thing has a distinctive personality and a metabolism. Imagine meeting someone who is great company. They have a certain effect on you and you feel different when you're with them. It's the same with classic films. We go back to them for the same reason. It's that feeling and atmosphere.

Drawing a viewer into a film, involving them in a way that most films don't, is not a simple business. It's a form of seduction. Both parties (viewer and movie) are willing participants but each have to observe certain rules and we can never really figure them out. Each time is slightly different. But what we *can* do is describe how we feel while it's happening and that can tell us a great deal.

In looking at what makes *The Thing* special we can learn a lot about movie making. But it isn't a roadmap. Yes, great films have imagination, character, and a genuine sense of place but this is easy to say, not so easy to do. Atmosphere is not just

¹ For this reason several years need to pass before we can decide if a film is a classic or not.

about the wind in the trees. Many modern films are self conscious but telling a story that is different doesn't just mean taking the obvious (a cranky petrol station attendant in the American outback, for instance) and reversing it (it turns out he's an okay guy), or putting some other spin on it.

Although good film making cannot be taught, good films *can* be demonstrated. When we see how *The Thing* goes about telling a story it feels so instructive. Yet to understand *The Thing* is not to see the strings move. Our pleasure is increased, not diminished, and that really is the mark of a great film.

We should be careful because every pointer, every piece of good advice, every rule can be broken in the pursuit of something that feels right, that has authenticity. What we need is a burning desire to tell a story. *The Thing* breaks quite a lot of rules itself but because it does so without even thinking about it (confidence) we don't notice. It's just *The Thing*. It's the same as the person with the great personality, they can get away with making comments that others can't. It is just how they are, and they don't even seem to be trying.

To be a great film maker it helps (in most cases, not all) to have learnt everything but to have forgotten it. Similarly, the end point of all analysis of art seems to be the realisation that you know nothing. Anything goes. But you have to learn everything and then forget it before you can say this.

When I began this book I hoped it could be used almost as a manual on how to make films that draw the viewer in, that seduce without even appearing to try. The subtitle might have been, *How to Make a Classic*. I now realise that was probably a little over ambitious.

What it does describe is the personality of *The Thing*. It goes through the film from beginning to end in a kind of heightened awareness (What are we actually thinking and feeling as we watch this movie? Why can we watch it again and again?). It aims to increase your enjoyment of the film. Mostly by recreating the mood of being with that old friend.

This book can tell you why *The Thing* is such a great film. It takes 130 pages. It can't tell you how to make a great film, unfortunately. But it is a step in that direction. Read it and then forget about it.

NOTE

This book takes the point-of-view of someone watching the movie. For that person, it doesn't matter if something appears in the film by accident or on purpose, if the writer put it there or an actor happened to improvise it. All that matters is what we see and how we respond to it. The script, comments by the creative talent, behind the scenes anecdotes, etc, are all interesting and fun but have no bearing on what we feel when we watch the film.

All About THE THING

The credits appear steadily as white text on a black background. The music is simple and quiet, a few low menacing cords which we can hardly even hear at the beginning. When the spaceship becomes visible and flies overhead we cut to a reverse angle to see it heading towards the Earth and the editing compliments the rhythm of the credits. Nothing more is revealed than need be, it is pared down to the bare minimum. The ship begins to burn as it enters Earth's atmosphere and then disappears from sight. After a beat, the director's name appears and the title burns in. The entire sequence has been covered in just two stationary shots. It is the very deliberateness of this, the self-contained nature that makes us concentrate. It stands like an announcement. We are not being asked to consider something complex but a story detail has been imparted and it is the simplicity that creates the effect. We have the feeling that nothing will be wasted. Compare this to the appearance of the spaceship in *Independence Day*, which is not to deride that film but simply to point out the difference in our reaction. The opening of *The Thing* is not busy and it is the quietness that allows us to relax into the atmosphere. Already, rather than sit back and observe we are being pulled in. There is a confidence to the film making.

The spaceship is clearly in trouble. Perhaps as a result of a malfunction the pilot is trying to land on the nearest available planet and the Thing we will come to know was being transported. What feels more likely is that the pilot, an alien being we never get to meet, was in trouble because of the Thing (presumably there was also a crew).

This raises some interesting questions. We learn later that the Thing is both intelligent and instinctive. It will not give itself away unless it is forced into doing so. It is described as a chameleon that strikes in the dark. Why, therefore, would it choose to attack the pilot and endanger its own existence? Could the intelligent beings flying the ship be fighting amongst themselves, undergoing their own paranoia and fear? If so, this little sequence is like a condensed version of the whole film. As the movie goes on it gradually expands on the concept, adding more detail each time. First the ship; then the visit to the Norwegian camp and the suggestions of what went on there, and then the American camp where we see it all in much finer detail. Events repeat and each time more is added. It becomes more personal. However, rather than simple dramatic irony (where we know something the characters don't), it creates a feeling of inevitability. We can see it all happening but our privileged information doesn't put us at an advantage because in the same circumstances we would be just as stuck. The main character, MacReady, seems to be aware of this helplessness himself and we see him try to rebel against it. This subtly puts us on the side of a complex character. Knowing won't save you.

We fade out and we are into the main movie, but an important detail has been omitted. It's a technique that will become important to the storytelling. Most films would signal in some way that the spaceship crashed on earth 100,000 years ago. *The Thing* doesn't. We simply realise this fact later in the film and when we do it isn't presented as a great revelation or twist. It simply happens.

Unannounced movements forward in time will play a significant role. It will add to the ambiguity of certain characters and create blanks that we have to fill. It is the way

these blanks are arranged that make it so interesting. It creates a film fertile with many different possibilities. Was this done on purpose in *The Thing*? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. To us, it doesn't matter. All that does matter is the film.

Knowing *when* to leave out information is an instinct as much as anything. As is often the case with film making it can be analysed and theories drawn but it is the feeling that matters. A good film maker knows how to feel his way through.

Two men in a helicopter are chasing a dog across the Antarctic landscape. The scene lasts for several minutes but is covered in the same deliberate style as the crashing spaceship. The men are excited and engaged by what they are doing but the scene itself doesn't share their state of mind. We are watching them. There are no close shots of either of them. Their humanity is portrayed by their actions and not their facial expressions.

The spaceship was a vehicle designed and piloted by intelligent beings and it was clearly in trouble. This scene shows something similar. The sense is of precarious organic life (which includes the Thing), hard hand-built machinery and the landscape.

Since this is a movie and we know the two scenes are linked it creates a mystery. Even for someone familiar with *The Thing* there is something satisfying about this juxtaposition. However, the connection is not forced and the scene can quite naturally pass us by without a second thought. We may be reminded of the famous jump-cut in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But where that film wanted to make a big point about the linkage, here it is just part of the story.

The dog knows someone is chasing him. He seems very self aware, calculating in a way that isn't quite natural. When the men catch up to him, they begin shooting. They

are quite close but do they hit him? We can gather from the way they behave, and it is confirmed by what we learn later, that the man firing is not familiar with guns. Because he knows the dog is actually a thing he is also under enormous pressure. There is no sign of blood on the snow. The Thing can only mimic its host when all of the host's body parts are working properly. Although the Thing itself would not die from a serious bullet wound (something that would kill a dog) it would not be able to maintain the form of the dog and still be mobile.

The U.S. outpost is established and we see nearly all of the men are in the recreation room. Lazarus Danzig, a man who actually spent several years in Antarctica wrote an article on *The Thing*² saying that the majority of those who worked there were blue-collar and cynical about the American policies relating to the area, implying they had a political dimension that outweighed any scientific interest. He said that those who thought they were there for a scientific purpose were considered naive. If that is so then this first shot of the men at the base could almost be interpreted as high comedy. The only man we actually see working is Childs, glimpsed briefly in the exterior shot. Inside, Windows is strumming a guitar, Fuchs is reading a magazine, Palmer is listening to his walkman and a doctor is playing table-tennis with a scientist. What makes this especially funny is the thought, judging by the clock on the wall that this may all be taking place at 8:30 a.m. and that they all treat the outpost as a holiday camp. On the other hand, the day-night cycle is different in Antarctica and so presumably it is 08:30 in the evening (this is something that the film doesn't even bother to recreate with any accuracy, in reality there is roughly six months of daylight followed by six months of night).

² *First Goddamn Week of Winter* (www.bigdeadplace.com).

MacReady is by himself, alone in his shack and drinking. He appears comfortable and gently talks to himself. He is a loner, something emphasised by his living quarters, which are off on their own while the majority of the men live in the main compound. He is playing chess against a computer and believes he is winning. Until the computer pulls a move he wasn't expecting and, a bad loser, he pours his drink onto its circuits. A somewhat childish over-reaction, it will reverberate throughout the film. It is interesting to note that the film begins with MacReady losing a game of strategy against an inhuman opponent, which he then pours whiskey into. *Is this the way the film ends?*

The Norwegian helicopter arrives and everyone gathers outside to watch. Palmer, indoors just a moment ago is now outside, holding some spanners and an oily rag. This is clearly a continuity error and it doesn't add much to the film, but we have another unannounced change in time. This will play a more important role later. That the film allows it here prepares us in some way, purposeful or not.

It is clear that the Norwegians are out of their element and coping badly. We never learn precisely what they have been through but we can assume it has pushed them beyond their limits, another reason they were so poor at stopping the dog. When one of them tries to throw a hand-grenade he accidentally lets go on the backswing and his friend is killed. A box of grenades in the helicopter is ignited and the whole thing blows. The manner in which this scene is covered is observational and from the point-of-view of the Americans. Whereas most films would cut to a close shot of the helicopter exploding, we only see it from a distance. It is kept separate and isn't an entertaining effect. The only person who dives for cover is the Norwegian and there is no sense of a huge fireball

behind him. The film does not get distracted by something unnecessary for a short term thrill.

The death of the Norwegian pilot is interesting. It is believable and absurd and tragic at the same time. There is almost something comical about the way he blows up into the air in the distance. But it is bitter-comic. These men are risking their lives to try and save humanity, after all. The situation is similar to a war, where victory must be achieved even at the cost of one's own life, and in this film life does mean something. The Norwegians unquestionably accept that the world is worth fighting for, a sharp contrast to many of today's post-modern movies. *The Thing* feels closer to existentialism.

Since we know even on a first viewing that that Norwegians are not just crazy we understand that they are behaving this way for a legitimate reason. We might compare their mistakes with the one we saw MacReady make when he was playing chess. A theme is being introduced.

Even though his friend has just been killed (because of his own error, what's more) the Norwegian ploughs on. His focus is such that nothing can distract him. His nightmarish situation is that he is not able to speak English and that he cannot seem to hit the dog. The Thing itself is trapped, also. It cannot afford to transform and alert the new group to its true nature, doing so would prove fatal. It has to continue in its pretence and hope for the best.

When Garry shoots the Norwegian dead it can seem an extreme course of action. However, the Norwegian is shouting, firing a rifle, (has been willing to shoot a person) and there has been a large explosion. The Norwegian could easily have ended up killing

someone. It would, of course, have been better if Garry had wounded the man but in the heat of the moment it is understandable that he does what he does.

Garry is the leader of the group but, in a reversal of the usual custom, is the only character in the film to be called by his first name.³ The only other time we hear someone else referred to by his first name is when MacReady rushes to help Bennings in this scene, he calls him George.

Clark is introduced in a way that recalls MacReady. Like Mac he is separate from the group (we didn't see him in the rec' room). He is another loner. But whereas Mac joins the others without thinking during the excitement Clark hangs back and only comes out to console the dog. It is acting nervous and we can see that Clark is good with animals.

We know that the dog is, in fact, a thing. This raises questions that will reoccur throughout the film, even as our knowledge of what the Thing is capable of broadens. Is the Thing pretending to be nervous, reacting as it believes it should and trying to gain sympathy? Or is it genuinely afraid (as a thing) and expressing that fear in its current form.

We have the sense early on that several of the men working at Outpost 31 are there for very particular personal reasons. All too often in films we are given a striking location which is then populated by character actors, but they don't seem to gel with the setting. They are simply parachuted in. That isn't so here. These men look as though they really work in this location and it is an unusual place to choose to work. The film

³ It has since been pointed out to me that this is, in fact, a mistake and that Garry's full name is actually, M.T. Garry (visible on his door), completely invalidating my point. I was tempted to simply remove the error but art is often about creating an atmosphere in which all sorts of things can be read into the finished work, even against the maker's intentions. So I have decided to leave it in as a demonstration of the way that, I think, criticism should work. It's wrong, but only because it was found out.

achieves this without turning them into a bunch of oddballs, something that would instantly kill the movie. MacReady gives the impression that he wants to get away from something. Clark appears to enjoy the isolation. These are themes common to art films but it is presented so subtly that the viewer is only ever really aware of it on a subconscious level. It never comes to the front and announces itself. It is part of the storytelling, a character nuance.

We come across each character. We encounter them. We are not introduced to them in an artificial way. This is a film which allows us to discover the characters in our own way and time. For instance, we know from early on that Copper is a doctor but only because a scene naturally occurs in which we see him treat Bennings. We never find out what Bennings himself does, although we probably assume it has something to do with the weather, and yet he never feels out of place or wrong. It is not until half way through the film that we hear Garry has been friends with Bennings for ten years. Such a style allows the film to breathe and the viewer greater freedom to observe and speculate. We feel more involved. Because the film refuses to attempt a God-like insight into its characters, something which comes naturally to a novel, it plays to its strengths. In life, we can meet and work with people for years and come to know their character without having to have a breakdown of their history.

Of the twelve men, Copper, Bennings and probably Fuchs and Nauls seem the least troubled. Fuchs seems to be somewhat idealistic and involved in his work, he also looks up to the senior scientist, Blair. The article referred to earlier by the man who had actually spent time in Antarctica said that if someone worked there for more than a year

and was *still* idealistic, he was regarded as a fool. We can probably assume that it is Fuchs's first year.

We understand, therefore, that there are certain things that we aren't being told, whether it's a character's history or actual events occurring elsewhere during the movie. We are then free to witness the behaviour that we *can* see and draw our own conclusions.

MacReady is one of the first to reach the burning helicopter. He may be a loner but when he joins the group he naturally becomes a part of it. His concern for Bennings is authentic. Others rush in and put the fire out. It is fashionable in action films to have every important scene either controlled by the main character or to have him at the centre of it. This sequence is much more effective for showing MacReady as nothing more than a concerned member of the group.

It is an effectively self-contained scene that doesn't illustrate more than it has to. The temptation would have been to make the Norwegian's death more explicitly unavoidable (to have had him turn his gun on one of the group members, he is shot just in time) and to have had MacReady play a role in that. If it weren't for the fact that MacReady has been introduced in his own scene, there would be nothing to separate him from the other group members.

However, after the fire has been put out and they all stand around, framed in a beautifully composed widescreen shot, he is the only one to speak: "First Goddamned week of winter." And it is a line that naturally has an authority to it without being over the top. It is rueful but completely lacking in playful irony for the audience. It isn't made to *us* but to the other characters. Instead of feeling kidded (and kept on the outside) the viewer is drawn into the situation.

Copper is introduced treating Bennings for his gunshot wound. He wears a nose ring and copper wrist bracelets. Progressive and unusual for a man who must be in his forties or fifties and yet no reference is ever made to it, in spite of the easy comic potential. Many viewers even miss it completely. Copper's personality is probably the most agreeable of them all. He is peppy and bright. When Garry says there is nothing they can do to help the Norwegian camp it is Copper who jumps in, "Oh, yes there is. I want to go up." He seems comfortable with people in a place where many of the others don't. The irony for them is that in choosing a job that gets them away from almost everybody they are thrown into close and frequent contact with people who feel the same way as themselves. Not the healthiest atmosphere.

Windows is introduced trying to reach someone on the radio, and he isn't having any luck. It is a brief scene that quickly establishes the camp as cut-off from the rest of the world. The nearest equivalent is the Norwegian base and that is clearly dead. There is a vague feeling of something happening in the background, of a virus beginning to spread. Blair walks in with a cup of coffee and Windows snaps at him.

The setting itself is being established and it is entirely convincing. The décor feels authentic and the place looks lived-in. It is slightly drab, above all banal and functional. The scene is covered in one uncut shot, there are no close ups. It allows us to get a sense of the men in the setting. Blair's introduction is unspectacular. He was the only one who didn't go outside at some point when the Norwegians arrived and here he simply walks in holding a cup of coffee. Blair's appearance matches the furnishings. He looks comfortable and at home.

Windows by contrast is excitable. He is highly strung but his temper is not grating, at least not for the viewer. It feels human, especially when he shakes his head and says, "Nobody." Windows may well regret taking a job that has him so far removed from civilisation. He doesn't fit in. This creates a certain amount of humour when we witness his temper. Already, he seems to have had enough.

This scene mirrors another later in the film in which Garry finds Windows napping and wakes him by turning up the volume on his headphones. The way Garry does that implies he is not surprised to find the radio man asleep when he should be working. As the leader Garry has to work with people he doesn't like. This comes across but in a gentle way. Like Garry, we accept it and move on.

Nauls is introduced on his skates, rolling down a corridor and into the rec' room, where they have temporarily laid out the dead Norwegian on the ping-pong table. One of the few things I remember from my first viewing of *The Thing* is the thought that Nauls's roller-skates were being established and would play some part later in the film. When one knows how the film actually does progress this sounds absurd but it is a useful reminder that *The Thing* does not follow a familiar path. At the same time it is not simply unpredictable, actually a very easy and often tiresome technique. It follows through on its convictions without making a show of it. Nauls's roller-skates are not included so they can be subverted later, which would be self-conscious storytelling and jokey.

A scene in which someone is chased by the Thing and roller-skates away from it is easy to imagine and one we should be grateful was not included. Although *The Thing* is an action picture there are no chase scenes. That sense of inevitability would be damaged if someone successfully outran danger.

Nauls's joke: "Maybe we at war with Norway," is funny but also deadpan and droll and nobody laughs. There is a tendency in the cinema for audiences to laugh when they think something is *trying* to be funny, often when they see someone laughing on the screen (one of the biggest perpetrators of this crime is *Porky's*). Nauls's joke is witty. It is also gently subversive, poking fun at patriotism.

It is immediately followed by another comment, equally deadpan, from Palmer. He refers to Garry and the shooting of the Norwegian. "I was wondering when the El Capitan was going to get a chance to use his popgun." From what we see of Garry he lacks the charisma of a true leader but is perfectly competent and isn't arrogant or hostile towards the other men. Palmer's joke refers to Garry's fondness for wearing a firearm on his hip when none is needed. As mentioned earlier, we get the impression that several of the men have chosen to work at the base for personal reasons. On the whole Garry comes across as a professional doing his job but at the same time the isolation from the standard rules of society mean he is freer to pursue his idiosyncrasies and he clearly enjoys walking around with a six shooter on his hip.

Palmer's joke, therefore, is particularly deflating and a real laugh although, again, nobody in the film reacts.

Palmer, we feel, is intelligent as well as a slacker. He isn't completely lazy: We see him working later in the film, he goes outside, gets involved and he even offers to fly Copper to the Norwegian camp. Understandably, he's turned down (he *does* appear to be smoking marijuana at the time). We have the impression of an easy going intelligent observer, probably held back because of idleness and a growing dependency on drugs.

With the exception of Fuchs none of the group are idealistic or even show much enthusiasm. The two jokes from Nauls and Palmer, taken together, capture the tone of people at work and give just a hint of something political. A slightly subversive view of authority. It is convincing that these men would work together this way. They haven't developed strong friendships.

The subtle dynamics of the group have been drawn speedily and without our being aware that it is being done. Twelve characters have been established in a very convincing environment. We sense how life could go on without the Thing and because the characters feel like real people and not convenient movie types the dynamics are inherently more complex.

Garry is reluctant to allow Copper to fly to the Norwegian camp because of the dangerous weather but he is open to persuasion. Bennings, the man who was shot, says he can't condone it much himself but it *is* a short haul. His irony is gentle and he doesn't hold a pointless grudge. He recognises that the man who shot him was crazed and that the situation needs investigating. In this reaction we get the sense of a real person who existed before the film joined the story, not a character whose mental life is formed solely by the events of the film or for the story's convenience.

MacReady is outside sifting through the helicopter wreckage. At this point he is seen as a strong member of the group but not its leader, the decisions are being taken inside and don't involve him.

We cut to him from Palmer who has just been refused his offer to fly to the Norwegian camp. It creates the impression that the two scenes are happening simultaneously. But Palmer is now suddenly outside as well, smoking a cigarette and

standing behind Mac. Although it is unlikely this was done on purpose it has a subtle effect. It lets us know at a level which is under the radar that the film is willing to be flexible with time. When combined with the very careful precision of the film making it creates a slightly unusual, odd tone. Uncanny and ever so slightly weird. The film is carefully designed and yet there are gaps. Of course, these thoughts only occur if one looks closely and gives careful reflection. Since this doesn't generally happen the effect is subconscious. It enhances the feelings of paranoia. Later in the film when there is a similar cut we will, at some level, feel that something might have happened. We will wonder, "What did we miss?" If such a stylistic were announced it would feel experimental and pull us away from the story.

When Copper suggested going to the Norwegian camp:

Garry: In this weather?

Bennings: Winds are going to let up a tad in the next couple of hours.

Garry: A tad!?

Garry is reluctant to risk it. But in the next scene he is suddenly confident they should go ("MacReady. Mac, get your gear on.") Mac's response is to say nothing but quietly look up at the sky. There is a time ellipse, covered by a 'white-out,' and a 'white-in,' and the same conversation continues later.

Few films make use of different scene transitions for the good reason that they stand out too much. They have a disturbing effect (like the red fades in *Cries and Whispers*). The white-outs in *The Thing* are so beautifully timed and work so well we

hardly even notice them. They carry less weight than a fade-to-black and are closer to dissolves in terms of time passing but they add a certain unique feel. The snowy setting allows the film to do something different without distracting us. It is all part of its internal rhythm, its heartbeat.

In this scene Garry appears to be amused, almost as if he is trying not to smile. As if he knows Mac's character and was expecting the grumpy response, a contrast to Mac's frame of mind in the previous scene where he was involved and at the centre of the group going through the helicopter.

Mac is reluctant to go but all business and moving quick, partly in anger. Although he has no opportunity or even the desire to display his leadership skills he still has a natural authority. Does Garry sense this and is therefore trying to demonstrate his own force? Is he trying to put on something of a show in front of Copper (and by extension the others) because there is already an unacknowledged feeling about MacReady? Perhaps, but the look of gentle amusement on Garry's face hints that he isn't being sadistic or jealous. It is more complex. Garry is now justifying himself confidentially with an argument that he was reluctant to be convinced by. He knows that Mac is reacting as he himself did just a moment ago and that Copper will be aware of this, so there is some amusement there, as well. Irony, but between the characters, not between the characters and the audience.

Characteristically, Copper says that if Mac doesn't want to fly then they won't, and Garry doesn't argue. Garry is in charge but there is a respect when it comes to decisions that require expert knowledge, they are delegated to those best placed to take them.

Garry's wave when they take off underlines that the relationship between the three is good natured.

Inside, Palmer and Nauls watch the helicopter take off and the camera moves down to show the dog. The viewer has already guessed that there is something wrong with the dog. The effect of this shot is to underline what we already know but rather than feel unnecessary it creates the sense of a mistake being made and of inevitability. The deliberate calmness of the camera move emphasises the control of the storytelling.

We cut from the dog, in daylight, to an exterior of the camp, now in twilight. Time has clearly passed but in the scene after this it is daylight again, with just a hint that it might be getting dark. The camp scene is out of continuity and the light is altered to suit the mood but because it works so well we don't notice.

Nauls's music is so loud it will provide a cover for the noise which we imagine will accompany the assimilation about to take place off screen. His arrogant response to Bennings's request that he turn the music down is one of the few weak moments in the film.

The camera slowly moves towards a doorway and we see a shadow on the frame. The moving camera could easily have been from the dog's point of view but it isn't. Instead we are aware of something else. The film itself is creating a mood, assuming control. This is emphasised by the shot of an empty dark rec' room. Nobody is there and we are aware on some level that it is the movie showing us. We can see the ping-pong table on which the Norwegian's body had earlier been stretched out and under which, only a few moments ago we saw the dog sitting and waiting. The fact that the dog is not there now adds to the unease.

And then comes one of the great shots of the film. The dog slowly enters a corridor, his head cocked, walks towards us, pauses at one doorway and glances inside, seemingly to check if it is empty, walks towards us again, pauses to look inside another room, and then enters. We pan around to follow him but then hold on the wall, which shows a human shadow. The shadow turns to look at the noise. Fade out. In one sense this is lightening caught in a bottle: It's amazing just how well the dog acts.

We know something important has happened but not to whom. Important information is being withheld. It is the first time such explicit control has been exercised since we saw the flying saucer at the beginning. It creates terrific suspense but it also reminds us of the guiding intelligence telling the story. The film is not discovering the story as we do (a favourite approach for action films because it can create a sense of urgency), instead it is being presented to us. It is unusual for this film to take over so explicitly but that sense of control is always there.

As we approach the Norwegian camp with Mac and Copper, music plays. It is not traditional suspense music. It is somewhat desolate, not exactly sad but certainly bleak and despairing. The visit to the Norwegian camp would be the perfect opportunity to engineer some movie scares: Something moves in the dark, something suddenly appears that makes the audience jump. The music signals straight away that that is not going to happen. It plays over almost the whole sequence but it is never intrusive. The long notes tell us that we are not going to be made jump. In a sense this allows us to relax. To be intrigued and feel something that is probably the most underrated element in a good film, a sense of place. The suspense is generated by our knowledge that whatever happened

here is starting to happen at the American base. It is as if the film were being told in flashback or that these two characters who will die were visiting the scene of their death after it has happened: We see what is going to happen and compare it with how things are now. It is not just suspense but dramatic irony and the beautiful atmosphere allows our minds to wonder.

We see the helicopter land in wide shot and we cut to an angle inside the camp, looking out. Mac and Copper disembark and walk towards the building we already occupy. The effect is observational and further proof that identification in a film is a strange business, since emotionally we are still very much with the characters. We share their state in our *own* way, we are not being asked to see the world specifically through their eyes. The choice of shot is another signal that there will not be any cheap shocks.

Of the two men Mac seems the most nervous. Copper by contrast is calm and he even leads the way. It is a reversal of the script writing convention that says the protagonist must always lead the action, always make the decisions. At the same time it is not forced and artificial. It occurs naturally and isn't noticed.

The Norwegian camp is desolate but very beautiful. Living and working quarters are now dark (there is no interior lighting). It is frozen and covered in frost because several big holes have been blasted in the walls, and they also provide the only light. There is a real sense of place and it is fascinating. It is a ruin, intriguing enough that one could easily spend time wondering around it.

There is an opportunity for gore in this scene that isn't exploited. Only one body is discovered. The man they find has killed himself not only by cutting his wrists but his throat, as well, assuming somebody else didn't do that to him. His blood has frozen. It is

a fascinating image, a snapshot of horror. The extremity of it, coupled with the massive holes in the wall create an impression not just of violence but of something incredibly physical.

One has the sense that the Norwegian committed suicide to avoid a fate worse than death and this creates real suspense, horror even, for what is in store for us. Simultaneously one is aware of the sacrifice. The Norwegians at the beginning of the film were risking their lives to stop something from spreading, and here is a suicide, and because of the violence we know it wasn't simply depressed and despairing but committed in hot blood.

Copper, a humanist we sense, is taken aback but isn't over excited. His single line, "My God, what the hell happened here?" is all the more effective for being quiet. Mac doesn't refer to the man but looks at him, disturbed. The film takes death seriously and the force of the violence is not offensive as a result. But the seriousness is authentic. It feels true, and isn't the forlorn phoniness of a film like *Signs*. Also noteworthy is that the Norwegians are taken seriously. There is never even a hint of the amusing foreigner. Mac is uneasy in the Norwegian camp, grumpy even, Copper remains calm.

The block of ice is a lovely homage to the first film⁴ but fits perfectly into this one. Unlike many homage in the movies it doesn't feel shoehorned in but is organic to the film as a whole. Visual and suggestive of what has come and gone. It comes at the end of the tour inside the Norwegian camp and provides for the audience a satisfying piece of dramatic irony: We know about the spaceship from the beginning of the film.

⁴ In the first version of *The Thing* we follow the camp as they discover the spaceship and dig up the creature. The block of ice they end up with is what we see here.

It is introduced in only two shots. Copper's point-of-view tracking towards it and the crane up as he walks down the steps. The two men contemplate it wordlessly in a tableau similar to that at the beginning of *Halloween* (when the killer's age is revealed). Their actions are slightly un-natural but it works so well because it is *interesting* rather than realistic. It feels right and so we do not question it. The two shots allow a focus that faster cutting would ruin. The camera pans down and then moves up, holding the block of ice central, regarding it as the actors do.

The different pieces of the back story are introduced for us to assemble like a simple jigsaw. We are slightly ahead of the characters which allows for a degree of comfort. In a film, if we discover the story at exactly the same pace as the characters, we can feel an amount of confusion and uncertainty. This can be pleasurable but would be out of place in *The Thing*. Instead we need to relax into this movie. The former technique creates a feeling in which we are in our own head. Here we need to feel the place and be surrounded by its atmosphere, which is difficult to do if we are busy putting the story together.

The rhythm of a film can often be most felt in the way it moves from one scene to the next: The shadow on the wall turning around just before we faded out; Blair and Windows looking at one another for a beat just before the cut to Nauls's roller-skates. Here we have Mac and Copper's silent contemplation before we cut to them emerging from the camp.

Copper is talkative. Mac is quiet. He notices the strange buried figure sticking out of the snow. MacReady displays a quality that is rarely seen in the movies, he looks like he's thinking. He is in the moment but one has the sense of his mind turning. It is the

times when he isn't thinking that stand out, as when he ran to help Bennings after Bennings was shot.

Looking at the figure in the snow, Copper has a great line, "Is that a man in there, or something?" Mac responds without looking at him, "Help me find a shovel, Doc." We don't see much in the way of detail. The kerosene cans are a reminder of the Norwegian helicopter, the theme of fire starting to gain currency.

Mac's thoughtfulness and his desire to dig up the thing in the ice and take it back to the American base, when he had previously been in a hurry to leave, is a contrast that attracts our attention. He is uneasy. Some of his manner is similar to that of the typical hero who just wants straight answers and won't put up with any nonsense. But it is counterbalanced with something else. He is that hero, matured. He wants to return but he senses the importance of what they are discovering.

The white-out is a beautifully effective way to end the scene.

The visit to the Norwegian camp is a self contained sequence, as suggested by the music; however the white-outs provide a different, and more sophisticated sort of bookend. The first occurs when Mac and Copper are preparing to leave, not with their arrival at the Norwegian base. The scenes between the two white-outs have all been about the trip. The exception and the quietest scene of them all, was the dog's visit to person unknown. It has the effect of emphasising that the *something-we-know-has-happened*, occurred during the sleepy lull in the excitement after the shooting and before the return of Mac and Copper. That scene even had its own light quality: Not quite dark.

When the helicopter returns a large group gathers to meet it. The dog is inside, watching intently through a window. The focus on the dog is emphasised by the cutting (we go back to it twice, from the noisy helicopter to the quiet rec' room).

The nature of the Thing is debatable but the behaviour of the dog demonstrates that it is not simply an infectious virus. Whenever the dog believes it is unobserved it behaves in a way that we register is different. It is very interested in what has been found at the Norwegian camp. When walking down the corridor earlier, it looked about to make sure it was alone.

This little sequence is a demonstration of the power of montage and presence in a film. Different emotions can be read on the face of the dog. It looks concerned and interested at the same time. It appears to be thinking in a way that is beyond the scope of a dog.

When the Norwegian-thing is revealed to the group, only two lines of dialogue are spoken, both of them measured and calm. The astonishment is shown only by the expressions and the looks that pass between the characters. The scene is covered in long slow tracking shots that allow us to watch the reactions of the actors without being conscious of the camera. The camera is outside the group. If it were inside, the impression would be quite different.

The slow movement and the framing give an audience the freedom to look from the thing on the table to the actors and back again. It helps draw us in by letting us take part in the scene in some small way.

We don't get a clear view of the Thing, it is so intricate the camera would have to explore it in detail. Instead we can just make out what appears to be hands, limbs, extra fingers, even a twisted face which may take us a moment to comprehend.

The music is queasy but there is also a feeling of despair and sadness underneath.

The camera focuses in for the first time on the twisted face, which appears to be splitting off into two. It looks to be in pain, but as we learn later it is not actually human. It was in the process of assuming a human shape when it was burnt. This seems to imply that the Thing was trying to assimilate more than one person at once, which would greatly increase its own risk to exposure. It doesn't try anything along those lines in the American base. Has it been learning?

The Thing neatly avoids something that has become a staple of thrillers with higher pretensions, the double. The image of the Norwegian-thing is fascinating because of its physical appearance, not because of some formulated, half baked psychology. It is instinctive movie-making: What becomes interesting springs naturally from the story and the visuals.

The camera pans up from the Thing to frame MacReady, who is studying the reactions of the group. The rhythm of the film and the music seem to tell us that the scene is over but unexpectedly there is an extra shot: The dog is there, watching. It is a very effective and creepy moment. Suddenly we are made aware of something that none of the characters know about. It clearly knows what is going on. It looks concerned but alert and prepared. As a dog, it is free to behave in this manner because it receives little attention. When people are looking at it it becomes friendly and ingratiating, as it did with Bennings. It knows how to act like a normal dog. But it is clearly an act that it can call

up. These little shots of the dog feel tacked on. Added when the scene is really over. The film is preparing us for later, when we suspect a person has been assimilated but don't have the benefit of this extra information. Our thinking *then* will be that another camp member is staring at the back of someone's head in a similar way when we aren't looking.

The Windows and Garry scene holds our attention on the characters while letting us know just how isolated they are. Covered in just one shot it is another nail in the coffin. Garry was apparently on his way for a shower, a homey touch that doesn't quite work because it is so different to all the other scenes in the film. It isn't the sort of detail we expect to see.

The autopsy scene takes place in an atmosphere of reason and science. It doesn't make a fetish of the dead body or even linger on the Norwegian-thing. Only the science personnel are there and nobody eats a sandwich. At the cut Copper is just finishing with the man shot by Garry. He is covered up by the sheet in wide-shot. We hear there was no alcohol or drugs in his system, a movie short-cut, as it would take a chemical analysis to tell.

Although this scene may affect the squeamish it is neutral in the presentation, there are no shots to emphasise the gore. On one level it is quite surreal, the being on the table is very weird looking, yet contains human organs. But we have to discover this. Blair takes it seriously. Twice he uses the word, "normal." The scene is subdued, as are the men, although Fuchs, in the background, looks twitchy and puzzled. He is definitely young and eager.

To have had Blair talk about what he is finding but not show it would interrupt the film and distract our attention. The film simply shows us what they are discovering. There are no inserts of blood dripping onto sheets, which are surgical green, not white. This scene should be compared to the autopsy in *Alien 3*, where the movie is fascinated by the cutting up of a little girl's body. Here the result is mature without pretence or effort. The scene is quite brief. It ends with Blair thinking, the word 'normal,' (the last spoken) hanging in the air, a contrast to the twisted thing on the table. Although, of course, for the Thing it *is* normal. Many scenes in the first half of the film end with someone thinking.

Childs and Palmer are watching videotapes of a television quiz show, smoking dope. Palmer is bored and changes the tape to a dance video. The scene is cosy but somewhat squalid. It creates a sense of the boredom. It is also droll, their existence is bleak. Palmer may well have been the shadow on the wall. If he was, why doesn't he attack Childs now? As we soon learn from watching the dog it would probably create too much noise. Later, Blair is able to eliminate Garry soundlessly but uses murder, not assimilation.

In the rec' room the games are similarly uninspiring. The scene is muted. Earlier the games were more lively. There is just one wide-shot before we cut to Bennings being made jump by the dog and there is no dialogue at all until that happens. Surely they would be discussing the day's events?

While Bennings is asking Clark to put the dog in the pen there is a significant shot of Norris watching it walk out of the room. One of the reasons *The Thing* is so re-watchable is that the paranoia is increased when we already know the film. Norris may

have been the shadow on the wall, which would explain his creepy glance, but it may be nothing and we are misinterpreting what we see.

The dog's behaviour alters as soon as it enters the pen and sees the other animals. It slowly walks in and sits down, staring rigidly ahead. Clark is so puzzled he looks back as he is walking away. If the whole basis of the Thing's success is camouflage why does it act this way here?

This is one of the many instances where the film does not supply an answer, but because we now feel we are in a convincing world and because of the precision and the confidence of the film making we feel free to speculate. The film simply shows us what happens, it doesn't make an active effort to encourage our analysis. It is a pure form of cinema because it's *all* description and there are few, if any, internal thoughts for us to consider. Because the novel (which does it much better) has been the dominant form of storytelling for so long, films are saturated with internal thoughts. When a film that is well made simply refuses to follow this line, it is very refreshing. It lends itself to subtle ambiguity.

When the dog enters the kennel it may be the first time that this particular manifestation of the Thing has encountered other dogs and it may be unsure if it can fool them. Thing-beings tend to behave with a hive mentality in which all the constituent parts work together for convenience sake and form a whole. It is easy to imagine the different parts that together create the impression of a dog may be reacting to an intimidating situation and that it might be having difficulty coordinating itself as a whole. Literally,

trying not to go to pieces. Although, considering what we see later (with Norris) Things do not like to split apart.

The Thing *is* accepted by the dogs, however, and they only begin barking and growling after it has started to change. Above all, one has the impression that instinct is taking over. As with humans the Thing is a logical being that doesn't always act in its own best interests. It is a complex organism.

This scene is covered in the same way as the rest of the film. The style of the camera work and the editing do not change significantly and there is no musical accompaniment. It covers something that is quite extraordinary in a style that is low-key. We now feel we are witnessing something instead of having it presented to us.

As the transformation begins we watch the dogs react. It is similar to the way in which the film focused on the group of men after the Norwegian-thing was unveiled. Reactions are carefully shown in this film, even in the action scenes.

The Thing's transformations are intensely physical events. It can improvise brilliantly, presumably by re-arranging itself into forms it has previously assumed, although it does seem to have certain stock favourites which probably relate to an original, if there is such a thing. It uses tentacles to control the victims and it seems to prefer using crab-like legs to move around. It can produce sharp teeth when needed but generally only appears to do this for defence. These implements are not there simply for effect, but serve a practical purpose. They feel like the implements of a living breathing creature, not just a special effect.

As an animal lover I am easily offended even by fake animal cruelty, but I find this scene less offensive than the sequence in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, where a

cartoon shoe is killed by being pushed into a vat of acid. The difference is that the Thing is not sadistic. It is not immoral but simply amoral, an organism trying to survive. It seems most likely that it isn't even on the planet by choice.

The creature in *The Thing* is not a freak show. It is a wonderful vivid attempt to imagine how an organism from another planet might actually behave. It feels like something that has evolved in a place where other creatures live and where there is gravity, it does not act as a symbol for a fashionable political idea and it doesn't represent something from our subconscious. It is definitely not a man in a suit. It feels believable that out of all the bacteria, viruses and animals living in the universe the Thing would be one of the few likely to become inter-planetary.

It seems able to perform several tasks at once; we see tentacles all over one dog while it holds another. There does appear to be a centre, however, which is the caramel coloured dog-type thing. If the hive analogy is true, we might say that when the Thing attempts an assimilation it breaks down to its constituent parts, which are themselves probably made up of other individual elements.

It *does* seem very exposed during an assimilation. There is something pathetic about the way it growls at the men when it is caught. It seems so focused on the task of assimilation that it takes valuable time to re-group, although having done so it can lash out unexpectedly with a brilliant improvisation.

When Clark returns to the pen to investigate there is something different about him. He is wearing a different T-shirt beneath his coat and when we see the rest of the camp in the main compound they are now getting out of bed when previously they were in the rec' room. Another time-jump has occurred. Despite appearances the dog-thing did

not attack immediately. On this occasion we stayed with the Thing. Perhaps later we will follow the characters while the Thing is at work behind the scenes and only similar subtle signs will give evidence of this. A thought which begins to fuel our own paranoia.

Clark tries to turn on the light, which doesn't work and leads to a horror film moment where he is knocked down by the escaping dogs. We don't see what he sees, partly because we already know what is there and partly because it saves the film from cutting back and forth until the whole group arrives. It is interesting that Clark is the one who discovers the Thing (normally left to the hero). We can watch him as he re-acts and we know from this point on that he isn't a thing. He becomes one of the more obvious suspects. By not even bothering to portray him as a red herring for the audience (only to surprise us predictably when he isn't) we can step back and watch events without the irritation of knowing where they are going. It neatly side steps a cliché. In fact, because the film doesn't try and force us to suspect Clark we might actually do so. It is Mac who sets off the alarm and we could interpret Clark's quick response in closing the door as an attempt to stop more dogs from escaping. Generally, though, we won't. The suspicions against Clark evolve in their own way and because we can see them for what they are we are freer to follow the path they take and observe how his character reacts to them.

When Mac sets off the alarm he was on his way to the kitchen. He looks unsettled and because we find out in the next shot that everyone else was in bed we can probably assume he couldn't sleep. Something is preying on his mind. So when he hears the weird noises in the distance he doesn't think twice about setting off the alarms.

Because of this he is the first one ready, and he brings a shotgun. Clark's response, "I don't know what the hell's in there but it's weird and pissed off whatever it

is,” is funny but it doesn’t receive a comeback or any sort of reaction. If anything Clark says it for himself. It is a human reaction, and so is the lack of response. Although there are jokes in *The Thing* (Clark’s line is the perfect place for the modern action-film aside) they spring more from character and are not there simply to amuse the viewer. They are people speaking to each other and not the audience. Similarly when the men first see the Thing they just stand and stare, which is more authentic than shouting at one another or immediate action. The sight *is* breathtaking, which is part of the Thing’s strategy.

Mac is quick to ask for the flamethrower (before he has even seen the Thing). He immediately connects any disturbance with his discomfort and the Norwegian camp, where they were quick to use kerosene on whatever had been causing all the trouble.

When the camera quickly dollies in on a dog as tentacles cover it, it is not just a needless special effect. It shows what the Thing is capable of and it captures the moment. It also adds a full stop to that part of the scene. After this Mac begins firing.

He isn’t clouded by indecision or awed by the site of the Thing. For the rest it is all happening too fast. One imagines that while images of the Norwegian camp and the Norwegian-thing are at the forefront of Mac’s mind, helping to break the spell of the visuals, they aren’t so prominent in everybody else’s thinking. Shooting the Thing may not necessarily be the best course of action (in this scene). It has obvious scientific interest and is a fascinating life form which could probably tell us a lot about the universe. But Mac isn’t a typical “shoot first, ask questions later” action hero. It is understandable. He is probably doing what the others would want to do under the circumstances but when actually confronted with them, don’t. Nobody argues with Mac’s

decision later. In this situation Mac's certainty is attractive. It is only after he has started firing that Garry follows suit.

After the Thing is shot it screams and tries to hide by pulling itself into the top corner of the room. At no point do we feel the men are in actual danger. Instead they are witnessing an event. They may be disturbed by what they see but it is contained in the pen.

When Mac shoots one of the dogs that the Thing is holding, Clark, in the grip of his own instinct, grabs the gun off of him. His first thought is for the dogs and we like him for that.

Childs turns up with the flamethrower and Mac tells him to burn the Thing. Like everyone else, when he first sees it Childs is unable to move. Because the Thing is vulnerable during a transformation it seems to depend upon its elaborate appearance to shock its enemies and buy time. When Childs doesn't immediately fire the flamethrower and when the Thing appears to be regrouping, Mac quickly moves to safety. The prototype hero would grab the flamethrower and do the job himself.

Cornered, exposed, hurt and in danger the Thing finally goes on the attack by ad-libbing a creation and throwing it at Childs. It looks like a large flower. It is, in fact, a circle of dog tongues with teeth. Before it reaches him Childs torches it, almost as a reflex.

It drops to the ground and the group rush in and put the fire out. Signalling the end of the threat, music begins to play. It is similar to the music that covered the visit to the Norwegian camp and it tells us that there will not be any attempt to leak the scene for further suspense (the Thing is dead, it won't suddenly leap back into life). The film takes

the time to show the quiet, subdued reactions. Here, less is more and the characters are left alone with their thoughts.

At this point in the film several story elements are taking shape, two of which are these: MacReady is quick thinking and bent above all else on his own survival rather than heroics (apparent when he stepped away from Childs) and this single minded determination combines with a quality that makes him a natural leader. Second, we know that at least one of the camp members is a thing (the shadow on the wall) and it has witnessed up close how humans treat things. It knows that its own survival, as important to it as Mac's is to Mac, is a direct threat to the humans and so they are on a collision course. But the Thing is hidden. It has become a battle of wits. Like a chess game?

It is interesting to note how quickly we forget about the dog-thing. Since the Thing can change its appearance the viewer tends to regard each manifestation as something different but the large lump of flesh, muscle and bone on Blair's operating table *is* the dog from the beginning of the film. The title of the movie is so perfect because the creature doesn't have one single shape that we can identify.

Blair removes the outer layer to reveal what was going on underneath. What we first see is a combination of twisted bone and muscle that resembles a dog's head. It is similar to a sculpture where a familiar whole is made up of unusual individual elements. Having revealed so much Blair looks down sombrely and we fade out. It would have been fascinating to have seen the whole Thing gradually unveiled but the film is always brief, if never rushed. It would also have been a detour from the film's main focus. By fading out like this we avoid Blair's examination. It is an unusual scene transition and

normally it would call attention to itself (fade out, then cut back to the same scene later) but it works seamlessly because the style of the film can now accommodate it. Blair's quiet lowering of the head is a pose similar to Mac and Copper's moment over the block of ice. It matches the fade out, and it fits the metabolism of the film.

When we cut back Blair is talking with more animation, describing how the Thing operates. This scene is just as concise as the last one. Although almost everyone is present only Norris speaks. Everything is pared down to the bare minimum.

It is normal for a film to cover scenes in which a group of people are talking with wide-shots intercut with close-ups of each individual talking and reacting to what is being said. This is how television works. *The Thing* has a very different approach, which is much more instinctive. The person talking is sometimes not even in view.

The camera work in *The Shining* famously creates the impression of an outside intelligence observing the scenes, almost as if we were watching the film from the point-of-view of a ghost. In *The Thing* the group scenes are comparable but more subtle. It is often as if the camera were a thirteenth crew member. It's very seductive and works to pull us into the film. Few of the characters engage in direct friendly banter. They will focus on one another as individuals but never seemingly to the exclusion of everybody else (they are always aware of the other people). The framing and the camera work are similar.

Blair's description of the Thing is an effective outline. Even though much of the Thing remains mysterious and open to interpretation, it is not mystical. The film regards it as something that must obey the laws of physics. Blair's talk is very down to earth. Like any good scientist Blair admits there is a great deal he doesn't know.

When he underlines that what we are looking at is not ‘dog,’ but imitation, it grounds the film and lessens the effect of the gore. It becomes stimulating on a level that isn’t just reflex emotion. We are thinking about it (like the characters) and not just gagging.

The description is level headed and even subdued (presumably a real scientist would be very excited) but it works better for the film than the all-too-familiar entranced man of science. Blair is thoughtful and gives the impression of a man who has been doing his job for a number of years. He may not be another movie scientist but neither is he an artificial opposite to that cliché.

The Thing, then, is wondrous as a part of nature, something to be afraid of certainly and fascinating from a psychological point of view but not just a projection of sexual or tribal fears.

One shot shows what is an almost complete dog (“This for instance”), next to something that resembles a human foot minus flesh. Living organisms, then, are just a collection of genes. In this film God and the soul doesn’t come into the equation. If a Thing were content to live its life as a dog it could probably do so for years as man’s best friend. Clark is an experienced dog handler and he didn’t notice anything unusual.

Blair has been focused on the dog-thing but something else is beginning to prey on his mind. The dogs are followed into the next scene and the motif of blood is introduced. Most films regard the face and the eyes as a gateway to the inner being, and so does *The Thing* to a large extent, but it’s interesting the way that blood has a similar function. It is something inside and hidden. A mark of humanity but also unemotional

and biological. When the Thing assimilates there is the impression that we are seeing the normal mechanics of a body externalised.

Blair takes a sample from one of the remaining huskies. It is here that suspicion begins to gather around a person. At this point the characters don't even know if the Thing has the potential to assimilate a human. Clark's indignation when he realises the suspicion is therefore understandable and even amusing. Blair has good reasons but what is Clark thinking? He probably believes it has more to do with his own outsider personality. Or is he just being paranoid?

That first note is introduced in a very quiet way, between just two characters. It is there and gone but it is a sign of things to come and it hangs over the following scenes. Like Blair we are beginning to look closely at everyone. Having set it up the film can then move on to other business. Because the film never explains who did what, we never have a sense of being able to see the strings move. The focus is elsewhere. On an atmosphere that is beginning to change.

In the next scene the group are watching the videotapes from the Norwegian camp. We cut from a close shot of Blair, who has been the guiding intelligence for the last two scenes, to a shot of him later, at the edge of the group. It's unusual for this film to follow someone across a cut in this manner but it helps affirm Blair as a part of the camp and because they are trying to get help from the tapes, he is shown as someone who can describe much about the Thing but cannot provide all the answers. He isn't the know-it-all scientist.

The footage they are watching is a homage to the first film⁵. Considering that both references (the block of ice is the other) imply that the Norwegian camp could be the camp from the first film it is interesting to imagine the characters from the first movie ending up like the Norwegians. The tone of the two versions is so different they are almost diametrically opposed. This is anything but a retread.

Bennings is impatient and unimpressed. “How much more of this crap is there?” he asks. But it is directly after he says this that the video becomes interesting. A first time viewer might wonder if Bennings is trying a little too hard to appear naturalistic. When a film has the right atmosphere everything starts to work in its favour.

The footage benefits enormously by having no sound. The whole scene is quiet except for the occasional comment and the whirl of the electronic equipment. It means we are with the group watching rather than caught up in the excitement with the Norwegians. The huge explosion that reveals the ship is just a silent, small visual, although still very pretty. And yet it makes an impression and may be in our mind at the end of the film when we see several other impressive explosions.

Thanks to the files that Copper brought back Norris is able to guess the location of the footage and Mac decides he is going to go there, in spite of the heavy weather. In this brief scene we gather that Bennings’s work involves the weather and Norris’s, geology. Again we are reminded that we have joined the outpost, it hasn’t been introduced to us.

Mac isn’t rude but wants to move along, Norris has to run to catch him up. Mac’s disposition in this scene is certainly in character but it also allows the film to follow him

⁵ It recreates the scene in which the spaceship is discovered in the snow.

at the same pace. We cut to a shot of the helicopter in flight and it neatly eliminates any further shots of taking off, etc.

The music begins before they have taken off and it continues until the end of the scene. It doesn't rise explicitly until the very end, and there is no sudden change to match the discovery of the ship. In this it mirrors the characters to some extent (Mac and Norris know they are going to discover something along these lines) but it *doesn't even try* to recreate their awe. It is actually much more in harmony with the audience, who remember the opening sequence, as well as other films, and know what to expect.

The editing and the music don't treat the discovery as a surprise or announce it with a fanfare. This helps us to accept something extraordinary (a flying saucer) but it is also highly effective and instinctive movie making. We never suffer the impatience of being ahead of the film because the film wants to move along, as well. MacReady's impatience matches our own. It is as if the focus of the film is beyond what is immediately in front. It is important to note that this isn't achieved with quick cutting (the first shot of the helicopter is actually quite long).

It is only at this point that we realise the ship we saw at the beginning crashed more than 100,000 years ago. It is a surprise that further carries the scene and we are reminded that the film only tells us what is essential. The film is so careful in this regard that we can hardly even recognise the other passenger (it is Palmer, just visible as they get out of the helicopter).

The beautiful visual of the spaceship in the ice and the thoughts it briefly inspires (the idea of actually being able to walk around on top of a spaceship; doesn't there seem to be an entrance?) are strong enough to carry the scene further. It *could* go on longer.

The scene cuts when just a portion of its potential power has been used, and because this is felt the audience end up contributing something of their own. Because the acting, music and editing all come together so well what is, in the end, little more than a throw-away sequence becomes a scene that people talk about later. This is pure cinema.

The music finally swells over the shot of the small oblong hole in the ice. The final piece of the puzzle, we can now put it all together. The various bits and pieces have not been complicated but were introduced out of chronological order. Their discovery has been logical and there is something satisfying (not revelatory) about the way they fall together. When combined with the atmosphere and characters these scenes stand up to repeat viewing.

It is Palmer who discovers the hole in the ice while the others are on the ship. It is very plausible that he is a thing by this point which makes us wonder why he calls the other two over to look. Is the Thing curious about how they will react? Is it trying to tell them something? Perhaps the Thing is looking for a sympathetic word. Or maybe it is just trying to help its camouflage. Either way it's interesting behaviour. The Palmer-thing is full of surprises.

Back at the outpost the other camp members instinctively ask Mac their questions, even though he can only make generalised guesses. They are turning to him more and more. We join the conversation half way through, eliminating the need for repetition. Childs is having a difficult time convincing himself about the ship, a token scene, this is an initial reaction and the only time when any doubt is cast. The characters do not fly in the face of the obvious.

It is the first time we have seen Mac in the rec' room. He seems comforted by the alcohol but is still irritated by the questions they keep asking. He is similar to the Western hero who can save the town but is reluctant to get involved. In those films the hero eventually changes his mind when he sees it is for the good of the community that he confront the villain. Here, the characters are much more complex. It is circumstances and pure desperation that continually draw MacReady back in. His only chance of survival is himself. It's self preservation. Like the Thing. And they both go about that job ruthlessly and they both make mistakes.

At the end Mac is willing to give up his life to stop the Thing. The Western heroes were apparently willing to do this but at the back of the viewer's mind was always the consoling thought that they would never really have to do so. Here, Mac does. His fears are genuine and more grounded in real life, not filtered through a modern fairytale.

Palmer interrupts ("Childs . . . *Chariots of the Gods*, man. Happens all the time. . . . Government knows all about it, right, Mac?"). Palmer actually saw the spaceship. If he *is* a thing he could be acting, using Palmer's personality on a kind of autopilot comparable to the way that Palmer's assimilated heart beats to keep his body functioning. But is it also possible that the Thing, reacting to the world as Palmer, is making a joke? The Thing clearly has access to its victim's memories: ". . . they taught the Incas everything they know." The Thing could be a lot more subtle in its interactions than we imagine. There are several occasions where potential Things use words that are ambiguous. Its control over its victim's personality can come across to those watching as a kind of subconscious influence. Because the film doesn't let us know when precisely or

even how the assimilations take place we are all the more aware that we could be reading too much into what people say. In which case we might be acting paranoid.

Garry's own question to MacReady is revealing: "So come along now, MacReady. The Norwegians get ahold of this thing . . . They cart it back . . ." It is asked in a stern teacher-like fashion and he trails off before finishing. It is Garry's attempt to make an impression with his authority and it contrasts with MacReady who has it without even trying. It is weak and MacReady responds irritably ("Yes, Garry.").

Nauls then interrupts to complain about the ripped drawers found in the kitchen rubbish bin. Immediately we know this refers to the Thing and that something has happened out of sight. It is the first time we have become aware of the film explicitly using such a technique, even though it feels very much in the movie's character. It alerts the viewer to the film's strategy of having events occur off-screen, of which we will only see the scattered clues and after effects.

Blair doesn't speak at all during this scene but his presence is certainly felt. He sits quietly listening, looking through some of the Norwegian papers and photographs. The scene could almost be from his point-of-view. One shot puts him in the foreground while the others talk in the background. We can understand his state of mind but in hindsight it is a terrible failing. Nauls's timing in delivering the ripped underwear could have been a gift from the gods. The clues already exist (the way the dog-thing tried to take over the other dogs) to spot the clothing for what it is, but Blair is so absorbed in his own thoughts he misses what is right in front of him and what the audience sees.

Instead Blair will return to his instruments and make a calculation. He is closed off. Internalised and isolated with his thoughts.

Blair quietly looks at Childs and we fade out. The expression on his face and the timing make it clear what his thoughts are. He is convinced. This is foremost in our mind, but we also quietly fade out on a human failing. The next scene will make clear Blair's approach to the problem. The arts are often ignorant and conservative when it comes to the sciences, and irrationally afraid. What is refreshing about *The Thing* is that the failure is human, not scientific. Science provides the answers. This isn't misanthropic because Blair's mistakes are all too understandable. So much so we can take them for granted. But what is Blair doing at the outpost in the first place? As noted earlier several of the men seem to be there for personal reasons.

Of course, all of the above assumes that Blair is what he appears to be. But what if he isn't? What if they were *his* ripped drawers in the kitchen trash can?

From the black of the fade out we cut to a computer screen that shows a simulation of healthy cells being assimilated. This shot is held without a cut for quite some time. It allows us to get an actual sense of something happening and the time it takes, not just a representation. There is even the sound of a stopwatch ticking. The simple graphics help. Anything flashier would distract and a speeded-up time-lapse effect would take us away from the feeling of the present. In this scene we are almost aware of the character breathing.

Blair is watching the simulation, alone and solemn. As in the previous scene he has no dialogue but it is so right for the sequence it isn't an announced silence. The effect is therefore woven into the storytelling.

We normally assume that Blair is assimilated later in the film. Looking at the computer screen he seems disturbed and burdened with a heavy responsibility. The computer predicts there is a 75% probability that at least one camp member is already infected and that if the Thing should reach civilisation it would need just three years to take over the entire planet. There is no telling how accurate these figures are, we assume Blair threw something together in a hurry.

However, if Blair has already been taken over his behaviour could be read very differently. Ambitious, the Thing could be checking out how long it would take to assimilate everyone and everything, using the 75% figure as the basis for that calculation. The image of Blair with the watch now becomes a little disturbing. We may also remember Blair looking at the Norwegian photographs and be reminded of Palmer, probably a thing himself, looking at the empty hole in the ice where the Thing had slept for 100,000 years.

Even with the benefit of hindsight we are never able to fully grasp the habits of the Thing. Much of it remains a mystery, but we do know it doesn't simply try and assimilate everything in its path. It may well kill Fuchs and it does kill Garry. Assimilations take time and energy and cause a lot of noise. If Blair is a thing at this point, his decision to open the drawer and take out the gun makes perfect sense. If he isn't then the sense of human failing, of a terrible mistake being made is very strong and emphasised by the music, which is sad and despairing.

In the same way that the Thing can assume different forms our own perceptions are starting to make out different shapes in the behaviour we are witnessing. The film is making a virtue of something which is often a limitation in movies, it can't see inside the

characters's heads. The irony is that humans trying their best can sometimes be indistinguishable from the enemy trying *their* best. The genius is that we can see such a damning example and just accept it. It took Luis Bunuel a whole movie to reach this level of ambiguity.

The music continues over the cut to MacReady, who is sitting at a table, looking at the ripped clothing. It is clearly playing on his mind but it remains a suspicion he is willing to dismiss. For the viewer the proof can seem obvious but not for the character. We learn in the next scene that he has been up for more than forty-eight hours (presumably, as the pilot he has been in constant demand), and this obviously plays its part, but so do at least two important components of his personality. One is his will to survive, the other is his desire to escape and be on his own. The situation of the film means that both of these can't be accommodated and one has to overwhelm the other. Here, he seems willing to overlook something important.

Bennings and Windows are in the process of carrying the Norwegian-thing into the store room. Copper has seemingly made this decision on his own (we learn from Fuchs that Blair doesn't want to be disturbed). If so, Copper's voice doesn't betray that he finds Blair's behaviour all that unusual. Has Blair been moody before? Later, Mac will find it easy to believe that Blair is cracking up.

The conversation between Bennings and Windows is relaxed and easy, it sounds like the conversation between two people who work together. Mac wordlessly walks in and takes what he needs. Bennings is friendly with him, jolly even, and they exchange a wry look. The whole scene has a feeling of dry wit. Nobody is speechless or eager or

even terribly impressed by what they have found. When Fuchs, the only scientist who does seem eager asks to speak to Mac alone, Windows and Bennings look at one another as if this is in character and amusing. Their look isn't malicious or superior, simply familiar and an acknowledgment that things are happening in which they play no part.

Windows looks at the Norwegian-thing and suggests it should be burnt. Bennings's response, "You can't just burn the find of the century. That's going to win someone the Nobel prize." is the joke of a working class scientist. He automatically assumes it isn't going to make Windows or himself famous⁶. When the blanket moves, just as Windows is turning away, it adds a nice surreal touch to an otherwise straightforward scene.

The movement of that blanket may distract us from what Bennings and Windows are talking about, especially as their talk appears to be nothing more than filler at this point. But it isn't filler, it's dialogue that will play an important part in the story. Windows asks about the keys and Bennings tells him to get them from Garry, as he still has some things he needs to do. Turning to leave, Windows does a double-take at the blanket, distracting us further from what has been said. Two important things are happening at once. The detail of the keys is virtually hidden, despite its importance to a later scene. Even people who are familiar with the film can miss it. But the effect is multiple.

When the subject is brought up again later during a crucial scene and an argument erupts, the keys (and their relationship to Garry) have been established without our even being aware of it. At another level we understand that Windows has something to do with them and it will add to the authenticity of his response.

⁶ They will only ever be footnotes.

If we *do* remember at some point that Windows had the keys and realise that this accounts for his reaction it will heighten our responsiveness to the rest of the film. We understand that important things are happening and that our attention is not always directed to them. We have to look for ourselves.

Because films often signal that something will become important by the very act of showing it to us (cutting to it, etc) when it *doesn't* happen and when we *realise that it* makes us go back and consider everything else. The whole film becomes alive with potential significance. Not symbolism but actual solid importance to the story. All of this works even more perfectly when so much of the rest of the film is ambiguous. But neither is it the loud ambiguity of a film like *L'Avventura*.

Outside, in the tractor (called a Thiokol) Fuchs has to battle to get his points across. It is interesting to note the lengths they have to go to for privacy. Although Fuchs thinks highly of Blair we may begin to wonder. In this scene MacReady seems to regard it as being quite believable that Blair would crack up. *The Thing* doesn't create neatly inserted potted character histories; the beauty of allowing us to find out for ourselves is very much in evidence here. We are free to draw our own conclusions.

That Fuchs considers it necessary to come to Mac illustrates he is not comfortable taking decisions on his own, despite the informal nature of the camp. His job position, we imagine, contributes to this.

Mac's response to Fuchs is certainly not that of the straight forward hero but neither is it too much the anti-hero. We get a sense of character above all else. When Fuchs drops the important news that the thing-remains (the dog-thing; the Norwegian-

thing) are not completely dead, Mac begins to listen. Because we know Fuchs has something important to say we tend automatically to be on his side but because we sense that Mac's response is understandable we are not irritated by his wish that Fuchs would hurry up and leave him alone. It is similar to the trip to the spaceship: Mac, like the audience, wants the story to move along. When Mac realises what Fuchs is saying and starts to take him seriously we share something of Fuchs's relief. At the same time it makes *us* take him more seriously, so our response to the characters is split. We don't identify with just one of them. Although the movie is taking advantage of its God-like capability of listening in on a private conversation we still feel like another crew member.

The cut to the snow-plough exterior, looking in so that we can see but not hear the conversation is similar to the tableau with Copper and Mac over the block of ice, except that here the pause is completely naturalistic.

During these scenes, cutting from Windows and Bennings to Mac and Fuchs and back again the feeling is of discovery, not suspense, even though we know Bennings is in danger.

Windows walks back into the store-room, swinging the keys he got from Garry. He sees the ripped and bloody clothes on the chair close to where Bennings had been standing. The clothing is evidence that the earlier discovery by Nauls proves someone else in the camp has indeed been assimilated. This shot is not rushed, despite the situation it slowly pans down the length of the chair.

Bennings has been dragged over so that he is sitting next to the table and the Norwegian-thing, which has its tentacles wrapped around him. Presumably it has just

formed these as we saw nothing of that sort earlier. Most of the Norwegian-thing *was* dead but enough of it survived to join together and strike out.

Clearly, the Thing needs to puncture skin quite violently to take someone over. The evidence for this is the clothing, not what we see of Bennings. The film doesn't wallow in gore and it isn't nasty or cruel. The shot of Bennings is brief and restrained.

When Windows sees him he drops the keys and runs out. We only hear the keys drop, there is no corresponding insert shot.

On the cut back to MacReady, he says, "Go get the doc." The inter-cutting has removed any conversation that we could easily guess and therefore find boring. Whereas most films place the hero as a counterbalance to the scientists ("let's stop screwing around and shoot the son-of-a-bitch.") it is Mac's instinct to include them.

Mac's line and the way it is delivered: "Go get the doc. I'll get Garry, we'll meet in Blair's room." shows the instinct that Fuchs relied upon kicking in. He realises that Mac can take a decision and stick with it, although Mac doesn't seem to display these qualities in every day life. He would rather stay by himself and drink.

We know that Blair has been working on the Thing and making discoveries and calculating predictions. Since the notations that Fuchs reads from Blair's notebook ("... it could have imitated a million life forms on a million planets.") indicate that he was human at the time we can assume it is Blair's character to keep these thoughts to himself. If he had spoken up earlier he could have saved Bennings and altered the course of events. The cutting back and forth from what Fuchs is saying to what is happening to Bennings underlines the mistake.

As Blair wrote, “It needs to be in close proximity with the life form to be absorbed. The chameleon strikes in the dark.” As such Blair himself is the perfect candidate for a take-over. Too much time alone and in close proximity to the Thing. He is consumed by his own character.

Windows runs out to Mac and Fuchs just as they are about to go back inside. He overheard them earlier and knew they were outside. Previously, he and Bennings had exchanged a light hearted look because of Fuchs. Now they are both feeling different. Considering what Fuchs has read he should have told them to stay away from the Norwegian-thing, himself.

Windows only has to say, “It’s Bennings,” for Fuchs and Mac to know what he’s referring to. They run inside and find him gone. So are the keys, it would seem, but nobody thinks of them.

Windows’s panic: “It was right there, Mac. I swear to God it had a hold of him.” is authentic and the movie is helped considerably by Mac’s reaction, which is to believe him. Although the theme of the film is paranoia it avoids the cheap shot of having them disbelieve Windows for a moment.

The Thing has been quick to clean up any evidence of what it has been up to. The ripped, bloody clothing has gone. It obviously knows that Windows saw it.

Mac runs to the broken window and we see Bennings staggering away. As before there is no attempt to create suspense, it doesn’t imply that Bennings might be hiding behind the door. The sight of him staggering indicates that he is not a threat.

They chase after him and set off the alarms. As with the dog-thing earlier it is a useful way to bring everybody together.

Windows seems to think that Bennings has been attacked and is simply staggering away, hurt. When he starts to get too close it is Fuchs who jumps on him and pulls him down, an action normally reserved for the hero. This sequence is covered in wide-shot, from a distance. The audience is trusted to see the action and not have it pointed out in montage. It means we are not distracted from the focus of the scene. The tone is not interrupted.

Everybody rushes out and gathers around Bennings (the notable single exception is Blair). “It isn’t Bennings,” Mac says, also meaning, it isn’t human. It has almost finished the assimilation but it looks helpless. When it looks at MacReady and makes a strange crying noise we can see its human-like breath in the air. The film takes time to pan around the other people. It seems obvious that the Thing, temporarily at least, is unable to defend itself. When it makes this noise is the Thing trying to communicate? The sound is creepy but mournful. The second most intelligent creatures on Earth are dolphins and there is much we don’t know about their methods of communication. What hope would we have with something that evolved on another planet?

Later in the film the Thing will be busy trying to frame MacReady. It is obvious it has the most to fear from him, and here it chooses to look specifically at Mac when it makes the noise. Would the humans be better off trying to talk to the Thing?

Mac’s response is fear and revulsion. He topples a barrel of fuel which leaks out over the snow and when it reaches Bennings he sets him alight with the flare.

The expressions of those watching are mostly blank. This is more naturalistic (presented with a scene like this most people would be unable to move) but it also allows us to read them as we wish.

When Mac throws the flare and it ignites the fuel the whole sequence is covered in wide-shot. To cut the scene up into individual shots (throwing flare, flare spinning in the air, etc) would create an ‘action sequence,’ instead of giving us what we have, which is a scene in which we *observe* an action. It seems to unfold more naturally. As with other scenes in the film there is a kind of tableau, here, which is an effective film short hand. When this happens the feeling is observational but with a God’s eye sense. At other times, during group scenes in which more than one person makes a contribution to proceedings (here it is only Mac), the sense is still observational but from the point-of-view of another character in the scene.

We realise for certain that the Thing doesn’t create a double and destroy the original, it takes someone over from the inside. As such one could have qualms about killing someone. Most people would hesitate. The attractiveness of MacReady’s character is that he is morally certain and still has an intelligence about him. What he does may be debatable but it doesn’t just spring from ignorance.

Such a single-minded drive is a powerful, positive quality but it can be so focused it becomes almost comical when put next to a more ordinary response. The next scene works on different levels, one of which is black comedy.

We learn for the first time that Bennings and Garry have known each other ten years. Garry describes him as a friend, although he may be exaggerating because he’s just seen the man set on fire (the way the line is delivered makes it a very human moment). Garry talks about what they have just seen as if something were happening to Bennings, Mac regards what they saw as an imitation, not a person.

Mac strides in going straight for the flamethrower, his mind preoccupied with what to do next. He is irritated that Garry has not immediately understood what is happening (“That was one of those things out there, Garry. Trying to imitate him.”). He may also be responding to the general situation: The official leader cannot be completely relied upon under pressure. Garry is not stupid and later is shown to be brave but he lacks the qualities called for. The film doesn’t take the easy route and show him cracking under pressure but the contrast between the two is immediate.

We also sense something else in Mac’s anger. The flamethrower is another reminder of the Norwegian camp and that events are repeating. He is rebelling against that fate. This is especially effective as the film has a strong feeling of inevitability. It also explains how he accepts the suicide mission at the end so easily. By that point he has been preparing for it for a long time. Having just heard from Fuchs he will also be annoyed at the mistakes being made. Blair should have spoken up, Fuchs shouldn’t have been so prissy about how he told Mac about the notebook. MacReady is more irritated than moved by Bennings’s death, preoccupied about what to do next. Again we are aware of people thinking.

Met with all this it is here that Garry says Bennings was his friend, as if he is looking for sympathy or a kind word. What he gets is: “We’ve got to burn the rest of them.” and Mac marches past him and out. A reaction that is just as human but in a different way. For a moment Garry is too full of thought to do anything, but to his credit he picks up a canister and walks out himself.

This brief scene cements Mac as the leader of the group but we also become aware of his complexity. Only earlier that day Bennings was cheerfully telling him the

weather was pretty nasty for flying. Now he's dead. It is the contrast between the two reactions that is darkly funny. And when we laugh in the context of this film we can't help but be reminded of our own humanity. It is black humour but we are not being encouraged to laugh at cruelty.

They burn the potentially dangerous thing-related materials and with the exception of Blair it is a group effort. There are no protests from the scientists, not even Fuchs, and it is Copper who emphasises that there is nothing left. It is refreshing that everybody works together and that there are no conflicts shoe-horned in for the sake of 'character.'

The film uses the location and the props extremely well. There is a real sense of place in this scene; it feels as if they really are many miles away from civilisation. A J.C.B. is used to dig a hole and the thing-materials are put in it and covered with a pink fuel. There is a neatness to these preparations which differs to the chaos of the Norwegian camp, as if they are purposefully trying to do it right this time. The use of fire as something cleansing is psychologically intriguing.

After Mac has blasted everything using the flamethrower everybody stares into the flames. When Copper says that everything thing-related is gone we know that the film is far from over. The Norwegian-thing appeared to grab an opportunity without thinking. We know there is a more calculating Thing amongst them. Garry's line, "Where's Blair?" hangs in the air. It lets us know that the *characters* know it is far from over. There is no attempt at artificial closure. It is a very effective line because the audience realises that the film has reached a point that with just two words our thoughts suddenly switch. Our *own* suspicions are aroused. It draws us closer into the situation while we have that

movie-audience luxury of a comfortable distance between ourselves and what is happening up there on the screen. The low violin sound as Blair's name is mentioned (a sound associated with the Thing) is another reminder that the thoughts of the film are still running in this direction. There is no let up.

There is no cutting between the characters, instead everybody is held in wide-shot and we can look from one to the other. The only person who looks different is Norris, his expression particularly grim as he stares into the flames. It is similar to the look he gave to the dog after it had startled Bennings at the card table. Does Norris look this way because he is disturbed to see such important work burned, because of the implications that someone has been taken over, because of Bennings or because, as a thing, he doesn't like to see another thing being burnt?

The camera pans up the length of the flames and onto the night sky. The music reprises a piece we last heard during the final white-out at the Norwegian camp, just as Mac and Copper were about to dig up the Norwegian-thing. At that time, Mac said "Whatever it is, they burned it up in a hurry." Events are repeating but it is all just part of the story. The film is not making a simplistic statement.

Although the Americans are taking care, trying to learn the right lessons from their Norwegian colleagues (there is something satisfying about burning and then burying the Thing material), it is still the first visual step towards the American camp resembling its Norwegian counterpart. All of this is so subtly suggested that the viewer isn't even consciously aware of it. It becomes something that we can't quite put our finger on. It's a tone; a feeling. "Where's Blair?"

*

We cut back to the J.C.B. pushing snow over the hole. Childs gets out and walks inside and Fuchs comes out to inform Mac that Blair cannot be found. Windows is in the radio room, by himself, while everyone else is in the rec' room (some serious decisions need to be taken). If Blair were a thing, now would be a good opportunity to assimilate Windows but time is limited and the Thing is unpredictable, following its own strategy. Blair, human or thing, has other plans that are keeping him busy.

Mac hears a sound and looks around to see the figure running from the helicopter back indoors. He shouts Blair's name but the figure doesn't stop. It is the first time in the film that we have actual evidence of someone up to no good. The tone is similar to a spy film in which there is a conspirator at work. Even if Blair is human, it still resonates this way and feels related (in terms of film convention) to the later scene in which the tampered blood is discovered.

The shot of Blair running indoors is covered over the width of the widescreen, there is no camera movement. It is from Mac's point of view but Mac is clearly not looking in just this way. Instead the image of an unidentified figure running across the screen is a nice visual, almost emblematic (*Who Goes There?*) and gives us a sense of the people in the space. Cutting the scene up would ruin it. The lighting outside the camp is particularly attractive, the most beautiful in the film, and the editing allows us to appreciate it.

Because Fuchs has just told us where everyone is (he has no reason to lie even if he were a thing) we surmise it must be Blair. It looks like him, as well, but rather than

confirm our suspicions it adds to our unease. It subtly puts us in the frame of mind that nothing can be fully trusted, even from the well meaning who don't lie.

The framing of the shot and Blair's determined state means that if he were to turn around at the entrance, under the light, and glance at MacReady it would strike us as wrong.

Even though it is nothing remarkable in terms of film making, allowing us to make the intuitive leap from the unidentified man running indoors to Blair destroying the communications room is the storytelling equivalent of letting us follow that figure across the frame with our eye instead of having the movie pan across or cut it up for us. The film is always in control, directing our attention, but by doing it in such a way we are freer to get involved and speculate. It opens the film up. Who knows, maybe it wasn't Blair, maybe it was Norris?

The shot of the helicopter under the tarpaulin is creepy and adds to our unease. Mac picks up the torch left by the saboteur, looks inside and finds the control panel smashed. Again, rather than cut, the camera simply pans left to show what Mac is looking at.

Mac hears the shot and we follow him indoors and down the corridor. Just a few moments ago everyone was in the rec' room, now we see them outside the communications room while Blair goes about destroying everything with an axe.

Because of Blair's ranting we assume he is smashing their communication equipment because he wants to stop the Thing from reaching civilisation. However, the strategy of the Thing is to remain camouflaged as perfectly as possible as an imitation. If it succeeds in taking over the entire camp it could conceivably try and reach the outside

world on the radio but it would have to invent a cover-story to explain the dead Norwegian, Bennings, etc. It would not make one mention of the Thing for the simple reason that it would risk exposure by doing so (even basic tests can reveal who's who). In other words, if one human remains the Thing is in danger. We know that the Thing can remain frozen for long periods of time and if it is discovered by a rescue team (the humans having frozen to death) it could reach civilisation before anyone knows what is happening. One of the brightest hopes for mankind, therefore, is that Windows succeed in getting through on the radio and explain what is going on. What Blair is doing is **HELPING THE THING IN THE BIGGEST WAY POSSIBLE**. That the film gets us to accept he is trying to help mankind (and he may very well be trying to do so) demonstrates how easily we can justify and rationalise the most terrible mistakes. Blair may actually be destroying all life on the planet (or destroying its genes which amounts to the same thing) as he tries his best to save it. We tend to accept him at face value because it all feels so heartfelt. Above all because it seems so human. But *is* Blair human? There could be another reason he's going on the rampage. And that's the blood.

After the Thing was caught trying to assimilate Bennings the entire camp gathered around him and then helped burn the thing-materials. Everyone except Blair. We also know that Windows had just dropped the all-important keys which allow access to the blood bags. Assuming Blair found the keys would he have had time to use them considering everything else he is doing? Nobody else would seem to have the opportunity. Until Blair starts going mad with the axe, that is. We know a meeting of some sort was about to begin in the recreation room. The first topic would most likely

have been a discussion of potential tests that might reveal if anyone were a thing. As we later find out, although the Thing's imitations are brilliant it can be exposed with some simple science. At that point in the story, therefore, time is quickly running out for the Thing or Things. We can imagine a great deal of thinking and panic going on behind the scenes. The Thing must be aware of how easily it can be exposed, natural self-knowledge and probably a reality it encountered at the Norwegian camp. By creating the disturbance he does Blair stops the meeting and gives someone the perfect opportunity to leave the group unobserved, slash the blood bags, and return the keys to where they were found or back to Garry's room. It also has the predictable result of getting Blair separated from the main group, which is precisely what the Thing would want.

The 'Blair going berserk,' scene is covered in the same minimalist, pared down quality as the rest of the film. It becomes slightly more noticeable because this an action scene but it is now so much a part of the rhythm of the movie that it doesn't feel artificial or self-conscious. It doesn't have the feel of a film like *Le Samourai*, for example. Mac's long run down the corridor is covered in just two shots, and a third as he comes to a halt⁷. There is a dialogue exchange and it is only after a moment longer than in most films that we see the other people standing around the corner. The film doesn't take the time to establish them and only shows them when they enter the conversation.

Blair has a gun and is willing to use it. He looks out of control. In this he resembles the Norwegian. Events are repeating again. Garry shot the Norwegian and he looks like he is getting ready to shoot Blair. As with the Norwegian this might seem an

⁷ Fans of *The Simpsons* might be interested to learn that Blair makes a note-perfect Homer Simpson, *D'oh*, sound, just as Mac is running down the corridor.

over-reaction but presumably he doesn't intend to kill Blair, and Windows, trapped in a corner, is in serious danger. We know how Garry feels about Windows but he is also the first one to help him after Blair has been subdued. He seems genuinely concerned about the men under his command. If Garry is making a rash decision it is understandable considering the circumstances. On top of everything else he has just seen Mac set fire to Bennings without much hesitation. (Ironically, if Garry had walked forward and simply shot Blair dead he might have ended up saving them all and maybe even all of humanity.)

Mac comes up with a better solution, perhaps slightly more dangerous for themselves, but he is reacting to the situation rather than coming up with a stock response, which is Garry's approach. He senses that although Blair has a gun and is dangerous it's a problem that can be overcome. It demonstrates that Mac's attitude when he was alone with Garry was not simple cold-heartedness.

We hear from Childs that Blair has killed the remaining dogs and Clark leaves the scene without even thinking. His priorities are elsewhere.

Childs runs around to another entrance, tries to talk to Blair and Blair unloads the revolver, missing wildly. While shooting he says, "I'll kee-ul yew," in his thick accent. It is comical but also a little creepy to think that if Blair *is* a thing it is also imitating his accent. Something we would ordinarily take for granted stands out because Blair's accent is different.

When the team rush Blair the cuts are quicker to cover the action but the camera always follows the people and not the objects, there is no individual shot of the chair smashing into the window, for example. During these brief shots there is little or no camera movement (something that will always create a chop-suey effect). There is a

feeling of control even during these scenes. The style is constant and it doesn't alter to match the sudden change in pace, a technique that often feels like a strategy and can pull the viewer out of the film.

Blair succeeds in throwing quite a few people around and they land in undignified ways, Mac included. Subduing him is largely a group effort.

We cut to a close shot of Clark. The scene is quiet except for the distant sound of wind. Clark's expression is shock. On a wider shot we can see a dog in the foreground, out of focus, with an axe buried in it, but we are looking at Clark. There is no blood and the film doesn't emphasise the death (we only see one dog). The scene is strongly connected to the previous one, it's essentially a part of it and the quietness and the focus on one person's appalled but contained reaction provide a nice pause at the end of the sequence as a whole. Again Clark is on his own and his reactions are very human. The performance here is particularly good. They are early casualties in what is at best an ill thought-out plan. Clark's opinion of human beings isn't going to improve.

There are several points in *The Thing* that recall World War 2 in a strange way (so often it stops feeling like coincidence). Here we have brutal and pointless death that is part of an overall strategy. Blair has certainly removed one option available to the Thing but could it all be a variation on the Nazi strategy of shooting one of your own (or a potential convert) to convince the rest you are innocent. If it is purely to stop the Thing, the logical end point of that argument is to kill and set fire to everybody.

After the drab indoors and the night scenes we cut to bright daylight as Blair is led to the tool-shed the next morning. We become familiar with this location during both day and

night and under different weather conditions. It helps establish the sense of place much more effectively than slavishly following reality (six months of day followed by six months of night).

“What about your shack, MacReady?” Copper asks. “I don’t want him in my shack, we’ll lock him in the tool-shed,” is the quick response. This establishes where Blair is going but it is also funny, dealing as it does with the practicalities of locking someone away on a camp where no such facilities exist. They are making do with what is at hand but one can sense that Copper is uncomfortable and finds it demeaning for Blair to be treated in this way. After Copper has injected Blair, who is clearly already under medication, Blair asks why they have brought him here. Copper appears to feel embarrassed as he says, “for your own protection, Blair.” Fuchs looks awkward and anxious to leave. He appears uncomfortable at seeing his boss in this state and it is a nice touch that he should bring Blair a bottle of liquor (it is the same brand that we saw on Blair’s desk earlier, a favourite).

The scene is covered so that everyone is in frame. We look from Copper to Fuchs ourselves. The tone of awkwardness is shared by Blair’s colleagues. The one who doesn’t feel that way is MacReady. He seems more prepared to accept Blair’s breakdown and human frailties in general. He waits until Fuchs and Copper have gone before clapping a friendly hand on Blair’s shoulder and asking how he’s doing. It is another layer to MacReady’s character. Blair is very convincing in this scene, and really does look too far gone to offer any help. When Blair says he doesn’t know who to trust, Mac brushes it off and goes to leave. He has made a point of being friendly but it is his nature to move on quickly.

Blair emphasises that Clark should be watched, Mac leaves without saying anything but has clearly listened. This moment is emphasised by the only close-up of the scene. Since we have seen Clark alone and haven't witnessed any thing-like behaviour, quite the opposite, the effect of Blair's statement and the way it is presented is multi-fold. In many ways Clark is the typical movie red-herring but the film itself casually goes out of its way to show his innocence. When we see the film for the first time our position is similar to a second viewing, so it forces the movie to work in such a way that it will withstand repeat screenings. The film never sets anyone up by showing artificial suspicious behaviour. As a result we see the paranoia more clearly while still feeling it ourselves about others.

We will see the result of Blair's advice and how others react to it over the course of the film.

After Mac has left the tool-shed he walks down the path a few steps to join Garry, Copper, Childs and Fuchs. There is a nice symmetry to the shot: Copper, Childs and Fuchs face us, in the centre, while Garry and MacReady, the two leaders, face one another, either end. We hear that the radio and helicopters are out of commission, something that would have been known last night but which has been confirmed in the day (it is Childs, the mechanic, who says that the helicopters are beyond repair).

When Garry suggests they have to wait until spring for help, Mac speaks for the first time. His natural instinct is to confront the problem head on. Although Garry is in charge, he has his authority undermined constantly by Mac and others. In spite of this there are no tiresome, "I'm-In-Charge," arguments. Garry is simply swayed by the merits.

He is more believable and less of a movie character as a result. Mac, in turn, asks for Copper's help.

Copper's test involves mixing the human blood they have in storage with blood drawn from everyone on camp and observing the reaction at a microscopic level. An emphasis on the biological nature of the Thing which grounds it more in reality and less in nightmares. Copper's use of the term, "if there's a reaction," is the sort of language a doctor would use and we aren't given a quick chemistry lesson to explain exactly what he means, instead we are left to imagine it as best we can.

Garry tells him to get started and hands over the keys. It is while he is doing so that Mac says to keep an eye on Clark. Again we are distracted from the keys. Blair stressed that Clark should be watched, giving it as much emphasis as he could. Mac only adds it as a precaution and gives the reason Blair didn't, he's been close to the dog. It's an indication that Mac doesn't take Blair too seriously and it explains why he is dismissive when Fuchs stops him and says that they need Blair's help. He clearly thinks Blair is more trouble than he's worth. Everyone pauses momentarily, it is the first time someone has been so forthright, but they soon understand it is just a suggestion.

Blair has presented them with a dilemma. If he is kept indoors he poses a real threat to their safety but by isolating him outside, entirely on his own, they are putting him at risk if there is a thing amongst them. Because Blair is so unpredictable they have little choice but to do what they do. To lock him up indoors would mean they are more likely to hear any commotion but they would all have easy access to him. By isolating him like this it means that anyone going out to see him will be easy to spot and can be

accompanied. It's risky but at this point still logical. They are now hoping it can all be solved in the near future.

It is during this scene that Childs makes a point about the Thing being a "perfect imitation." It's important to remember that Childs is just one character amongst several. It is the character talking and not the film. He's a mechanic and not even the scientists understand much about what they are dealing with (The Thing is still surprising us at the end of the film), and Childs is speaking theoretically. Evidently, the Thing is not a one hundred percent perfect imitation otherwise it would not be able to do what it does. It only needs to be perfect enough to fool the eye, our knowledge is limited concerning what happens internally. The autopsy on the Norwegian-thing revealed that it does mimic the workings of the internal life support system (heart, lungs, etc) to keep its new body working in a convincing way but as we have seen, these can change in a hurry.

The creature itself follows its own logic and the film never provides a clear explanation, it is up to us to try and figure it out. The characters are in the same situation. They know that their knowledge is sketchy, a perfect environment for paranoia to grow and take new forms.

The scene ends with Mac walking back inside. Fuchs glances back at the tool-shed, clearly unhappy that he is going to have to deal with much of the new work on his own. He doesn't like the new responsibility. It will only get worse.

The next scene shows Fuchs inside with his coat off, Copper is the same. Time has passed again, although we can assume they would have gone straight to the lab to prepare for the test and that the Thing must therefore have corrupted the blood supply before it

was mentioned. The bags have been slashed. Each of the characters outside who heard about the test were human (we later learn). Few of the characters actually turn out to be things, the film is a study of people.

This scene is a masterful example of storytelling in the movies. It is also a perfect example of how to handle group scenes. There is very little camera movement but what there is is significant. The editing doesn't use many angles but there are not so few as to make a long take obvious. We are so focused because of the style that we don't notice it. There is so much going on it is unlikely we actually see and consider everything but we are aware of the undercurrents to the extent that they make the scene feel right.

After Copper discovers that the blood bags have been slashed he calls out and everyone enters the room. Fuchs is crouching by the fridge. There is a sudden flurry of activity followed by a stillness. Everyone reaches a point in the room and stops and they don't really move from these positions throughout the whole scene. It is significant that nobody who is a thing plays much of a part in this scene.

Their entrance is covered by a shot of the doorway which pans around to follow them and then holds as the scene plays out.

When he sees what has happened Childs looks around with animation, "Where's Clark?" He is saying this in response to Mac's warning in the previous scene. Blair's idea is beginning to take on a life of its own (mutating). Childs was surprised just a few moments ago when Mac passed it on. Now it is the first thought that comes into his head.

Clark's glum, "Right here." is sardonic and amusing. His state of mind comes across so well we don't even need to cut to a shot of him. He is standing with his back to the camera and actually had to cross the shot when he entered the scene. His voice alone

is enough to tell us he is perfectly aware of what they think about him. He will remember that Blair started to suspect him earlier and know they will have talked about him behind his back. He will also still be upset about what Blair has done to the dogs. Clark will not regard Blair in the highest of spirits. All of this from a two word remark and a two word response. Suspicions that would have remained hidden come straight to the surface.

The next logical step would seem to be to question Clark but Mac steps in and changes the direction of the thinking. For some reason he never seems to think that Clark is a thing.

Mac focuses upon the safe, asking if it has been broken into. There is a cut to another angle to match the change in approach (we lose Clark from shot) and the camera slowly tracks to the left bringing Copper and Garry into frame, the new focus of the scene. Some people are obscured from view and the screen is virtually blacked-out by Childs at one point. The effect is to place us right in amongst them with the freedom to observe their reactions and yet the shot doesn't feel constructed for this purpose. It feels spontaneous, as if the camera is following *them*. It's in the moment.

Fuchs points out that whoever broke in did so with the keys. The lock is undamaged. The keys are held by Garry alone.

Mac is self consciously calm. He seems determined to solve the problem logically and in clear view of everyone, as if he has thought about a scene like this occurring and has planned what he will do. He doesn't want to make (Norwegian) mistakes.

Copper admits he's the only one who can ask for the keys but suspicion falls more heavily on Garry, who keeps them. Garry's fondness for wearing a firearm is probably a

minor clue to his feeling for showing authority. We can imagine that he would have made a show of jangling his keys, as well. And now it's come back to haunt him.

When Garry admits he has the only set, Copper stares hard at him. It's as if he's trying his best to see Garry's Thingness, to see what one actually looks like. He knows he's innocent himself. He can't quite believe it.

When Mac asks if the test would have worked Copper nods with conviction, "Oh, I think so, yes." This is different to what he said just a few minutes ago ("Well, I've been thinking about a blood serum test . . . I suppose if there's a reaction."). He is shaken and trying to emphasise his own innocence.

Off frame, we hear Norris say, "Somebody else sure as hell thought so." By not cutting to Norris we keep our focus more squarely on Copper and Garry. The ping-pong match between the two is not broken even though other people are speaking. Because the film is not playing God (cutting to show whoever it likes from any angle) it keeps us more firmly in the mindset of the characters.

It also allows us to imagine what Norris looks like when he delivers that line. Norris may well *be* a thing at this point and may even have been the one who slashed the blood bags. Norris's choice of words is actually quite careful, and he wouldn't be lying if he had been the guilty party. Could the Thing be trying to stick the boot in and have a joke with itself at the same time?

Faced with this dilemma Mac tries to keep it logical and fair. He asks Garry if anyone could have stolen the key from him. We cut to Garry for the first time. He is flustered, shaken that someone clearly *is* a thing, aware of his own innocence and that everyone is never-the-less going to suspect him. He is mystified and trapped at the same

time. His own natural suspect is Copper. He betrays all this in his quick answer but it paints him into a corner. Without thinking it through he says nobody could have gotten it from him, and he only ever gives it to Copper. But Copper says he always returns it straight after use and the ball is straight back in Garry's court. The editing reflects this volley back and forth while emphasising the careful look Mac is giving Garry in particular. The situation is similar in one sense to the stand-off in a Spaghetti Western. As far as the characters are concerned they may have a thing cornered and they don't know how it is going to react.

We cut to a two shot of Windows and Childs. It is the first time we have seen Windows since the axe scene with Blair and he now has a cut on his nose and bandage on his forehead. He looks bothered and begins backing away towards the door. He can see the stalemate developing in front of him and he knows it all revolves around the keys. He has probably just realised that he was the one who lost them when he discovered Bennings being assimilated. His reaction tells us he didn't simply hand them back. We can guess he forgot all about them or assumed they somehow found their way back into Garry's possession. Along with everybody else Windows will have several thoughts racing through his mind at the same time, but now it has become more personal. He will fear for his own safety because he could easily become a high ranking suspect (Garry and Copper both seem innocent enough) but he is having to confront in a more concrete way than the others that there is a thing amongst them with its own agenda. He has unwittingly become involved. Helped even.

We cut back to Garry. Childs is out of focus in the foreground. Everybody is looking at Garry and he is still struggling to come up with an answer. So he backtracks.

Aware that he can't just blame Copper he contradicts himself and says that someone could have lifted it from him. When Childs talks over him, expressing disbelief, the shot composition allows us to stay with Garry's reaction. Garry's mind is clearly racing but he looks offended that they can turn on him so suddenly. An argument erupts and now Clark, who is obviously still seething from the quick way Childs looked for him at the beginning of the scene, and has probably been getting more and more irritated at the way suspicion has fallen on him (as well as anger at what has happened to the dogs) feels confident enough to boil over, pointing his finger at Childs.

The manner in which these arguments come about is very naturalistic, long periods of simmering discontent followed by brief moments when people lose control and begin shouting. The inconsistencies are natural.

Prior to this scene Childs has been fairly easy-going and likable. Here, under pressure, he is unintelligent and quick to accuse. He is a useful contrast to MacReady: They both seem determined above all else to survive, but their approaches are entirely different. Mac will tell others what to do but his decisions are based on thought, not emotion and he involves everyone. Although Childs has a strong personality he is more insular, thinking about himself, and emotional. He is forthright in scenes after this but never quite as bad again. It's as if he has learnt a lesson about himself and doesn't want to repeat this performance, but when the pressure mounts (much greater than it is here) some of the characteristics return, none-the-less. He may be chastened but he can't change his personality, especially when circumstances become urgent. We don't see Childs wrestling with his soul, instead it is something we sense in the coming scenes and we are left to imagine the thought process.

When the argument dies down Garry has gone back to his previous position, claiming that Copper is the only one who has any business with the key. Fuchs says that Copper thought of the test. Childs makes a fair point when he implies that Copper might be bluffing but hampers his own argument by appearing argumentative for the sake of it. Whereas Garry became angry that they could be so vocal in accusing him, Copper, in keeping with someone who seems so decent, looks hurt. Another argument flares and they realise Windows has gone.

While these suspicions generate real suspense and feel completely authentic they are often quite funny in the way they are expressed, perhaps *because* they are so authentic.

This scene has lasted less than two minutes. It relies very delicately on a lot of the foundations that have already been established, but it's so indirect we take it for granted. Each character reacts in their own particular way. In the middle are two innocent people under suspicion and who suspect each other at the same time. We see how another suspicion (about Clark) is starting to find currency and simmer away under the surface. Windows realises something of great importance but keeps it to himself (fatally?) because he can see the manner in which everyone is reacting to the situation in front of them. And we are shown how two people with similar aims contrast. When *The Thing* was first released back in 1982 the most common complaint was that it lacked depth.

We cut to Windows running down the corridor as soon the group realise he has gone. Because of how he left they will automatically think he had something to do with the blood. By cutting to him in this way and by showing how he walked towards the door

earlier there is no attempt to generate suspicion that he might be a thing. Instead the situation is allowed to breathe and unfold.

The camera follows Windows all the way down the corridor to the gun cabinet and then holds on him during the early dialogue. The steadicam work is smooth and doesn't create what is often (not always) its own problem, a strange floating feeling. At the same time it doesn't call attention to itself in the way that the steadicam work in *The Shining* does, for example. Instead it is used to let us see the characters in a better, clearer way and it places them in their environment.

We only hear the rest of the group arrive and see Garry's gun enter frame. Our focus is on Windows. We can imagine he panicked and ran for a number of reasons. The Thing's existence has been brought to his attention in a very immediate way. He knows he's innocent but he can also see what is likely to happen if they suspect him. He will be outside the group and probably become an easy target for attack, like Blair. By not speaking up, though, suspicion falls on Garry and Copper when it shouldn't, and this leads to more mistakes.

In the previous scene Garry was the focus of concern. Now he is pointing a gun, but the moment seems to have taken over. When he tells Windows, "I'll put this right through your head," it doesn't feel like acting for the benefit of the others.

The reverse-angle only shows half the group. The rest are around the corner, out of view. To show them would require a 'film-like,' (or God-like) extra shot to be inserted. It would follow traditional film grammar but break the ruthless focus. Garry will even talk to someone (Norris, after Garry has put the gun down) and we don't cut away until there is a reaction. It isn't necessary for us to be continually aware of every

character's exact location. It also helps give the impression that there is just one consciousness following events as they happen. The film can't rewind just a little bit and show us something happening over here, as well. The result is something closer to life and our own way of seeing the world. It is easier for the situation to take over. It starts to surround us.

Mac steps in and reasons with Windows, saying that Garry doesn't want to hurt anyone. "Right," says Garry, no doubt eager to emphasise that he doesn't. That there is little doubt that he *would* if he felt it necessary does help diffuse the situation, however.

When Windows finally puts the gun on the floor, Garry turns his own on the group, momentarily assuming the same position as Windows, but he only uses the time to swear his innocence. He puts the gun down and offers it to Norris. It is here that we see the rest of the group for the first time, out of focus behind Norris, as he turns down the offer.

It is very likely that Norris *is* a thing by this point, but if so why does he turn down the chance to have a firearm? The gun will not put Norris in charge anymore than it did Garry. The group have already turned to Mac. Having the gun would put the Thing under the kind of scrutiny it doesn't want. It is interesting to speculate on whether or not the Thing has been taking people over based solely on opportunity or if there was a strategy at work. It has picked two individuals who stand out the least. At the beginning of the film the dog spent a long time carefully watching everyone. Was it paying close attention to the social dynamics?

When Childs is bold enough to step forward and go for the gun Clark steps in his way holding a pocket knife (Childs is the last person he would want to have it). After

Mac has the gun, however, he looks at Clark until he puts the knife away, which lets us know that no alliances have been struck. Everybody is working together but they can only trust themselves. Whatever Childs's faults he doesn't seem thing-like. None of them do.

The scene ends with a shot of Windows slowly lowering his hands while we hear Mac gently speak in the background, "Alright." It creates a nice sense of the situation having played itself out as far as it can. The scene ends but the tension doesn't. Questions have only been raised, nothing has been resolved.

Windows never reveals what he knows about the keys and no-one else realises. His decision to keep quiet is understandable but a bad mistake. At best it means that Garry and Copper, two important team members are effectively removed from proceedings as they simply cannot be trusted (Garry is about to be tied to the rec' room couch). If Windows had spoken up the evidence against them would not appear so conclusive. In fact, even more may have been achieved. If it could have been pin-pointed that the Thing found the keys at that particular moment (it was under a great deal of pressure and had to take a chance) they might have been able to account for everyone's position and the list of suspects would be much more accurate. Perhaps the Thing could even have been caught. Windows makes an error we can empathise with and it may well end up killing him and everyone else. The noisy, though equally understandable, reaction to the slashed blood bags could itself be to blame for the consequences. Human nature we can compare to our own is its own worst enemy. Mac and the others will now go down the wrong path. We see the immediate result in the next few scenes. Stalemate. But the clock is ticking.

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In the next shot it is night again, there will not be any more daylight scenes. In a repeat of the earlier procedure the blood bags are placed in a small hole and burnt. Emotionally it feels like a reminder that little progress has been made. With hindsight we can see the mistakes beginning to build and the fault lines that will run through the rest of the film.

This time there is no music and the procedure is less involved. It feels more of a formality. They are making an adjustment to living with the Thing.

We don't see the group until Mac has burnt the bags. They are all there (apart from Blair). The composition is almost painterly. Mac delivers a speech which solidifies his position as leader. He describes what they are dealing with ("it wants to hide inside an imitation.": A good explanation of why Norris wouldn't take the gun even if he were a thing). Judging by the extent to which people stick together and keep a close eye on one another from this point onwards (they are also armed), it seems likely that the Thing has done all of the assimilating it can, by now. This won't prevent it from murder, however.

Many horror films try and frighten the audience by making the opponent seem almost indestructible. Here, we have something very different. Mac describes the Thing as hiding and vulnerable out in the open. It isn't needlessly aggressive but will fight if it has to. He has a form of respect for the Thing. He sees it for what it is, an animal trying to survive, just as they are. He doesn't call it names. One can imagine a tense film in which events are re-told from the Thing's point-of-view. He certainly doesn't see it as something that is virtually impossible to destroy. His speech is designed to inspire but it isn't showy. It's an appeal to reason. "There's a storm hitting us in six hours. We're

gonna find out who's who." is a great line. It lets us know about the storm which will further confine them but it doesn't feel inserted. It's pro-active with a purpose.

But that great line is ironic because we see how it contrasts with what actually does happen next.

He separates Garry, Copper and Clark from the rest of the group and tells Fuchs to begin working on a new test. Fuchs is the same here as always, he doesn't want to work alone. He may also believe that Copper is unlikely to be a Thing because he thought of the test. Mac agrees with Childs (if Copper had slashed the blood bags the test could be a way of diverting suspicion) but he deals with that problem in a different, though never-the-less forceful manner.

In many respects everything now depends upon Fuchs. As we see later it *is* possible to devise a test which will unmask the Thing and it seems likely there will be many variations. Often in the movies if someone is asked to rise to the occasion, to exceed their capabilities, they grit their teeth and by sheer willpower are able to do so. Here, Fuchs seems to be aware of his own limitations, and he is right. He is asked to do something beyond his capabilities and his demise is one of the saddest.

We next see the three innocent men being tied to the rec' room couch and drugged. The only person we see injected is Copper. The close up shows an arm actually getting stuck with a syringe. It recalls a previous shot when we saw exactly the same thing happening to Blair, except that now Copper is receiving, not administering. He is uncomfortable with Norris's amateurish handling of the needle but still submits. Garry looks away. When we know that they are innocent the sense of waste is powerful. What is all the more ironic is that Norris actually does prove to be a thing. When Copper tries

to take the syringe himself, Childs stops him (“No, Doc, he’s doing a real fine job.”). His tone is polite but firm. More often than not Childs is a likable character.

The next scene takes place more than two days later but we move into it with a straight forward cut rather than a fade or a dissolve. If we weren’t told otherwise we would assume it was later the same day. Rather than show all of the frustration and boredom of that wait they are essentially condensed into this one short scene.

With no chance of contacting the outside world Mac is recording an audio tape to act as a warning (“if none of us make it,” he says, a line which prepares us for the end). After two days, Mac’s thoughts are beginning to turn in this direction. He looks exhausted and emotionally drained, in direct contrast to his attitude just a few moments ago, in film time. We sense that his plan is taking longer than expected. Having adopted his approach they now have to live with it. Over the last two days everyone would have been required to stay in sight of each other and the storm would add to the claustrophobia. Tempers would begin to fray. Presumably, they would get little sleep and more than one person would have to remain awake at all times. Copper, a character who could be of considerable use because of his knowledge and his outlook, is sedated. And they are all gathered in the rec’ room with its drab decor and dull lighting.

We hear that Windows has found some shredded long johns, another reminder that someone has been taken over and is amongst them; we may also begin to wonder how many people have *been* assimilated. We sense that the clock is running down. Unless something happens soon they must at least start trying something new. But there doesn’t seem to be any kind of alternative. And wouldn’t the Thing be feeling the

pressure, as well? It *may* only be a matter of time until Fuchs does come up with a test and the Thing would be thinking about that the whole time.

Considering how people stick together during the latter half of the film we can surmise that Fuchs is allowed to work on his own and that Mac is allowed to leave the group but that no-one else has that privilege. If anything happens to Fuchs or Mac the culprit will be obvious.

As Mac records himself we can see Garry's gun sitting on the desktop. He tapes himself saying that "nobody trusts anybody, anymore," before deciding to rewind and tape over it. He doesn't like the way things are going. He doesn't appear to have any other suggestions.

The final two shots emphasise the open doorway behind MacReady. Although an open door is actually the best strategy it creates a feeling of vulnerability, of something watching. The fade-out gives the impression that something may be about to happen but it also signals the start of something new, of moving on, which we didn't get with the previous scene transition.

Like Mac, Fuchs is working at a desk with an open doorway behind him. He is frightened when he hears someone enter. With some signs of impatience Mac asks him if he has come up with anything but Fuchs's ideas are slight and don't inspire much hope. It would be a film convention to have Fuchs killed off just at the moment he realises what needs to be done. But Fuchs is clearly not going to be in that position for a long time, if ever. As far as the Thing is concerned, however, Fuchs is still the biggest threat and because two days have passed we can gather it has not had an opportunity to reach him. The strategy has been working. Unfortunately, Fuchs is what he is and his lack of

progress is in keeping with his character and experience. It's naturalistic and refreshing because it avoids a potential cliché. It adds an irony because the Thing is exposing itself to danger (and setting off a chain of events that may lead to its own destruction) when it probably doesn't need to. It resembles a Dashiell Hammett story in the way that everyone has their own agenda and is making mistakes, sometimes by taking the most logical route.

The scenario, at this point, is bleak. Fuchs didn't think he could achieve much on his own, he was right (although he tried his best) and he dies. The tone is failure but it's a human failure which is sad and solemn rather than angry. It is also under the surface but still a part of the story, which stops it from feeling pretentious and po-faced or preachy. It isn't a self-consciously liberal film with a message. Everything is woven into the fabric of the story. It's all just stuff that happens.

The single false note hit by the film concerns the manner in which Fuchs goes outside and the surrounding narrative. There is an effective scare scene indoors when the lights go out and someone passes in front of the camera (could it be Blair?) but the sense of increased claustrophobia works both ways. He only has to call out and he should be heard. If not he should at least make his way back to the others. Instead he follows the figure outside. One can rationalise his actions by saying that he has been working futilely for many hours and is presented with an opportunity to find out the identity of the Thing. Whoever it is gives the impression that he is going about his own business. However, the scene still feels wrong. When Fuchs does go outdoors the weather is calm when it should be stormy, as it is for the remainder of the film. How the Thing (or things; it is a mark of

the complexity of our response to the creature and its nature and its place in the world that we are not sure whether to capitalise its given name) became separated from the group is also a problem. We have the sense later that something happened which gave it the opportunity. Palmer refers to the lights having gone out and that “guys were missing.” One of the reasons *The Thing* is so successful is because of this technique of suggesting something and then leaving it to us to figure out while the movie gets on with something else. Here, though, such a crucial story development is *too* hidden and the clues aren’t strong enough. We are left with a gap and not enough information to make the imaginative leap to scale it.

The problem here lies only with the manner of the upset which allows someone to get away from the group and the reason Fuchs actually does go outside. What happens when he is out there and the mystery of his unexplained death still works extremely well. We see that Fuchs has found some clothing. They are torn in a way that indicates that whoever was wearing them has been assimilated. They are MacReady’s.

But MacReady isn’t a thing. Has the creature been busy planting all the other shredded clothes (found by Windows, Nauls, etc) in order to try and foment the paranoia? The scenes that follow work so well because they don’t go out of their way to imply that MacReady has been assimilated. The only shot in the film that actively seems to do this is the earlier view of MacReady sitting at his desk through the open doorway. Mac’s behaviour isn’t bent to fit the convenience of keeping the audience in suspense. Quite the opposite, in fact. His behaviour undermines that inference from the very beginning. As such the focus of these scenes is elsewhere and they stand up to repeat viewing. These

scenes feel even more observational than the others. It's odd that this style draws us into the film more than traditional attempts to make us identify with characters.

Fuchs has disappeared. Mac's attitude as he explains this to the group is the same as the time he spoke to Garry about the Bennings-thing, and, we sense, for the same reasons. He is angry but in control. This development means that his plan isn't working. It means that the Thing has been at work although the three suspects are tied to the couch. When we saw Mac sitting at the desk he looked haggard. Fuchs's disappearance appears to give him a boost of energy. After a period of inactivity it brings back his will to fight.

He arranges for search parties to look for Fuchs, telling Palmer to team up with Windows. Palmer says he doesn't want to go with Windows. By now the paranoia is a predictable part of the story but the characters are so well established and believable, as people, that the scenes work in spite of this. Windows's straightforward angry response, potentially grating and boring, is one of the best moments in the film ("Hey, fuck you, Palmer."). He was in the process of getting ready, prepared to trust Palmer without a second thought when the rebuff comes. The manner in which he's all business until the insult creates a very amusing moment. What makes this exchange interesting is that Palmer is almost certainly a thing. He says he would rather go with Childs, as if he feels that would be safer, but does Palmer actually have plans to take Childs over? Most likely, although apparently he never has a chance to act. As noted, the Thing's transformations are slow enough to alert someone who is suspicious. If the Thing relies on the immobile awe it causes in its victim during a metamorphosis it is unlikely to take the risk when the potential victim has a flamethrower and is watching everything very closely.

Childs butts in with, “Who says I want you going with me?” and we sense he wants to *demonstrate* his humanness by saying something to show he is suspicious.

When Mac bangs on the table and shouts at them he is irritated at the descent into obvious arguments and he wants to get moving. Like the audience he doesn't want proceedings to get bogged down in long boring shouting matches. Even though the actual arguments are entertaining his approach gels with something in the viewer's mind and reassures it.

He is angry that the Thing seems to have pulled something off, which is going to fuel his irritation with pointless arguments, it may also remind us of his response to the chess game, except that here we know he can't walk away.

In this scene Nauls doesn't talk, he has had few lines in the film up to this point. In keeping with his personality he takes part but hangs back, probably acting as most people would under the circumstances. But his presence is still felt. We see another reaction to the situation. He stays in the background but is willing to go with Mac when he suggests they look for Fuchs. He looks disturbed during the arguments. At the beginning of the film he was relaxed and droll, he is far from that now. He has certainly paid a price for not turning his music down when Bennings asked him to.

There is only one path to the tool-shed holding Blair. We see Mac, Nauls and Windows walking through the storm, passing the same location where the blood test was talked about a few days ago. Because the change in weather and light is so convincing we really do have the impression of time passing and of the place itself. The lighting and the location result in something three dimensional, all immersing. There is a contrast between

the white snow at night and the black sky, the blue camp lights and the pink flares whistling away in the wind. They cast a pink light but flare the lens blue.

The scene with Blair is both very creepy and very funny. We can be almost certain he has been assimilated by this point. He ignores MacReady's enquiry after Fuchs and asks that he be let back inside, making light of just how much havoc he caused. It is amusing, not because of any particular joke, but because of the overall situation. He is eating, sitting hunched over a tin, and wears a large thick padded coat. Next to him is a hangman's noose, presumably there in case the Thing should try and take him over but, we also sense, made because of boredom and depression. He complains of hearing "funny things out here," and one can imagine him sitting alone, listening for sounds in the wind. Even if we believe he is a thing we imagine it happening to a human.

The Thing will still have to feed its body and keep warm if it wants to function as an imitation and so this animal from another galaxy, having been forced to adopt a human form is now having to live like a bachelor in order to survive.

It is the human undercurrent that also makes the scene disturbing. Blair is convincing when he asks that he be trusted again but he seems a little too lively, a little too eager. It is the most we have seen from him. His words start to seem double-edged: "There's nothing wrong with me and if there was I'm all better now." Is he speaking as a Thing when he says this, expressing its view of tissue that hasn't been assimilated? Is there something autistic about the Thing's world view? A characteristic of the condition is to see the outside world as an extension of one's own consciousness. It is distressful when something challenges that view. The Thing appears to be trying to solve the problem.

Blair confidently says that Fuchs isn't the Thing but how would he know if he's been locked up for two days? It is possible that Blair was the one who planted the clothing that implicates Mac. When he says it isn't Fuchs he could be thinking to himself, "It's you."

When Mac is closing the viewing panel Blair gets to his feet, saying "Hey, wait a minute. Wait a minute, man." The use of such a phrase sounds uncharacteristic. One person who would say something like this is Palmer, a thing himself. Could the Palmer-thing have taken Blair over and this is a clue? An element of Palmer's personality in Blair?

They are returning to the main compound when Windows spots something. We may notice that Mac throws the flare away at about the time that Fuchs's body is coming into view, which could make us suspicious, especially considering what happens next. Fuchs's body is essentially charcoal, he has been burnt so thoroughly. The three men stand looking down at him, taking up the width of the widescreen frame. There is no cutting between them in order to emphasise one character more than the other, or to try and make MacReady look suspicious.

As they briefly discuss what might have happened there are pauses between the lines, and there is the impression of people actually thinking. We are never told what happened to Fuchs, instead we have to try and put it together. Nauls asks why it would burn him. Since *we* know it would have done so *after* Fuchs found the manufactured evidence framing MacReady, and therefore murdering him would apparently ruin that whole scheme, we have an extra clue. Although Fuchs wasn't getting very far he was still

the biggest immediate threat to the Thing. It seems likely that the clothing was already planted outside and that Fuchs simply discovered it before the Thing did away with him. It wasn't there for *him* to discover. Later, when we hear that Nauls has discovered more clothing that implicates Mac we get a clearer sense of what has been going on. Although there are still intriguing gaps and we don't know who did what, we know Mac is unlikely to keep making the same mistake with his own clothes. If Fuchs was the biggest threat that could be gotten to, MacReady was the biggest threat that had to be dealt with by other means. Presumably the phoney evidence that Fuchs found was burnt along with him and the Thing had to try again. The Thing encounters difficulties, as well.

Mac suggestion is that Fuchs may have committed suicide, introducing that theme again. Since his visit to the Norwegian camp this is a subject that never seems to be far from MacReady's mind. What does seem certain is that Fuchs couldn't have burnt himself so badly using only a flare.

The only moment we may actually feel a frisson at the thought that Mac might actually be a thing, is in this scene. He tells Windows to go back and inform everyone they have found Fuchs. When Nauls speaks up he is not timid and even here we get a sense of his droll character. He asks where they are going. Mac says they are going to his shack, when he left yesterday the light was off, now it is on. Of course, if Mac were a thing this would be the perfect opportunity to attack Nauls. We fade out on the image of them fighting the storm as they head towards the shack. For a first time viewer anything might happen, while for those familiar with the film there is probably even more to think about.

From the brief fade-out we cut to Childs, looking out through a window. We see the shack from the same angle as just a moment ago, but now the light is off. Childs starts to assume control. He will be the third leader. He begins by asking Norris, probably the most easy-going camp member, how long Mac and Nauls have been gone: Forty five minutes, is the answer, more than double Mac's deadline figure. Childs's actions are perfectly reasonable and he goes about them in a level-headed way. He has learnt some lessons, it seems. By asking Norris and calmly saying they should secure the outside doors he gives himself authority and they are happy to go along.

The camera moves in on Norris as he struggles to remove the flamethrower, giving us privileged information. They are nailing shut the outside doors at a time when it looks as though something is about to happen inside. When we see Norris, our immediate thought is that the Thing is at work somehow but this seemingly contradicts what we know about its methods. Is something else happening? Can it take someone over by stealth? However, as we saw with the Norwegian-thing that dissected by Blair, the Thing imitates the internal organs and the body runs largely as normal. It is equally plausible that Norris had a health problem which was simply imitated and which is now starting to give way, probably due to the stress of the situation and perhaps made worse by the assimilation⁸. The Thing may imitate someone who is unwell but when the host form stops functioning it will not be able to mend such an intricate system (the Thing's creations are staggering but crude compared to something like a heart) and so it will have to find other ways to improvise.

⁸ Although it carries absolutely no weight whatsoever it should probably be noted that in the script, Norris has a heart condition.

The shots of them nailing the doors closed are brief and emphasise the group effort. The music, which started just before the fade-out, is a low synthesiser score. It reacts more to the general situation than any particular feature of the action. Palmer stays close to Childs, the next potential leader. What stands out is that, with the three main suspects tied up and with Mac and Nauls gone, how reduced they look in number. The result is more intimate but they also seem more likely to voice disagreements, less likely to go along with the group.

It is unusual for a film's hero to disappear from the narrative in the manner that MacReady does here. He is the strongest character and we have come to empathise with him but now the film does something special: It allows us to see the flip side of the story. It skips the predictable by side stepping Nauls's discovery in the shack and Mac's battle with the weather. It is the opposite of traditional film making. We have been prepared for Nauls and the shredded clothes by Fuchs. To see it again would be an unnecessary repetition. The beauty of this approach is that as soon as Nauls reveals what he has found we realise what the Thing has been up to. Until that moment we have been with the group as they lock the doors, but then dramatic irony is introduced. And yet it has unfolded so surely it doesn't come as a revelation. Events we haven't witnessed suddenly fall into a kind of focus.

We hear that Nauls has cut MacReady loose of the guide-line after discovering some ripped clothing. Windows is shocked. Such is Mac's persona they would have thought it more plausible that Nauls got to MacReady. But Nauls is right in front of them, looking very human.

Windows asks when it could have gotten to him. Norris and Palmer are definitely assimilated by this point and in this scene they stand next to one another. Palmer responds to Windows, saying it could have been anytime, and he and Norris look at one another. But it is not a shifty look. We may begin to wonder to what extent the Thing is acting in the sense of lying. Is it able to control the original personality in the same way that the artificial lungs keep breathing, so that the original personality is out-front running on autopilot? Ordinarily Norris is quiet. Here he reacts to the immediacy of the situation and shouts without thinking. A human reaction or the Thing at work?

It is during this scene that we hear hints about the *something* that distracted everyone earlier and allowed the Thing to go after Fuchs and frame MacReady. Palmer, speculating on how the Thing got to Mac says that the “lights were out and guys were missing.” Norris adds (with a note of regret?) “That would have been the perfect time.” Coming thick and fast in the middle of a heated exchange it is too easy to miss but it’s the only real reference to an important event the film doesn’t show. Palmer blames Windows and a fight break out. One has the impression that Palmer picks on Windows because he is short tempered and alerts everyone that Palmer is suspicious of him. Either that or even as a thing Palmer enjoys pissing Windows off.

At this point in the story the Thing is at a high point. It is using their humanity as a weapon against them. “That’s just what this thing wants, to pit us against one another,” says Norris, which is particularly insidious because he *is* a thing. The group is beginning to splinter. There is an added confidence in the way the two human-things speak up instead of remaining in the background, which is what they have done until now. Nauls, almost crippled for the moment because of the cold, looks up at them arguing. His

expression and position reflect how hopeless the situation has become. What makes them regroup is the creepy image of the door handle being tried from the outside.

Now we get to see the humans at their worst.

Palmer's line, delivered in the hush that follows is quite funny for the response it provokes, "Let's open it," he says. It is the perfect opportunity for the Things to get rid of resourceful MacReady once and for all.

The inconsistencies in the arguments that follow reflect the characters and their circumstances. Childs says that they will let it freeze to death outside, forgetting that Things can wake up after thousands of years in the ice. Windows line, "Do you think he's changed into one of those things?" allows us to find humour in the situation that they cannot; at this point the film is really stepping back and allowing us to observe them, helped by the dramatic irony created by the torn clothing.

Childs says that nothing human could have made it back through the extreme weather, which is his weak justification for murder. Windows ask, what if they are wrong. "Well, then we're wrong," says Childs, which is both funny and a terrible thing to say. It is bad leadership because he is taking the easy option rather than confront the situation. It reflects badly on him, and that part of his character seems to be one reason why the others find it easier to debate and argue with Childs. The decision to leave Mac outside to freeze to death, amounting to murder, is something that will haunt them in an unusual way.

When they hear Mac break the supply room window, Norris shouts, "We've got no choice now," keeping up the momentum. Nauls could almost represent the everyman in this scene, watching it all unfold.

They go to the supply room door but find it locked. Mac has the infamous keys. From inside we hear him say that the tow-line snapped. In the moment, Nauls speaks up: “He knows damn well that I cut it.” There is anger mixed in, he is full of conflicting emotions. The instinct that is coming most to the fore just now is self justification. Childs and all who followed him are in a position where they must continue to assert that MacReady is a thing in order to justify their attempted murder. Yet as we saw, they had their doubts but still left him outside.

Even here Mac is kept almost entirely off frame. Other than a brief shot while Childs is smashing through the door we see nothing of him until they succeed in breaking it down. When he lights the flare he looks truly haggard and vulnerable. As with Nauls, we have a convincing impression of the destructive force of the weather.

They back away quickly when they see the dynamite. As a group they weren't exactly getting along but are drawn together in their focus on just the one character. They start to have a lynch-mob mentality. Mac can be ruthless (he didn't hesitate with Bennings) but it is based on something more intelligent and decent. The group are right to be wary of MacReady but their response is brutish.

When Mac reveals the dynamite the focus has a stillness. Windows, who had the strongest doubts about what Childs was doing, hangs back while the two Things get mixed up in the thick of it.

There is a sudden rush of action as Nauls and Norris make a grab for MacReady. It is more effective for being a brief struggle. Again, when the audience is likely to know the outcome the action is kept to a minimum.

There is something moving about the way Norris stops breathing. There is nothing dramatic about it, he simply opens his mouth and he's gone. It happens after all the action and tension of the last few hours and so it could well be his heart that gives way. Even though Norris is a thing there is something very human about it.

Under these high pressure conditions the characters reveal parts of their personalities that would ordinarily remain hidden. Nauls rushes over to help Norris and although they were all fighting just a moment ago there is nothing bitter or sarcastic about the exchange with MacReady.

Mac's behaviour is in contrast to Childs. He tells Nauls to fetch the doctor. It is said as a natural response in the heat of the moment. There is no time to filter the reaction and only as an afterthought does he add that from now on no-one gets out of his sight. That these characteristics feel so ingrained in the characters is what makes the scenes work, not the acts themselves (and the physical presence of the actors contributes to that, not just their performances but their actual presence and persona).

The tensions and the arguments in the film are interesting. Before the Thing arrived the men got along in a convincing manner. If the Thing hadn't turned up it is reasonable to suppose that each would have completed his time with little complaint. Ordinarily in films there are a variety of tensions between the characters, carefully sketched, and which the situation then exacerbates. This often (not always) feels phoney and constructed. The tensions in *The Thing* are very minor comparatively (Garry and Palmer) and therefore more life-like.

From the sound of the flare hissing we cut to the quiet sound of the flamethrower. The film has not bothered to hide that something is coming with Norris but instead of

becoming predictable it creates tension, even on subsequent viewings, partly because what happens is so extraordinary. In *The Thing* nothing is ever telegraphed only for it not to happen. Also, when information is consciously withheld it is never revealed at a later time. Therefore if it works the first time it is likely to work on other viewings. Pleasure is derived from the tone, atmosphere and the characters all working together.

Palmer and Windows set Norris down on a table for Copper, now untied. Apart from Copper, Palmer is the most interested in what is happening to Norris.

The framing of the shots in this scene communicates a great deal: We can often see several events happening at once, and yet, except for Windows and Copper working on Norris, the only thing that moves is Clark's hand. There is little camera movement and the cutting is not quick.

Mac is still bent over, the weather has now become another character in the film, he is angry but the scene doesn't degenerate into name calling. Those who took part in the murder-attempt are presented with the result of their decision, right in front of them. The two biggest players, Nauls and Childs are closest. They react differently, Nauls looks disturbed, Childs justifies himself.

Mac has involved everyone in his leadership so far and it has sprung back and hit him. He tells them what we have already figured out, that someone has set him up. The framing of the shot as he says this shows Mac's back on the edge of frame; Nauls is in front of him and behind Nauls is Clark. In the background we see Clark glimpse down and we cut to a brief point-of-view shot showing a scalpel on a table before returning to the wide shot. Nauls still looks the same and behind him Clark still looks blank (on purpose) but we now know what he is thinking. It is extremely confident film making of

a type rarely seen. It understands that the audience will recognize we are seeing the scalpel from Clark's point-of-view with hardly any visual pointers. On paper it wouldn't seem to work but on the screen it does.

Clark, like Copper and Garry, has literally sat the last few scenes out. When they are untied they react to the news about MacReady in different ways. Why is Clark willing to do what he does? There is something about his actions that remains inscrutable, as much for the other camp members as for the viewer. He is alone with his thoughts. The film doesn't grant us an insight. From what we have seen we can imagine that for Clark, the loner, this act of bravery would be a way of proving to everybody that he is human and capable of doing what they cannot. The situation, the suspicions against him and his character all contribute to his taking the scalpel and trying to use it. Another theory is that Clark takes it simply because he can. Chance plays its part, it is there and so he takes it.

The shot of the scalpel contributes to a sense that everything is building up against MacReady, that he is being surrounded with nowhere to go. And we can feel each character taking part in his own way. We have a sense of the situation in three dimensions.

Then comes one of the best lines in the film. In the midst of all this, Copper is working on Norris, with little sign of success. He says, "Stop that bickering over there. Windows, wheel that defibrillator over here." It isn't snappy, clever dialogue but it's a great line under the circumstances. Ignoring the accusation against Mac and forgetting that he himself has been tied up for the last two days he puts the situation in perspective. He comes across very convincingly as a doctor trying to save someone's life under extreme circumstances (as in a war?) and that this is of paramount importance to him. He

is the natural humanist of the group. He knows he's innocent himself and so has good reason to be sceptical of Mac's supposed thing-ness.

If Mac *were* a thing he could easily wipe out all the none-things with the flamethrower. Obviously a thing doesn't want to have to do this but if cornered it will murder and Mac is very much in a corner.

Some of the characters now begin to form the impression that someone can be a thing without even knowing it. There is little evidence that this is the case. The biggest contradiction is the large amount of conscious thing-related activity (sabotaging the blood, etc). But because they continue to justify their decision to murder MacReady by believing he *is* a thing and because Mac is so convincing and doesn't behave like one (he could wipe them out; he doesn't waste any time with Norris; he's right there in front of them) this is the only way they can resolve the two points.

When Norris is revealed as a thing it is in a way that emphasises how independent of Norris's mind it can operate. Also, Norris was the last person one would suspect. All of this together, in the heat of the moment, makes them regard Mac as a kind of irresponsible plague victim, denying he has anything wrong when he could infect them all. It gains such a foothold in their thinking that in the blood test scene those who were a part of the potential lynch mob even begin to have doubts about their own humanity while those who weren't (Mac, Garry) have no doubts at all. This is real paranoia and a demonstration of the way that a bad decision, taken in bad faith (succumbing to a questionable instinct) can turn around and bite the person who made it in unexpected ways. The pressure they are under and the limited time they have to make decisions create a situation where it is easy to do something ugly. The conscience takes a little

longer to sway the mind. In some ways the film becomes a reflection on the mind's reflex rush to survival and the thought processes just behind that. Most films would make great sport out of this kind of insight but in *The Thing* it is no big deal. And it *isn't* a big deal, it's just part of a well told monster movie.

Copper asks Windows to put some gel on the defibrillator pads and we cut to Clark's point-of-view of his own hand reaching for the scalpel. Although it cuts from Copper to Clark's hand we don't doubt who's hand it is we are seeing. It demonstrates how much information can be communicated with only a small amount of editing, and how much the audience can be trusted. We move from one man trying to save a life to another preparing to take one. Copper is trying to save the life of a thing while Clark and the others are preparing to murder a human. The line over this is, "You've got to sleep some time, MacReady." MacReady's response and his stance make him look very vulnerable and alone.

This is followed by a remarkable deep-focus shot. In the foreground, at the very edge of frame, Clark's hand now has the scalpel (we never actually see him pick it up). Beyond we can see Nauls's back, MacReady bent over and on the other side of frame, Childs, looking as if he will jump MacReady whenever he has the chance. The depth is emphasised by an open doorway which shows another room beyond. Rather than just have us identify with the hero in trouble we have a God-like shot where we see the picture as a whole. It looks like MacReady can't last much longer.

And then Norris's chest opens up.

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If the Thing did indeed imitate Norris so well it copied a heart condition then after the heart stopped working it was stuck. Disguised as a dead body it couldn't move around as a human any longer. It would probably have been content to wait as a corpse to be shipped away or at least until it was alone; as Mac said, it's vulnerable out in the open. It doesn't choose to show itself until Copper begins shocking it with the defibrillator, at which point it seems to go into a kind of reflexive defence mode. It forms a mouth in the chest and bites his arms off, it even starts chewing them. A bit of an overreaction, perhaps, but the Thing depends upon stunning those that can hurt it. The chewing motion seems automatic as if having bitten, a mouth must move. There are no shots of Copper's arms spurting blood. After he's attacked he falls to the floor and he's out of the scene. The film isn't sadistic towards the injured man or fascinated by the wound, instead it allows us to watch what the Thing is up to, which is fascinating.

The body becomes a vessel, centred around the hole it has made in the chest. As we hear the strange sounds and see tentacles emerging we feel anything could happen but to the film's credit, although the Thing seems to provide a license to imagine any weird form, all of its creations seem to be in character and follow their own logic.

Other than Copper, which the Thing had time to prepare for, it doesn't attack anybody else. It clearly needs time to plan an assault. Instead it improvises as quickly as it can and throws up a hastily put together invention using the available materials (which is why it looks like Norris), crude in one sense but remarkably sophisticated in another. It appears to be responding to the fear of attack by trying to frighten away the would-be attacker, hence the sharp scary teeth it gives the second Norris head and its overall

appearance. It is rather like a puffer fish which suddenly increases in size when faced with a predator, except here it is using the building blocks of life to respond. It is something that feels natural and evolved, as if the more extreme the appearance the more success it has had as an organism, in the same way that a bird's colours become brighter, the patterns more elaborate as natural selection plays its part.

On a different level what happens to Norris is like a surreal version of a heart attack.

At one point we can hear what sounds like two separate screams. We soon find out why: Two heads *are* screaming.

Whereas most are at least temporarily entranced by the Thing (there could almost be a temptation to see what it can come up with next), MacReady seems immune. Each of the other characters are already fleeing by the time the Norris-thing appears. He blasts it with the flamethrower. *The Thing* is so exhilarating as an action film because they really do set fire to the sets and the special effects, and the fires are not small. The flamethrower sends out a powerful burst. There is nothing restrained or artificial about the fires but neither are they elaborate for the sake of it.

While the Thing is burning and while they are putting the fire out we see Norris's head pull away from his body and slide down to the floor. The inside of the body is a green gooey substance, red would have been too unpleasant and a distraction. The image of the head is astonishingly effective and a demonstration of how much better special effects look when they are achieved in-camera. They have a weight and a presence which is very difficult to fake. The eye can tell the difference.

Norris's death was not violent but his rejuvenation certainly is. The Thing has clearly re-appropriated most of the body for other uses but the head still seems to be reacting in a human way. As it lowers to the ground it is the only part of the body that isn't burning. We have the impression that the Thing cannot easily split apart, that it takes a great deal of energy to do so and prefers to be bound together. Even when it attacks later in the film, having had time to prepare, it doesn't split apart in order to have more than one angle of approach. The Norris head looks open-to-attack and simply wants to get away. The scene follows the content, not the other way around. It becomes *about* the Thing, not making us jump by having the head attack someone.

When it grows legs and two eyes on stalks the head itself becomes a body but still behaves like a head in some ways. The mouth opens and produces a sound (could it be a language? an animal call?). Most of all though it is something entirely new. It is upside down and the facial features are not perfectly in line with the legs, what is now a body is at something of an angle. It is a great imaginative touch to have the Thing grow eyes of its own rather than use those on the head itself, it has become a vessel. It develops a distinctly Thingish appearance. Although it's a shape-shifter we have become aware of a Thing-look.

The shot is on MacReady when we see the head running away in the background. Gentle humour at the end of such an intense scene, a technique that films often employ, but here there are no wise-cracks from the hero, he remains in character. The biggest laugh comes from Palmer's response, still very much in character himself, in more ways than one ("You've got to be fucking kidding.").

We move in on MacReady. The camera doesn't move a great deal in this film (in ways that we become aware of) but in doing so here it provides a kind of emphasis, it underlines just how momentous the scene has been, emotionally as much as anything. It's as if the film is responding to what has happened. It extends the moment.

The film goes out of its way to have Palmer, a thing, notice the head and draw everyone's attention (the line could easily have been given to Windows). It is something else we think about on repeat viewing. Perhaps the Thing is reacting to the world in character. The most probable explanation is the simplest: The more perfect the disguise the greater the Thing's chance of success, and giving up the Norris-head-thing is a price worth paying.

And it works because Palmer is one of the characters least suspected by MacReady. Windows and Palmer are chosen to tie everyone down in the following scene. During the blood test MacReady sticks the needle in Palmer's blood almost as if it were a formality.

Ironically, though, it is Palmer's very attempt to win trust that leads directly to his true nature being revealed. Even the Thing makes mistakes.

The blood test scene is as tense and suspenseful as the movies get. It doesn't act as the climax and there have been no signals that something like this is coming. All of the surviving crew members (apart from Blair) are assembled together for the last time but it doesn't resemble an opera finale. It isn't grand, it just sneaks up.⁹

⁹ *The Thing* wasn't a financial success when first released and despite a cult status, it hasn't been embraced by pop culture. As a result it still feels fresh. Nothing has been watered down by parody or homage.

Everything we know about the characters comes into play but at a level below the radar. Nauls, for instance, doesn't have a verbal exchange with anyone but his presence is very strong and helps make the scene what it is (this wouldn't be possible without our having followed him to this point). All that they have been through hangs over the scene but is never referenced. It is simply there. Although the scene is isolated from all the others because it is the most suspenseful, it couldn't exist by itself and have anything like the same effect.

Mac has recovered from the beating he took from the weather. He wants to tie everybody to the chairs but they still don't trust him. He doesn't once mention their attempted murder, so the point doesn't become laboured, but it informs the scene in more ways than one. His brusque and determined character is accentuated. We may wonder at their lack of trust considering how quickly Mac set fire to Norris but, as noted, their beliefs seem to have been warped as a result of what they did and, as it turns out, they are right, as we find out with Palmer.

Mac doesn't want to tell them what he has in mind until they are all safely tied down. If one or more of the characters *are* things and he tells them about the test while they are still free it is possible they could try something.

Garry loses his temper and shouts that they should rush him, "he's not going to blow us all up." But nobody does. Garry played no part in the attempted murder and so doesn't have the same conflicted feelings. He seems to be reacting to the way he is being treated as much as anything. He has been tied to a seat without protest for more than two days and the thought of that happening again is not likely to put him in the best frame of

mind. The possibility that in his quiet co-operation he may have been letting a thing run the show would make him feel even worse.

Childs's, "You ain't tying me up," is an understandable rebellion. He is testing the water. What helps Mac to proceed is that he really does have a good idea worth testing. It's a foundation that allows him to push forward.

There is a sense that some of the characters are *acting* in subtle ways. If they really were so afraid that Mac was a thing they would have rushed him when Garry cried out, regardless of the consequences. But to what extent does Childs still believe that Mac actually has been assimilated? The feeling is that Childs may be acting to himself, contrary to his own best interests and good sense in order to be consistent with his previous actions.

We may also wonder if Mac actually would shoot Childs in cold blood. To what extent is he bluffing? Childs doesn't intend to find out. He's made his point.

Clark is obviously acting while edging closer to MacReady, planning to tackle the problem on his own (Garry tried to rally everyone). He is thinking one thing but saying something else. As such his slightly odd choice of words rings true: "No, no, let's do what Mac says . . ."

And finally the Thing itself is acting, but the Thing's performance is so good it fools everyone. By acting as they do for various human reasons the people put their lives in danger while the Thing stays safely in the background.

The build up to Clark using the scalpel recalls the scene in which he took it: The scene plays out from a low angle, his clenched hand in the immediate foreground. We know what he is thinking without having to see him, an approach that saves time and

keeps our focus on the unfolding events rather than with any person in particular. When Clark is shot we see him fall back from the same low angle as before. We are not even asked to identify with MacReady. The tension comes from the overall situation.

We feel what a waste it is for Clark to get killed so pointlessly, but his death isn't sentimentalised. Quite the opposite, it is so sudden it is chilling. After a long build-up it is over with in two seconds. We have come to know Clark quite well and suddenly he is gone. But the film is not dealing with him callously, we are left to provide the emotions. The film gives us the space to do so.

The bang of the gun effectively signals the end of the scene, as we now accept they will allow themselves to be tied up. There is a pause, partly in shock but also in case Clark's body should display any thing-like activity, and we cut to Clark being tied to the ping-pong table alongside Copper.

Mac is now stripping the plastic off the end of a roll of wire. There is something hypnotic about the tone of this sequence. Although the previous scene included action it wasn't noisy. Now it becomes even quieter, relaxed in a strange way, and the situation is allowed to creep around us and take a grip. It slows down and focuses upon every action. The voices don't betray much tension despite an enormously stressful situation.

Mac is calmer now that almost everyone is tied down. He instructs Windows to tie up Palmer and there is then a cut to Windows that, almost subliminally, tells us that time has passed. This little exchange is quiet, almost soothing. It is a return to zero, emotionally. Everything will now slowly build.

As Mac describes what he intends to do the camera slowly tracks along the five crew members. We have the impression that they are actually listening, the scene doesn't come across as exposition for the audience.

It is here that the film's ruthless approach in refusing to take the easy option and make any one person look guilty or dislikeable or stand out in any particular way, pays off. We can superimpose our own thoughts on those blank faces. We are more aware of the situation as a whole, emotionally present at every step rather than waiting for a particular event to prove us right or wrong.

In spite of what Mac is saying there is no rush to get to the test. His first two lines are, "We're going to draw a little bit of everybody's blood. We're going to find out who's the Thing." We know there is going to be an unmasking and so every second from then on creates tension. But it does not feel needlessly protracted (which would be irritating) because the film itself is enjoying every moment. It is rather like being at the end of a lengthy journey and wanting to prolong it. This explains why the scene stands up to repeat viewing. It is not just about showing who's who, it's *about* that process. It's in the moment.

The only person in the group who shows a reaction is Palmer. After Mac has announced he intends to draw a sample of everybody's blood, Palmer sighs. Blood is a weak point for the Thing. Has Palmer just had his fears confirmed?

At the end of Mac's speech he puts the knife down and the sound of this provides a nice punctuation. We see Windows drawing some blood from Nauls and then from himself. These images are queasy but the film isn't dwelling on the blood, it is paying

attention to every detail of the process. To have fudged these shots in some way would have pulled us out of the moment.

Mac points the flamethrower at Windows and heats the wire on the pilot light. It is a unique image in the cinema. We also have the sense of real objects being used in the real world, not just props on a film set.

Here the quietness of the scene comes into its own. There is no music or quick editing or unusual camera angles and so the situation gradually takes over. The movie does everything possible to minimise anything disruptive, we don't see sweat running down faces, the expressions and gestures are reduced. Because of all this it tightens around us effortlessly. There is a *sense* of hearts thudding which would be ruined if we actually heard anything like that on the soundtrack. Without knowing it, we are contributing to the scene.

Mac puts his complete faith in the test and we may wonder how wise that is when it's unproven, but as the previous scene demonstrated, he is in a desperate situation and has to make a leap of faith.

Windows's test is negative. Mac tells him to put on the second flamethrower and watch the others. As noted, for complex reasons, some of the men seem to doubt their own selves. What was Windows actually thinking in those moments just before the test? He appears to be worried that he'll test positive. The film has given us a clear enough view of the Thing to be almost certain that it doesn't operate in that way (just before Palmer is tested his expression betrays him) but their confusion helps add a slightly disorientating element for the audience. It is something else for us to consider.

Whereas Windows was afraid of the test result, MacReady isn't. "Now I'll show you what I already know." The blood hisses and Childs is unimpressed, "That's a crock of shit." Mac then tests Copper and Clark, both negative, and Childs says, "So Clark was human, huh? Which makes you a murderer, doesn't it." His arguments are inconsistent but perfectly in keeping with his state of mind.

By this point each of the four tests have proven negative. The group is paying attention but it is beginning to look as if the test may not be working. Mac is also testing the blood of the dead and although we know this is a good idea we begin to see the absurdity of the situation.

Garry has been quietly watching until now. Just as Mac is getting ready to test Palmer, he speaks up: "This is pure nonsense. It doesn't prove a thing." This line works so well because we are not being forced to identify with the hero continually. Garry's comment is not an irritating refusal to believe what is obvious. We can see his point. It is therefore the perfect distraction and Mac's angry response is equally convincing. He has just proven Copper was human and so he accuses Garry of being the only person who could have gotten to the blood. It is interesting that this subject should come up again just before Windows gets attacked by the Thing. If Windows had spoken up earlier this situation may have been avoided. For reply, Garry stares ahead. He knows the test will prove him innocent. When Mac pushes the needle into the blood there isn't a conversation going on, it's over, but it's just enough to distract us, even on repeat viewing, because the exchange is so plausible. The movie doesn't feel like it's cheating, even though our mind is elsewhere when the blood screams and jumps out of the Petri-dish.

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When Palmer is announced as next in line for the test we cut to him. His expression is priceless. He raises his eyebrows and looks deadpan, ironic even. He's a thing reacting to his imminent discovery in a human way. We may wonder what he's thinking, but can a thing think like a human being?

Mac drops the flamethrower and begins backing away. So does the blood, streaming off in another direction. Both of them instinctively think of their own survival. After the various improvisations by Norris, Mac is afraid of what the blood may do.

The flamethrower is damaged and it won't light. Windows reacts as he did when Norris began to change and backs into a corner, waiting for Mac to do the job.

Because of all this we get to see Palmer's transformation. He has waited until the very last moment and the surprise of the blood jumping out of the dish is what gives him time. Although the scene has been quiet until now it doesn't suddenly burst into action. We have the sense of a body physically changing. It looks hard work. During the Norris change there was virtually no blood, which reduced the disturbing nature of that scene, potentially strong because Norris actually looked in pain. The body was abstracted to some extent. The Norris-thing, we were reminded, was just something that looked like a human being. However, because Palmer is bringing the change on himself the film can afford to show certain gory details without alienating the viewer.

The Palmer-thing doesn't have much of a plan. It is cornered and reacting defensively. It breaks free of its restraints by sheer force and in a brilliant exhilarating moment jumps up with so much strength it sticks to the ceiling. It stays there until Mac tells Windows to blast it with the flamethrower. When Windows comes forward it drops

to land in front of him, looking seven feet tall. Windows's reaction is predictable, he freezes at the wonder of it. Before he can snap out of it, as Childs did in the nick of time, it goes on the attack. Mac is trying to make the flamethrower work, which has the quality of a bad dream, but his response is level-headed. There are no shots of him pointlessly hitting the flamethrower, he is making a proper attempt to get it working.

What the Thing does to Windows is horrible but the violence isn't pornographic. Despite the nightmarish quality it is still grounded in a reality. The Thing is using its reproductive tools to attack. It's a weird form of rape. It is clearly pumping fluid into Windows, not trying to bite his head off. The character of the Thing comes across, it doesn't just dispose of Windows and turn to MacReady, it follows its nature. Fortunately, that takes time.

As noted, it is interesting to imagine the film from the Thing's point-of-view. In this scene it is tied to a couch with two men pointing flamethrowers at it. It knows it will be dead soon if it doesn't do something and so it reacts in the only way it can. Because such thoughts are somewhere in the back of our mind, because we sense this more than we think it, the violence is counterbalanced. We see a fight for survival.

The Thing takes too long dealing with Windows. By the time it lets him go Mac has finally got the flamethrower working and he blasts it. The Thing did its best.

We can see the Thing in its changed form through the flames. It makes a noise. We may feel some sympathy for it. It smashes through a wall and falls to the floor before being obliterated by the dynamite Mac throws at it. He takes a moment before going back indoors, giving us a pause and a sense of the increasingly intense weather (which will soon play an important part in the story). Outside is the heavy bluster and the deep freeze,

inside is the warmth and the drab room and the men tied to the couch, still screaming, barely audible over the wind. The sense of place is similar to that created in a Jacques Tati film, where the sound of the waves is temporarily eclipsed by the sound of voices.

Windows is coming back. During the Thing's attack it smashed some bulbs and the darkness in that part of the room adds to the atmosphere.

When Mac goes back indoors he rushes to grab the flamethrower that Windows dropped and uses it on him. From the moment he returns there is no doubt who will win. The film doesn't have Mac save someone by blasting Windows in the nick of time. The Thing is dangerous but wouldn't lend itself to a sequel in the manner that *Alien* became *Aliens*. The Thing's attempt to fight was, in the end, violent but slightly pathetic. It is clearly not built for that kind of combat.

There is a time jump to cover the fire being put out and the wall blocked up and now the film moves quickly to get to the end of this sequence. Several seamless time jumps remove anything unnecessary. Now the focus is on the people alone, not the process.

We cut to Nauls, about to be tested. As Mac pushes the wire into the dish we can see Windows's blood sample in the next Petri-dish, which is quietly touching. The test is negative. Childs is very tense but contained. We don't realise how tense until the wire hisses in the blood and he sighs with relief. Garry on the other hand shows no sign of being unsure of himself. The scene now becomes his in a subtle way. He sits quietly and awaits the results.

The next time jump is amusing. Childs demands to be cut loose and we next see Garry alone with Childs and Nauls pointing flamethrowers at him. There is no delay. Mac

performs the test and it proves Garry innocent. It marks the end of the scene (one of the most suspenseful scenes ever) but rather than focus on the hero it stays with Garry and he gets one of the biggest laughs in the film. The scene goes where it needs to, taken there by the characters. Since Mac flamed Windows he hasn't had any dialogue. The focus has been upon the reactions of those tested.

Garry has been tied to the same couch for over two days, some of that time spent under morphine. He was untied briefly but then put back again after helping to put out the fire from the Norris-thing. He's had somebody change into a thing sitting right next to him and all of this time he has been the number one suspect. His response is sardonic and witty and unleashes his pent-up anger. It has a lot of emotion in it. A simple wise-crack, especially from MacReady would ruin everything. Garry's response seems so human.

If everything in the film has worked extremely well up until now it gets even better in the last fifteen minutes. It is here that the film becomes a true classic. It follows through on its convictions and takes the story where it wants to go, but it is more than that. The story could quite logically end different and we wouldn't feel cheated. It is imaginative, as well. It isn't simply a matter of being ruthless as a storyteller.

So far the tone has been naturalistic and humour has spontaneously occurred in unexpected places (the way Childs says "What for?" after Mac has said he wants everybody tied up). Now it darkens considerably. Although they appear to be getting on top of the situation for the first time the mood is not celebratory. The mistakes and suspicions appear to have bruised them.

There is a difference in emphasise. They now trust one another and there is a complex bond between them. They have all had to confront their own characters and their own reactions and mistakes, so they are more humble in some respects. They are all aware of each other now in a way that they weren't at the beginning of the film. The subtle tone change is part of the characters and the storytelling. It isn't there merely for effect, as when a comedy suddenly becomes a horror.

Their number has been considerably reduced. In most films when this happens the characters become quicker and more desperate. There is a burst of adrenaline. Here, that doesn't happen, they start to look genuinely tired and there is a conscious purpose to their actions. Thinking occurs, it is not simply a rush into action in which instinct takes over. The battle of wits between the humans and the Thing does not involve narrowly dodging bullets. Instead it is slow and logical and follows through on a brutal truth: The Thing can afford to freeze but the humans cannot. The Thing just wants to survive, it doesn't want to pull the trigger. It doesn't have revenge on its mind. There are no jokes. The lighting becomes increasingly baroque, but justifiably so, relying more upon the practicals¹⁰, which always has the effect of drawing us closer into a scene. Flares and flames often seem to be providing all of the important light for a scene.

The camera tracks towards Childs as he stands peering out of a window. It is similar to the earlier shot, when we saw him waiting for Mac and Nauls to return from the search for Fuchs. At the side of him are the planks of wood Norris was going to use to nail the doors closed. As the camera tracks up to the doorway we hear light sounds of

¹⁰ Practical lights are those that we see in shot. A movie is normally lit by lights from behind the camera and the practicals are there solely for appearances. To actually light using the practicals is a big challenge and creates a very particular and very beautiful look (see *Barry Lyndon*; *Alphaville*).

movement but Childs doesn't suddenly look around. He doesn't move until Mac speaks. There is now a strange calm.

Mac explains that they are going out to give Blair the test and to burn him if he tries to return to the camp alone. Childs doesn't talk, he simply nods. There is a quiet acceptance that they may lose. It is an unusual line in many respects because the odds seem to be very much in their favour. But the movie hasn't tried to give us a false ending with the blood test. It doesn't try and fool us into thinking it is over. It knows that *we* know it isn't and these thoughts are used to make us adjust to the ever darkening mood. We make a correction.

The expression on Childs's face is difficult to read. Under different circumstances it would look suspicious. Perhaps even he doesn't know exactly how he feels but he will be aware of the mistakes and the part he played in them.

The shot of Nauls, Garry and Mac heading to the tool-shed, holding onto the rope and struggling against the wind is the last time we see this location. Now the weather is brutal. It seems to emphasise the humanity of the camp buildings with their lights on. At least from the outside. Inside the banality gives a different impression.

Many viewers have expressed surprise when they realise the number of survivors is so small. An indication that the film has not been about blood and guts, otherwise they would think the opposite: How can there be so many?

Nauls leads the way to the shed, the man who previously cut Mac loose of the tow-rope. When they reach it the door is open and we can see the roof is missing. The adapted living quarters are frozen and coated with frost. The weather ever present and closing in. It is against this background that the three tired men are working together. The

shot is low as they enter the room, an unusual angle for this film. Instead of making them look powerful (the received wisdom) it allows us to see the skeletal ceiling and it makes us aware of the floor. Every shot choice and camera movement underlines how they are working together. They move at the same time and compliment each other in the composition. It creates an almost subliminal effect of the characters in harmony.

When Mac walks over the planks they move. Nauls and Garry exchange a look and begin removing them. They find a tunnel, cut out in the ice. It resembles a tunnel from a World War 2 escape movie. Without thinking, it is Garry, not Mac, who is the first to climb down. There is none of the tired character building we might expect (“Please, Mac, let me . . . “). Often, when the hero is drawn into the scenario of a film against his will he becomes more and more involved until at the end he is in full control. *The Thing* interrupts that pattern in the final act. The reward for Mac’s having become involved is bleak, death itself, but it isn’t empty.

The editing jumps ahead of the characters as they head down the tunnel but the framing means we make the discoveries at the same time as they do. The effect is to keep us with them emotionally but to lesson the suspense and fear that such a scene could effortlessly create. We can then focus on the discovery itself without distraction.

The conversation is equally divided between them. They react to the ship as characters, not as purveyors of information. They make statements which lead nowhere because they don’t have any answers.

The ship is another clue and a puzzle in itself. It just sits there, unfinished. We can see a screwdriver and a pair of pliers on one of the panels. It resembles the ship from the beginning of the film. Did the Thing assimilate the alien intelligence that flew the craft at

the beginning of the film and is using a retained knowledge to build something similar now? We have to deal with these questions in the same way as the characters. The imagination behind the film is one that sees the events happening first. It imagines a story and can feel if it adds up or not. Nothing is constructed as a symbol or for effect. It is storytelling at its purest.

There is something exotic about the craft. It is persuasive as something conceived by an alien intelligence. It is different and out of place, rather as if they had discovered an Egyptian tomb. Its exact purpose is never made clear. Has it been built to leave the planet or just Antarctica? Considering the materials used (parts from the helicopter) it seems most likely that it couldn't pass through the atmosphere but the propulsion and design is clearly based upon the alien ship.

Is the Thing trying to get to civilisation because it wants to take over more life and spread its genes or is it just trying to survive? Both. And one because of the other. But it is surprising how few people it assimilated in the camp. Perhaps circumstances forced it to be cautious. We don't know what the Thing encountered at the Norwegian camp but it does seem to have met with violent resistance wherever it has gone, and it responds in equal terms. Despite all this it still needs to be stopped. The destruction and the attempts to kill it do not come across as unintelligent or a glorification of ignorance but as something that needs to be done.

The lighting here is very beautiful. Their voices echo. The sense of place is very strong. The coldness and the short-lived flares (a new one always needs to be struck) create an environment from which there is no escape. Although their dress makes them blend in we are especially aware of people against this setting.

“Where does it want to go?” asks Nauls.

“Any place but here,” is Mac’s response.

We cut to a tracking shot inside the main camp. It is the first time we have heard the main theme since the Norwegian dog was in the film and it signals something important. It comes directly after Mac’s line. We have seen how grimly determined the Thing is to get away and something about the speed of the tracking shot matches this. We appear to be seeing a point-of-view shot from the Thing. It looks down the steps leading to the generator room before moving up and through a doorway and into the room where we last saw Childs. The door is open and there is a sprinkling of fresh snow on the floor. Childs is gone. The only explanation ever given is Childs’s own. If the point-of-view shot is indeed from the Blair-thing then Childs, who was armed, could have killed it. He has abandoned his post in one sense. The snow on the floor indicates that the door has been open for some time. In the next scene we see Childs running out into the snow. Could the tracking shot have been from Childs’s point-of-view, the Thing already having taken him over? We know the Thing rips through clothing when it takes someone over and Childs *may* be wearing a different coat when we next see him. Other coats are visible here, hanging on pegs.

The shot comes to a gentle stop in the doorway, leaving the question unanswered. The movement is exactly how the Blair-thing would travel if it found Childs gone. We know its main interest is the generator room nearby. The shot is self contained. Without it we would still learn that Childs has gone out into the snow. The music lets us know straight away that the scene is not there for suspense (such scenes are mostly

unaccompanied by music). We leave the characters briefly to be made aware of another intelligence indoors. It has the feel of something being announced.

These final scenes have a rhythm all of their own, it is like the rest of the film but concentrated. The rhythm is felt in the editing and on the soundtrack (the sound of a flare being struck).

The music carries over the cut. Mac and Garry are preparing the dynamite while Nauls stands watch. Childs appears in the distance, outside the main camp, staggers slightly. The shot is astonishingly beautiful. The wind is tearing away at the snow and the building. Nauls is so well wrapped up he is barely visible. He calls the others over but by the time they arrive Childs is out of view. The lights go out. Mac lights a flare which illuminates the scene.

The three characters look frozen already. Mac is pale. Their clothing is increasingly functional and colourless. Mac says that in six hours the temperature will be a hundred below. Their appearance and the sense of the weather are now so well established that not only is this believable, it's felt.

The characters now start to achieve a kind of nobility, a dignity. Mac knows they are dealing with something that simply wants to live: "It just wants to go to sleep in the cold until the rescue team finds it." Even here there is no thought of calling it names. In this remote bleak place it has become a potential fight for the planet but it's on a very human level, it is intimate and personal. A fight for civilisation that for once doesn't feel like a comic book story.

At the forefront are these characters and what makes them worthwhile. They are cut off from the world, by their personalities as much as anything (it is partly that which

drew some of them to the remote location in the first place) but they are willing to sacrifice themselves. In an era when it is often said that life is not very fulfilling, even depressing, these characters reflect us in many ways (their eccentricities, alienation) but when confronted with the abyss and an opportunity to make a real contribution, they do so. It's a weird, sad kind of wish fulfilment. The human race still has something going for it: The Norwegians began the film by doing something very similar, trying to destroy the Thing no matter what the cost to themselves.

Garry asks, what they can do? Mac says that no matter what happens to them they cannot let the Thing freeze again. He adds, "We're not getting out of here alive. But neither's that thing." It signals early on that there is not going to be a happy ending. Their heroism is not brash. There is an acceptance of their fate. The paranoia has gone and now the fear for themselves largely evaporates.

Nauls, who until late in the film was willing to stand back and allow others to make the decisions in the hope that everything would resolve itself is the only one who looks distressed.

"Maybe we'll just warm things up around here," Mac says and smiles a complex smile. It's as if he's relieved a decision of this type has finally been made. He doesn't have to worry about it any more. Garry, staring at him, smiles slightly, as well. It's a natural human response, to smile in response to another.

The Thing cannot afford to stray too far away from the main camp or there is a risk it will not be found by the rescue team. When Mac, Garry and Nauls begin setting fire to the rooms they are buying time. Keeping themselves alive a little longer and working to flush

the Thing out into the open so they can confront it. There is only a limited number of places it can hide.

They go about this task as a group. It is Nauls who drives the J.C.B. into the compound and Garry who starts axing the fuel container. The music that began with the tracking shot stops when they begin setting fire to the main compound and this sequence is introduced by a brief moment of silence. There is no sense that the Thing is going to jump out at them. We are seeing a plan put into effect. The way the scene is shot, one explosion after another, shares the point of view of the characters.

Soon, everything is in flames. They stand and look at the burning corridor for a moment. Whereas the earlier scenes of flamethrowers being used indoors had something exhilarating about them, this doesn't. There is no joy in the destruction.

It may be a kamikaze mission but they appear too tired and resigned to their fate to feel much sadness or regret. They don't appear to be afraid.

“Generator room.” *Pfeszzooo.*

The sound and the timing of that flare tells us that something important is going to happen. The rhythm of the film is now like music. We hear the cap bounce on the floor and they begin descending the steps. The camera pans down to follow them and the image recalls the earlier tracking shot, which revealed that Childs had disappeared: It dipped down to show this very angle. The subtle repetition adds to our unease. Of course, we know that the Thing has been down there because the lights have gone out but this visual rhyme is more effective. Adding to our disorientation is the knowledge that only one Thing remains and yet it appears to have been doing two things at once. Childs was

running out into the storm at the same time that something was tampering with the generator. Even when we know the film well this is still effective because it remains unresolved. The tracking shot served more than one purpose. It was the film taking over the narrative, it cut away from the main characters and it didn't reveal much in terms of story. Instead it contributes to the atmosphere and it puts us closer to the state of the characters by creating that unease as they walk down the steps. When they were setting fire to the rooms there was no real sense of threat. Now, there certainly is but it feels conjured from the ether.

There is a crash and an explosion which carries over the cut to the generator room, except in here it sounds more distant and reverberate. There are many subtle sounds in here.

We first see them entering the room in a shot taken with a long lens, which is unusual for *The Thing*. They are virtually obscured by the steam and the small light sources dazzle the camera. The generator room is bleak but incredibly beautiful. The fires above are melting the snow and water pours down. There is a contrast between the frozen walls and the hot steam. But it is the three exhausted characters against this background and their purpose that make the scene what it is.

Their descent is covered in just one shot, a more familiar wide angle lens. The suspense is very high and radiates off the screen. It is not generated by any one particular shot or the thought that we may be made jump by the Thing's sudden appearance but by the sense of unease that began in the previous scene. There is a powerful feeling of expectancy, of events coming to a head.

When Garry goes to inspect the generator the shot is there ahead of him. Films can telegraph much of what is coming, sometimes to misdirect (although the rewards from such an approach are often only short-term). What is telegraphed here is that there will not be a shock around the corner. Even here the film is trying to let us relax into the situation so that it creeps around us. Garry deflates and leans back. He says the generator has gone. Mac asks if there is any way it can be fixed, a final thought towards survival. Garry looks back. "It's *gone*, MacReady." That rhythm again. This is Garry's final line. One of his first was, "Quit that griping, MacReady." He is one of the few characters to refer to Mac without abbreviating his name.

The missing generator underlines that we are dealing with something which continues to be strange and unfamiliar.

When MacReady was entering the room he held his flare out to look at a lantern on some barrels. There is now a time jump and we see that Mac has the lantern, lit. A little detail, it contributes to the jump forward in time. We know what they were doing in those few seconds and it fills the gap. It doesn't feel like a jump forward solely for the convenience of the movie and so when Mac tells Garry and Nauls what they are going to do it doesn't feel like shoe-horned exposition.

"Alright, we're gonna bring this whole place down under the ice." Mac looks from one to the other and they nod quietly. They don't seem to be concerned about themselves at all, now. All that matters is stopping the Thing.

We see them planting the dynamite. Nauls places his near the generator. Garry opens the gate to an old store-room, his lamp dazzling the camera. Mac is in the background keeping an eye on them both, looking up regularly.

It is a beautiful section of the set, sometimes lit solely by Garry's headlamp. We can see dowdy office equipment, frozen solid and crusted with ice. As Garry ventures further in his lamp acts faulty. He takes it off and leans against a wall to look at it, cutting himself off from Mac as he does so and Blair appears. The build up is naturalistic and Garry's mistake understandable but Blair's appearance is unsurprising. As soon as Garry's light acts faulty we gather something is going to happen. In many ways the film would benefit if Blair didn't appear again (or at least only in the sense that his face can be glimpsed on the side of the creature). On the other hand it does raise a question: We often have the impression that we don't quite understand everything that is happening behind the scenes. Blair's appearance, quickly followed by the big creature, makes us think of doubling. Would Blair have had time to become part of it? Change into it? Or is there more than one Thing at the end? Did Childs actually see something outside?

Blair murders Garry as quickly and as quietly as possible. Assimilation takes too long, as Palmer demonstrated. Garry's death does not feel tragic but more like an early loss in a battle, an inconvenience to the plan. This stems not from coldness but their own attitude towards their impending demise.

Blair's sudden appearance prepares us for Nauls. He hears something happening in the storeroom and walks towards it. He is still in sight of Mac. We pull back past the same landmark that Garry passed. We cut to behind him as he shines the torch around. The whole sequence is covered in two shots and because of the length becomes extremely suspenseful. We know he's heading into danger. Before he gets too far we cut back to Mac preparing the plunger detonator. Almost immediately he calls out, "How's it coming in there?" He receives no reply. By showing Garry attacked and Nauls heading in the

same direction it removes the repetition of seeing the same thing twice. Instead he simply disappears and this is a much more striking touch. We never know what happened to him. It puts us more in the mind of MacReady, working one minute with two colleagues, only to suddenly discover he's on his own. But he knows now that the Thing is down there, still fighting for its life. Hiding from him at the moment.

The suspense of this sequence is expertly crafted. We think we can hear a sound but we aren't sure. Mac slowly lifts the plunger.

But it's more than just clever pacing. Their personalities come into play (Mac and the Thing). The scene plays by the rules. The Thing is waiting down there because it has to, not because it is a way of helping the movie deliver a suspense sequence.

The situation is something of a stand-off. It is also rather like a chess game in which there are pressure squares and different advantages for each side. Mac has the dynamite. The Thing can move around under the floor. It is waiting for Mac to move far enough forward into that part of the room, but he knows that that area has become like quicksand. So he stops at the gate, a marker that both Garry and Nauls crossed.

The Thing has played all its moves and revealed itself. When Mac lights the dynamite fuse it is cornered and decides to charge him because it has no other option. The floorboards shuffle as it moves along underground.

Mac jumps out of the way and it is not elegant. He hits some barrels and bounces back into the Thing's path. If it had not run out of tunnel, or hit a foundation wall, it would have caught him.

Everything now happens quickly, there is no further suspense.

The Thing blasts a hole in the floor and a tentacle sweeps out. It succeeds in grabbing the detonator but not Mac. He is out of reach. So it then does exactly what it has done before, except here it is multiplied by ten. It throws up a frightening distraction to try and hypnotise its attacker. But despite its heart-stopping appearance there is something of *The Wizard of Oz* about it. Its appearance is so awesome precisely because it cannot do any immediate harm. Because the Thing couldn't assimilate Garry or Nauls (the only two remaining people Mac could trust) it was forced to confront Mac without disguise, at its most vulnerable. It appears as a hodgepodge of different species. They all react as one. The human face looks like Blair. A strange, twisted dog-thing emerges from the trunk, an indicator that whoever took Blair over was them-self taken over by the dog-thing. It snarls and makes a lot of noise but it does so precisely because it is not a threat.

Is the dog-thing that emerges trying to reach Mac?

He is the only one who hasn't hesitated when confronted by the Thing's creations. It's as if the Thing realised this but rather than try something different it did the only thing it knows but on a grander scale. It is hampered by its own abilities, its own nature. Its attempt to freeze the humans to death was an intelligent plan that acknowledged its own weakness. Now it has been forced out into the open, literally cornered with no one to imitate, and it throws everything it has got into performing the only act it knows.

When Mac looks back, having rolled over and grabbed the dynamite there is a lengthy shot of the creature. The film is giving us a good look but it can afford to do so because the Thing is helpless. Mac shouts a very human insult (essentially what the Thing is trying to say to him in its own way), throws the dynamite and runs away.

Even the explosions seem to match the rhythm of the film. There are several shots of the camp blasting apart and then a building explodes in wide-shot producing a large fireball, a moment later a smaller shack next to it blows up with a small -flump- sound, perfectly timed.

The film is not interested in showing Mac narrowly avoiding death, there is little point since he is going to die anyway. The explosions are very impressive but not joyful, as is often the case at the end of a film. They are reminiscent of the silent explosion we saw on the Norwegian videotape and, of course, the camp now resembles its neighbour. There is something sad about it.

The landscape is dark and frozen and there probably isn't another human being for hundreds of miles. The fires already look as if they are burning down, and as soon as they die so will any survivors.

Unless . . .

Unless, of course, one of them is a thing.

After the final explosion we hold on the burning camp. There is then a cut to somewhere inside. As we have found on several occasions a simple cut can include an unannounced time jump. Something important may well have happened here.

Mac appears in the background. He now has a blanket draped over him and has found a bottle of whiskey (would the tape he made earlier have survived the explosions?). He is stiff and bent over and walks awkwardly. There are fires all around but we can hear the wind.

In a single shot, Mac walks towards the camera and sits down. There are no angles from his point-of-view, looking about the camp, and the camera isn't tracking next to him, but we feel much closer to the character than we would if the scene were split up. It emphasises how alone he is by showing him in his environment. Mac is probably only half aware of his surroundings himself. This shot goes some way towards recreating that. Point-of-view angles assume a heightened consciousness on the part of the looker, a focus that Mac doesn't have.

Childs appears just as Mac is sitting down and Mac has to twist his whole body around to look. Their conversation is fascinating. As a tone it is the perfect way to end the film. It is quiet and a great deal is communicated by looks alone. There is the feeling of distrust and humanity. The music that plays is the piece we first heard during the visit to the Norwegian camp, which is fitting. This final scene perfectly encapsulates the themes of the film and it does so naturally, without pretentiousness.

When Childs explains that he thought he saw Blair and ran out into the storm, Mac begins laughing. It is slightly desperate, ironic, a mixture of things. He knows that that apparent mistake by Childs could have cost them everything. He also knows that there is no way of proving if it is true or false and so after everything they have been through there is still an element of doubt.

Childs's story could well be true, and it sounds believable, but there is something about it that makes us uneasy. The lights went out while we could see him so we know he couldn't possibly have seen Blair. But if he were guilty, why go charging out into the storm like that? Did he make a mistake or is he lying?

At the same time, because of the time jump we cannot be completely sure about Mac. The film does seem to imply an important difference between them. MacReady's breath is very visible, Childs's isn't. Does this show MacReady is hotter and more thing-like? Does it show anything? If MacReady had somehow been assimilated after the explosions then he would sit down precisely where he does in order to be found by the rescue team.

The film allows us to see the situation from the point-of-view of both men.

Childs has a flamethrower and if he were a thing he could use it on Mac without ceremony, but he wanted to do just that earlier in the film. What stopped him then is what would stop him now: The dynamite that Mac carries around with him. It's a true stalemate. They both have the ability to destroy one another and so neither can be sure. They just have to drift off the sleep that way.

Childs takes the bottle of whiskey that Mac offers, smiles and sips from it. Mac laughs. Some of the concern earlier in the film, perhaps wrongly, was that a small particle of the Thing could be dangerous. Fuchs suggested they should prepare their own food. Does Mac pass the bottle as a test? Or maybe even as a thing trying to infect someone wearing a flamethrower? Is his laugh victorious, or bitter because Childs has failed the test? If Childs were human he *should* refuse it.

We may remember that the film began with Mac losing a game of strategy to an inhuman opponent (his chess computer) and that he then poured whiskey into it. Is it that thought that makes him laugh now, or is it the thought that all of this proves nothing (Childs could have forgotten; he could be thinking, "What the hell?"). It is a whirl of ambiguity.

Despite this, and the lack of certainty is what makes the ending so powerful, we are likely to think of them as human. It is all so fitting and *The Thing* is not the kind of film to use trickery or be tempted by the easy charm of a surprise ending. The ambiguity contributes to an overall atmosphere.

As such we might note that Mac began the film drinking alone but he ends it drinking with someone else, and that together they have done something honourable. It is this stoical acceptance of their fate that is so evocative. The sense of their humanity is very strong.

In many respects *The Thing* is a catalogue of mistakes and the often deadly spin-off consequences, but we are with them every step of the way and somehow it is by *showing* these mistakes and how the people have to live with them that something positive about humanity is communicated.

Finally, there is, of course, one other possibility. And that is that they are *both* Things. Seen in this light their final conversation has a very different meaning:

“Did you kill it?” (Meaning MacReady)

“Are you the only one who made it?”

“Thought I saw Blair. Went off after him.”

“How will we make it?”

“Why don’t we just wait here for a while? See what happens.”

But perhaps that’s just for fun. We can’t really ever be sure. We could try asking Kurt Russell who played MacReady, or Wilford Brimley who played Blair, or T.K. Carter who was Nauls, or David Clennon who played Palmer, or Keith David who played Childs, or Richard Dysart who played Copper, or Charles Hallahan who played Norris,

except we can't because he has since died, or Peter Maloney who was Bennings, or Richard Massur who played Clark, or Donald Moffat who was Garry, or Joel Polis who was Fuchs or Rob Bottin who did the special effects, or John L. Lloyd who was the production designer, or Dean Cundey the cinematographer, or Ennio Morricone who did the music, or David Foster and Lawrence Turman and Stuart Cohen, the producers, or Todd Ramsay who was the editor, or even Bill Lancaster the author of the script, except we can't because he has since died or even John Carpenter who directed it, but I'm not sure if they'd know any more than we do.

Final Notes

This book was written in longhand in two A4 ledgers: 08/01/06 – 17/02/06.

Typed and revised: 23/03/06 – 10/04/06.

A long-time fan of *The Thing*, I got the idea after reading through the forums of a website (www.outpost31.com) where men and women have spent years discussing the film. A debate concerning the identity of the shadow on the wall could become so all embracing that eventually it seemed to reference every branch of human knowledge, from biology to philosophy.

There are many different ways to read *The Thing*. The whole point of this book is to demonstrate a method of film making which allows that to happen. More than likely (hopefully), others will disagree with my interpretations.

Here is an interesting little point: I know *The Thing* about as well as anybody can. Since first seeing it (aged around ten) I have watched it many dozens of times (I'm now thirty one). While writing this book I would watch a few minutes late at night, make some notes and go to bed. The next morning, when I should have been working, I wrote the book properly based upon the notes. Now, here's what's interesting: If I went back later that day and re-watched the scene I had just written about I still found, in spite of all those previous viewings, in spite of the close attention I had been paying while I made the notes, that it looked different. The version in my head had been distorted by the way

memory works. Rooms were a different shape, the camera didn't move quite as I'd remembered. And yet that version in my head felt very real. I *remembered* it.

Robert Meakin