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Anne Billson: THE THING

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Anne Billson: The Thing

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The BFI should be praised for including *The Thing* (1982) in its Modern Classics series. Anne Billson's well-illustrated book is a spirited 'case for the defence' (p.11) as she feels a grave injustice has been done to a film which was a critical and commercial failure at the time of its release and has never been critically re-evaluated since. She puts this down to a number of reasons. The first of which is the normal one defenders of commercially unsuccessful films of the early 80's give: *ET*, and the reactionary demands of its Reaganite audience, for whom *The Thing's* bleak ending was considered too subversive. She argues convincingly that this film rightfully belongs to the anti-establishment cinema of the late 1960's and early 70's. Other reasons relate to it being an 'unnecessary', gory remake of the SF classic *The Thing from Another World* (1951), whose Hawksian ideology, critics, being older and uninterested in the spectacle of modern SF/horror, could relate to.

I, like Billson, was transfixed by *The Thing's* atmosphere of tension and paranoia fuelled by its breathtaking/stomach turning special effects, and view the film as

part of a golden age of SF/horror in the early 80's, stretching from *Alien* (1979) to *Aliens* (1986). She points out that's its lack of closure and its homages to the original give it a mythical, cyclical quality.

Billson is very good at describing the 'mechanics' by which director John Carpenter creates his suspense, which is, as often as not, a direct rebuttal to the criticisms which are made about the film: the pared down plot isolates the characters à la *Alien* or *The Evil Dead* (1983), the lack of female characters allows the film to focus on the mistrust and breakdown of authority between the men without the interference of gender politics, and the indeterminate number of things running round and the shredded garments which are found at intervals, which, rather than confusing the plot, emphasise the premise of the original novella *Who Goes there?*, that anyone could be a thing, the tattered shirts acting as a MacGuffin to distract the audience (although critics and audiences still find the narrative perplexing). She feels the twelve characters are well-delineated, their varied physical characteristics alone being enough for identification.

Of course, it is the gruesome special effects which alienated most viewers. No-one denies the innovative quality of what Rob Bottin produced for Carpenter, and the effects it's had on subsequent films, although you could argue Dick Smith's work in *The Exorcist* (1973) or Roger Dicken's 'chest-burster' in *Alien* have had a greater effect on the reception and acceptance of such images in contemporary cinema, but it seems to me that Billson has failed to make a case for why such repulsive images are either necessary to the story or make the film a classic. It is clear from her book both Carpenter and Bottin wanted to bring the monster into the light and make you believe in it, but also remind you that the things don't use shadows to hide in; „man is the warmest place to hide“. Personally, these sequences of mutating forms make spectacular cinema, but films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) or even *The Stepford Wives* (1975) were able to invoke that sense of paranoia, and question the nature of humanity without resorting to such explicit visuals. However, she rightfully defends Carpenter's ability to direct these scenes with tension, in particular the blood testing scene, after which I remember the audience jumping out of their seats.

Billson writes about *The Thing* as a fan, which is no bad thing. SF fans, myself included, like the spectacle in the genre, and as Carpenter particularly gives those effects such a central role, you cannot ignore their significance to the over-all meaning of the film. However, Billson doesn't analyse the dark pleasures to be had from such extreme images, or even comment upon the nature of the relationship audiences have with such cinema. She is much more interested in conjecturing about who was a thing and for how long. She asks questions, which neither the film nor the audience are asking themselves, about the nature of being a thing, rather than the nature of being human. She ignores Carpenter's own words in an interview with Yoskiaki Washizu in 1993, „[...] it's like whatever kind of plague that attacks mankind. But it's the reactions of the humans I'm interested in.“ However,

philosophical discussions about the nature of humanity are relatively absent in relation to a film like *Bladerunner* (1982).

She seems dismissive of any attempts to investigate the film's meaning by saying „horror subtexts are too subversive . . . to be pinned down in a single definitive interpretation“ (p.77). It seems neglectful not to apply some of the concepts around Body Horror to a film which has some of the most excessive manipulations of the human form. Surely, anxieties around the human body are being expressed here, even if the director says he is more interested in the way people behave and Rob Bottin says the effects aren't gross, „it's fun.“ (p.75)

There are even some interesting interpretations by applying a little Freud. Are we watching men's fears with regard to the feminine? We see a *vagina dentata* when Norris's chest opens up to reveal jagged teeth, and when his head detaches itself and walks away on spider legs, are we seeing a castration anxiety being played out? Is the constantly procreating thing, a mobile pulsating womb, enacting versions of the primal scene? The lack of female characters could be significant! Even the self-reflexive nature of lines such as „You've got to be fucking kidding“ when Palmer sees the head walk off, could be deserving of a little analysis, for as well as allowing us to relate to the 'ordinary characters' and allowing a note grim humour to be introduced, they could be significant as a 'textual' and 'institutional' event.

Overall, Billson has fashioned a book which reflects her enthusiasm for the film, and to a certain extent critically re-evaluates it. It is an enjoyable and quick read, written in a down to earth, approachable style with an ironic tone, but it needs a little more academic meat to it in order to lift it above a purely personal appeal for the film's wider acceptance. In any case, it should lead a number of readers back for another viewing.

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