

‘Mimic the Strata’ or What Is Becoming About Becoming-*The Thing*

Abstract

The article presents a post-humanist reading of John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982). At forty, the second adaptation of John Campbell’s Jr. novella *Who Goes There?* (1938) has recently undergone a revival of critical interest. However, this interest has only elicited – to date – new iterations of the traditional paradigm of ideological readings of the film. This article attempts to read *The Thing* outside the paradigm of ideology and human(ist) subjectivity, as per the formulation of Louis Althusser (2014), as well as to critique such paradigm. First, the article offers an analysis of the ideological components at work in various traditional readings of the film. Then it scrutinizes ways in which these traditional readings can be overcome. This opens the possibility of a post-humanist interpretation of the film, an interpretation in which the Thing is not just a manifestation of otherness, but a material and effective realization of life seen from a non-humanist perspective. This reading arises after dispensing with the subject-object relationship enforced in Althusser’s ideological structures. Outside these structures, the article then ponders on the materiality of the Thing through Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concept of the Body without Organs (‘BwO’), which envisages the body as a material dimension for the flow of becoming, a dynamic force field free of fixed and normative pre-conceptions. Finally, the article explores the new sources of horror in the film, as well as the ethico-political implications this analysis brings to fore.

Keywords

The Thing; John Carpenter; Deleuze; Guattari; Post-humanism; Althusser; ideology.

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Introduction

Forty years after its premiere, a recent revival of interest has pulled the critical focus back on John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982), the second adaptation of John Campbell’s novella *Who Goes There?* (1938). *The Thing* recounts the gruesome fate endured by a group of men – scientists and support personnel – living in an isolated Antarctic research station, on account of a shapeshifting, mimicking alien creature that penetrates said station. As the creature wreaks havoc, men become increasingly suspicious of each other, since they all could be human imitations or *Things*. MacReady (Kurt Russell) leads the efforts to exterminate the alien Thing, yet to no avail, as all men succumb to various deaths. As a last resort, MacReady sets the station on fire to contain the menace, even as he and Childs (Keith David) – or maybe their alien imitations? – remain the sole survivors. The film has garnered its well-earned current attention in the wake, mostly, of the cultural discussions of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Academic (Thomas 2022) or mainstream (Khairy 2020) alike, new criticisms of the film have, however, resumed where traditional readings arguably left off, i.e., providing interpretations that construe the Thing through various ideological discourses, as a manifestation of the ‘other’ or the dissimilar (i.e., the ‘female’, the ‘queer’, the ‘disabled’ or the ‘diseased’, etc.) against which the “I” (i.e., the ‘male’, the ‘straight man’, the ‘wholesome’, etc.) can define his identity. These are valuable and valued readings indeed, for they mostly operate within the interpretative boundaries the film arguably hints at. There are, however, alternative readings to these interpretations, mostly enabled by Stephen Prince’s capital contribution to the film’s canon of criticism (2004). Construing through the lens of structuralist anthropology, Prince already points out some of the underlying – and dysfunctional – contradictions ideological readings bring to the fore and presents instead a critique of the film as ideological process. Albeit obliquely – i.e., withholding the term ‘ideological’ – Prince upholds that the film seems to

function, indeed, *ideologically*, i.e. within the boundaries set by both the system of meaning culture enforces and the power structure that legitimizes said meaning: ‘Emphasis is placed on a culture’s rituals, beliefs, and customs, its means of imposing a system of punctuation on the world’ (2004: 129); even as he ponders the weaknesses and flimsiness the ‘imaginary’ relations of ideology (Althusser 2014: 259) and the boundaries of its organized structures betray (2004: 128-129).

This article attempts to read *The Thing* differently too, as it ushers in a post-humanist interpretation of the film. It is post-humanist because it is post-ideological, as it focuses on the meaning constructed beyond the human ‘subject’, i.e. the way in which ideology articulates the individual (Althusser 2014: 265), ultimately, the basic constituent of ideology. Overall, the article sets out to *think* the Thing *differently*, in a way in which the organism becomes free from the ideological restraints enforced by the (also ideological) human subject. To achieve this goal, the article uses Deleuze’s and Guattari’s philosophy of ‘becoming’ as theoretical template, which is deployed to ‘undermine essentialist norms’ of humanity (Powell 2012: 80). Arguably, the Thing can be construed as the materiality of desire, that is, as a body without ideological restrictions, and which, together with other bodies, channels in turn the flux of desire. The article thus recognizes a new source of ‘horror’ in the film. Horror lies not solely within the context of particular ideological functions – i.e. traditional readings of the human self vs. monstrous other – nor on the blind spots defined by ideological systems – Sartre’s ‘anti-value’ (Prince 2004: 125-126) – but also on the revelation of a self-destructive human animal, who conceives ideology and constitutes itself as an ideological subject in order to enforce a life-restricting, ethico-political system of repression and destruction.

The article offers, firstly, an analysis of the ideological components at work in various traditional readings of the film. Then it scrutinizes ways in which these traditional readings can be overcome. This opens the possibility of a post-humanist interpretation of the film, which arises after dispensing with the subject-object relationship – i.e., the subject ‘man’ against the object / ‘monster-thing’ – enforced by traditional ideological structures. Then the article ponders on certain tenets of the – largely post-humanist – ‘theory of things’ or ‘thing theory’ (Brown 2001; 2003) to delve in the materiality of the body known as the Thing. The article probes the materiality of the Thing through Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concept of the Body without Organs (‘BwO’). The ‘BwO’ remaps the body as a purely material dimension, a dynamic force field free of fixed and normative – i.e., ideological – pre-conceptions that actualizes becoming, the flux of desire. The article concludes by exploring the ethico-political implications this examination brings to fore.

The Ideology of the Ooze

The Thing revolves around a question the character of Childs (Keith David) formulates halfway through the film: ‘So how do we know who’s human? If I was an imitation... a perfect imitation, how would you know if it was really *me*?’ (Carpenter 1982: 56’ 35”). Most comments on the film discuss the query with close reference to the broader issue, namely, what it means to be human and how unstable or weak humanity proves to be (Addison 2013: 159; Muir 2000: 103; Prince 2004: 129). In other words, these readings focus on how the film fixes the ideological boundaries of the ‘human’, how it establishes the privileged category of ‘humanity’ in dialectical negotiation with opposite categories such as the non-privileged human (the ‘sub-human’) or the downright ‘non-human’, that is, the perverse other. To answer Childs’s question these readings then provide different interpretations of the Thing in ideological terms. The alien entity has been construed variously as a feminine other (Billson 1997: 107), ‘horrific *femme fatales* [in] the form of things that consume and absorb [men]’; a ‘threatening hypermasculine form that illustrates the harmful nature of traditional manhood’ (Addison 2013: 163), any non-normative body (mostly masculine, though) that (sexually) threatens traditional masculinity ‘penetrating its very being’ (Williams 2004: 122), queer identities (Thomas 2022: 194), an allegory of AIDS and its ‘[subversion] of the appearance of normalcy’ it bestows in the subject (Guerrero 1990: 88; see also Prince 2004: 130); and, most recently, it has been aptly re-signified as a parable for COVID (Khairy 2020).

Childs’s reservations, nevertheless, also bring home another problem, inextricably connected, though, with the issue of the ideological limits of humanity. Childs cares, too, about *individual* ‘recognition’, the acknowledgement, or the awareness of the ‘self’ as a human subject by his peers. ‘Recognition’ is, in Althusser’s terms, a cardinal function of ideology (2014: 263). It serves to impose ideology and bind a community through ‘a complex system of representations by which people are inserted as individual subjects into the social formation’ (Boumelha 1985: 5). This formation is not ‘the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals’, as Althusser specifically clarifies, ‘but the *imaginary* relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live’ (2014: 258). It is in the context of these ‘imaginary relations’ that ‘recognition’ gains value, as it coheres the semiotic structure in which subjectivity – individuals are inserted therein as subjects – and identity – that is, ‘a description under which you value yourself [...] you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking’ (Korsgaard 1996: 101) – are at all possible. ‘Recognition’ is not just discursive validation, but rather awareness, both self-awareness and collective

awareness; it is awareness of the performance of ‘material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus’ (2014: 260). In other words, the recognition of subjectivity coalesces in ‘the “consciousness” of our incessant (eternal) practice’ of ideology (Althusser 2014: 263). It is within this unescapable context – Althusser contends ‘we live, move and have our being’ ‘in ideology (2014: 263) – that the category of the subject becomes central. We are subjects because we are ideological creatures. Thus, in Childs’s question, for as nonchalant as its delivery might sound, the ‘I’ becomes the hinge around which the problem of ‘humanity’ revolves.

Shortly after Childs formulates his concerns, MacReady reaffirms, perhaps unwittingly though, the definition of the subject as ‘human’. And what is more, he even suggests the ethico-political ideology that defines subjectivity (‘humanity’) in the film:

I know I’m human. And if you were all these things, then you’d just attack me right now, so some of you are still human. This thing doesn’t want to show itself, it wants to hide inside an imitation. It’ll fight if it has to, but it’s vulnerable out in the open. If it takes us over, then it has no more enemies, nobody left to kill it. And then it’s won. (Carpenter 1982: 61’ 23”).

MacReady’s ‘humanity’ is unquestionable, plain, visible, self-evident, yet the only assurance of his subjectivity – here significantly encoded as the political identity of a ‘human self’ set against an ‘other’ (i.e., ‘these things’) – is nothing but its ‘obviousness’, precisely its ‘self-evidence’. Ideology has a way to ‘[represent] as obvious and natural what is partial, factitious, and ineluctably social’, Penny Boumelha argues (1985: 5). Thinking with Althusser, this is not just ‘an ideological effect’, but rather ‘*the* elementary ideological effect’ (2014: 262; emphasis added) whereby ‘like all obviousnesses, including those that make a word “name a thing” or “have a meaning” (therefore including the obviousness of the “transparency” of language), the “obviousness” that you and I are subjects’ we cannot ‘fail to recognize’ (Althusser 2014: 262). MacReady asserts his subjectivity in such manner, both affirming the ‘obvious’ quality of his individual subject, inscribed and constituted within the ideological structure, and putting forward ‘recognition’ as the fundamental dynamic to “constituting” concrete individuals as subjects’ (Althusser 2014: 262).

If MacReady assumes the ideological prerogative of asserting the obvious – i.e., that which, being ideological, purportedly passes as natural – by and large, he can also exert the opposite function, namely, to demote an individual from the category of the subject and into

the derogatory condition of non-acceptable, unnatural, non-human, and horrific individual. For MacReady's argument also unfolds another, more intricate function of 'ideology', i.e., the flipside of 'recognition', to wit, '*misrecognition*' (Althusser 2014: 263). Human individuals inscribed within the ideological limits recognized by MacReady would be subjects 'endowed with a "consciousness"', who would believe 'in the "ideas"' their 'consciousnesses' inspire in them and that they willingly and freely accept (Althusser 2014: 260). Yet they 'must "act according to his ideas"' since doing otherwise presumes 'a man who is either inconsistent [...] or cynical or *perverse*' (Althusser 2014: 260; emphasis added). Given this premise, *The Thing* is clearly a film about performing recognition or misrecognition. It is a film about allocating humanity (subjectivity) and / or perversity (*non-humanity* or *in-humanity*).

Misrecognition becomes at all possible in the disruption of social bonds within the close-knit community of US NSI Station 4. 'A collection of autonomous, angry, unpleasant, and self-interested individuals', John Kenneth Muir summarizes, 'as chilly as the stark Antarctic landscape they inhabit' (2000: 107) look outwardly like human subjects in a very specific ideological milieu of ineffectual individualism. This context assumes – correctly – that the social community here portrayed is truly dysfunctional from the outset of the film:

The absence of human bonds is *already evident* before the Thing's arrival. The men's interpersonal isolation is *amplified* by the Thing's invasion but not *caused* by it. Thus, the film presents a diegesis or story world of cold isolation in which humans do not form strong relationships with one another. (Addison 2013: 161-162).

The dysfunctional trait that characterizes the community in the film 'marks' it 'off from the 1951 version,' (Nyby, 1951) 'which emphasized the resourcefulness of the human community, its solidarity and efficiency, in defeating the intruder' (Prince 2004: 123). Carpenter's version recognizes these communal values, if only to undercut them, as the archetypally 'human' subject in the film – MacReady – bluntly but dismally states, firstly, that 'trust's a tough thing to come by these days' (Carpenter 1982: 55') and, finally, that 'nobody trusts anybody now' (Carpenter 1982: 61'). The spread of the Thing amplifies the decomposition of the collective in terms of 'trust' – or rather the lack thereof – which, in effect, allows the characters to misrecognize the 'humanity' of the fellow subject and write it off as 'perverse' (Althusser 2014: 260), as 'Otherness' – in Freudian terms, the repressed – or, more generally, with Robin Wood,

that which bourgeois ideology *cannot recognize or accept but must deal with* [...] in one of two ways: either by rejecting and, if possible, annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself. (2003: 65; emphasis added)

The notion of the Althusserian ‘perverse’ – the misalignment between dominant ideology and individual behaviour (Althusser 2014: 260) – help characterize the entity in ethico-political terms. Earlier in the film, an unhinged, axe-wielding Blair (Wilford Brimley) assigns subjectivity to the entity *as a whole*. Blair claims the Thing does not want ‘to be an animal’, since ‘no dogs make it a thousand miles through the cold’; ‘No! you don’t understand’, he resumes after smashing a few shelves in the lab, ‘that thing [wants] to be us! For if the cell gets out, it could imitate everything on the face of the earth, and it’s not gonna stop!’ (Carpenter 1982: 52’-53’). In point of fact, Blair ascribes identity, a sense of will, agency and purpose to a thing which ultimately amounts to a monocellular being. Yet when working *collectively*, this cell can become a conscious subject with ‘reasons and obligations’ (Korsgaard 1996: 101) that happens to be ‘perverse’ – *a la* Althusser – since, according to Blair, it imitates for the sake of destroying from within that which it imitates silently, i.e., ‘humanity’.

The scene, combined with MacReady’s elucidation of his ‘humanity’ as ‘obvious’, plays out akin to the generic – and heavily ideologized – model of the alien invasion movie of the 1950s. Films such as *Invaders from Mars!* (William Cameron Menzies, 1953) or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) overtly stipulate the conscious goals and purposes of the (perverse) alien subjects through the uncanny voice of a possessed or simulated human. The generic ploy helps these films ‘function as sites of contestation between the antagonistic definitions of human life offered by capitalism and a caricatured communism’ (Prince 2004: 130) and, consequently, works as shorthand to allocate the ‘perverse’ in the misrecognized counterpart of ‘humanity’. Bearing this in mind, the formulaic device can easily be conceived as part of the cultural ritual the horror film (and *The Thing* as such) constitutes as a genre. Stephen Prince stresses the cultural significance of this ritual and its formulaic components (with close regard to *The Thing*) within the context of his anthropological theory of horror:

The spatial geometry of Carpenter’s film [...] models the generic structure of the horror film, with its play upon boundary conditions and the ordering and violation of distinctions that give form to the social environment. The significance of this structure, and perhaps the reason why audiences never tire of being frightened, is that it bespeaks

the fragility of human identity. Horror films may be regarded as a compulsive symbolic exchange in which members of a social order, of a class or a subgroup, nervously affirm the importance of their cultural inheritance. Emphasis is placed on a culture's rituals, beliefs, and customs, its means of imposing a system of punctuation on the world, important because this system is easily lost and because it is crucial to the task of maintaining existing definitions of the human. (2004: 129)

Prince's theory qualifies the horror film as a cultural phenomenon that works in the fashion of an 'ideological state apparatus', that is, a 'private', 'distinct' and 'specialized [institution]' (Althusser 2014: 243) set to actualize the materiality of ideology through 'practices' and 'rituals' (Althusser 2014: 259, 260). In other words, the ideological construction of 'the human' depends on the constraining significance enforced by the genre as an ideological apparatus or, to use the more clarifying language of cultural analysis, the interpretations of the human and the non-human rely on what Stuart Hall brands as 'dominant' or 'preferred' readings:

[The] question of the 'structure of dominance' in a culture is an absolutely crucial point. We may say, then, that the different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into connotative domains of dominant or preferred meanings. [...] We say 'dominant', not 'determined', because it is always possible to order, classify, assign, and decode an event within more than one 'mapping'. But we say 'dominant' because there exists a pattern of 'preferred readings', and these mappings both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized. (Hall 2019: 269)

Blair assigning subjectivity to the Thing or MacReady laying out the Thing's plans to dispose of its enemies provide the entity with perverse subjectivity, and therefore allows its misrecognition, as the interests of the Thing (its will and purpose) are misaligned with Blair's or MacReady's, i.e., the (ideologically) human subject. However, in attributing (perverse) subjectivity to the Thing, the film performs a formulaic ploy laden with 'dominant' or 'preferred' undertones, effecting the structural limits of the genre as ideological apparatus. To cast the critical readings of the film anew, outside the practices that actualize ideology, interpretations of the entity must necessarily dispense with the 'different areas of social life [...] mapped out' and culturally built-in onto the otherwise 'indiscernible Thing' (Conrich 2004: 97). A reassessment of this kind must also dispense with an ideological idea of

‘humanity’ or at least it must challenge the very context that assumes humanity as an ideological construct altogether. The following section attempts to do so by construing the film as an *indictment* of humanity *qua* ideology.

Beyond Otherness: The Thingness of the Thing

Stephen Prince homes in on *The Thing* to argue for the weaknesses of culture and its seemingly insurmountable pervasiveness. To Prince, the film mirrors the structural fractures of the genre, even as it enacts the way in which these fractures reveal ‘the manifestation of the internal contradictions that every social order, based upon a classifying operation, must generate’ (2008: 128). These contradictions arise prominently with ‘the transgression of boundaries, the violation of the spatialized social system’ or rather when ‘formlessness invades form, rupturing and destroying the linguistically and socially ordered community’ (2004: 125). Prince channels then Jean Paul Sartre as he moulds ‘formlessness’ into ‘Taboo – anti-value, that which is simultaneously dog and not-dog, human and not-human, that which is normally anchored and stabilized through ritual’ but now ‘becomes fluid and expansive, engulfing the social order’ (2004: 128). Sartre’s depiction of ‘the slimy’ (2005: 631) here becomes of the essence, in that it imbues the Thing, its nondescript outward complexion, its drooling tentacles, ooze and fluids with symbolic value. The ‘slimy’, as does the Thing in this context, constitutes ‘a type of being not realized, but threatening, which will perpetually haunt consciousness as a constant danger’ (Sartre 2005: 631), i.e., it constitutes ‘*anti-value*’.

Though flawed (Addison 2013: 165), Prince’s reading of the Thing is utterly valuable insofar as it deviates from the traditional decoding of the entity as ideological Otherness. Prince assigns to the Thing a more abstract role in the ‘institutional / political / ideological order’ (Hall 2019: 269) built-in on the film’s narrative. The Thing is not an ‘other’ but *that* which symbolizes the fundamental flaws of ideology. It reveals a blind spot that the ideological apparatus, the performative assertion of ideology, eventually cannot obfuscate or ignore. It does not lie within the boundaries of the cultural or the social, but beyond them:

As a horribly anomalous animal, the thing represents a form of cosmic pollution, an entity existing outside the accepted categories that give shape to human life and knowledge. Its very existence challenges the ontology separating human from non-human, solid from liquid, edible from inedible. It threatens to erase the distinctions and, in doing so, to erase the bounded human world. (Prince 2004: 126)

Ideological horror arises from the perception of the other as a symbol that recruits its significance from the 'perverse'. Prince relocates the source of horror in the film into the very flaw of ideology, 'outside the accepted categories that give shape to human life'. The source of horror shifts then from the practice of ideology to its core structure. It becomes meta-ideological, as it were. Nevertheless, Prince keeps construing the Thing in terms of category – 'the negative category' to be precise – and representation. This is not to say that Prince's reading lacks coherence. Quite the opposite, Prince's interpretation of *The Thing* is valid and invaluable, in that it opens new and intricate ways to recast the criticism of the film afresh.

Rather than *outside* – a spatial metaphor which still assumes ideology as a pre-condition for interpreting the film – it seems more compelling to locate the Thing in a space *between* the subjectivities that make up the ideological structure of the social order, thus opening a completely new paradigm of interpretation far removed from the ideological conception of the human subject. This should not be very difficult, for the film makes a point of assessing subjectivity by submitting humanity to the purported material purity of the body. For instance, to answer Childs's question, Dr. Copper (Richard Dysart) suggests that a simple 'blood serum test' should suffice to assert the humanity of the remaining members of the station (Carpenter 1982: 56, 58). MacReady adopts the idea later on and conducts the famous makeshift bloodwork that plays out at the centrepiece of the film (Carpenter 1982: 56, 58). Yet far from constituting an irrefutable material proof of humanity, these tests too enforce 'dominant' or 'preferred' ideological meanings onto the materiality of the body, which play out, then again, as 'obvious' and 'self-evident' ideological reaffirmation (Boumelha 1985: 5; Althusser 2014: 262). Dr. Copper and MacReady simply map an organism – *qua* structure – on to a set of empirical observations to enforce preassigned conceptions of identity and subjectivity. Still, the negotiation of material decay in the ideological conceptualization of the body does suggest an alternative way to look at the Thing beyond ideology. If most interpretations of the Thing stem from the subject-otherness structure, an analysis of the materiality of the body, both human and otherwise, without said structural limitations could provide an adequate starting point to interpret the Thing *as thing*, not as otherness or as an object.

It is remarkable how the entity around which the entire film hinges – i.e. the Thing – has hardly elicited readings considering its materiality-for-itself, namely, the *thingness* of the entity. But the Thing can be conceived beyond the cultural limits of subjectivity, that is, as a representation of an objective category that critically affects the construction of the subject. Materiality, the constitution and agency of matter, sits at the core of the critical theory of things

or as is commonly known, ‘Thing theory’. Bill Brown, starting off from Heidegger, puts forward its basic principle thus,

As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption, and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (Brown 2001: 4)

Brown refers to the thing as it ceases to work for us within the (fundamentally human) subject-object structure. Only then, the thing ‘asserts’ itself as ‘thing’ and its materiality thus soars over the human(ist) boundaries exposed by objecthood.¹ Nevertheless, since objecthood is inscribed in subjectivity by virtue of said structure, thingness must also transcend (though not *transcendentally*) the boundaries of the subject. In other words, the newly revealed materiality-in-itself, or thingness must also do away with the subject as pre-condition for its own assertion, i.e., the revelation of its ‘brute physicality’ (Brown 2003: 40). Once thingness is freed from both subject and object, thing theory can focus on ‘the indeterminate ontology where things seem slightly human, and humans seem slightly thing-like [...] [tracking] the metamorphosis of the one into the other’ (2003: 14). Nevertheless, readings underpinned by ‘thing theory’ – Elaine Freedgood’s *The Ideas in Things* (2006) comes to mind – tend to elaborate on the history of the materiality of a particular thing to disclose new ‘allegorical’ structures of meaning elicited from the ‘strong metonymic readings’ (Freedgood 2006: 4) Brown’s principles give rise to. In brief, the practice of Brown’s theory affirms the materiality – or thingness – of a thing outside the subject-object structure in order to return the meaning thingness elicits back to the context of subjectivity. It is the assertion of the thing, though, that is at stake here: how the thing manifests outwardly in a context that neither concerns representation (Prince) nor the physic or metaphysic negotiation of objecthood (Brown).²

Thing theory serves as a gateway to understand there is a materiality to be considered outside ideological structures. This is the point in which Deleuze's philosophy of becoming comes in handy, as it channels the material dynamic flow of desire through the assemblage of bodies, their 'interlocking and penetration' (2021b: 89).

(Un)becoming human, becoming the Thing

The material ground that human and thing share in the film and wherein both can interact properly is 'the body'. Bodies not only partake of thingness or 'brute physicality' (Brown 2003: 40) in itself, but also engage with each other to become some-*thing* else. This is precisely the kind of materiality in progress the film sets in motion and considers.

Visually, the Thing is 'a concatenation of organisms: humans, dogs, plants', insects, 'and other, often unidentifiable, creatures' (Addison 2013: 159). Mulvey-Roberts envisages its ever-changing form in connection to Kelly Hurley's description of the 'Gothic body' as a 'horrific re-making of the human subject' (1996: 5). To Hurley, the ab-human subject is a not-quite human subject characterized by its 'morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other' (1996: 3). In view of this, Mulvey-Roberts upholds that the 'monstrous becoming is intrinsic to the transformations taking place in *The Thing*' (2004: 83) and characterizes the entity as a body in perpetual state of becoming while highlighting the 'difficulty in stabilizing human identity once it has been polluted by the Gothic subject' (2004: 83). Notice that Hurley directly attributes subjectivity to the Gothic body, whilst Mulvey-Roberts follows suit and – *a la* Blair – attributes subjectivity to the Thing. This is in keeping with the dominant reading inscribed in a generic negotiation of the film, and apparently precludes the analysis of the materiality of the Thing in-itself – i.e., the body of the Thing as *thing* – in that Mulvey Roberts's reading bestows objectivity onto the Thing's body within the 'dialectical reversal and dissolution' of human 'boundaries' the film displays (Mulvey-Roberts 2004: 83). Yet Mulvey-Roberts eventually points out to an intermediate space where materiality reveals itself despite humanist subjectivity: '[The Thing's] mimetic horrors arise from its being an undifferentiated body or *interstitial* creature' (2004: 84; emphasis added). In fact, a post-humanist reading of the film, as has been suggested, lies therein, in the interstice, *between* the subjective boundaries that obfuscate, rather than clarify the materiality of the body.

Mulvey-Roberts's *interstitial* creature constitutes, in true Bakhtinian fashion, a 'grotesque body' (2004: 84). It is a body in perpetual 'act of becoming', 'never fulfilled', 'never completed' (Bakhtin 1984: 293); or rather, it is a body at the singular, concrete moment of 'synthesis' (or 'contraction'), in Deleuze's words, of the living present:

[We are] contracted water, earth, light and air – not merely prior to the recognition or representation of these, but prior to their being sensed. Every organism, in its receptive and perceptual elements, but also in its viscera, is a sum of contractions, of retentions and expectations. At the level of this primary vital sensibility, the lived present constitutes a past and a future in time. (Deleuze 2013: 93).

Deleuze's (and Guattari's) philosophy of becoming illustrates the materiality of the Thing as a body in the *act* of transformation. If the Thing is perpetually becoming, the entity itself perpetually constitutes a present – 'the present alone exists' (Deleuze 2013: 97). This present, however, brings along its own past and future, as these are, Deleuze contends, dimensions of said present (2013: 97). The past of the Thing does not refer back to an anteriority, an original or an identity which has been corrupted by the passing of time. Rather, its past is preserved in the present, in the form of the multiple differences or potentialities (human, dog, plant, insect and so on) that have become *that thing* at the very moment and in the present body of *the* Thing.

Yet these potentialities are not static either, in that they also point to the future, specifically to all the virtual expectations lodged within and by said present. In other words, the Thing is open-ended. This conception of the Thing distinguishes the entity from a (potentially) fixable – or already fixed – (id)entity, pointing onwards and upwards to reach completion. The Thing can never be completed. The Thing neither evolves nor progresses along a given axis. The Thing constitutes a body that hinders stratification – i.e., turning into a form 'which induce[s] mechanical repetition', 'a centralized, hierarchical, and strongly patterned body' (Protevi 2012: 249, 257), it shatters the possibility of a purportedly finished individual, like the human subject. The Thing is a body that cannot be pinned down within the limits of a cultural category or a semiotic structure, such as the subject-object paradigm, hence its status as Thing, as an entity or matter that defies objecthood. Its formless materiality coalesces in a body in perpetual state of becoming other. Rest assured the Thing comes to be 'indicative of the difficulty in stabilizing human identity' (Mulvey-Roberts 2004: 83); but this is not because 'it has been polluted by the Gothic subject' (Mulvey-Roberts 2004: 83) – thereby suggesting an earlier, unpolluted state of the body that could still be discerned from the polluting object; rather, it is because the encounter of human and thing transforms both into *something* else: not human, not thing, but always *other*-thing. Incidentally, this other-thing is always 'a collectivity', not an individuality, a singularity, or an essence, as it assembles, with

Deleuze and Guattari, ‘elements, things, plants, animals, tools, people, powers, and fragments of all of these’ (2021c: 188).

The latter idea helps clarify how the Thing genuinely constitutes a body perpetually ‘open to multiple becomings-other’ (Powell 2002: 79). Properly speaking to Deleuze and Guattari, a body in an infinite, ongoing state of becoming-other is actually a misnomer, in that all bodies, material and virtual alike, are always becoming other. The body conceived as material dimension for the flow of becoming is, in overall terms, what Deleuze and Guattari brand as the Body without Organs (abbreviated BwO), namely, a ‘connection of desires, conjunction of flows, continuum of intensities’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 2021c: 187) that first and foremost constitutes a material conduit:

A BwO is made in such a way that it can be occupied, populated only by intensities. Only intensities pass and circulate. [...] [The] BwO is not a scene, a place, or even a support upon which something comes to pass. It has nothing to do with phantasy, there is nothing to interpret. The BwO causes intensities to pass; it produces and distributes them in a *spatium* that is itself intensive, lacking extension. [...] It is matter that occupies space to a given degree – to the degree corresponding to the intensities produced. It is nonstratified, unformed, intense matter, the matrix of intensity, intensity = 0. (Deleuze and Guattari 2021c: 177-178)

The BwO remaps the body as ‘a dynamic force field’ (Powell 2002: 211), a body free of fixed and normative – i.e., ideological – pre-conceptions. The BwO is the site of the flux of desire and interacts with other matter, thus ceaselessly becoming other. The materiality of the BwO tells it apart from an ‘interpreted’ body, a body conceived with ‘reference to an exterior agency’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2021c: 178-179) or, simply, an ideal or an identity. A BwO is a material plane of ‘intensities’, which are ‘the form[s] of difference’ (Deleuze 2013: 281), the ‘impersonal’ affects (Protevi 2012: 245) that occur to us – passively – as differing in kind – e.g., vibrancies, micro-changes in tone, density and the like – before we synthesize them and ‘claim mastery or ownership’ of them as subjects (Holland 2012: 325).³ Intensities pass through assemblages or connected BwOs, thus articulating a flux of becoming – indeed ‘becoming’, as Anna Powell brings home, ‘is intensive in quality’ (2002: 66). Any metaphor construing the body otherwise assumes a ‘stratum’ – to use Deleuze’s language – and thereby enforces a hierarchy and a structure upon it. Such stratum, in turn, subjects the body to a particular ‘mental’, with Anna Powell, ‘and social topography’ (2002: 79), which is precisely the reversal

of the BwO. To Deleuze and Guattari, the BwO ‘is not the opposite of the organs’, but the ‘enemy’ of ‘that organization of the organs called organism’ (2021c: 184). In consequence, the BwO is ‘openness, change, mutability, fluidity, feedback’ and ‘complexity’ (Kennedy 2000: 99). As it ‘is not reached by regression’, ‘but by a systematic’ and forward ‘practice of disturbing the organism’s patterns’ (Protevi 2012: 258) – that is, the ‘strata’, the hierarchy, ‘the mental and social topography’ that we lay over the body – the BwO shelters a manifold of virtual becomings-other pointing continually to the future. The BwOs are then not only material, but also ‘open-ended’, since ‘they can potentially connect with other’ – also ‘open-ended’ – ‘bodies’ ‘to form new assemblages’ (Powell 2002: 79). As is the case in *The Thing*, the new ‘assemblages’ enable the becoming-other of the bodies involved, ‘removing the subject / object interface’ (Powell 2002: 210) and creating new ‘singularities’, namely, ‘the specificity of a particular [...] assemblage, [...] its distinctive equality, as well as its infinite potential’ (Powell 2002: 214).

The film connects the body-human and the body-thing in such ways that both can be experienced as visual enactments of a particular flux of intensities and their correlative becomings. These connections actualize the many possible becomings-other precisely by de-stratifying the bodies, which in this context and in Deleuze’s model implies destabilizing the human *organism* (the ‘strata’, arguably corresponding with Althusser’s ideology). In discussing the becoming-other within the context of postcolonial theory, Kathrin Thiele introduces the concept of ‘unbecoming oneself’ (2012: 70) as precondition for becoming-other. Even though Thiele develops the idea in a broader context of colonial relations, she effectively deploys it as proxy for Deleuze’s concept of ‘destratification’ (2021c: 84). ‘Unbecoming oneself’ arguably informs the visual source of horror commonly found in *The Thing*. The film constantly presents new fluxes of becoming that follow the effective destratification of the body – human or otherwise – as organism. Notice how the entity manifests openly as a body becoming-other or, more suitably, a BwO *after* a process of ‘unbecoming’, usually carried out under threat. The ‘dog’ fled from the Norwegian camp does not manifest its ‘thingness’ until the other dogs in the kennel have already sensed (and rejected) its particular condition of simulacrum-dog. When it shows its condition, a cluster of intensities – differences of density in fluids, everchanging textures, growling diverging from regular dog-bark etc. – exacerbates and articulates the de-stratification. Bennings (Peter Maloney) flees the camp – in dread – at the very act of transforming into the *entity*; only the reaction of the others prevents him from stratifying his becoming, i.e., from putting the ‘human [...] straitjacket’ on the ‘inhuman form and substances’ (Deleuze: 2021c: 54). Norris’s (Charles Hallahan) transformation takes place

after his receiving an electro-shock – a sudden and intensive flux of energy that runs across his body – which blatantly puts the entity’s survival at risk. Likewise, in the famous centrepiece of the film, Palmer’s (David Clennon) blood reacts by instantly becoming a formless mass – even though it was ‘organized’ tissue – after MacReady heats the blood sample in the Petri dish. A disembodied sudden scream of the blood sample – aural intensity – coalesces singularly with the changes in density, texture, and volume of the blood – tactile and visual intensities – to develop the process of *unbecoming*. Palmer then ‘*unbecomes*’ Palmer and reveals his condition, even as he finds himself at risk of being incinerated. Lastly, Blair too shows his becoming-thing after being discovered, but in a more subreptitious manner, as he tries to forestall MacReady’s, Captain Garry’s (Donald Moffat) and Nauls’s (T. K. Carter) efforts to burn him in the cabin. Oftentimes, for each visual rendering of a BwO at the point of becoming, there is a prior de-stratification, or, in Thiele’s language, ‘*unbecoming*’ of the body as organism.

Further, as has been noted, these processes of ‘*unbecoming*’ are performed under duress. The ‘threats’ work as such in the plane of the strata, thus rendering the creature truly vulnerable when in a stratified body. Yet from a post-humanist perspective, behind the ‘mental and social topography’ (Powell 2002: 79) of the menaces, laid over by and in the subject, there is always a set of intensive affects – the variance in barking, the electric shock, the heat and light of fire, the explosions – that passes through the stratified bodies and fosters the process of *unbecoming*. The process of destratification – or *unbecoming* – unfolds as the reaching of the plane of the BwO. The film invests in the horrific manifestation of this plane, of the Thing as BwO or pure becoming, thereby foregrounding the ultimate unsteadiness and groundlessness of the strata as chief source of horror. Nevertheless, the revelation of the interstitial quality of the Thing – *unbecoming* a stratum to become *an-other* – also enables another source of horror. As the following section will show, the film unveils a human subject with enough ‘negative passions’ – in Braidotti’s words – (2012: 182) against the life-affirming process of becoming to enforce a repressive, destructive, and death-oriented ethico-political system. It is precisely the disclosing of such subject and said system as sources of horror what the post-human reading of the film ultimately contributes.

Post-humanist politics, post-Thing ethics; conclusions

The observations laid out in the previous section lead to two further issues in the context of the film, which are a) the ‘stratum’ itself or the ‘organism’ (Deleuze 2021c: 184) in the form of the human-body and b) how it distinguishes (if at all) with the simulated body-thing. The

previous analysis started with the claim that the Thing does not lie outside the socio-cultural apparatus Stephen Prince inscribes the film in, but rather within or, more specifically, *between* (ideological) subjects. This is precisely how the film works visually: the Thing hides into a subject, it then *un*becomes the subject and ends up becoming another subject, so much so that, arguably, it enacts the becoming between two subjects. The affirmation requires nuancing at this point. And the nuance lies precisely in the ethico-political overtones the Deleuzian reading of the film entails.

In discussing the life-oriented concept of ethics Deleuze argues for, Rossi Braidotti characterizes subjectivity in a manner that resonates with the way in which it is presented herein. Braidotti brands the subject as a ‘spatio-temporal compound that frames the boundaries of processes of becoming’ (2012: 179). She then assesses these processes ethically, in the context of an overall project set to unfold a notion of nomadic – pending the term ‘post-human’ – ethics ‘beyond individualism’ (2012: 175) or any other type of stratum for that matter. As Braidotti points out, ‘becoming is an intransitive process: it’s not about becoming anything in particular [...] it’s life on the edge, but not over it. It’s not deprived of violence, but deeply compassionate’ (2012: 179). The subject is a ‘stratum’ embedded in the continuum of becoming, not its source, origin, purpose, or pre-condition. ‘Flows of intensity’, claim Deleuze and Guattari, ‘their fluids, their fibres, their continuums and conjunctions of affects, the wind, the segmentation, microperceptions have replaced the world of the subject’ (2021c: 188). Consequently, this is a transformative redefinition of subjectivity, which now stands for a singular boundary or threshold of becoming. The ethico-political ‘sensibility’ (Braidotti 2012: 179) involved in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s philosophy then repositions the subject in a broader context, one that acknowledges the spatio-temporal, ephemeral limitations of subjectivity as a specific singularity, a particularly complex assemblage in perennial transition to become-other. The subject no longer rests at the centre of the lived experience; instead, it constitutes just one limit (and a precarious one at that!) of a larger – and comprehensive – flux of intensities in a perpetual and ongoing state of aimless change.

Rossi Braidotti contends this shift of focus, from human to becoming, is nevertheless affirmative and liberating, in that it is, first and foremost, life-enhancing:

Turning of the tide of negativity is the transformative process of achieving freedom of understanding, through the awareness of our limits, of our bondage. This results in the freedom to affirm one’s essence as joy, through encounters and mingling with other

bodies, entities, beings, and forces. Ethics means faithfulness to this *potentia*, or the desire to become. (Braidotti 2012: 179)

On the other hand, there is value and functionality in the ‘stratum’. ‘You have to keep small supplies of significance and subjectification’ Deleuze and Guattari go on to affirm, ‘if only to turn them against their own system when the circumstances demand it, when things, persons, even situations, force you to [...]. *Mimic the strata*’, they specifically recommend, for ‘[you] don’t reach the BwO, and its plane of consistency by wildly destratifying’ (2021c: 187). The core of Deleuze’s ethical project puts forward ‘a positive vision of the subject as a radically immanent, intensive body’ (Braidotti 2012: 179). In this respect, the Thing embodies Deleuze’s and Guattari’s programme to the letter. Blair’s forensic observations and MacReady’s intuition about the Thing inform us of an entity that is at once individual and collective: ‘Watching Norris in there’ says MacReady ‘gave me the idea that maybe every part of him was a whole. Every little piece as an individual animal with a built-in desire to protect its own life’ (Carpenter 1982: 76’). The Thing is an ‘individual animal’, but it arranges itself and becomes other collectively,⁴ in assemblages or ‘desiring machines’ interacting (Deleuze and Guattari 2021a: 5-6), up to a point in which the Thing(s) mimic the human subject and assemble itself / themselves within the cultural strata as a ‘compound that frames the boundaries of processes of becoming’ (Braidotti 2012: 178). In doing so, every ‘boundary’ of becoming the Thing mimics does not negate the ‘other’; it conversely reaches out to keep on becoming altogether.

There is a life-affirming element embedded in the stratification of the subject as a conduit of becoming. And it constitutes a type of ‘post-human ethics’ that, as Rosi Braidotti poists,

rests on a multi-layered form of relationality. It assumes as the point of reference not the individual, but the relation. This means openness to others, in the positive sense of affecting and being affected by others, through couples and mutually dependent co-realities. [...] it is a pragmatic praxis of immanent relations. (Braidotti 2012: 181).

Contrariwise, ‘negative passions’ such as Nietzschean resentment or any other behaviour aimed at ‘[diminishing] our capacity to express [life’s] high levels of interdependence’ (Braidotti 2012: 182) – Reaganite individualism comes to mind in the context of the film – involve exactly the opposite outcome, the negation of ‘the power of life itself’ (Braidotti 2012: 182).

This is arguably how the human subject operates in *The Thing*. Not only the human subject – *qua* stratum – dreads but also abhors the processes of destratification and becoming performed in and by the Thing, as these entail and bring to the fore the groundlessness of its own subjectivity. Thus, the horror that surfaces in the Thing is arguably the horror of a world non-dependant on human subjectivity and ideology. It is the assertion of the absurd, feeble, and contingent condition of individual subjectivity – and its purported agency – as a fleeting component, conversely, of the ceaseless, interactional yet purposeless material flux of reality. From a post-human perspective, defying the processes of destratification implies the negation of life as interdependence and relationality; as a sexual or *erotic* process, as it were, although ‘in a broader – cosmological – sense’ (Thiele 2012: 73), that is, beyond ‘the subject / object interface’ (Powell 2002: 210), connecting assemblages wherein ‘the economical desire and fixation on the other is’ destratified into ‘a multiplicity of desires’ (Thiele 2012: 73). The human stratum resents these erotic processes, ‘the power of life itself’, and aims at their suppression. From this post-human standpoint, *The Thing* opens and un-works the ethico-political dynamics of othering and ideological suppression / misrecognition – the dynamics of colonialism, patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, or ethnic segregation, to name a few – exposing their reliance on a ‘majoritarian’ type of subjectivity (Deleuze and Guattari 2021c: 122-123). Majoritarian subjects presuppose ‘a state of power and domination’, a given prerequisite, ‘standard measure’ or ‘constant and homogeneous system’, set before political negotiation. Majoritarian subjects enforce ideological narratives bestowed upon individuals, thus constituting ideological constants, as it were. They aim at preventing ‘[determinations] different from that of the constant’ from affecting said system, since these determinations are conceived as unprivileged and as subsequent variations of the referred ‘constant’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2021c: 122). Thusly in the film, the majoritarian standpoint of the human stratum – as subjectivity – seeks to suppress, to obliterate the Thing, a ‘continuous variation’⁵ that encroaches the ‘representative threshold’ or stratum ‘of the majoritarian standard’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2021c: 123) to protect said majoritarian subjectivity, to keep the erotic processes of life from undercutting and de-stratifying it. This reactive, life-suppressing but also weak, unstable, and frail majoritarian subjectivity favours death over ‘the positive sense of affecting and being affected by others’ (Braidotti 2012: 181), and therefore constitutes a negative force, a life-restricting drive that informs the post-human source of horror in the film.

When Robin Wood upholds the unsympathetic trait of the Thing as a monster (2003: 72), he stresses the condition of the entity as an absolute, unrelatable ‘Other’. Wood, on the one hand, channels the classic ideological reading of the Thing, which identifies the source of

horror in the unfolding of the repressed (Freud) or of that which is not recognized (Althusser). On the other hand, Wood hints at Prince's anthropological theory of horror, as he assumes a subject that cannot relate to any of the traits unveiled in and by the monster, thereby suggesting not an 'other', but the representation of 'anti-value', the negative category. Finally, a post-humanist reading of the Thing, like the one argued here, fully reveals yet another source of horror: the horror that spawns from a fleeting and transient human subject unwittingly condemned to become-other, resented against the process of becoming, lashing out amidst the life-oriented flux of desire that both assembles and disassembles its own subjectivity into ephemeral *strata*. This is a subject (or a stratum) that unleashes its own violent, brutal force and sets to kill the uncontrollable, de-stratified flux of desire – full, by the way, of unexplored *erotic* possibilities. This is the horror that arises in the subjective strata and as a response to the passing constitution of said strata. The character of Childs spelt out the concern about ideological recognition sitting at the core of the film. In keeping with his shrewdness, he also points in the right direction to perceive the source of horror here considered. When MacReady shoots Clark (Richard Masur), Childs does not miss the chance to note that MacReady has finally become a 'murderer' (Carpenter 1982: 79'). Ultimately, the killing spree these individuals embark upon can only be justified on the assumed basis that the killing helps protect the feeble condition of the human subject. Once the ephemeral stratified condition of the subject falls to pieces, only the killing remains.

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¹ Brown refers to the materiality beyond and after the structure of subject and object in terms of inanimate entities, but the model easily applies to animal studies as well – to quote another (primarily) post-humanist area of studies – as has already been the case (Malewitz 2017: 154-155; Fudge 2015; 2017: 262).

² According to Brown's model, the collapse of the subject-object structure constitutes a necessary condition for the thing to actively 'assert' itself. This tenet has been nuanced critically however by Brown himself (*via* William James) to probe ways in which, as Raymond Malewitz informs, 'human activity can promote thing-making' too (2017: 155; see also Brown 2003: 75-76). This does not bring thing theory back into the 'humanist' fold – thing theory is essentially a 'post-humanist' theory (Malewitz 2017: 153) – since the 'human' involved here only works out by a temporal suspension' of 'socially constructed value' which reveals thingness as an 'ephemeral transitional state [...] in order to reach a new objecthood' (Malewitz 2017: 155). And this is crucial to understand that even though Brown provides a suitable theoretical gateway to problematize the materiality of the thing from a post-humanist perspective, thing theory never really leaves subjectivity as a point of reference altogether.

³ In this context, the subject is not an exterior agency, an ideal or an identity, but a stratification of the becoming (see below p. 16). The 'subject', Eugene Holland summarizes, claims possession of the 'intensities' and the becomings produced via the BwO overall – thus 'replacing it by an "organised" body' (Powell 2002: 78), a stratum dependant on the grounding subject – 'when' the subject 'is in fact a mere derivative of both the BwO and its intensities (Holland 2012: 325). In other words, Holland goes on to argue, the 'subject, as a product, appropriates and obscures (represses) he very process that constitutes it as a subject' (2012: 325).

⁴ The biological life cycle of the Thing works akin to the model of 'colonial animals', like corals or 'portuguese man-o-war', for instance, do (OED, 'colonial', 'coral').

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari also refer to this 'continuous variation' as the 'becoming-minoritarian' (2021c: 124). To Deleuze and Guattari standpoint, 'all becoming is minoritarian' (2021c: 124), insofar as it is

‘potential, creative and created’ and always ‘deviates from the model’ or the majoritarian standard (2021c: 123).