THE THING IN FILM AND GAME: SUBLIME MONSTERS AND SPACES

The eponymous monster of John Carpenter's film *The Thing* (1982), and of the computer game of the same name (2002), is an elusive creature. Its very name implies liminality and transformation. It is a resolute shape-shifter, unnameable at the very moment of naming. It is also a creature of the popular imagination, brazenly monosyllabic, refusing the Gothic ornateness of a Frankenstein or Dracula, Jekyll and Hyde. It belongs to a family of postwar B-movie creatures (though it is adapted from a novella from 1938), whose vagueness of shape or name make them fit receptacles for the vague and shifting fears of this period: *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *The Blob*, *It* (as in *It Conquered the World*), the alien spores of *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*.

In short, it is hard to pin down, more elusive and eclectic than most of its stable-mates. Its migration from film to computer game adds another kind of transformation to its impressive record, compounding the difficulty of analysis. It shifts from a narrative to a ludic dynamic, from stop-frame animation and animatronics to 3D mechanics, from the matter of latex and goo to the digital skin of game animation, in a particular configuration developed by the production company Computer Artworks specifically to manage creature transformation effects.

To engage with the creature, watching the film or playing the game, is to engage with two difficult questions about horror. One is essentially about metaphor – what might such a bizarre fantasy represent? The other is to do with affect, taste, aesthetic judgment, and cultural value. How do we experience the fear and pleasure of horror? How do we engage with social evaluations of this kind of text? And how are these questions differently answered in the case of the film and the game?

To address these questions, I want to consider the category of the Sublime, especially as formulated by the philosopher of the German Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant (1763/1960; 1790/1952). How can the Sublime be used to explain specific socio-cultural meanings of *The Thing*; and how does the Sublime function, in this specific instance, as an object of, and expression of, aesthetic taste?

The question about representation asks how the tradition of the Sublime offers resources for the representation of what is unknown, obscure and fearful, adaptable for the specific historical moment in question. This is a semiotic question as much as a philosophical one. The representations of obscure fears can either be viewed as transcendental, existing in an extra-semiotic domain; or they can be viewed as an effort to bring the transcendental within the semiotic (see van Leeuwen & Kress, 1992, for a discussion of this principle in relation to Barthes' various forms of transcendent meaning).

The question about cultural taste and cultural value is often viewed, in the Cultural Studies tradition, as an obligation to champion popular cultural tastes and pleasures,

and to oppose them to the chilly, ascetic experience of elite art. The classic articulation of this position is Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984), with its critique of the Kantian aesthetic (the 'pure gaze'), and its vigorous deployment of Bakhtinian carnival as the metaphor for, and justification of, the popular aesthetic. While Kant and Bakhtin can similarly be deployed as representatives of opposing forms of the Sublime, I want to argue that it is not sufficient simply to celebrate carnival as a popular panacea or antidote to the oppressive aspects of the elite aesthetic.

The discussion will draw on outcomes of a two-year research project in role-playing games (see Carr *et al*, in press), in the course of which we interviewed the lead game programmer of *The Thing*, as well as teenage players of the game.

The Carpenter film, like all horror narratives, deploys images, characters, landscapes and events designed to stir the familiar thrill of fear and pleasure which some commentators on the genre have seen in terms of the Romantic tradition of the Sublime. Appearing in Kant's work as a phenomenon inspiring awe (terror and pleasure) by its measureless extent or intensity, the sublime is a philosophical category well-placed to provide an account of the contradictory emotions of the horror viewer, and of the images which provoke them. Kant proposed an image of an empty desert, populated by the human imagination with ghouls:

> Deep loneliness is sublime, but in a way that stirs terror. Hence, great far-reaching solitudes, like the colossal Komul desert in Tartary, have always given us occasion for peopling them with fearsome spirits, goblins and ghouls. (1763/1960)

Both parts of this double structure function in the horror genre: the empty space is terrifying because of what it might conceal, and because it represents the unknown and unknowable by images of absence; the spectacular monsters of fantasy are terrifying because of the spaces they inhabit and because they represent the unknown and unknowable by images of presence. The sensation of the sublime is a feeling of mixed fear and pleasure: awe inspired by the sense of limitlessness; pleasure by our rational ability to conceive of the total idea of it:

> The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of the object, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of limitlessness, yet with a super-added thought of its totality. (1790/1952)

There is a paradox here which lies at the heart of the function of popular horror texts. On the one hand, the affective thrill of horror is a profoundly irrational pleasure, related to dream logic, to superstition, and to fantasy. It can be seen as the irrational underbelly of the Enlightenment, a persistent residue of older ways of understanding the world, resistant to the explanatory regimes of science and rationalist philosophy. On the other hand, Kant makes a rigorous attempt, in *the Critique of Judgment*, to tame the Sublime, to encompass it within the bounds of Reason. He does this, effectively, by two means. One is to construct the pleasurable element in the Sublime as the satisfaction of being able to conceive of it rationally: if the vastness of a mountain or ocean dwarfs our imagination, at least we can measure it (Kant calls this the Mathematical Sublime). The other tactic he adopts is to reject all versions of the

Sublime which threaten his rational ideal. In effect, this is, as Bourdieu argues of his aesthetic in general (1984), a promotion of the cultural taste of a particular social group; and the exclusion of popular cultural forms. This can be most clearly seen, not in *The Critique of Judgment,* but in a work written twenty-six years earlier, where Kant separates out the elevated Sublime taste he approves of from the superstitious clutter of popular taste:

> In human nature, praiseworthy qualities are never found without concurrent variations that must run through endless shadings to the utmost imperfection. The quality of the terrifying sublime, if it is quite unnatural, is adventurous. Unnatural things, so far as the sublime is supposed in them, though little or none may be actually found, are grotesque. Whoever loves and believes the fantastic, is a visionary. ... Monasteries and such tombs, to confine the living saints, are grotesque. ... Castigation, vows, and other such monks' virtues are grotesque. Holy bones, holy wood, and all similar rubbish, the high Llama of Tibet not excluded, are grotesque. (1763/1960: 56/7)

It is this rubbish dump which Kant so contemptuously rejects, with its grotesque sublime, that runs as a thread through the Gothic novel and the popular melodrama of the 19th century, and surfaces in the twentieth century horror film (cf Donald, 1992). Its best critique, as in Bourdieu's attack on his aesthetic in general, lies in Bakhtin (1968), whose vision of 'grotesque realism' exactly reverses the values of the grotesque as Kant conceived them. However, simply to substitute a celebration of the Bakhtinian grotesque for the chilly rationalism of Kant may produce a kind of cultural optimism that does less than justice to the ambivalence of these texts, the social anxieties they represent, and the kinds of play involved in computer games.

The question addressed in this article, then, is: what is the experience of the Sublime offered by the film and the game of *The Thing*? What is its representational function; what is its aesthetic function? How are these different in film and game?

THE SUBLIME SPACES OF *THE THING*

In Carpenter's film, the sublime space is the icy waste of the Antarctic: resolutely alien, exotic, indeterminate, limitless. To signify it is to use semiotic material which inevitably connotes indistinctness, liminality, drift: boundaries are unclear, light is either blinding or dim, surfaces are unstable. To venture into the space is to trigger a survival economy: death can only be counterbalanced by clothing, heat or briefness of exposure, factors that literally become programmed economies in the game, where vulnerability to the cold is factored into the player-character's health meter.

In the game, the Antarctic space is most extensively used in the first three levels of the game, and in the final level. In the earlier sections, we are obliged to venture out into the snow to find the spaceship of The Thing, to move between ruined shacks and bloodspattered buildings, to encounter small thing-creatures (scuttlers), and to shoot them. The space, as in much of the film, is dark, opaque, and threatening, and we are blinded by snow and confused in our direction. In the final level, we move through bright, white, daytime snowscapes in the final hunt for the chief villain, Colonel Whitely, who has become the largest manifestation of the Thing creature, intent on world domination.

The cultural significance of this kind of space in these two texts is to represent alien territory, which has its own visual discourse in the international politics of America and Britain since the second World War; a discourse perhaps more extensively elaborated in the fictional film narratives of war and exploration adventures than in documentary reportage, though there is a close relationship between the two. The narratives of exploration and conquest in which the boundaries of the known world are exceeded and annexed in the interests of the ideals and power of the nation state unfold in parallel. One minute, John Mills conquers the desert in *Ice Cold in Alex*; the next he struggles to encompass the Antarctic wastes within British territorial ambition in *Scott of the Antarctic*. These genres specialise in a repertoire of alien landscapes, the othered sites familiar to American and British audiences as the strange places in which their sons and husbands (and occasionally their daughters and wives) struggle against indistinct enemies in the service of equally indistinct principles. These landscapes range from the palmscapes of Vietnam to the Normandy beaches; from the sands of Iraq to the waters of the Atlantic. They are a form of sublime space terraformed by the neocolonial ambitions and fears of the West; and their most recent form is inhabited by its latest catchall bogeyman, the terrorist.

The sublime thrill of the unknown reaches further back in American colonial mythology, of course. The boundary of the known is familiar as the territory of the frontier, and the plains, forests, deserts and snowscapes that lie beyond, the indigenous peoples of America in this case cast as the alien Other. While there are many obvious references in *The Thing* to narratives of polar exploration, there are also significant nods to the older narratives of the frontier: the sombrero worn by the hero MacReady (affectionately recreated at the end of the game); and the music of Ennio Morricone, with its spaghetti western associations.

The Antarctic has specific qualities, however. For one thing, it is literally subject, still, to neocolonial ambition, and Outpost 31, the American research station in both film and game, is apparently partly based on the real McMurdo Station in Antarctica. This is part of the United States Antarctic Programme, run by the National Science Foundation, but arguably maintained for reasons quite other than science, as this website run by experienced critics of the establishment suggest:

> In fact, the main purpose of the United States Antarctic Programme, as stated by an external panel report published by the NSF, is to establish a physical and political presence. (www.bigdeadplace.com/welcome)

Furthermore, the Antarctic has particular properties as a sublime signifier. Its natural characteristics render it both spiritually uplifting as well as hostile, beautiful but deadly. It is the perfect semiotic material for the representational purpose of the Sublime: in the Romantic tradition, it elevates the spirit while reducing the human subject to an insignificant, intensely vulnerable speck. The Arctic creates part of the sublime effect of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and the final, fitting location for the creature. The Antarctic appears in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* (possibly inspired by James Cook's second voyage of exploration) as a place of beauty and dread.

In the film, its effect is similar: it is a limitless wasteland, and the home of monsters; but it is also, as we have seen, contested territory. It is delimited by the frame of

successive shots; though this construction, the very mobile camera, and the aerial shots, imply limitlessness beyond the edge of the frame.

In the game, the effect is rather different. Visually, it is constructed as a beautiful space, and an *hommage* to the film. The game builds the Antarctic space as a bounded entity within the 3-D gameworld. The frame is now player-controlled, so that we can explore the limits. We begin the game awed and confused by the landscape; the horizon is obscured by mist and falling snow; we have to find our way by following light-poles; and we cannot explore far before we succumb to the cold. As we find our way around the first level, however, we come up against the limits of the designed space; if our imagination can extend the space into limitlessness, our player experience measures its boundaries.

In different ways, film and game semioticise the limitlessness of the Antarctic, structuring and delimiting it, but preserving the affective chill of emptiness and solitude.

However, the Antarctic wilderness is not the only space in the film and game. The research station forms, in both, a contrasting space in many ways: it is confined, spartan, utilitarian, but sparsely fitted with insecure reminders of home. These spaces in *The Thing* belong to a paradigm widely elaborated in films of war and exploration: the portable, temporary spaces in which soldiers and explorers recreate home. These bunkhouses, tents, supply depots, trenches and military headquarters are intentionally fragile and ephemeral, to buttress the heroic qualities of their occupants, or else to emphasise the alien landscape pressing in from outside. They are typically decorated with a semiotic panoply of national identity: flags, photographs, dartboards, pool tables, bourbon bottles, teapots, cigarette packets or tobacco pouches.

In the film, the research station is of this kind: there is a pool table, a juke box, a pinball machine; and a sequence early in the film shows the men relaxing in this context. Already, however, something dysfunctional seems to be at work: in the background, one of the men is mending the pinball machine.

The research station rapidly decomposes as the film progresses. The corridors imply the impending arrival of the creature; the fabric of the buildings is progressively destroyed by flamethrower, explosives and the mad axework of the biologist, Blair. The horror of the dystopian industrial site, with its broken generators, twisted piping, torn wire-mesh, and sinister basements, carries its own message of a human enterprise violently perverted. In many ways, the fulfilment of the promised monster round the corner only completes the logic. What should, then, be a place of comfort and defined borders has become another kind of sublime space, each corner, pool of darkness, underfloor space, dissolving the limits of the known.

In the game, the buildings on the first few levels function, as in the design of the Antarctic space, as an *hommage* to the film. There are loving recreations of details of the American outpost, the spacecraft the Blair-creature was building, and the Norwegian outpost, complete with the ice-block from which the Thing was originally thawed out. The marks of the destruction made towards the end of the film are everywhere apparent; and here it should be made clear that the game is not, in fact, an

adaptation of the film, but rather a sequel, in which, perhaps, it is unique in the history of film-to-game adaptations so far.

As with the Antarctic landscape, the difference between the space of the film and the space of the game as sites of suspense and the unknown is player control. While the mastery of terrifying spaces, for the film viewer, is in the end to come to see everything that once was hidden, the rate at which this is accomplished in the game is at least partly up to the player. In my case, caution always rules; so my progress through these spaces was careful and methodical. However, the lingering approach, while it gave me the security of knowing the space as well as possible, only extended the suspense of what might be around the corner; so the suspense in these cases became quite alarming. In addition, the game includes brief cut scenes when you trigger an approach to Thing creatures, so you get flashes of the monster hovering round the corner, or above you on a snow-covered roof, accompanied by an alarming chord of music.

In later levels of the game, the research station is extended into a variety of complexes, weather stations, laboratories and hangars. In many ways, these function as puzzle mazes, with a number of minor challenges incorporated: locked doors, lighting controls, CCTV screens which give advance views of rooms as yet unexplored. The different buildings also provide the multi-level structure of the game, each with its own mission, set of challenges, enemies to overcome, and resources to achieve all this planted around the space as ammo, weapons, medikits. In semiotic terms, this affects the modality, or truth-claim, of the game. The naturalistic modality of the first levels mimics that of the film, which in turn mimics the over-wintering location of a real US science station in the Antarctic, as we have seen. The more fantastic the underground caverns and laboratories become in the game, the more the narrative of a fantastic sci fi plot develop, the closer the game comes to the fantasy modality of, for instance, the James Bond film franchise, and its related games, such as *Goldeneye: Rogue Agent*. Indeed, this comparison was made by one of the teenage participants in our research project. He also compared *The Thing* in its later stages to *Half-Life*; the spaces of *The Thing* strongly resemble, and are perhaps influenced by, the research facility in this game, with its blood-spattered walls, alien creatures and enemy troopers.

This shift in modality does not render the spaces less sublime: they still trigger unease, claustrophobia, even (for this player) vertigo, as the player character, Blake, has to venture across a network on narrow beams high up in a warehouse. They are sublime because of the way they conceal and reveal the monster: an increasing variety of Thing beasts are encountered, glimpsed through windows, foreseen through CCTV screens. The narrative which unfolds is one of illicit experiments, in which the natural viral invasion and transformation of the original Thing becomes adapted for sinister purpose by murky human agencies; for the purpose, as it unsurprisingly transpires, of world domination. The sublime spaces here, then, are redolent of obscene interference of science with nature, such as *The island of Dr Moreau*; or the ruthless corporate exploitation of alien or artificial lifeforms in the *Alien* trilogy, or *Bladerunner*. The sublime thrill is inspired exactly by the uncertainty of whether the danger is alien or human, or both. The metaphor behaves like the mutating alien virus itself – the suggestions of conspiracy, like those of that arch-narrative of alien invasion/insider

plot, *The X-Files*, never settle, but spiral out of control, constantly producing new, elusive versions of themselves.

If we think of these two spaces – the Antarctic and the research station – in relation to Kant's original conception of the Sublime, and to traditions of sublime imagery in literature and film more generally, it is clear that they awaken rather different associative chains. The Antarctic belongs to a class of sublime images that fits easily within Kant's ennobling sublime, along with oceans, mountains and deserts. It is the kind of awe-inspiring natural phenomenon which serves as a transparent signifier for limitlessness, and which is easily associated with elevated poetic inspiration, and easily accommodated within the aesthetic taste of an educated literary elite; as we have seen, it makes regular appearances in Romantic and Gothic literature.

By contrast, the research station recalls Kant's reject-bag of superstitious clutter; but the game develops this further, decorating the ruined buildings with corpses, severed limbs, pools of blood, and so on. Its underground laboratories recall those of a succession of film versions of the Frankenstein story, with brains, limbs and homunculi in glass jars: several of the levels in the game feature varieties of Thing creatures behind glass, in cages, subject to experiment.

The two kinds of space, then, are distributed across a wide range of the popular-elite taste spectrum. They represent the unknown and liminal both by refined emptiness and by replete intensity. It is impossible to make simple judgements about their location in the visual discourse of popular horror; rather, they collapse the stylistic markers of different aesthetic regimes.

THE CHARACTERS: ENGAGING WITH THE SUBLIME

> *I send greetings to the international community gathered in Antarctica as you celebrate Midwinter's Day on June 21, 2003.*
>
> *Since the signing of the Antarctic Treaty on December 1, 1959, scientists from around the globe have cooperated peacefully to push the outer bounds of human knowledge and understanding. By working together to study Antarctica and its interactions with the rest of the planet and to explore the darkness beyond our world, these brave individuals serve as shining examples of the promise and hope of mankind.*
>
> *George W Bush*

Both the Antarctic waste and the research station are related to the characters who occupy them, who could in principle represent either the solidarity and comradeship of the ideal platoon; or its polar opposite (no pun intended!), intense alienation, mistrust and internal division; or any shade on the spectrum between. The fantasy of the Antarctic science team, like that of the military platoon, is represented most clearly in George W Bush's message above: 'brave individuals serve as shining examples of the promise and hope of mankind'. The Carpenter film's imaginative effort is to produce the exact antithesis of this fantasy. The game takes this a step further.

Since the 1950s, the military and quasi-military narratives of war and exploration have conjoined with those of sci-fi and horror, with which they merge efficiently. The figures of aliens and monsters often serve similar representational functions to those of enemies; indeed, often serve as metaphors for historic enemies of the West. Similarly, the sublime landscapes of horror and sci fi not only produce similar frissons of fear and unfamiliarity as those of war and exploration: they are often the same landscapes. The structures of camouflage and combat fatigues, machismo and machine guns, are integrated with sci fi and horror in a series of generic hybrids, in which the conventional team of commandos is pitted against fantasy enemies, as in *Predator*, in which Arnold Schwarzenegger leads a team of commandos against a transparent alien, or the *Aliens* franchise, in which Ellen Ripley similarly deploys crewcut, automatic weapons and flamethrowers against the alien-mother.
The relationship between national and ethnic identity is a well-known feature of American war genre, with the stereotype of the melting-pot platoon at its centre. This cliche speaks of America's more nostalgic construction of certain immigrant communities, in particular African, Irish, Latin American and Polish. By contrast, Chinese, Japanese, German and Asian immigrants are much less frequently represented.

The film of *The Thing* replicates the melting-pot team with its omissions: the faces and names in the film signify Irish or Scottish (Macready, Garry, Blair); Black American (Childs, Nauls); English (Clark, Palmer). There are no Asian characters. With the exception of Blair, a biologist, they are not scientists, merely a skeleton staff to maintain the station in the winter months. Their function, then, is unclear and antiheroic. Their demeanour, dress, relationships, all seem quasi-military, especially in the case of the bleak hero, MacReady (Kurt Russell), the helicopter pilot and final conqueror of the alien. In the case of this film, the point of the group is to emphasise estrangement, alienation and loneliness. None of the characters has any clearly-developed history: there is no comfort in recollections of home. None has even a first name. There is little evidence of friendship or affection; in fact, the only explicit reference to friendship comes from the station leader, Garry, who bleakly remarks, after the spectacular death of the first victim of the Thing, Bennings: 'I knew Bennings for ten years. He was my friend.' But this is less than convincing. Who would refer to their friend, even in 1982, by their surname, in the very act of remembrance?

Otherwise, the relationships are marked by mistrust, inconsiderate and selfish behaviour, and irritation. Nauls insists on playing loud music in spite of Bennings' complaints; nobody smiles; there is little evidence of respect for Garry, the nominal leader; and MacReady spends more time in the first part of the film communing with his chess-playing computer (the only female presence in the film) than with any of his colleagues; and he pours a glass of whisky into her works after she checkmates him, consigning her to oblivion with the words 'Cheating bitch!'

If these are the intrepid representatives of civilisation in the face of the sublime unknown, the message seems to be, as in other fragmented, doomed teams (*Apocalypse Now, Alien, Predator*) that whatever precious value is being protected, it isn't solidarity. There is no reason here to suppose that family, friendship, community, even national identity, are under threat: they have already fallen apart.

The only faint sense of redemption is an odd purity about MacReady, a low-budget Messiah, whose integrity we are encouraged to trust through a subtle blend of signifiers: a calm manner contrasting with the edgy nervousness of the others, the sombrero and its frontiersman connotations, a capacity to command, and a nifty way with weapons.

The game retains much of this sense of alienation. The designers took central themes of the film, in particular infection, fear, and trust, and built them into the logic of the game, where they become economies. The lead game programmer, Diarmid Campbell, explained:

> And then we saw that the team dynamics was actually what the film was about, it wasn't some great rolling storyline. It was all about the team dynamics, who they trust and fear and all of this. And so we thought, 'OK, well can we, can we turn that into a game mechanic?'

So, non-player characters (NPCs) are programmed with fear and trust economies, which the player can restore if depleted by giving them weapons, ammo, adrenaline shots, and so on. While fear and mistrust are diagrammatically represented as meters in a Team panel accessed by the player, they are also represented as part of the naturalistic narrative flow of the game: the characters tremble, back away suspiciously from Blake, refuse to comply, speak appropriate pre-scripted dialogue, and in extreme circumstances, shoot the player-character, resulting in the temporary death of the avatar, and the ludic setback to the previous save-point for the player.

As in the film, then, the trust between the characters is at issue, and the ability of the alien to take the shape of its victims develops mistrust into the kind of paranoia that this metaphor has represented since the alien invasion narratives of the fifties. You never know which of your companions is about to erupt into alien obscenity and turn on you. However, no real bond is able to develop between the player and the NPCs. Although Blake (a commando captain investigating the mystery of the original events shown in the film) has previous knowledge of many of the NPCs, it is difficult for the player to share or develop this. The reason for this is that the NPCs are largely disposed of at the end of each level, and replaced by new ones; so that it is not possible to develop any sense of attachment to them, and as the player, you come to regard them largely as another resource to make your way through the game. The effect of this is to increase the sense of alienation which the film has already made something of an art of. In the game, you are caught up in the ludic imperative to look after your team, build up their trust in you and reduce their fear by giving them weapons, adrenaline shots, medikits, and so on; while being quite unable to connect with them, learn anything of their backstories, and any of the other character-driven substance more typical of RPGs and some adventure games.

So, in both film and game, the men battle the alien creature; but strictly for survival. Neither text develops a backstory, so there is no hearth and home to defend; in neither is there any bond of solidarity between the team members, except in the most short-term sense, survival at any cost, with team-mates as disposable resources. While the liminality of the sublime is present in the disintegrating spaces of the film and game,

it also inspires fear in the dissolving bonds between characters, in the emptiness behind the faces.

THE MONSTER

If the spaces and their human occupants form two essential terms of the sublime experience of horror, then the monster occupying the space is clearly the third. In Kant's sublime, the monsters are on the one hand the despicable goblins of popular imagination, and on the other hand the noble sublime creatures of literary imagination best represented by Milton's Satan. The continuum between these poles is of course not one of inherent cultural value, but the kind of social distinction that Bourdieu discerns in Kant, here used to separate out a sublime structured around the ascetic taste of bourgeois sensibilities from a popular taste which for Kant needs lifting up by education.

The Thing is related to a more recent class of fantasy monsters in films whose particular aesthetic of spectacular excess was made possible in the eighties by a new generation of special effects in latex, pneumatically-operated prosthetics, and, more recently, computer animation. This often produces creatures whose full shape is ill-defined, or never fully revealed, or whose surface is never completely resolved, uch as the creature in *Alien*, or the Brundle-Fly in David Cronenberg's remake of *The Fly*. This particular paradigm, distinctive enough to have become criterial to a virtual sub-genre, is sometimes referred to as body-horror. Mark Jancovich (1992) reads this as a typically postmodern signifier of identity in crisis - the creature (sometimes a transformation of a 'normal' human character) shows signs of physical dissolution representative of psychic disintegration or at least uncertainty: boundaries between physical categories (such as the inside and outside of the body) become unclear.

Jancovich sees this representation of dissolving identity as potentially pleasurable.He relates it to a sense of liberation from the twin restrictions of bourgeois individualism and state regulation and control of the kind Foucault described - especially regulation of the body:

> The forces of transformation within *The Thing* not only provoke fear and repulsion, but also pleasure and excitement. They not only threaten engulfment and assimilation, but they also offer the possibility of liberation from the conventional limits of the body and the self. (1992: 114)

Rather less pleasurable is the principle of degradation in Kristeva's notion of the Abject (1982), which has been used in the analysis of transgressive monsters, most notably in Barbara Creed's study of *Aliens* (1986). Diane Carr also employs the Abject in her consideration of the creature in game of *The Thing*. She points out how 'abjection involves disturbing phenomena that cross or threaten the borders that are necessary to our sense of self' (in press). In many ways, the Abject is the flipside of the Sublime; indeed, Kristeva sees the Abject as edged with with the Sublime. In some ways, the two can be opposed: where the Sublime traditionally ennobles, the Abject degrades; where the Sublime lifts up, the Abject casts down. However, my argument here is to refuse this opposition, and look for a grotesque Sublime in Kant's rubbish bin, which can only be understood in relation to popular tastes and pleasures. While degradation and abjection is one effect of the oozing, obscene bodies of The

Thing, they also inspire exuberance, even humour. While the Thing-monster disgusts, it also exhilarates; where it degrades and dissolves the human body, it also produces fantasy monsters which have a kind of bizarre appeal; indeed, Anne Billson in her study of *The Thing* (1997) compares the monster to Lewis Carroll's exuberant creation, Jabberwocky.

Rather more straightforwardly, we can also argue that the dissolution of self and the body represented by the transforming monster is a metaphor for the extreme forms of alienation the men in the film already suffer. Their tragedy is that the bonds of solidarity which more sentimental evocations of the classic GI platoon conventionally promote, have broken down, if indeed they ever existed. These men are not only separated from home and family by this alien environment, but from each other. The ultimate horror the film promises, as in *The Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*, is that the alien creature lurks behind the familiar faces of comrades, with the addition that here, they were never really comrades in the first place.

The sublime monster, then, is a spectacular representation of this deep loneliness in every corner of the men's existence: the limitless Antarctic space, the endless corridors and subterranean storerooms, and the bodies of their dogs and their colleagues. It is a metaphor for the horror of alienation and the breakdown of bonds of solidarity.

In terms of the temporal structures of horror films, the affective charge of the sublime is in large part created by the articulation of sublime space and monster. The concealment of the monstrous spectacle and its revelation exist in a dialectic relationship. In the film, the suspense is constructed by delay, by intimation of the monster through visual and musical clues, and by the play of lighting and various forms of visual obscurity: snow, mist, fire. By contrast, the sublime thrill inspired by the monster's full appearance is one of Bakhtinian spectacle, where the aesthetic of shocking excess evident in the transformation scene is that of Bakhtin`s 'grotesque realism' (1968). This notion presents a vision of the body as visceral, abundant, excessive, fecund, the 'material bodily principle' which Bakhtin perceives in Rabelais, and which he invokes as an antidote to the contemporary tyranny of the bourgeois aesthetic, which has lost sight of the vitality of the grotesque, the folk spectacle.

Like Bakhtin`s image of the reversal of bodily topography, in which birth can take place through the mouth or ear, the transformations in The Thing distort and recombine the body parts of the consumed creatures in the grotesque birth of a new creature. The sense of a bodily destruction which is also a rebirth, the turning inside out of the body, the birth of the dog's and men's heads from the alien stomach, recalls Bakhtin`s account of the stomach replacing the head, the succession of swellings and eruptions of skin and muscle; and the defiant refusal of the sublimated aesthetic of the Kantian pure gaze which this represents.

As well as representing specific social anxieties, these images are sublimely limitless in that they reach beyond the limits permitted by prevailing social norms: limits of taste, political opinion, sexual mores, the new power of hitherto powerless social groups. The limit is the closure which these norms would impose; the sublime pushes

us up to the limit, as its derivation suggests: *Sub limen*, 'up to the lintel'. John Carpenter describes the effect of seeing a film which took him to the limits of taste:

> In 1976 I saw a movie that I thought went right up to the line of taste in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. It rode the taste-line that separates something unspeakably awful from something that you can handle, and I recall after I saw it I went to sleep and I slept like a baby because it had, sort of, pacified my soul, I was able to go down into the depths of human depravity and come up and not really be damaged by it. (Carpenter, 1994)

So, if the representational strategy of the monster is to critique the comfortable fantasies of the American establishment about its contemporary frontiersmen, its affective strategy is, like that of Cronenberg's films, a frontal assualt on the sublimated taste of the 'pure gaze'.

In the game, some aspects of the monster are very similar. It erupts from the bodies of team members in the same kind of way, it stalks the corridors and snowy wastes to similar effect, and the story is partly structured around three especially large and nasty manifestations of increasing size and power, along with a fourth right at the end, the massive transformation of Blake's commander, Colonel Whitely.

The difference is that the monsters function also as end-of-level bosses in the game, with a set of features and expectations typical of the adventure and RPG genres. There are three bosses, four counting Whitely at the end (though that is more of a finale to the game, offering narrative closure and a visual treat to reward the player). The main three bosses offer a set of challenges to the player, to be overcome through a combination of having amassed the right kind of weapons, player agility (all three battles depend on the player being able to manoevre and position the avatar accurately), and tactical attacks on specific vulnerable spots on the monster's body.

While contemplation of the monster in the film corresponds very closely to Kant's description of contemplation of the sublime, battling the thing-bosses in the game is a quite different experience. There is, certainly, something of the same frisson of fear as the monster approaches – but this happens during brief cut-scenes which introduce us to the monster before we start the battle, our only chance to *contemplate* the sublime ugliness of these tree-like, tentacled beasts. Once we begin the fight, the prevailing emotion is the excitement of the battle, the shock at being hit, the exhilaration of hitting back, the anxiety about whose life-force is going to give out first (the monsters in the game have a coloured target frame around them which goes red when they are weakening). Furthermore, these emotions are altered subtly each time the battle is repeated, which can be several times, as the player is likely to be killed initially by these very powerful enemies.

This kind of repetition is anathema to the sublime effect of film, where the whole point is the one-off shock of the monster's revelation, after a suitably protracted build-up of suspense. In the game, the repetition has a different effect, as the scenario becomes increasingly familiar. Perhaps the best analogy is the recurrent nightmare, which Freud described in his attempt to move beyond the pleasure principle (1912). He looks at the effect of traumatic experiences (shell shock) on the psyche, asking why there should be a compulsion to repeat them psychically, in dreams, for instance.

He suggests that the powerful stimulus of the original trauma breaks through the crust of the conscious, flooding the psyche, and temporarily displacing the pleasure principle by draining all other parts of the psyche in order to bind the excess energy. The accompanying feeling is of fright, which Freud associates with unpreparedness for the trauma. The pleasure principle cannot restore its dominance until the trauma has been re-enacted, in dreams for instance, the difference being that, unlike the original experience, the repetition is accompanied by anxiety instead of fright; anxiety being characterised by preparedness for the trauma. So, the dreams/repetitions are different from the original trauma in that they restore the anxiety that was missing, thus allowing a retrospective mastery of the stimulus.

There is no doubt that battling the boss-monsters in *The Thing* allows a form of mastery, quite literally: a mastery of the skills needed to defeat the monster. However, it seems feasible, too, that the repeated battle with an enormous and terrifying monster in which fright is succeeded by anxiety, and the anxiety is increasingly that of the adrenaline-fuelled battle, does afford mastery of the horrific image. The limitless sublime is brought within the limits of player-control; the terrifying powers of the alien are subjugated to player technique. In all of this, we gradually develop a sense of the limits of the monster's power which recalls the rational aspect of Kant's sublime: awe at its limitlessness, 'yet with a super-added thought of its totality'. This suggests a kind of corrective to the rhetoric of the sublime of horror narratives as an irrational reaction to the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment. By the same token, it makes it difficult to sustain the idea of playing horror games as a chaotic, anarchic experience entirely. In some respects, this rule-governed activity is a rational process; our play is positioned midway between Caillois's *paidea* and *ludus* (1962). Similarly, our apprehension of the sublime monster is a balance between the thrill of its liminality and the gradual recognition of its limits: what Kant called the Mathematical Sublime, which may not be able to grasp the apparently limitless object completely in imagination, but which can, as it were, measure it.

CONCLUSION

So it becomes possible to read the tropes of monster, wilderness and dysfunctional platoon as critiques of the colonial and neo-colonial legacy, the persistent efforts to annex natural wildernesses, the fantasy of synthetic national teams, the dystopian prospect for science as general panacea, the lookingglass experience of finding our own face in the alien Other.

However, the affective experience is equally important. A visceral thrill replaces the ascetic sublimation of the pure gaze; the aesthetic of both film and game regains the emotional and sensory feeling that Aristotle's *aisthesis* originally signified; the energy of popular entertainment combines fear and pleasure in excess. When we played *The Thing* with teenage participants in our research project, they exclaimed with pleasure when the corpses, monsters and amputated limbs appeared; and they laughed, a laughter redolent of Bakhtin's carnival laughter, and the complete lack of distance between the spectator and the cultural object it entails:

> In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not
> acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. ... Carnival is not

a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. (1968: 7)

In the computer game, arguably this abolition of footlights is carried to a qualitatively new level. The distinction between actors and spectators, as Brenda Laurel (1991) and Janet Murray (1997) both argue, is in certain ways abolished. At least in the micro-level of the narrative, we have some control as player over what happens; while our dramatic immersion in the spectacle is undoubtedly of a different kind than that experienced by the spectator of the film. But above all, like carnival, it is a form of play, and the subversive laughter of the game is the whole point.

However, the use of Bakhtin to explain the pleasures of popular horror can all too easily produce an easy optimism about the healing energy of popular excess, in which the energy of these texts and their consumption is enough to dispel the oppressive effects of dominant groups, multinational corporations, or the deadening power of bureaucracy. It is important, then, to recall that Bakhtin observes a degradation, a 'loss of laughter', with the arrival of the Romantic grotesque, which he saw as 'a terrifying world, alien to man' (1968: 30).

This view should warn us against too easy a transposition of the productive image of carnival to a modern horror genre which derives from exactly this Romantic grotesque as much as from earlier popular-festive forms. In the end, the film may partly offer a gleeful, excessive, witty way of dealing with contemporary anxieties; but it also leaves quite unresolved the fragmented social order it has so powerfully represented. In terms of the Kantian sublime, this experience is absolutely not intended to elevate the aesthetic sensibilities of 'the pure gaze'; but to revel in chaotic, subversive spectacle; with the exception of the sublime space of the Antarctic, which wraps the spectacle and noise of The Thing in its deadly quiet.

The game allows further trespass over the footlights, into the spectacle; and it allows a different engagement with the monsters and spaces of the popular sublime. Though subversive and irrational pleasures are still produced by the bloody spaces and raw, swelling bodies of the monsters, these are balanced against the rational pleasures of rule-governed play. If the goblins of Kant's rubbish dump return to haunt us, the ratiocination of his Mathematical Sublime finds an unlikely place among the junk. We collaborate in the production of suspense; and we measure, manage and eventually master the economies of our monsters.

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