# Thought Experiment

## ALIENS, OUTSIDERS, AND *THINGS*

Kelly Lagor

*The dozen or so men spread out across a large, melted stretch of ice in the midst of an empty expanse of snow, as the strong Arctic winds gust around them. The men gradually form into a rough circle some thirty meters across. Once in place, they extend their arms out toward one another.*

*"Holy cats. Hey . . ."*

*"It's almost . . .*

*"Yeah. . . . Almost a perfect . . .*

*"It is. It's round."*

*"We finally got one."*

*"We found a flying saucer!"*

Scene from *The Thing from Another World* (1951)

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*The half dozen or so men have gathered around the television to watch the black-and-white footage shot by the now-dead Norwegian team of their discovery. From a distance, the camera shakes as it does a slow pan of the men as they stand in a circle around something massive in the ice. Some wave at the camera.*

*"What's that?"*

*"Looks like something buried under the ice."*

*"And look at that, they're planting thermite charges."*

*"Whatever it was, it was bigger than that block of ice you found."*

Scene from *The Thing* (1982)

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The 1982 summer box office was dominated by a film about an alien stranded on Earth. The film was such an unprecedented blockbuster that, to this day, it remains in the top 100 highest grossing films of all time. That film was not John Carpenter's *The Thing*. It was Steven Spielberg's *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* (1982), which, unfortunately for Carpenter, came out two weeks before his own, decidedly not family-friendly film about a different kind of stranded alien.

Carpenter's *The Thing* was an adaptation of a 1951 adaptation of a 1938 novella. The novella, "Who Goes There?" by John W. Campbell, was published in the science fiction magazine *Astounding Stories* shortly after Campbell took over as its editor, and it follows a crew of an Antarctic research station as they're besieged by a shape-shifting alien they found frozen in the ice. *The Thing from Another World* was adapted for the screen by Howard Hawks, the "greatest American director who is not a household name," according to critic Leonard Maltin. It would be Hawks' only science fiction film, and would substantially depart from Campbell's novella, changing the location and nature of the alien, while throwing in some comedy and romance for good measure. Carpenter's version made nods to both; to Campbell in the restoration of the original setting, alien, and plot, while channeling Hawk's style through his own paranoid take on the tale. Carpenter's version would be the least successful of the three upon its release, but is now widely considered to be Carpenter's masterpiece, including by Carpenter himself.

Despite their similar plots, all three versions focus on different fundamental central conflicts—science versus an alien menace in Campbell's, military versus scientists in Hawks', and mankind versus itself in Carpenter's. So, what was it

that inspired these three very different takes on the alien invasion story?

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*"There are no enemies in space, only phenomena to be studied."*
Dr. Arthur Carrington in *The Thing from Another World*

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Conflict is a central component of narrative. It's what drives the plot and generates the drama. The ancient Greeks called a story's central contest the *agon*, and while conflict always happens between a protagonist and an antagonist, the nature of the antagonist can be many and varied. The four general types of antagonist include classic villains like Darth Vader from *Star Wars* (1977), simple conflict creators like Q in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994), an aspect of the main character as with Paul Atreides and his struggle with his own destiny in *Dune* (1965), or some kind of external force like nature, society, or even fate. One of the most versatile science fictional antagonists in the history of the genre is the alien, as it provides a perfect blank canvas for any of the above types of conflict.

Speculation about the nature of alien life didn't begin in earnest until the heliocentric model of the Universe, first posited by Nicolaus Copernicus in 1514, became the dominant model in the early 1600s. The only person to defend Copernicus's model in his time was the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno. Bruno penned the text *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds* (1584), in which he included speculation on the nature of alien life, but he would, alas, be burned at the stake by the Catholic Church for his many and varied "heretical" ideas in 1600.

It would only take a few decades for people to start wondering if there was life orbiting other stars. The astronomer Johannes Kepler used science as a lens through which to imagine Lunar alien life in an environment with low atmosphere and extremes of temperature in his 1634 book *Somnium*. In 1686 the French author, and one of the first science popularizers, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontanelle, published *Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*, in which he summarized the work of Copernicus and René Descartes on the heliocentric model and opined on the possibility of alien life on planets both within the Solar System and without. In these early works, the aliens were mostly described *in situ*, and they didn't inspire any real conflict. Aliens were just an entertaining way to convey different scientific or philosophical ideas.

Aliens would visit the Earth more regularly after the mid-eighteenth century. *Micromégas* (1752), by French philosopher and satirist François-Marie Arouet (a.k.a. Voltaire), recounts the journey across the stars of the twenty-plus-mile tall eponymous humanoid alien, including his time spent on Earth. Initially, Micromégas presumes there is no intelligent life on Earth, as humans are too small to be considered sentient, but after using a magnifying glass and discovering a boat full of philosophers, he is surprised that humans could ever believe the Universe was created solely for them. Still, beyond a bit of sarcasm, aliens weren't much for stirring the pot.

The shape aliens took changed as science matured. Prior to the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), alien life was largely humanoid and possessed of angelic traits, both in morality and form. After Darwin's ideas about competition and how species are adapted to their environments spread, alien life in fiction became significantly more diverse. In *Real and Imaginary Worlds (1864)* and *Lumen* (1887), the French astronomer and author Camille Flammarion imagined all kinds of fantastic alien life that had a basis in the scientific thinking of the time, like sentient plants with combined respiratory and digestive tracts.

Still, whenever we encountered alien life, it was overwhelmingly benign. It was H.G. Wells who changed our fictional relationship with aliens forever after. For the last few decades of the nineteenth century, a fin-de-siècle pessimism in Britain fueled the popularity of the "future wars" sub-genre of literature, in which the British

Empire came under attack by other nations, mostly Germany. Wells mashed up a post-Darwinist alien life form with the future war genre in his chilling Martian invasion of Earth novel, *The War of the Worlds* (1897). The novel was serialized in *Pearson's Magazine* in 1896 and was such a smash hit, it was reprinted in *Cosmopolitan* and came out as a novel the following year. After that, it became a perennial classic. Wells' tale appeared on the cover of a 1927 issue of the first all-science fiction pulp, *Amazing Stories*, and was notoriously adapted for radio in 1938, by then stage director Orson Welles, reportedly causing a mass panic, though the panic was overstated.

After *The War of the Worlds*, hostile aliens flooded the science-fiction pulps, most often appearing as background, antagonistic forces of nature, or as classic villains. All types of alien could be found in the space opera work of two of the most prolific pulp writers of the early twentieth century—in E.E. "Doc" Smith's *Skylark* (1915–1965) and *Lensmen* (1937–1948) series, and in Edmond Hamilton's *Interstellar Patrol* (1928–1930) series. These were largely adventure stories of super science, with simple plots, simple villains, and satisfying endings where humanity was saved and the alien menace was vanquished.

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*"The blood—the blood will not obey. It's a new individual, with all the desire to protect its own life that the original—the main mass from which it was split—has. The blood will live—and try to crawl away from a hot needle, say!"*

Van Wall in "Who Goes There?"

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Science fiction, and by extension, its aliens, evolved during the "Golden Age" of the late 1930s and 1940s, and the editor most responsible for the shape the genre took was John W. Campbell, Jr.

Campbell was born in New Jersey in 1910. His father was an overly rational and unemotional engineer, from whom he inherited his rightwing politics and interest in science. He got his interest in speculative fiction from his mother, who also had an identical twin sister. The sister hated Campbell, which often led to confusing interactions for him as a child. Campbell, who coped by being intellectually insufferable, was a lonely kid, and he read science fiction, popular science, and the pulps to escape.

Smith's 1928 serial, *The Skylark of Space,* inspired Campbell to major in physics at MIT, and when he wanted a new car, the per word rate at *Amazing* inspired him to start writing. He sold the first two stories he wrote to *Amazing*. They were light on story and heavy on super science technical jargon, which made him an instant hit with the readership, and he soon became nearly as popular as Smith. He'd found his people.

After getting kicked out of MIT in 1931 (he'd finish his degree later at Duke), he married Doña Louise Stuart Stebbins. With Doña's support and feedback, he grew as a writer. In 1933 the new editor of *Astounding Stories*, F. Orlin Tremaine, approached Campbell for some fiction. The second piece Campbell sent Tremaine wasn't his usual super science fare. "Twilight" (1934) was a more atmospheric short story about a hitch-hiking time traveler. At Tremaine's recommendation, Campbell published "Twilight" under the pseudonym Don A. Stuart, which from then on he would use for his more thoughtful stories. *Astounding* readers preferred the "Stuart" stories, which had more ambivalent conflicts and dealt with issues of insecurity.

Campbell wasn't a stranger to alien invasions. He published a number of them under his Stuart byline, like "The Invaders" (1935), about alien cannibals, and "Brain Stealers of Mars" (1936), about a shape-shifting alien. The latter inspired him to write his best, and final, work of fiction when he realized he could put the shapeshifter on Earth and play up the paranoia. "Who Goes There?" appeared in

*Astounding* in 1938, shortly after he took over as the magazine's editor.

To this day, it remains an effective and creepy tale. In it a group of researchers and support staff at an Antarctic meteorological research station discover an alien lifeform frozen in the ice that, when thawed, has the ability to perfectly imitate anything its size, including men. The alien was partly a faceless force of nature bent on the conquest of Earth, but also part classic villain in how it kills without conscience and assumes the identities of animals and men in order to survive. True to Campbell's style, the scientists overcome the threat to both themselves and humanity by using iterative logic and science.

In his role as editor of *Astounding*, Campbell quickly established himself as the heart of science fiction and *Astounding* as the dominant magazine. He shaped the careers of practically every major science fiction writer to emerge during the era, including Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and Theodore Sturgeon. His insistence on high quality prose, that science fiction was a genre of analogies (thus the later retitle to *Analog* in 1960), and his personal attention to new talent were a boon to the genre's complexity.

Campbell's vice grip on *Astounding*, however, also meant he used both the magazine, and his subsequent platform, to promote things like dangerous pseudoscience, particularly L. Ron Hubbard's Dianetics (which he had a hand in developing), school segregation, the opinion that some Black people preferred to return to slavery following the 1965 Watts riots, and to cheer on the Kent State Massacre of student protesters by the National Guard in 1970.

By the 1950s, he'd been abandoned by many in the science fiction community he'd helped build. He only relinquished the reigns of *Astounding* upon his death in 1971.

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*"So few people can boast they've lost a flying saucer and a man from Mars—all in the same day! Wonder what they'd have done to Columbus if he'd discovered America, and then mislaid it."*

Ned Scott in *The Thing from Another World*

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The 1940s weren't just science fiction's Golden Age, they were also the start of Saucer Mania. The prelude to the craze was World War II's "Foo Fighter" phenomenon, in which allied pilots reported seeing intelligent, fast-moving lights following their aircraft. Named for a nonsense word from a cartoon strip, they were initially suspected to be a German weapon, but they never attacked. A post-war commission cited phenomena like St. Elmo's Fire and reflective ice crystals as possible causes.

Saucer Mania, however, started in earnest in 1947. On June 24, a private pilot, Kenneth Arnold, reportedly saw nine disc-shaped objects flying quickly and in erratic formation near Mount Rainier in Washington State. He took his story to a newspaper, who dubbed the discs "flying saucers." Soon after, an additional sighting was reported on nearby Maury Island, Washington, along with a report that it rained metallic debris on two fishermen.

That same year, the infamous Roswell incident occurred. After a resident of the small New Mexico town Roswell found wreckage from a flying vehicle in the desert, the military reclaimed the material, then issued a press release saying it belonged to a "flying disc." They soon walked that statement back, amending "flying disc" to "experimental weather balloon."

The floodgates opened. Flying saucers were suddenly everywhere. Photos appeared in magazines and newspapers, just as they flooded science fiction magazine covers. Psychologist Carl Jung considered the phenomenon the beginning of a new modern myth. They were the perfect distraction from the existential angst of the times; a way to turn a fear of nuclear annihilation into a contemplation on our place in the Universe, and a way to minimize the everyday anxieties of rampant

unemployment, inflation, housing shortages, and a newly aggressive Russia.

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*"Every one of you listening to my voice, tell the world, tell this to everybody wherever they are. Watch the skies. Everywhere. Keep looking. Keep watching the skies!"*

Ned Scott in *The Thing from Another World*

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The combination of nuclear anxieties and saucer mania is what also inspired Howard Hawks to make his first and only science fiction film.

Hawks' first hit, the World War I aviation film *The Dawn Patrol* (1930), gained him enough Hollywood clout that he was able to spend the rest of his career as an independent filmmaker. This was an oddity in the era of studio directors. His status allowed him work in any genre, producing countless classics as he followed his creative whims without being pigeonholed. He made noirs like *The Big Sleep* (1946), John Wayne westerns like *Red River (*1948) and *Rio Bravo* (1959), and screwball comedies like *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *His Girl Friday* (1940), and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). So in 1950, when his longtime friends and collaborators screenwriters Charles Lederer and Ben Hecht urged him to acquire the rights to the recently reprinted *Who Goes There?*, Hawks agreed.

Lederer wrote the script, throwing out most of Campbell's story, but the core of it remained—an alien ship is discovered in the ice, then accidentally destroyed. The lone survivor is taken back to base and thawed, after which it attacks the crew until science is used to defeat it. But the tone of the piece is wildly different. It was moved to the Arctic, to better bring in the Russian threat and a military presence; and the shape-shifting alien, which was impossible to do with the effects of the time, was abandoned for a classically villainous Frankenstein's monster-type antagonist that survived on blood. Lederer played up the good guy military versus bad guy scientist angle, too, portraying the scientists as dangerously naïve, and he threw in a romance for good measure. Lederer also changed the shape of the alien ship from a classic rocket to a faddish saucer.

Hawks' unobtrusive cinematic style shines in *The Thing from Another World*. It brings in satisfying elements of his western siege movies and his screwball comedies. The characterization is superior to the Campbell story, filled with snappy dialogue, competent professional men, and "Hawksian" strong women. The result is a satisfying and unexpectedly fun ensemble picture that is genuinely frightening at times. *The Thing from Another World* opened in April 1951, and it would be the top grossing science fiction film of the year, beating out other nuclear paranoiac alien classics like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *When Worlds Collide.*

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*"Trust's a tough thing to come by these days."*

R.J. MacReady in *The Thing*

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John Carpenter was born in upstate New York in 1948. He developed a love of films early on, but 1953 changed everything. First, his father took a position at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green in the music department and moved the family south. Second, Carpenter saw *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), which terrified him, and a rerelease of *The Thing From Another World*, which got him hooked.

When Carpenter was eight, he got an 8mm camera and was off and running, seeking out films by his favorite directors, Alfred Hitchcock, Roger Corman, and particularly Hawks, for obsessive study. As he grew up, Carpenter chafed against the conservative culture and the ubiquitous racism he was surrounded with in Kentucky, and his cockiness and anti-authoritarian attitude set him apart from the other kids. Instead, he played in a rock band, and he and his best friend, Tommy Lee Wallace, made

countless short films, with titles like "Revenge of the Colossal Beast" and "Terror from Space."

Carpenter and Wallace moved to Los Angeles in 1968 after enrolling in the prestigious film studies and production program at the University of Southern California. There they were taught by cinematic greats like Welles, Hitchcock, and even Hawks, whose unobtrusive style, efficient characterization, and genre-blending penchant Carpenter would channel throughout his own career. In 1970 Carpenter worked on the Oscar-winning short film, *The Resurrection of Broncho Billy,* and when USC claimed all credit for it, Carpenter rebelled. He, Wallace, and fellow student Dan O'Bannon personally financed *Dark Star* (1972), an absurdist and anti-authoritarian science fiction comedy, which Carpenter described as "*Waiting for Godot* in space," and which drew inspiration from Stanley Kubrick's (notably saucer-less) *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). Because they took the movie and ran, getting funding from a distributor to make it a full-length film, they never graduated.

Carpenter's first post-USC film was the micro-budget *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976). He wrote the screenplay himself, inspired partly by Hawks' *Rio Bravo*, and partly by George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The story is set at a Los Angeles police station besieged by gang members, in which an unlikely crew of criminals and police must band together to survive. Enlisting friends to help during production, and scoring the film himself, Carpenter used what funds he had to make the film look as professional as possible.

Carpenter had hoped to become a studio director, like Hitchcock, so he could maintain complete control over his projects. He was able to ride the critical goodwill from *Assault* to make *Halloween* (1978), the film that would establish him as a new important voice in horror. He used the same low budget, high quality approach for the now classic slasher in which a group of teenage girls, including Jamie Lee Curtis in her first role, is stalked by the masked killer Michael Myers on Halloween night. While it wasn't the first slasher, it would become, for better or worse, the template for 1980s horror. He followed that up with the atmospheric ghost story film, *The Fog* (1980), starring Curtis again. To avoid being pigeonholed as a horror director, he then made the science fiction action film *Escape from New York* (1981). In it Kurt Russell plays Snake Plissken, the nihilistic, western-inspired antihero forced to recover a kidnapped president from the super-prison island of Manhattan. Carpenter had, in five years, made a name for himself as an efficient and effective director.

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*"I don't know what the hell's in there, but it's weird and pissed off, whatever it is."*
Clark in *The Thing*

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By 1982, saucer mania was a distant memory, having waned with the dawning of the Space Age. With the release of *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and *2001*, science fiction became more introspective, and space travel more utilitarian. Science fictional aliens and nostalgic saucers were briefly revived by films like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), but it was only an echo of the 1950s. The 1970s were a time of economic recession and post-Vietnam cynicism. The era saw a rise in crime, the religious right, and yuppie culture. By the start of the 1980s, the previously collective ethos of "Look to the skies!" had been transformed into a more individualistic "Look out for yourself" mentality.

As aliens were a bit passé, Carpenter's *Thing* almost wasn't made, but the unexpected success of Dan O'Bannon's *Alien* (1979) made Universal Pictures want an alien picture of their own. It was Carpenter's first assignment from a major studio, but they wanted it done cheap, which is why they approached Carpenter. Carpenter, though, wanted to make the grandest monster movie of all time. He brought in Kurt

Russell to play MacReady, and recruited Rob Bottin, who was hot off his award-winning work on *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), for the effects, which would be front and center. Carpenter didn't want the Thing to lurk in the shadows, like in *Alien*. He wanted it "live, in front of the camera, like a magic show." The studio even brought in legendary western composer Ennio Morricone for the score.

Carpenter's film included a direct nod to Hawks' film in the Norwegian footage of their discovery of the saucer, with the men standing around it in a ring, effectively making Carpenter's version a kind of sequel. Beyond that, it drew heavily from the novella, except with significantly more horror, thanks to Bottin's incredible practical effects, and amped up paranoia. The antagonist was thus not only the unstoppable force from Campbell's story, but it was also each character's isolationism. Carpenter also discarded the definitive victories of both Hawks and Campbell's versions, ending on an uneasy note where we are left uncertain if all the struggles have been in vain.

*The Thing* is an expert blend of a Hawksian western siege, 1950s monster movie, and 1980s body horror, and it is still as stunning and effective as it was in 1982. Unfortunately, 1982 audiences weren't looking for a cynical horror masterpiece. They were much more interested in the wholesome good feelings *E.T.* provided, and audiences and critics alike decried Carpenter's film as nihilistic and "disgusting." *The Thing* bombed, and Carpenter would never realize his dream to become a studio director. He would, however, have a career much like Hawks', as an independent director who maintained a high degree of creative control over his work. He'd go on to make a number of notable films, including the kung-fu comedy *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986), and his most outwardly political aliens-among-us film, *They Live* (1988).

While the popularity of aliens is nowhere near what it once was, as long as we remain alone in our little corner of the Universe, they're still effective blank slates onto which we can project all our collective fears and paranoia.