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FI526 – The Fantastic Film
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Essay no.2

“It has been argued that special effects aim not only at creating a specific fictional entity, such as a werewolf or alien. They also address the viewer, drawing attention to the fact that they are special effects, flaunting their fabricated nature. To what extent do these two functions support or conflict with each other in films you have seen on the course?”

Creating a shocking and believable specific entity and drawing attention to their own blatant fabricated nature are the double identities of the same ‘thing’. These two identities (or functions as it is put in the question) both support and conflict with each other. From Nosferatu’s shadow, to the upside-down severed human head with insect feet, the Fantastic Film course covered various milestone examples of special effects. Themes essential to the course, like the notion of the Fantastic, the Double and the Uncanny are many times depicted and told through the benefit and guidance of the special effects. Among the countless types of special effects, what are focused on during the course were the ones in 70’s and 80’s horror movies and shocker classics. During the 90’s, special effects advanced to a new level, almost losing the ‘drawing attention to their blatant fabricated nature’ identity. The Tyrannosaurus-Rex of *Jurassic Park* or T-1000 of *Terminator II* were great images, shockingly real entities but they didn’t make the viewer say ‘what the hell am I looking at?’. It was rather obvious what was looked at; a Tyrannosaurus-Rex attacking the car or a liquid-metal cyborg morphing into the shape of other human beings. The catch of the special effects has been altered. Landmark entities created by the landmark films of 70’s and 80’s were quite indefinable, like the phallic-like organ in the armpit of Rose in *Rabid*, the fusion of the telepod and Brundlefly in *The Fly*, or the unspecific alien life form in *The Thing*. This indefinability was the catch and it was crucial to understanding the themes mentioned above which finally leads to understanding the art of the 20th century; existence without being.

This essay argues that the specific art of special effects towards the end of the century (focusing on Rob Bottin’s work on *The Thing*) is the cardinal example of the notion of the art of the 20th century. So, what is special effects and what is art of the 20th century?

Leo Tolstoy asks “What is this art, which is considered so important and necessary for humanity that for its sake these sacrifices of labour, of human life, and even goodness may be made?” and he continues “Every work of art causes the receiver to enter into a certain kind of relationship both with him who produced, or is producing, the art, and with all those who, simultaneously, previously or subsequently, receive the same artistic impression.”¹ Above all, art is an intercourse, a relationship between man to man. That’s the reason one wonders about the director of a movie that excites him and searches for another movie of the same director. It is also the very reason why children relate to the protagonists in the films they love. It is the most apparent person they can see which is associated with the feeling of the movie. David Cronenberg, in an interview, states that he wanted to be an actor when

¹ Sesonke, Alexander., *What Is Art?* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1965)

he was a child, watching movies. Keeping this definition of art in mind, one should primarily know that the main difference of the art of the 20th century is the emergence of ‘mechanical reproduction’.

During the 19th century, simultaneous with the rise of socialism, revolutionary means of reproduction evidently threatened the total function and definition of art. “An analysis of art in the age of mechanical reproduction must do justice to these relationships, for they lead us to an all important insight: for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an even greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for the reproducibility... the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice-politics... by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value, the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions...”² These entirely new functions, new qualities, transformed the concept of the ‘final product’. The final product lost its ultimate importance. The reproduced copies and their copy’s copies became the final products. For example, today even watching a cheap Hong Kong DVD copy of *Mulholland Drive*, is a way for the intercourse between David Lynch and the receiver. But even before DVD and straight-to-video concept, the cinema itself was a 20th century art form and the final product had become –in theory- irrelevant for the art of cinema.

The intercourse between the film and the receiver can be in many forms. The film might attempt to keep the viewer cheerful, excited, guessing or even attempt to disturb the viewer. It is not this feeling itself but how well the film manages to structure and give this feeling determines the power of the film. This makes the bond between the film and the audiences. When interviewed about his film, the young filmmaker Steven Spielberg says “I wanted *Jaws* for hostile reasons. I read it and felt that I had been attacked”³. *Jaws* went on and became the highest grossing movie ever when it was released. It was this ever so powerful bond that earned the film its popularity. On the other hand, more than a decade ago, *Peeping Tom* was another picture with great hostile bonds too. However, one of the most disturbing films ever, *Peeping Tom*, was highly despised by the critics and the director Michael Powell’s career was almost destroyed. The same ‘British state of mind’, behind the reason that the heart gouging scene in *Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom* is still censored when screened at UKC University at the year 2004 (and lots of other scenes in other films in the library), had banned *Peeping Tom* due to its strongly disturbing nature. The power of *Peeping Tom* was so intense and ahead of its time that it was feared by British critics and media, and therefore tried to be ruined. Today *Peeping Tom* is considered a classic and is one of the milestones of Horror Cinema. Films like *The Blair Witch Project*, *Irreversible* and *Open Water* are contemporary examples of this aggressive and disturbing attitude of art of cinema, which nowadays receives the appreciation and gets respected.

An interesting example of the bond between the artwork (film) and its receiver (audience) at the end of the 20th century is the new ‘re-embodiment sequel’ concept. The films which take place not in the aftermath of the events in the first film but take place in the aftermath of the box office success of the first film. *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* and *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch Project 2* are examples of this unique

² Benjamin, Walter., “The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, *Illuminations*, (UKC hand-out from the course HA301 in the academic year 2003-2004)

³ *Summer of the Shark*, Time, 23 June 1975, 44.

approach. *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* takes place in a world where Freddy has become a cultural icon and phenomenon. And the funny thing is, it actually is the real world today. So the myth of Freddy takes another route and reincarnates itself once again to the real world.

Together with the sequels, the merchandise, TV series and fan clubs, this bond leads some artworks (films) to become modern myths. This great bond between the film and the viewer, or the myth and its fans, is of course a great business tool. Concepts like Star Wars, Jason or Freddy have long ago lost their identities as single films and become modern myths. Today, when somebody says Jason, he is probably not referring to the mongoloid kid who emerges from the lake, at the end of *Friday the 13th* (That scene originally wasn't even in the movie but was later added as a final scare for the audience by Sean Cunningham). So what has now become an inhuman monster slashing teenagers in a spaceship in the 25th century* as a representative of archetypal fears and protective of cultural values, was originally a piece of special effect added to the end of a horror flick 25 years ago.

What is the role of special effects in this copy of a copy of a copy art world? History of special effects' roots goes back to the theatre. Trying to keep the production process behind the scene was already a game put on theatre before cinema. Using fire in the early European theatre can be considered the first form of special effects. "Appropriate evidence concerning the use of special effects in fire and flame in the medieval and Tudor theatre points to some hazardous, exciting and spectacular theatrical activity. The effects range from the simple use of candles to impressive 'Set-pieces' for dramatic firework events."⁴ The first known example of cinematic special effects (in the term we use it today) was in 1895, in Edison's peep show *Mary Queen of Scots*. "In 1895, the head of a dummy rolling off the axe man's block was enough to be called a shocker. The director, Alfred Clark, stopped the camera before the axe fell, told the players to stand still, then replaced the actress with a dummy."⁵ Going back to the basics, one might say that, even the cuts and fade-ins are special effects. This point of view, which is theoretically very true, leads to the thesis that the cinema itself is a special effect. What is reflected on screen through the camera is never pure. The production process itself is a special effect. It is the magic for the viewer since the viewer doesn't know the production process which creates the world he/she's looking at. The viewer can't help but see what he/she's looking at. It is a famous anecdote that in one of the first examples of film history, the audience was dreadfully scared and left their seats when they see the train coming towards them on the screen.

In the range from Alfred Clark's decapitation scene, to the modern CGI creatures of the 2000's, The Fantastic Film course focuses on mainly the 80's special effects. The reason for that is the nature of special effects in the 80's. The Double, The Uncanny and The Fantastic are best interpreted through the fabricated nature of 80's creatures and transformations; especially the transformations. What was special about 80's special effects was the fact that there was actually a creature or transformation happening in real time. A theatre-like quality it was. If you were on the set of the film, you'd see almost the same special effect. The world you're looking at

* *Jason X*, which is the tenth instalment in the series and the last Jason movie before *Freddy vs Jason*

⁴ Butterworth, Philip., *Theatre of Fire: Special Effects in Early English and Scottish theatre* (The Society for Theatre Research, London, 1998)

⁵ Turner, George E., "*The Evolution of Special Visual Effects*" (American Society of Cinematographers, Hollywood, 1983)

was not only created on screen but before the camera (something which can not be achieved with the computer effects today.. yet). The real-time transformation in *An American Werewolf in London* was truly groundbreaking at the time and it was challenging for the viewer's mind. Without a cut, or any other cinematic effect, the viewer was confronted with the hand stretching to become a claw and the guy's face morphing into a face of a beast. Tom Savini's gore effects, David Cronenberg's disease effects, Rob Bottin's make-up effects and Sam Raimi's evil creatures are the first ones to name from the decade of special effects. Their special effects were artworks themselves. In real time and space, there were these unique models, make-ups and mechanisms in a non-fiction identity. In the 'making of' documentary of *The Thing*, actor Keith David points out the fact that each morning they were coming to the set and there were these great, not quite definable pieces of art lying around. They are great pieces of art, yes, but it doesn't mean they look unquestionably real. Oppositely, they don't look anything like real which adds to the narrative effect of the film. "It is what one might call both a 'textual and institutional' event: a remark addressed to the spectator of the film, and by the cinematic apparatus, about the nature of its special effects. As such it is the sign of a number of things. It is sign that the film is, at this point at least, violently self-conscious"⁶

The Thing is probably the best example for the double identity of indefinable special effects. The concept of the alien life form in *The Thing* sums up the notion of the art of the 20th century. Even the description of 'alien life form' is not ultimately correct for the Thing. The film begins with the shot of a spacecraft and the viewer is very vaguely guided through the theories of the characters who confront the Thing. But, what really happening is beyond the reach of the viewer. The Thing displays the power and awareness of the film; and also the art. Questions about the Thing like; how it works, what it aims, how does it survive, etc... They are misleading. It's very hard to find a fact about the Thing, which is also not disproved at some stage of the film. The life form, or the entity (it is the best to call it the 'thing' really) in the film is very close to the alien life form described in the short story *Who Goes There?*. Both the original movie *The Thing from Another World* and John Carpenter's *The Thing* are based on this short story (Also the *X-Files* episode "Ice"). However, due to the technology of 1951, it was not possible to create an alien life form other than a man-in-a-suit. John Carpenter took the concept a step further. He wanted to create a being, an entity that's beyond any monster or alien description. In the 'making of' documentary of *The Thing*, Carpenter clearly indicates that one thing he didn't want was the Thing to be a man-in-a-suit monster. Quite truly, until *The Thing*, every single monster or alien in cinema history was a man-in-a-suit (so was the monster in *The Thing from Another World*). That's why he says he was extremely relieved when he saw special effects artist Rob Bottin's first piece for the film; the upside-down severed human head with insect feet.

The star of *The Thing* is not Kurt Russell, not John Carpenter but definitely Rob Bottin. The special make-up artist Rob Bottin's work is the core of this film. Rob Bottin's original artwork is the protagonist. Themes like 'the unseen enemy', 'embodiment of the death drive', 'merging with the origin' and 'copy of a copy of a copy' are created through Bottin's work. Moreover, it is the most accurate example of the special effects, addressing the viewer and flaunting its fabricated nature. The Double of cinema emerges here. The Thing is an entity which looks like fabricated.

⁶ Neale, Steve., 'You've Got To Be Fucking Kidding!' Knowledge, Belief and Judgement in Science Fiction (UKC hand-out from the course FI526 in the academic year 2004-2005)

Even at the most gripping scenes, the Thing really looks like a moving, unconscionable independent art project with lots of fluids on it. Throughout the movie Rob Bottin keeps the viewer guessing and never gives the answer. In every scene with the Thing he defies his previous work in the previous scene. The viewer looks at the special make-up effects and can't figure out what this 'thing' is! Additionally, the Thing imitates and makes copies of the humans. The copies created by the Thing are inseparable from the normal people. Not like the clones in *Invasion of The Body Snatchers*, but these clones, here, even have the very human feelings. The Thing can construct identities. The very identities that are constructed in the mirror, and in language is fraud, that one can never live up to. The Thing copies, creates this! Then, the clones merge together and form a coherent, continuous, single entity. And where this all going to end if the Thing conquers the world is very unclear. Is there going to be a world where every single human is in fact the Thing but nothing seems different than today's real world? Or will there be nothing alive but one humongous creature sitting on the world, waiting for its death? This 'creator' and 'copy of a copy of a copy' and 'going back to origin (merging)' and 'death drive' themes are the essence of art. So this loads more responsibility and meaning to the artwork (special effects) used to create this concept.

It's very hard to define the notion of art of the 20th century, but then again, it is the point here. When Church lost its grip on the art, it started to work for other notions. Art got loose from the responsibilities it carried for ages. Rather than being a definable and reachable concept, it became simply the intercourse between man to man. Moreover, the Godless artwork, the Frankenstein, was now considered art. It was realized that art didn't have to be something holy, good, or even existent. Trying to define the inexistent, not try to reach a conclusion (not try to reach a final product) but rather riding the ride... the blur in between... The unending search for the Man... after all "Man is the warmest place to hide".

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