

Even baser instincts: notes on *Hollow Man* I.Q. Hunter

Anyone looking to Paul Verhoeven's cartoonish thrillers for philosophical nourishment and carefully worked out allegories of life might seem to be woefully misguided. Still, his films do furnish a comprehensive view of the world that can be summed up in a handful of flippant, easily memorised soundbites. To some extent, this 'vision' embodies the cynical realism of the bottom line that you'd expect in Hollywood films, albeit without the usual sugar-coating of sentimentality. What matters now, as in the historical past (*Flesh + Blood*) and the dystopian future (*RoboCop*, *Total Recall*), is power, sex and the pursuit of self-interest. If Hollywood numbs audiences to the possibility of social change, then this ideological project is arguably intact in Verhoeven's films. Even when laying bare, as *Showgirls* does, the social-darwinism of capitalist reality, they encourage complacency by their smart ironic distancing. Resistance seems futile to capitalism's anarchic energy, its seductive thrills and surfaces.

Hollow Man (2000) is the latest and by some margin the least controversial of Verhoeven's American films. Despite its violence, sexual overtones and gruesome special effects, *Hollow Man* is a relatively straightforward mad scientist movie. An updated variation on H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*, it veers away from science fiction in its later stages and into slasher film territory. It is a thin, conventional thriller, an example of textbook postmodernism, stitched together like some Frankenstein's monster from bits and pieces of old movies. Technically adept and with startling special effects, it is nevertheless empty - a word that, in this film, paradoxically carries a good deal of thematic weight.

The central metaphor out of which the narrative is spun is powerful and fascinating. The hero, Sebastian Caine, a scientist who discovers the secret of invisibility, is a man of brilliance, talent and drive who is spiritually and morally hollow to his non-existent core. He was metaphorically empty as a human being even before he became literally so: this is a fine image for an otherwise entirely commonplace awful warning about the perils of materialism and self-obsession. Caine's name refers us back not only to the first murderer but to another hollow over-achiever, Charles Foster Kane, who also gains the world but loses his soul. The film's title, of course, echoes T.S. Eliot's great Modernist lament for the secular waste land of mass culture. *Hollow Man*, sublimely post-modern in invoking Eliot in the title of a trashy horror film, takes for granted the waning of transcendent values and the brute meaninglessness of life, over which Modernist high culture abstrusely fussed with such fashionable and subversive angst. But, like *Showgirls* and *Starship Troopers*, the film could be seen as a symptom as much as a diagnosis of the postmodern condition. It deliberately panders to the worst instincts of its audience and contemptuously delivers, with furious overstatement, what is required of a formulaic blockbuster.

Caine (Kevin Bacon) leads a team of scientists working to achieve invisibility through a process of 'bio-quantum phase shift'. In the first major scene of the film they succeed into reversing invisibility in Lucy, a gorilla, by injecting her with 'irradiated proteins'. Unlike many film scientists, Caine's team are neither nerds nor emotionless drones. Caine himself, with his Porsche and leather jacket, is like a young entrepreneur, hyped up and career-orientated, overdosing on his own magnificence. The scientists are funded by the Pentagon (though the film ignores the usual moral dilemmas about the military use of scientific discoveries), and answerable to an 'oversight committee' (an appropriately ocular title) led by Dr Kramer (William Devane). Their experiments and almost all of the film's action take place in an underground laboratory reminiscent of a nuclear bunker.

Two opening sequences deftly set the film within the usual Verhoevan universe of blood, desire and repression: first, a lab rat is eaten in emetic close up by an invisible gorilla; and second, as a hint of coming attractions, Caine is distracted from his work by a beautiful woman undressing in the apartment opposite. Thus are established not only the film's themes - predatory violence; frustrated voyeurism ('Dammit', Caine says, on behalf of men in the audience, when the woman's blinds snap shut) - but also its unapologetic use of clichés and exploitation tropes to show the audience what it would like to see but is uncomfortable with seeing.

Caine, immensely egotistical and ambitious, is a stock character: the scientist as self-appointed Creator. For slower members of the audience, the point is made several times that Caine is not only 'a goddam genius' but also thinks that he is God. He openly makes the claim himself, and towards the end of the film, Lynn, another scientist, says to him, 'You think you're God. I'll show you God', before blasting him with a flame-thrower. Caine is an amoral, cartoon *übermensch*, who, appropriately enough, quotes Nietzsche before confronting the existential void of invisibility, 'That which doesn't kill me makes me stronger'. (Mottos from Nietzsche are used surprisingly often in Hollywood movies to connote a macho attitude of Existential stoicism. 'That which doesn't kill me...' is printed before the credits of *Conan the Barbarian*, and *The Abyss* opens with '...when you look into an abyss, the abyss is also looking into you'.) Overriding his subordinates' objections Caine decides to 'go to Phase 3' and make himself invisible without informing the Pentagon. The procedure is successful but the team are unable to reverse it and Caine is forced to remain invisible while they search for a solution. In a sub-plot, Lynn (Elisabeth Shue), his ex-girlfriend, has secretly begun an affair with one of the other scientists.

After taking advantage of his invisibility to fondle Sarah, a vet on the team, while she sleeps, Caine tires of his imprisonment in the laboratory and escapes to his apartment. This time, when he sees the woman opposite undressing, he slips into her apartment and rapes her. This sequence, though we do not see the detail of the rape, is the turning point of the film. It underlines Caine's amorality, now liberated by his slippage from social control ('Who'll ever know?', he says, before raping the woman); cynically fulfils a promise to sneak the audience behind the previously closed blinds; and shifts the focus of identification from Caine to Lynn. All this was anticipated in Caine's puerile joke, which he tells just before he is made invisible, about Superman swooping from the sky to rape Wonder Woman, who is sunbathing naked on a rooftop, and inadvertently bugging the Invisible Man, with whom she is discreetly having sex. This joke is a nice touch, placed as it is on the verge of Caine's big transformation scene. Not only, by undercutting the expected build up of tension, does it acknowledge the silliness of the whole enterprise, but it also hints at what is to come: rape, comic book action, and the misuse of superhuman powers. After the rape Caine is essentially a monster, part incubus (as in *The Entity*), part serial killer. Like the Id monster of *Forbidden Planet* he acts out repressed selfish desires, as if de-evolving to the asocial grandiose world of the child, or, in Darwinian rather than Freudian terms, regressing to the basic instincts of his simian ancestors. In Oedipal revolt he kills Dr Kramer before he can order Caine's recapture, and in a jealous rage watches Lynn make love with her new boyfriend.

Back in the laboratory Caine starts killing the other scientists one by one, with varying degrees of imagination. Finally, having been bludgeoned, burnt and left for dead, he rigs a bomb to destroy the laboratory. He attacks Lynn and her lover as they escape the conflagration up a liftshaft, but she defeats him and he plunges to his death into the flames.

As this summary indicates, the film sticks pretty closely to generic convention. Like countless mad scientists in the movies, Caine commits the sin of hubris, transgresses the laws of nature and becomes a monster of his own creation. Once the murders begin the film switches to the formula of *Friday the 13th* and *Alien*, with Caine an indestructible creature picking off victims in corridors. Lacking the obvious self-parody of the *Scream* movies, the film reacquaints us with the obligatory tropes of the slice-and-dice genre: Caine gains implausible superhuman powers of recovery and rises from the dead for a last attack; while Lynn is a 'Final Girl' who carries out a ritual exorcism of that most contemporary of social demons, the white male serial killer. The obvious interest of the film lies in its extraordinary special effects. While most films about invisibility depend on blue-screen work of objects floating mysteriously of their own accord, this one's 'money shots' are in the transformation sequences in which Lucy and Caine are progressively stripped of their skin, muscle, viscera and bone. The effect is to recreate an anatomically correct medical doll: not so much disgusting as clinically educational. In the 'body horror' films of the 1980s, human flesh is sticky, deliquescent meat which defines, socialises and subjugates the self. But here the visual flaying is clean and hygienic, a coldly observed revelation of the skull beneath the skin. Caine doesn't fuse with his material self, but attempts to transcend it as pure disembodied Will.

Reviewers dismissed *Hollow Man* as beneath Verhoeven's talents. Having re-evaluated the merits of *Starship Troopers*, many were disappointed he had not produced another witty exercise in generic deconstruction. But unlike *Starship Troopers*, which had performed weakly in the US, *Hollow Man* was a major commercial success, Verhoeven's first since *Basic Instinct*. *Starship Troopers*'s genre-bending irony seemed to perplex and repel the mass audience, but *Hollow Man*'s unpretentious B-movie thrills were expressly tailored - or dumbed down - to appeal to it. Like other recent blockbusters it substituted special effects, product placement and rampant intertextuality for characterisation and narrative development, and as with, say, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* there is no pretence at emotional or thematic depth. Even for seasoned Verhoeven buffs like myself there is no ironic subtext to excavate in *Hollow Man*, no gap to open up between the mass audience (or American) interpretation of the film and the elite (European) one. The film is just what it seems to be: an SFX-heavy horror film shorn of the alienating postmodern trickery of *Showgirls* and *Starship Troopers*. There is little room for playful *auteurism* in contemporary Hollywood, and with *Hollow Man* Verhoeven seems to have given up trying to subvert it from within. Like Brian De Palma and Tim Burton, he may well be abandoning edgy personal projects for bland studio fare. The best one can say is that even in *Hollow Man* Verhoeven pushes against the limits of genre filmmaking: feeding our fantasies of sex, control and guilt free perversion; exaggerating clichés and stereotypes rather than working elegant variations on them; making hollowness and voyeuristic prurience themes of his film rather than merely its defining characteristics.

It is a challenge to discuss this film without going on about scopophilia and Laura Mulvey, but I'll try. In fact, it would be an exaggeration to say that *Hollow Man* is 'about' voyeurism. Invisible man films inevitably touch on the fantasy of becoming a fly on the wall, and are therefore to some extent self-reflexive discourses on invisibility as a metaphor of film-spectatorship. (*Hollow Man* intermittently gestures towards self-reflexivity and acknowledges its reliance on well-worn generic clichés: 'If I die, pretend I said something clever', Caine says before his transformation, which, he is jokingly warned, will 'break the laws of nature'.) But *Hollow Man* is not an illustrated lecture on the stale topic of film and voyeurism. It doesn't need to be. A few nods towards relevant movies (*Rear Window*, *Body Double*, *Halloween*), some pointed lines of dialogue ('It's amazing

what you can do when you don't have to look at yourself in the mirror anymore'), and we cine-literate cultists can be left to work out the rest for ourselves. It is as if Verhoeven realised there was no point developing the theme in 'depth' (an illusory concept anyway in the postmodern view): the paying audience couldn't care less; middle-brow film journalists don't bother with the subtleties of a slasher film; and academic critics have their own esoteric priorities, to which authorial intention is usually irrelevant.

Insofar as we are encouraged to 'identify' with Caine's ability to enter any space unseen and so cross the line from voyeuristic fantasy to rape, the film does work as an allegory of the pornographic implications of film spectatorship. *Hollow Man* teases the audience with its Sadean assumption that voyeurism and amorality are states of human nature - or, more accurately, *male* voyeurism and amorality: one of the technicians, cast in the role of the average horny guy (he reads the skin mag *Perfect 10*), pesters Caine about the infantile transgressions he's perpetrated. Caine replies, 'You have no idea how much *fun* this is'. Like *Basic Instinct* the film is disarmingly matter of fact about giving male audiences what they secretly desire. The subtext of *Basic Instinct's* notorious leg-crossing scene is, 'What you really want is to see Sharon's cunt - well, here it is.' In a similar spirit *Hollow Man* frankly equates the voyeurism of film spectatorship with aggressive male sexuality, and, especially in the rape scene, seems determined to inspire embarrassed disgust at the enthusiasm with which it caters to the audience's worst fantasies. It is worth pointing out that the rape scene was originally far more explicit (a version of it, intercut with comments by Verhoeven, is now available on DVD). It was significantly trimmed after test audiences found the rape too disturbing in an 'popcorn' movie. You can interpret this two ways: either audiences rebel when its pornographic fantasies are enacted on screen, or they are simply less perverse than the film cynically anticipated. As with *Showgirls* Verhoeven perhaps miscalculated the appeal of going too far, blurring the line between the mainstream and exploitation, and showing audiences more than, in the end, they really want to see.

Interestingly, as a sign of its deliberately limited ambitions, the film does not explore many of the obvious ways in which its plot could have developed, though it slyly acknowledges how it could have expanded the range of its themes and action. For example, early on in the film Caine and Lynn talk together on a restaurant balcony overlooking the Capitol building. The thought occurs: perhaps an invisible man could penetrate the heart of government, eavesdrop on national secrets, even change the world politically for the better. Whereas in John Carpenter's *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* the transparent hero is coerced into becoming a spy, that possibility is never explored in *Hollow Man*, which is content with a small scale drama of the fulfilment of private desires. (There may be a cinematically self-reflexive point to this: films like *Hollow Man*, with their astonishing and expensive special effects, waste technical brilliance on exploitative freak show imagery and pointless theme park diversions. It works as a joke too on the poverty of human ambition: having made the greatest scientific discovery of all time, Caine's first impulse is to use it to tweak a woman's breast.) The film's interest is in the personal temptations of invisibility, asking the audience, what would *you* do if you were emancipated from the bonds of social disapproval? It poses, as in a dinner party conversation, an ethical thought experiment, and answers it with the utmost cynicism: if you were Caine, postmodern man *extraordinaire*, you too would lose your moral bearings and run amok at once.

This is a very old moral problem, whose classic account is Glaucon's fable of Gyges and the magic ring in Plato's *The Republic*. Gyges is a shepherd who discovers a ring that makes its wearer invisible at will. Glaucon argues that

anyone who possessed the ring of Gyges would lose the will to be moral because morality depends on the threat of discovery. If one no longer has to *appear* moral in order to obey social norms, one's instinct would be to submit to natural amorality. As in *The Lord of the Rings* invisibility results not so much in moral corruption as in the unconcealment of humanity in the raw. On this reckoning, we remain good only so long as artificial social norms deter us from expressing our naturally demonic selves. The same assumption underlies such disparately pessimistic works as De Sade, *The Lord of the Flies*, Nicholson Baker's *The Fermata*, in which the hero arrests time in order to commit minor acts of perversion on oblivious victims, and Russ Meyer's *The Immoral Mr Teas*, where the X-ray spectacles of schoolboy fantasy enable the hero to see through women's clothing. As Caine remarks, it is amazing what you can do when you don't have to look at your face in the mirror. You become in effect God: unseen and all powerful, to whom other people are as flies to wanton boys (at one point, showing his contempt for lower forms of life, Caine crushes a fly between invisible fingertips). Evading the eyes of God and society one is untethered from society and its arbitrary moral values. In Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* an optometrist who successfully engineers a murder comes to realise that because there is no God that observes and judges him he will never be punished for his crime. His conscience does not plague him (as in *Crime and Punishment*), and he is surprised to discover that he is existentially free. There is neither an inbuilt moral sense, programmed into the human software, to inhibit him, nor any objective moral order in the universe. Verhoeven's films hinge on a similar insight: in the absence of God, nothing is true and everything is permitted.

Caine, like Catherine Tramell, the blonde *überfrau* in *Basic Instinct*, is a rare individual who manages to live beyond good and evil. Comprehending the hollowness of the human soul, he and Catherine engage in Nietzschean projects of self-creation on ultra-darwinian lines: Caine is territorial, aggressive and spreads his selfish genes opportunistically, by rape if he has to; Catherine is his female equivalent, who, like the alien in *Species*, is intent on eliminating unfit men from the gene pool until she can find one with whom she can 'fuck like minks, raise rug-rats and live happily ever after'. Both films, on this interpretation, are about amoral superbeings who live according to the Chicago gangster version of life, and who monstrously embody the basic instincts of their world.

But crucial ambiguities about why Caine becomes a monster are unresolved in *Hollow Man*, not so much because they are not neatly tied up at the end, but because they are unresolvable in life. Certainly, we can glibly interpret Caine as a symbol of 'our' natural amorality or, more specifically, of the hollow shell that postmodern man has become. But the title of the film refers to *a* hollow man, singular, rather than to hollow men, and Caine is unquestionably a special case. The crux is this: is Caine's response to invisibility what anyone would do given the chance, or is it 'natural' only to him, a dominant alpha male who belongs to a specific social and generic type? One character remarks, there is human nature and there is Sebastian's nature, and as Caine is keen to impress on his subordinates the rules do not apply to extraordinary individuals like him. On the one hand, he becomes a monster because he is the archetypal male scientist, who needs to penetrate nature in order to objectify and control it; it is implied that other people, such as Lynn, with her 'feminine' scruples, would act differently. On the other, the phase shift to invisibility seems itself to provoke violence in experimental subjects. It is unclear whether Caine is unhinged by access to his 'real' self or by the effects of genetic tampering. As in the 1931 *Frankenstein*, biology as destiny (the monster's criminal brain, Caine's irradiated cells) vies as an explanation with social determinism (Caine as a clockwork orange, acting out the repressed violence of a distinct kind of person). Either

way, Caine is revealed as lacking an autonomous Self: the more free he seems to become, the more dutifully he obeys the prime directives of his 'nature'. As in *RoboCop* and *Total Recall* the hero is at the mercy of forces greater than himself, which manipulate him even as they grant him the illusion of freedom and heroic superhuman masculinity. (Quaid at the end of *Total Recall* cannot tell whether he is really the saviour of the Martian freaks; he could be mad, dreaming or still working unconsciously on behalf of an evil corporation. Murphy seems to recover his true self in the final moments of *RoboCop*, but he nevertheless remains the property of a powerful conglomerate whose interests he is programmed to uphold.) In Verhoeven's films human beings are malleable subjects of their basest instincts: in *Starship Troopers* an entire society happily conforms to a hive mentality which tames and normalises the fascist within.

If one is eager to make Caine out to be symbolic of a human type, the most plausible option is to regard him as masculinity *in extremis*. Like *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, werewolf movies and *Altered States*, *Hollow Man* elaborates an allegory of the killer ape beneath the rational male exterior (the transformation scenes press home of course the minimal difference between human and simian anatomy). This is a paranoid and conservative definition of men as bundles of genetically programmed violence, kept in check by socialisation and the civilising influence of women. *Hollow Man* therefore complements *Basic Instinct's* absurdly overstated world of male paranoia, in which every woman is either a murderer or a castrating bitch. It is as if Caine invisible is the ultimate female nightmare: a man in whom masculinity has found its purest disembodied form. (Indeed twice in the film Caine enters the dreams of women. He caresses Sarah's nipple as she sleeps (she responds with an aroused moan) and Lynn dreams that Caine starts to rape her.) But his invisibility is also a function of his white maleness. In Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, invisibility represented the black condition - unseen by society, having continuously to remind yourself that you exist at all. A similar metaphor is worked through in *Memoirs of an Invisible Man*, whose hero is a white everyman made invisible by an experiment that goes wrong. Invisibility literalises what was already the case: people like him are nobodies not worth a second glance. Or as Lynn says to Caine, he was never really there in the first place. In *Hollow Man*, as in recent serial killer films such as *American Psycho*, the source of horror is a middle-class American white man, because in him are located all the evils of the world in their most lethal form.

In an earlier article on Verhoeven I mentioned that getting a film right, which is to say fabricating a complete, truthful and complete interpretation of it, is not necessarily the most interesting thing you can do with a text that comes your way. (This is especially true if your intention is to use the film to illustrate some big external Theory or - more standard practice these days - to 'see through' it with monotonous and self-righteous outrage.) I mentioned too that as a Verhoeven fan I have a tendency to appropriate them as schematic 'visions of life' that mirror (and flatter) my own preoccupations, and simplify them as stark allegories of the depthless banality of consumer capitalism - or some such jejune generality. So too with *Hollow Man*, which, though not a very good film, at least affords an opportunity to discourse, in a somewhat fragmented and inconclusive manner, about the moral void of postmodernity (another generality, for which I apologise). Compared with the difficulty and richness of, say, Bergman's vision of the world, Verhoeven's (in my abstract, fantasised version of it) is unyieldingly cynical and reductive. Even though both directors focus on meaninglessness, moral bankruptcy, and spiritual disenchantment, Verhoeven, as I have interpreted his films, does not so much explore these themes as recycle them into T-shirt slogans. His films are squarely in the Modernist tradition of antagonism towards mass culture, but rather than employ the rarefied vocabulary of the art cinema he finds blunt metaphors for contemporary reality in its most

symptomatic cultural product, the popular genre film. To allegorise exploitation he therefore makes *Showgirls*, an exploitation movie; to uncover the seductive fascism of the action film, he makes *Starship Troopers*, an action film whose style and address are explicitly fascistic; and in homage to the emptiness, banality and horror of the postmodern condition, he comes up with *Hollow Man*, an empty and banal horror film.

I freely admit that that, in my eagerness to recruit Verhoeven for postmodern cynicism, I may have misunderstood his intentions. I can imagine another critic or fan arguing that Verhoeven is in fact engaged in some kind of negative theology, emphasising - rather as, in their very different ways, do 'The Hollow Men' and Paul Schrader's early films - the meaninglessness of the material world in order to direct us towards the higher but wholly uncommunicable reality of a spiritual one. Pursuing this alternative interpretation, my imaginary respondent would point out only Verhoeven's long standing interest and research into the historical Christ, but also the scattershot religious allusions in his films: Martin in *Flesh + Blood* acquires a halo; RoboCop is crucified, resurrected and walks on water; the 'Goddess' imagery in *Showgirls*.... All true, I suspect. But for me Verhoeven's American films will always remain seductive visions of what postmodern life, in our *very* worst moments, seems really to consist of: exploitation, consumerism, gratuitous violence, moral vacuity and (to end on a brighter note) lots of meaningless sex.

I.Q. Hunter is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at De Montfort University, Leicester. He is co-editor of Routledge's British Popular Cinema series, for which he edited *British Science Fiction Cinema*, and has published widely on Paul Verhoeven, horror and science fiction films. His email address is moonzerotwo@hotmail.com