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Symbolic Power and Religious Impotence in Paul Verhoeven's *Spetters*

Abstract

This article explores the religious symbolism in the Dutch film *Spetters* (1980), by controversial director Paul Verhoeven. An examination of the symbolic referents in the film, in particular the use of stereotypical male power symbols, shows how expectations of power dynamics are reversed in the lives of the main characters. The film's embedded message, played out in Verhoeven's later films, concerns the impotence of Christianity in the modern world. Questions concerning theodicy are not satisfactorily answered through traditional religious ideas. God, it seems, has abandoned the human race.

In their book, *The Sacred Quest*, Cunningham and Kelsay point out that "The history of humanity indicates that throughout the centuries we have made a persistent attempt to relate questions about existence to ideas and experiences of sacred reality."¹ One of the central issues raised in this area involves the "problem of evil," framed with questions such as "'Why does good fortune turn bad?' 'Why do the righteous suffer, and the wicked flourish?' 'Why is the world not a happier place?' 'What is the meaning of life?'"² Cunningham and Kelsay go on to point out

When such questions are raised in connection with belief in God or gods, we may describe them as issues of theodicy, or "divine justice." Especially in traditions which stress the power and goodness of one God who rules over all creation, the occurrence of evil presents a logical dilemma. If God is good and powerful, what is the nature of evil? If God could prevent evil but does not, can God be good? On the other hand, if God is good but cannot prevent evil, can God be powerful? A satisfactory resolution is difficult to come by, as the continuing discussions with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam show.³

It is as part of this discussion that we want to explore religious symbolism in the films of Dutch, turned Hollywood, director Paul Verhoeven. Verhoeven explores, and most often rejects, much of the classical Christian responses to issues of theodicy, ultimately suggesting that traditional Christian theology is inadequate and impotent, unable to satisfyingly address the problem of evil.

Cunningham and Kelsay rightly point out that "religion" signifies ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that refer to a notion of sacred reality made manifest in human experience."⁴ Within such a framework we can explore the ways of

"thinking, feeling, and acting" as depicted in the main characters in Verhoeven's films. Although often maligned as a director of quasi-pornographic, ultra-violent films, a closer examination reveals that Verhoeven's depiction of sex and violence explores the very roots of human experience of, and alienation from, sacred reality. Much of this is accomplished in Verhoeven's films through the use of symbolism - overtly religious symbolism and more subtle symbolic representations of power dynamics. Using Verhoeven's Dutch film *Spetters* (1980) as an exemplar, this article will examine the symbolic potential Verhoeven's films have for an exploration of the sacred quest.

Paul Verhoeven was born in Amsterdam on July 18, 1938. He received a Ph.D. in math and physics from the University of Leiden in the Netherlands. He never used his degree, opting instead to invest his energies in a career in film. He entered the Royal Netherlands Navy in 1964, where he began his film career by making documentaries for the Navy and later for TV. From the 1960s through the early 1980s he directed a number of successful, albeit controversial, Dutch films. His film *Turks fruit* (*Turkish Delight*, 1973) received an Academy Award nomination for best foreign film and in 1999 was awarded the title "Best Dutch Film of the Century" at the Netherlands Film Festival⁵ In 1985, fed up with the bureaucracy of Dutch film making, Verhoeven moved to Hollywood, where he has directed a number of successful (*RoboCop* [1987]; *Total Recall* [1990]; *Basic*

Instinct [1992]), and not so successful (*Showgirls* [1995]; *Hollow Man* [2000]), films.

Throughout his career Verhoeven's films have provoked strong responses. He prefers to shoot realistic scenes, more in the nature of a documentary than an impressionist painting. This is particularly true when it comes to sex and violence, earning Verhoeven's films the reputation of being shocking and obscene.⁶ Verhoeven likes to cite the precedence of the Dutch art community, particularly Dutch painters from the seventeenth century such as Bosch, who give attention to gritty detail. Nevertheless, Verhoeven also admits, "I love to shock audiences."⁷ His motto as a filmmaker is "to wake up in the morning and think, today let's film something that people will be talking about for years to come."⁸

Spetters was Verhoeven's twelfth Dutch film, following on the critical and commercial success of such films as *Turks fruit* (*Turkish Delight*, 1973), *Keetje Tippel* (*Cathy Tippel*, 1975), and *Soldaat van Oranje* (*Soldier of Orange*, 1977). The film follows the lives of three amateur dirt-bike racers as they come of age in the late 1970s. On the surface it is difficult to call *Spetters* a "religious" film. Although religion is portrayed in the film, it seems like simply part of the backdrop to the coming of age stories of the protagonists. Nevertheless, I will argue the reverse is true, just as the reversal of all stereotypes and expectations occurs in the plot and sub-plots of the film itself. Rather than see religion in the background,

religion is central to the message of the film. The loss of power and final impotence of all the characters are symbolic of the ultimate impotence of the church, and of God. Indeed, there is little about religion that the film recommends. As Lorefice notes,

Spetters is not kind to religion. It shows that giving people hope can crush them when they realize that the promises are empty.⁹ Despite the lack of transparency around the issue of religion, the film works on its viewers' subconscious, causing them to question their own religious values.

Spetters' plot revolves around the effect a French-fry seller named Fientje (Renée Soutendijk) has on the lives of the three twenty year old men in Maassluis in the Netherlands. In the film, each of the main characters wants to improve his or her situation in life, although each has his or her own definition of what that might entail. Verhoeven's camera tracks the ups and, mostly, downs, of their search for a better life. At a deeper level, however, *Spetters* is about power, or lack thereof, as conveyed through numerous non-verbal symbols used throughout the film.

The film opens with a techno-pop soundtrack and the roar of a motorcycle. The motorcycle and its rider are in black and exude masculinity. A second rider joins with an almost equally powerful bike. A third rider almost misses joining the other two since his small motorcycle refuses to start without a push from his aging father. The motorcycles symbolize to the viewer the relative strengths of the three main male characters: Eef, Rien, and Hans.

This power relationship is played out a bit later in the film through the color of their racing suits. Eef (Toon Agterberg) has a black leather motorcycle suit, which conveys his power, although the dark color is suggestive of an evil side to him, and the red stripe that outlines his body signals his sexual ambiguity. Rien (Hans van Tongeren) dresses in white for his motor-cross races, like a knight in shining armor, with the motorcycle as his steed. In an encounter with members of Hell's Angels at the racetrack French-fry wagon, Rien prevents the new girl in town, Fientje, from harm - our white knight fills his role properly. The third rider, Hans (Maarten Spanjer), wears a yellow one-piece racing suit, reflecting the cowardly ineptitude of his character.¹⁰

At this early point in the film Rien is shown to be the most virile of the three male leads. After a night of drinking and dancing the three friends and their respective girlfriends find places in which to have intercourse. Rien is the only one to succeed in doing so, the other two being sidelined by impotence (Eef) or the onset of his partner's menstrual cycle (Hans). Rien's virility is carried onto the racetrack where he is heralded as the new amateur motocross champion.

The symbolic power reversals begin early in the film. The three male characters settle their argument over who should be first to bed the newly arrived French-fry girl by measuring their penises with a mechanic's tool. Although Verhoeven received much criticism of his film for the graphic depiction of the male

member, the symbolism is a key part of the plot. Playing off a common male stereotype that penis size is an indication of power and virility, Eef and Rien are dismayed to discover their hapless friend Hans outranks them in this department. The scene foreshadows the greater role reversals that will take place towards the climax of the film.

Although Verhoeven was accused of homophobia, sexism, and racism,¹¹ other power reversals take place in the film that suggest that this is far from the truth. For example, in an early scene we find the three male friends at a disco celebrating the day's racing victory. Hans stumbles over an attempt to pick up a fashionable black woman, identified by the others as an "easy lay," when she humiliates him with a well-placed jar of mustard. Eef is likewise humiliated when he leaps to the dance floor to strut his stuff ala John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*, only to be quickly out-danced by a black man, the "Black Pearl," dressed more in the Travolta style. The power and virility of the three male leads is subverted and their racism is shown to be misplaced.

Other power reversals are at play in the film. The self-serving race promoter, Frans Henkhof (played by Jeroen Krabbé) is confronted by the equally self-serving Fientje. The scene opens with Henkhof leaving the racetrack in his white convertible Mercedes. As he cruises along the road, Fientje hurries to catch up with him in her large blue American made car, eventually managing to cut him

off the road. Verhoeven's choice of vehicles and his slightly lower than eyeline-match camera angle serve to indicate that although power seems to rest in the hands of Henkhof, real power resides with Fientje.

Nevertheless, even Fientje's power is transient, and by the end of the film one is left wondering whether she has really attained the means towards fulfilling her lust for success, measured through material goods. As the film draws to a close Fientje and Hans are in the midst of renovating their newly purchased establishment. Their desire is to turn it into a disco, but Fientje insists, in two different scenes, that it will include a snack bar, one that serves French-fries. Yet, it is precisely the perpetual smell of French-fries on her body that has compelled her deceit and betrayal throughout the film. Far from the "bitter-sweet" ending identified by van Scheers the ending is simply bitter - Fientje turns out to be as impotent to fulfill her real dreams as all of the other characters.¹²

In an early scene in the film, Eef's somber parents, dressed in black, walk toward the Calvinist church in the town square. Eef roars up from behind, beeping his horn in greeting but startling his father. The motorcycle engine drowns out the church bells, symbolizing the power of the motorcycles over the power of the church, despite its high steeple (which Verhoeven shoots from a low camera angle to accentuate its height). Eef's father is an elder in the church and seems to embody the strength of the church, symbolized in his physical labor on his farm and his

appearances on a large tractor. However, viewers come to learn that the father's strength masks a deep-seated cowardice that is expressed through physical violence. For Eef's father "every 'worldly aberration' of his son merits severe punishment,"¹³ and twice in the film he gives Eef a severe beating. God, it seems, meets out punishment but not mercy.

Eef's own homophobia and violent muggings of homosexuals slowly give way to his voyeurism of homosexual behavior and eventual admission that he is himself gay. His "conversion" is brought about through a violent 'rite of passage' in which he is gang raped by four leather clad homosexuals.¹⁴ In contrast to the stereotypical effeminate portrayal of homosexuals in the film, the leather-boys are strong and masculine. Eef had not expected this of homosexuals. Despite his earlier failure to attain an erection with his girlfriend, he comes to recognize the sexual pleasure attained through this all-male encounter. One of the rapists returns moments later to tell Eef that he should admit to himself that he enjoyed it. "I'm not a queer," replies Eef, only to be told, "What do you care what you are, as long as you are honest with yourself." This completes the "conversion" and Eef, who was symbolically portrayed as the most "masculine" of the three friends, has now become what he most feared - gay.

Although the stereotypes in the film to this point would cause us to think that Eef will become effeminate, the admission of his sexuality actually gives him

the strength to confront his abusive father, despite the inevitable severe beating he receives. The beating takes place under the ripening grapevines of his father's greenhouse. The vines themselves are a recognizable Christian symbol for new life, that which his admission of homosexuality has brought him, and which the procreator of his "old" life, his father, refuses to acknowledge. Later, when he is given the opportunity to leave town with his new-found lover, he refuses to do so, preferring to stay and revenge himself on his father instead.¹⁵

At this stage in the film it is the power of youth and virility over age and conservatism. However, this is subverted through the story of Rien, whose motorbike does not empower its rider but causes his paralysis. A freak motorcycle accident partway through the film paralyzes him from the waist down. The accident reverses Rien's virility, and his power quickly fades away, almost as quickly as his friends abandon him. In this sub-plot, the weakness of the church is not reversed - it remains unable to meet the needs of the paralyzed Rien.

Weeks of hospitalization and rehabilitation therapy see Rien well enough to return to his home, albeit confined to a wheelchair. His pride of ownership of two top of the line motorcycles donated to him by his sponsor (Honda) is replaced by his ownership of a new motorized wheelchair. The chair itself provides mobility but is a far cry from the power of the motorcycle. Rien drives his wheelchair through the pedestrian center of town, obviously bitter about his condition, as seen

in his shouting abuse at those who show pity on him. It is here that he encounters a street preacher who is supported by rousing choruses of "Hallelujah" from a group of young people. The scene opens with the preacher quoting from the Bible, "Knock and the door shall be opened" which, he suggests, is an invitation to "knock now, for Jesus is the door. Jesus will let you in" (a common evangelical misuse of Rev 3:20).¹⁶ Rien stops his wheelchair in the front of the gathered audience, noticing what the camera has already shown the viewer - Maja (Marianne Boyer), Rien's former girlfriend, is part of the audience.

When the preacher announces that the Bible tells us of God, Rien shouts out "God is a clown. A joker who threw a bunch of orange peels in my face" (a reference to the cause of his motorcycle accident). The preacher responds, "Illness is the devil. What is the devil? Who?"

Rien: The doctor. The doctor who kept me alive.

Preacher: The devil causes illness. God heals.

Rien: What are his visiting hours? [The crowd laughs.]

Preacher: Laugh all you like, brothers. Laugh to your heart's content. Laughter won't help this young boy. God is always on call, my brother. And you can talk with God whenever you want. And I'm sure God will listen. With both ears.

Rien: You mean in stereo? [This comment brings forth more laughter from the crowd.]

Preacher: Keep on pretending you're strong, boy. But when it gets too difficult, remember the visiting hours. I can get you an appointment.

As the preacher leaves, an uneasy reconciliation occurs between Rien and Maja, in which Rien responds to her calling his name, "There isn't any Rien anymore."

Rien later appears, with Maja, at a tent meeting, although his mocking "Hallelujah" suggests his dis-ease with being there. The preacher calls for anyone "who needs the aid of God, let him now come up to me because the Lord will give us what we ask." Rien rebuffs Maja's attempts to bringing him forward, but following a woman's healing (from a headache) Maja pushes Rien to the front. The preacher lays hands on him, praying for healing. At the words, "Give him strength, give him courage" Rien begins to rise, only to drop quickly down again. God, it seems, has not given what Rien has asked for. Later in the car, Rien asks Maja to perform oral sex on him. He cannot, of course, rise to the occasion, his flaccid penis ("as stiff as boiled spaghetti") symbolizing the impotence of his legs to carry out their function. Yet the penis, the male symbol of power, also reflects the impotence of God to act when asked. As the mental desire for sex goes frustratingly unsatisfied, so also the intellectual desire to know the sacred remains unfulfilled.

The pathos of Rien's condition in the film is heightened when he strikes out on his own, riding his wheelchair through the deserted streets of Maassluis. The soundtrack in the background plays the same techno-pop song as that which opened

the film, although now it is slowed down considerably and sounds more like a dirge. Rien guides his wheelchair to the freeway where he places his wheelchair in front of a fast moving tractor-trailer. The once powerful Rien is now consumed by the power of the oncoming transport.¹⁷ Although some critics suggested that Verhoeven was signaling that all handicapped persons should commit suicide, the context of the film suggests otherwise. Rien's despair with life is not linked so much to his handicap as to the deeper issues of loss of power and loss of friendship. Not even God can help him, so in his lonely despair he takes his life. If anything, Verhoeven shoots the scene in a manner that suggests communities have the ability to empower the disadvantaged through recognition as full human beings. This fails to take place for Rien.

Space does not allow the same kind of detailed analysis of the symbolism in Verhoeven's other films. However, even a cursory investigation suggests that Verhoeven's fascination with power is played out in many of his movies. In his follow-up film to *Spetters*, a "psycho-sexual religious thriller"¹⁸ called *De Vierde man* (*The Fourth Man*, 1983), we find confirmation of our interpretation of *Spetters*. Verhoeven states,

The Fourth Man has to do with my vision of religion. In my opinion, Christianity is nothing more than one of many interpretations of reality, neither more nor less. Ideally, it would be nice to believe that there is a God somewhere out there, but it looks to me as if the whole Christian religion is a major symptom of schizophrenia in half the world's population:

civilizations scrambling to rationalize their chaotic existence. Subsequently, Christianity has a tendency to look like magic or the occult. And I liked that ambiguity, because I wanted my audience to take something home with them. I wanted them to wonder about what religion really is. Remember, that Christianity is a religion grounded in one of the most violent acts of murder, the crucifixion. Otherwise, religion wouldn't have had any kind of impact."¹⁹

For Verhoeven violence, sexuality, and religion cannot be separated, but ultimately the violence in society and the violence in religion do not serve to legitimate the Christian worldview. As human beings we are, to paraphrase Verhoeven's sentiments, alone and without God.

O'Hehir's comment is misplaced when he claims, "the key concept in understanding Verhoeven's work and career ... is ambivalence."²⁰ Far from being "ambivalent about sex, about men and women, about violence, about Hollywood" Verhoeven is very concerned with the corrupting nature of power as it occurs through human relationships, and is far from ambivalent about the impotence of the Christian religion.²¹ In *Spetters*, Verhoeven symbolically depicts how the once powerful church institution no longer holds sway over the life of Dutch youth. The powerful Christian father's violence can no longer dictate how Eef will live his life. The powerful preaching of the evangelist will not bring about God's hand on Rien's paralysis. God, it seems, is most like Hans, oblivious to the machinations of those around him and powerless to affect any real change anyway.²²

¹ Lawrence S. Cunningham and John Kelsay, *The Sacred Quest: An Invitation to the Study of Religion* (3rd edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002)107.

² Cunningham and Kelsay, *Sacred Quest*, 107-08.

³ Cunningham and Kelsay, *Sacred Quest*, 108.

⁴ Cunningham and Kelsay, *Sacred Quest*, 107.

⁵ It is also the most commercially successful movie of all time in Holland.

⁶ For example, Michael Medved refers to Verhoeven's "warped and feverish fantasies" (*Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* [New York and Grand Rapids: HarperCollins and Zondervan, 1992] 255).

⁷ Rojola. "Paul Verhoeven.net Articles and Interviews Quotes," online, accessed Jan. 30, 2003 (<http://www.paulverhoeven.net/articles/quotes/quotes.htm>).

⁸ Rob van Scheers, *Paul Verhoeven* (London and Boston: Farber and Farber, 1997) xi. This certainly proved to be the case for the twenty or so students in my Religion and Film class at Queen's University (Winter 2003) for whom this film was shocking but provocative. It became a touch point for many discussions throughout the semester.

⁹ Mike Lorefice, "Spetters" (June 30, 2001), online, accessed Jan. 30, 2003 (<http://www.metalasylum.com/ragingbull/movies/spetters.html>).

¹⁰ Van Scheers, *Verhoeven*, 129.

¹¹ See van Scheers, *Verhoeven*, 135.

¹² Van Scheers, *Verhoeven*, 136. The screenwriter of *Spetters*, Gerard Soeteman, describes the film as a "modern fairytale" in which "The hero does not get a kingdom but a chip shop and a girl with a (sexual) past. That does not mean to say she is not an acceptable match for a young man: it is real life" (van Scheers, *Verhoeven*, 128-29).

¹³ Van Scheers, *Verhoeven*, 128.

¹⁴ In the DVD director's cut of *Spetters* the rape scene is sexually graphic and brutal. This and other scenes were toned down for the American VHS release, with eight minutes removed from the original. Verhoeven identified the cut to the opening of what would become the rape scene as the most interesting in the film in its move from light to dark. He intended to show the opening desire of Eef to extract money from the homosexual prostitute as "diabolical" (Paul Verhoeven, telephone interview with Richard Ascough, March 5, 2003).

¹⁵ In the original script Verhoeven had intended to include a scene where Eef takes boxing lessons in order to stand up to his father. However, this scene was not included in the production of the film. The character of Eef, like most of the characters in the film, are based on news reports and interviews with real people, and reflect their experiences, although the overall plot itself is fictional (Verhoeven, Interview). Verhoeven states, "in [my native] Holland, my work was very much about autobiography and biography" (Richard von Busack, "Sweet Jesus! Director Paul Verhoeven discusses the importance of Christ's life on film," *Sonoma County Independent* [February 26-March 4, 1998], online, accessed Jan. 30, 2003). See also Peter Cowie, *Dutch Cinema. An Illustrated History* (London: Tantivy Press, 1979) 101-04

¹⁶ The scenes with the Pentecostal preacher are drawn from Verhoeven's own experience of religious crisis in when he was 27 years old (van Scheers, *Verhoeven*, 129; confirmed in a telephone interview with Verhoeven, March 5, 2003).

¹⁷ In a tragic twist on the film, the actor that played Rien, Hans van Tongeren, took his own life two years after the film was released.

¹⁸ This description come from an article in the *New York Times* (Feb. 12, 1995) and is quoted in van Scheers, *Verhoeven*, 276.

¹⁹ . Rojola, " Verhoeven.net." See also van Scheers, *Verhoeven*, 159-61. Explicitly Christian imagery is also used in *Flesh + Blood* (1985). Verhoeven views *RoboCop* (1987) as a "Christian fairytale" and deliberately included Christian imagery in the film (see van Scheers, *Verhoeven*, 195). *Total Recall* (1990) similarly employs Christian imagery, although more along the lines of apocalyptic themes (cf. Roland Boer, "Non-Sense: Total Recall, Paul, and the Possibility of Psychosis," in *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections Between Scripture and Film*, ed. George Aichele and Richard Walsh [Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002] 120-54).

²⁰ Andrew O'Hehir, "Paul Verhoeven," Salon.com (August 01, 2000), online, accessed Jan. 30, 2003 (<http://dir.salon.com/people/bc/2000/08/01/verhoeven/index.html>).

²¹ It will be interesting to see how Verhoven develops this in his widely anticipated film depicting the life of Christ based on his participation as a Fellow of the Jesus Seminar. For a discussion of this project see van Scheers, *Verhoeven*, 195-98, W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press.1997) 200-03, and von Busack, "Sweet Jesus." As of 2003 Verhoeven was planning to write a book on the life of Christ before returning to the screenplay (Verhoeven, "Interview").

²² In an interview with Verhoeven (March 5, 2003) I asked whether he intended to show the impotence of the church through the sexual symbolism of the film *Spetters*. He claims not to have been fully conscious in doing so but agreed that such an interpretation may be legitimate, noting that often directors (and other artists) focus on their craft without being fully aware of the range of possible interpretations and implications of their work.