The Invisible Body of God: Paul Verhoeven's Hollow Man

Melissa Conroy
conroy.melissa@gmail.com

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol8/iss2/3
The Invisible Body of God: Paul Verhoeven's Hollow Man

Abstract
The argument of this paper concerns the identity of God in Verhoeven's *Hollow Man* (2000). In *Hollow Man* the position of the subject is mirrored by the empty position of God: both are revealed as essentially empty positions. Drawing on Lacan's reading of Biblical commandments and *Hollow Man*’s analogy to the story of Cain and Abel, this paper argues for a re-reading of the mirror stage’s role in film theory. This paper has two aims: to draw out the theological implications of Lacan’s understanding of ethics and to reconsider, in light of this understanding, an ethics of the mirror stage in *Hollow Man*.
"Hollow Man" is largely an update of the classic H.G. Wells story, "The Invisible Man" in which a brilliant scientist finds the formula of invisibility and cannot find the antidote. Sebastian Caine is the scientist who grows increasingly violent and destructive as his invisibility continues. Interestingly the formula for invisibility and the antidote are characterized as being "stable" and "unstable." Both states are indicative not just of Caine's volatile personality but of his very identity as it collapses. Once Caine becomes invisible his cocky persona quickly fades to reveal his true personality: he degenerates into a diabolical misanthrope whose only desire is to see how much he can get away with. His violence starts with molestation and later culminates in rape and murder.

This fluctuation between "stable" and "unstable" in the film and in the subject's identity can be further understood by looking to French psychoanalytic writer Jacques Lacan. Lacan's work was highly influential for film theory and here we can see its implications. Lacan postulates that the moment a child recognizes its own image in the mirror is the crucial moment for ego formation. The child is an unwieldy creature at this early stage, lacking motor coordination and a sense of self, separate from the Other. The mirror image appears complete, whole and stable to the child and thus this image becomes the child's imago of self, the child's ego ideal. Consequently the image is held as superior to the child's own body, its own material existence is doomed to fall short of this stable perfection. The child's happy
recognition of itself in the mirror is always then a misrecognition; the child is alienated from its very self as its most ideal form is located outside of its own body.

In traditional cinematic language, the image on screen is parallel to the ideal image in the mirror. Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure, Narrative Cinema", places Woman as the typical object of the gaze for both the spectator and the protagonist. The Woman, like the image in the mirror, is a complete body of stable plentitude. Fetishistic images of the Woman that focus on her excessive female traits, such as eyes, hair, and breasts, emphasize a sense of stable wholeness. The cutting of film, however, compromises this illusion. By restricting access to the gaze, and hence to the Woman, the spectator becomes aware that he or she is not truly the one who possesses the gaze. The spectator's desire for the unrestricted pleasures of voyeurism is unfulfilled. We can only see what the character or the director allows us to see or, conversely, we are forced to look at what we do not want to see. Yet, the nature of narrative dupes, at least for a time, the spectator into accepting the gaze as his/her own. "Cutting" undermines the fact that we are not in control of the gaze. The gratification of looking is thus always also a disappointment as the realization of being alienated from the image always re-instates a sense of lack, of instability.²

Traditional film making uses a technique described as "shot/reverse shot" formation, in order to establish the viewer (the subject in the film) and its object.³
Typically this shot, "shot one", would be of the object in question and followed by a "reverse shot," shot two, that establishes the viewer within the film, the subjective eye/I of the original gaze. Shot one, usually of a Woman, the love object in most films, is the image of plentitude and fulfillment. This is parallel to the image of wholeness in the mirror that secures the subject's identity. Shot Two is a shot that establishes which character is looking at the Woman. It shows us that the Woman is not really being watched by our own eyes and shows us the character that holds the power of looking. To agree to this little voyeuristic fantasy life of cinema, we, as spectators, must in some sense give up our own identity and agree that what this character sees is what we see. This disavowal of our own subjectivity as spectator is called "suture." Suture is that moment "when the subject inserts itself into the symbolic register in the guise of a signifier, and in so doing gains meaning at the expense of being." At the prospect of meaning we sacrifice our being. We disappear.

In Hollow Man the empty position of subject is mirrored by the empty position of God. Some reviewers, such as Jay Carr of The Boston Globe, have classified Hollow Man in the clichéd science fiction genre. Its religious message, in this sense, is limited to the treatment of God in the "Man tampering with the natural order of things" genre. Carr writes that its main message is "Don't do research; you'll discover something that will offend the gods." Classic science
fiction films depict a diabolical scientist who, like a modern Prometheus, must pay for his hubris. The scientists of this genre acknowledge the existence of God by challenging his authority. Unlike these films the scientist of *Hollow Man* denies the existence of God, working with the supposition that the space God once occupied is empty. Anyone powerful enough can have the job.

In one of the opening scenes, *Hollow Man* plays with this convention of the hubristic scientist and the angry God. As Caine prepares to inject a gorilla with the invisibility serum a voice booms loudly, "THIS IS GOD. YOU ARE DISTURBING THE NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS AND WILL BE SEVERELY PUNISHED FOR ALL ETERNITY. GOD HAS SPOKEN." During this commandment the audience is shown who is really speaking, the lab assistant Frank. Unfazed Caine replies, "How many times do I have to tell you Frank, you aren't God. I am." On the narrative level, the position of God is an empty one in *Hollow Man*, one that must necessarily be filled by some character. No force fills this position: it is open for each character to fill as his or her power increases. Indeed when Linda (Elizabeth Shue) lights a flame thrower to rid the world of Caine, she informs him, "You think you're God! I'll show you God!" Later as Caine is thrown into the fiery pit of the hellish elevator shaft, Linda again asserts, "I'm your God now." At the end of film, once Caine is finally established to be dead, the character
Matt (Josh Brolin) exclaims, "Oh my God!" Linda replies, with the last line of the film, "Not any more." The position of God has effectively been emptied.

Drawing on another religious allusion, Sebastian Caine can be read as the biblical Cain. Both Cain(e)s exemplify the story of someone who must kill the site of his or her alienated desire. The story of Cain and Abel is a perfect example of the unstable mirror of identification. In both cases the murderers have difficulty distinguishing themselves from the Other: the process of identification has not clearly established a Self and Other. Reading Genesis with Lacan, Cain enacts humankind's first murder as he seeks to identify with Abel's position. God favored Abel and Cain desires to be in that position. Cain kills this alienated site of his desire, his image, his brother. As Lacan writes regarding the Mirror Stage, it is not wholeness that is at issue: "it isn't the appearance of this behavior at six months which is the most important thing, but rather its dissolution at 18 months."6 The pleasures of the tentatively bounded "Self" are only felt via the Other. The see-saw movement is the rising joy the Self feels through the Other followed by the crushing fall it feels as joy turns to alienation. It is as the see-saw falls, in "the movement of exchange with the other, that man becomes aware of himself as body, as the empty form of the body."7 The realization of the Other, as in the act of murder, reveals something much worse than the self being alienated from itself. One must also acknowledge that one's own body is empty. Without the Other, the very image of
the Self does not exist. The wrath of God in the Biblical story exemplifies this disappearance of Self. Cain becomes one of the earliest invisible men as God condemns him to never be seen by him again: Cain laments, "thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face I shall be hid" (Gen. 4. 14).^8

Like Cain of the Bible, Sebastian Caine has an alienated site of his own desire. In *Hollow Man* the role of Abel is played by none other than Caine's own body. Caine must destroy his own image in order to claim his own negative site of desire. Lacan's unstable mirror of identification shows us that while we may only know the illusory fullness of self through the other, the price that one pays is one of profound lack - one's own body is an empty form. Likewise in *Hollow Man* the identity of Sebastian Caine is formed over the emptiness of his bodily form. The other scientists must make a latex mask in order to deal with continuing absence of Caine. Dressed in an identity formed of latex and sunglasses, Caine uses his "human" disguise to cover his "real" state. The imaginary identity is a suture that barely covers gaping holes of the real.

The very first scene of *Hollow Man* acts as an obvious allegory to the narrative of the film. A hand, sheathed in a latex glove, drops a mouse into a laboratory cage. The mouse wanders around briefly, sensing something is afoot. Suddenly invisible jaws grasp the mouse and crush it. Blood explodes from the
mouse and revealing the deadly teeth of the invisible creature. What can this tell us about the film and the body of God?

In The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, Lacan looks at the paradox concerning images in the Bible. While "God made man in his own image," there is also a prohibition against images of God. Indeed, should there not be a prohibition against the very image of man? Examining the prohibition of images, Lacan suspects that images are inherently deceitful in regards to God. Lacan asks,

Why is that? Let's go to what is simplest: if these are beautiful images - and goodness only knows that religious images always correspond by definition to reigning canons of beauty - one doesn't notice that they are always hollow images. Moreover, man, too, as image is interesting for the hollow the image leaves empty - by reason of the fact that one doesn't see in the image, beyond the capture of the image, the emptiness of God to be discovered.  

Lacan draws this point out further as he proclaims that the basis of God's power is in "the capacity to advance into emptiness." This notion of an empty God has serious ramifications for Lacan's notion of the Self. As everything depends on the image reflected in the mirror, where is the subject's ethics to be located if God is in fact absent? It is said that "God made man in his own image" and yet Lacan shows that this image is an empty one. Images are deceitful as every image of God is ultimately false. Thus one must conclude, that the subject, like God, is empty.

Looking back on this opening moment in the film, one can easily see the director controls the film with a god-like power, while, like the barely visible hand, making his own existence as absent as possible. One of the key tenets in filmmaking is to structure the cuts of the film so that the camera denies its own existence. The invisible creature thus echoes the invisible director, or God, of the film. Man is
empty precisely because the place of God is empty. The monstrous jaws of the opening scene do not only belong to the evil Dr. Caine, they are also the jaws of hell, the punishment of an invisible God.

Like many other critics, Charles Taylor of Salon magazine hated Hollow Man. He concluded his review with the statement: "Verhoeven may be right that we all carry a hidden darkness inside of us. Personally, mine comes out when I'm promised a good time and wind up getting the hell beaten out of me."12 In most film theory, narrative is seen as a lure, a device that dupes the viewer into accepting the pleasure of the text. Taylor simply expected the bad man to be punished. He didn't expect to become the bad man and suffer for it. In Hollow Man we, as spectators, are made aware that the eye as we are forced to become grants us narrative pleasure, but at a price. We must accept ourselves as empty in order to enjoy this spectacle.

1 As Caine works on a computer model of both the serum and its antidote, a warning "UNSTABLE" in red or a pleasant "STABLE" in green flashes on the computer screen.


11 Silverman, 201.


Bibliography


