Hollow Man, hollow indeed

By John Andrews
15 August 2000

I found director Paul Verhoeven's latest movie, as crass and disgusting as it is, perhaps a bit more revealing than he intended.

In case you haven't already heard, Hollow Man is an update of 1933's The Invisible Man (directed by James Whale), which introduced Claude Rains as an actor.

We probably all know the plot: well intentioned scientist creates formula to make himself disappear; unable to reverse the process he goes mad, turning into a homicidal maniac. There is something of a Greek tragedy here. The scientist is motivated by the desire to help mankind, but through a cruel twist of fate his discovery winds up causing him to do the opposite. But that is precisely the element missing from Hollow Man.

Here our scientist, played by Kevin Bacon, does science—for the military only—apparently because it gives him access to a flashy Porsche and attractive ladies. There is not a shred of social consciousness. Invisibility doesn't change him, it just allows him to better get away with being a bigger jerk than he could be when people could see him.

The only thing motorizing this absolutely flat-line story are the truly spectacular special effects, which consist primarily of the scientist's body undergoing disappearance and reappearance organ-system by organ-system. But it all adds up to nothing more than another large box-office weekend.

In his early Dutch films, Soldier of Orange (1979) and Spetters (1980), Verhoeven used his talents to address significant issues confronting youth. Even his first big US film RoboCop (1987) alluded to a society corrupted by corporate greed and had something to say about the human condition. Then came Basic Instinct (1992) and Showgirls (1995), about which nothing more need be said. By now, like his Hollow Man mad scientist, Verhoeven has no purpose other than self-gratification. He seems entirely empty himself. It's a little sad, actually.