

# *The Invisible Man*: A woman struck by an “unseen hand”

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## *The Invisible Man*

*The Invisible Man*, directed by Australian filmmaker Leigh Whannell, is a psychological science fiction thriller very loosely based on H.G. Wells’ 1897 novel. The book has been adapted numerous times for film and television, the most famous version being James Whale’s elegant 1933 film, featuring Claude Rains.

The recent film has been quite successful, in part due to the pandemic’s having prevented the opening of various blockbusters. On a \$7 million budget, the movie has earned \$131 million worldwide and is currently one of the most popular films of 2020.

Its suspenseful qualities help explain its broader appeal, while its feeding on the #MeToo mood, becoming the latest entry in what one critic calls “boom times for feminist revenge narratives,” helps account for its success in certain narrower quarters.

As the movie opens, Cecilia (Elisabeth Moss) is lying in bed in the middle of the night. She tensely plucks an evidently disgusting and domineering male hand from her hip. Within the first minute or so, the audience has already been alerted to the general tenor of the film.

Apparently terrified, Cecilia creeps through the massive labyrinth of a house, disables the alarm and scales a high concrete wall, all to escape her abusive boyfriend, Adrian Griffin (Oliver Jackson-Cohen—“Griffin” was the name of Wells’ original character), an optics engineer. Griffin’s high-tech glass prison-house overlooking the northern California coast—a quasi-Alcatraz—testifies to his extreme wealth. With the help of her sister Emily (Harriet Dyer), our heroine escapes to the safety of close friend James (Aldis Hodge), a police detective with a teenage daughter, Sydney (Storm Reid).

Suffering from acute panic, Cecilia freezes at the thought of setting foot outside James’ home until Emily arrives with the news that Adrian has committed suicide. The beleaguered woman also learns, through an

appointment with Adrian’s lawyer brother Tom (Michael Dorman), in whose office sits an urn with Adrian’s ashes, that she is the beneficiary of \$5 million.

The ensuing celebrations involve tipping champagne and setting up a bank account for Sydney’s college fund.

However, to no audience member’s great surprise, disturbing events begin to occur. Cecilia, a Bay area architect, discovers her work portfolio has been emptied when she arrives for a job interview. She faints, only to learn that she is full of drugs ... and pregnant. When bed covers are mysteriously pulled off, fake emails sent out, footsteps appear in coffee grounds—she realizes Adrian has found a way to continue controlling her as an unseen, vengeful force. No one believes her suspicions and when corpses begin to mount, Cecilia is blamed.

In the end, needless to say, unbridled male villainy is no match for female power, strength and cunning.

As noted, *The Invisible Man*’s popularity is primarily attributable to its cliff-hanging elements. Moss adequately carries the film, although at times she chews up the scenery, perhaps to live up to a reputation for offering ultra-emotional performances.

Hodge, Reid and Dyer are competent adjuncts. The movie makes use of conventional horror tropes, while Benjamin Wallfisch’s pounding score occasionally borders on the hysterical.

The reality is that Cecilia’s relationship with Adrian is not truly a lifelike one, but largely a political construct-indictment. It does not appear that money is her motive, or low self-esteem her difficulty. So what is this apparently stable and rational middle-class woman doing with such a distillation of pure malice in the first place? The audience is asked to take for granted something that is neither proven nor convincing.

It is fitting in such “boom times” for “feminist revenge narratives” as these that a policeman is the hero. These layers can’t help themselves. *The Invisible Man* does not

have anything even vaguely radical or oppositional about it. Cops, as anyone from the working class or the legions of current protesters knows, are in the first ranks of society's brutal physical "abusers."

The plot is a fantastical rendition of the struggle currently under way within portions of the affluent petty bourgeoisie between male and female rivals. That struggle has nothing to do with social progress. There's not even a pretense here.

*Variety* put it this way: Cecilia is "every woman who's ever had to fight to be heard because her ordeal wasn't 'visible.'" Many critics chime in along similar lines. The *L.A. Times* writes that it is "a familiar story expertly retooled for an era of tech-bro sociopathy and #MeToo outrage..."

Another critic asks "What is it that makes us believe a woman's story? If a woman is struck by an unseen hand, as Cecilia is, has it really happened? Where's the proof?"

In an interview, Moss observes that the "feeling of not being believed, not being heard or being scrutinized for believing something you know in your heart to be true is something I think on varying levels we can all identify with. When I start telling people what this movie was about and how it was being used as an analogy for gaslighting, I was really surprised by how many people would get this look in their eye. It's a commonality that I think deserves to be explored."

It would probably not occur to anyone involved in the production of *The Invisible Man* that basing themselves on a circumstance that *could not actually take place* adds very little to their argument. The fantastic here serves a selfish, retrograde agenda.

Filmmakers once adopted a more critical attitude. In a 1973 interview, for example, German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder explained: "I'm often irritated by all the talk about women's liberation. The world isn't a case of women against men, but of rich against poor, repressed against repressors. And there are just as many repressed men as there are repressed women." What a torrent of abuse would rain down on him today!

### ***Vivarium***

*Vivarium* is a science fiction movie directed by Lorcan Finnegan, from a story by Finnegan and Garret Shanley. It is an international co-production between Ireland, Denmark and Belgium.

The film opens with images of cuckoo birds and their parasitical activities. There is a point being made: the common cuckoos trick other birds into raising their young

by sneaking their eggs into other parents' nests. They are "basically looking for foster parents," in the words of one biologist.

Gemma (Imogen Poots), a kindergarten teacher, and Tom (Jesse Eisenberg), the school's groundskeeper, are a young couple in the market for a house. "Don't get left behind," a friend warns, echoing the notion that home ownership is part of the American Dream. Gemma and Tom have an appointment with a bizarre, neatly dressed agent, Martin (Jonathan Aris), who leads them to a housing development called Yonder, comprising infinite rows of identical, sickly green houses.

The pair soon learn there is no escaping the hellish subdivision. They end up being forced to raise a creepy, alien boy (Senan Jennings), who torments the duo until, as an even creepier alien adult (Eanna Hardwicke), he goes on to replace an expiring Martin. Tom and Gemma, having been coerced into an unearthly facsimile of parenthood, meet a fate similar to that of the cuckoo bird's surrogates.

A Latin word meaning "place of life," a vivarium is also an enclosed area in which animals or plants are raised for observation and research. Superficially, the movie seems to be a boiler-plate attack on soulless suburbia that drains the life out of its inhabitants. Nothing new here.

The question arises: is the movie's central thrust just an attention-grabbing gimmick? Probably. But if one were to follow the logic of the movie's premises, it would lead to the gloomy conclusion that official society allows guileless, in this case semi-bohemian, parents to raise children, before snatching them away at a certain age and making whatever it wants of them, i.e., cold, heartless, establishment automatons. But then again, it's most likely just a gimmick.

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