

Cue the Cameras: Abuse Without Evidence in *The Invisible Man*

Cecilia Kass is not insane. At least, this is what she has to prove in Leigh Whannell's *The Invisible Man* (2020). Whannell's film operates from the basic belief that people trust only what they can see. So it comes as no surprise that others do not believe Cecilia when she claims that she is being followed by the abusive partner she thought she escaped from – an optics inventor named Adrian who “dies” at the start of the film. Rendered invisible (granted by an engineered suit), Adrian torments Cecilia, infiltrating every facet of her life. Abused without evidence, Cecilia is questioned and isolated. She even doubts herself, saying, “I just need to know that I'm not crazy.” In many ways, *The Invisible Man* transcends careworn tropes about abuse with its use of sight, particularly through camerawork, to illustrate Adrian's intrusive presence to the audience and Cecilia. However, it is with sight that Whannell offers a new approach to depicting how the true power and potency of abuse derives not from the abuser, but from others not believing the victim.

*The Invisible Man* tells its story of abuse through horror and suspense tropes. It opens with a scene of Cecilia's escape from her abusive partner, Adrian, fleeing from his mansion with her sister, Emily. Cecilia then lives with her friend, James, and his daughter, Sydney. For two weeks, she is paranoid of Adrian finding her, anxiously staring out the window for signs of him and even reading an article called “Are You Being Watched?” Soon, she learns that Adrian allegedly committed suicide (surprise, he didn't). After staging his death, Adrian dons an invisibility suit to follow and torment Cecilia, setting the plot into motion.

Whannell first reveals to the audience the existence of an invisible presence, plausibly Adrian, with Cecilia. One night soon after hearing about Adrian's death, Cecilia is working in her room. The scene opens with a still shot of the seemingly empty hallway outside the room, its

long duration priming viewers to expect activity in the vacancy. However, the only sense of “activity” is generated when the camera moves backwards down the hallway, as if it were following a person moving through it. Clearly, nothing – no one – is visible. Yet, Whannell’s shot hints to viewers about someone’s presence. At one point, the camera turns towards Cecilia’s room but stops at the doorway, stilling on her as she works, oblivious. Given that the camera moves in one fluid motion throughout the scene, it seems that the “person” walking down the hallway is now watching Cecilia, the audience privy to their perspective. As if to quell any doubts of an invisible presence, Whannell briefly switches to a shot of Cecilia staring suspiciously at the doorway, sensing someone watching her. He even shows the fog of an untraceable breath looming behind Cecilia, the camera angled so that only the audience sees it. Through the revealing camerawork, viewers may infer that this presence is, somehow, Adrian. As noted, Cecilia was paranoid of Adrian finding and watching her after the escape – behaviors that this invisible presence exhibits. Thus, Whannell’s use of sight convinces viewers to believe that Adrian has somehow rendered himself invisible, faked his suicide, and is with Cecilia. By informing the audience first while Cecilia is suspicious but still oblivious, Whannell establishes sight as a tool to disclose and convince the existence of the “invisible man” to certain people.

With the audience now aware of the invisible man, Whannell confirms Cecilia’s suspicions of Adrian’s presence. After waking up one night to find her blanket pulled off, Cecilia suspects that someone is in her room. Visibly afraid, she examines, finding nothing. Though, when she picks up her blanket and walks back to bed, she stops when footprints appear on the sheet. In this moment, the camera slowly zooms in on the footprints, showing them to be walking. Given that the shot is taken from over Cecilia’s shoulder, its angle convinces viewers that she has just witnessed evidence confirming her suspicions, now clearly aware of an invisible

person in her room. The slow duration of the shot establishes a knowing intimacy between Cecilia and the footprints. Just as the audience deduced that this invisible presence is Adrian, Whannell suggests to viewers that Cecilia somehow infers her “dead” abuser made the footprints. As noted, Adrian is Cecilia’s most direct source of paranoia. Her fear of the stalking presence here naturally associates the footprints to Adrian. Thus, while Adrian’s invisibility suit is not revealed until much later, Whannell’s camerawork suggests that Cecilia senses Adrian – being the optics inventor that he is – has rendered himself invisible and is with her.

Whannell illustrates how other characters, unable to see Adrian, will sow doubt into Cecilia. In a continuation of the scene with the blanket, Cecilia screams after spotting the footprints, alerting James and Sydney. Here, Whannell suddenly shifts from the enduring, zoom-in shots of the footprints when Cecilia was alone to quicker shots that jump between the three characters. The shift marks a stark change in dynamic, where it feels as though Adrian’s threatening presence has disappeared and that Sydney, James and Cecilia are the only people in the room. In fact, when James investigates the blanket after Cecilia points to it and cries “there is *someone* in here,” the camera does not even acknowledge the spot where the footprints were moments ago. Instead, it focuses on James as he picks up a limp, normal blanket. Whannell’s camerawork suggests that James and Sydney, unable to see the evidence that Cecilia witnessed, cannot believe her. For James, Cecilia seems to be letting traumas of the past get to her. He even accurately infers her suspicions, saying “Adrian will haunt you if you let him.” Moreover, the camera here moves back and forth between Cecilia and James. By focusing on these two (visible) characters, Whannell emphasizes the uncertainty of Adrian’s presence, almost as if Cecilia imagined it. As it happens, Cecilia concedes to James, saying “O.K. sorry” for causing a disruption. Despite having undeniably seen footprints, not only does Cecilia doubt herself, but

even the audience questions her sanity. Yet, viewers cannot deny what they saw: footprints, clear as day, walking on the blanket. Whannell shows how in making Cecilia question herself, James' disbelief fuels Adrian's psychological power and control (a.k.a. abuse) over her.

Adrian, in his invisibility, perpetuates his abuse by convincing others Cecilia is insane. At dinner one night with Emily (her sister), Cecilia watches in horror as a "floating" knife slits Emily's throat then flies into her hand. Now aware of Adrian's invisibility suit, viewers – and Cecilia – do not doubt that he is behind this. However, the shot shifts to depict a nearby diner turning her head towards the scene and screaming in horror. Whannell's camerawork suggests that others in the restaurant missed the floating knife and, with no evidence of Adrian, deduce that Cecilia has murdered Emily. Seemingly insane and dangerous, Cecilia is taken to a mental hospital. Here, the camera stills on an "empty" corner of her room, indicating that Cecilia believes Adrian is present, watching her. Pleading for help, she tells the psychiatrist restraining her "He's right there! He's going to hurt me." But the psychiatrist, unable to see Adrian, dismisses and sedates her, saying "there, you're all right." Without evidence to convince others of Adrian, Cecilia is vulnerable and helpless. As she passes out, the camera depicts the whole room from her perspective, showing both the "empty" corner and the psychiatrist. The shot's composition implies that even though Adrian's presence was suggested, the only "real" and visible person is the psychiatrist. Briefly, viewers doubt Cecilia, wondering if Adrian is a figment of her imagination. They question if she is truly insane, needing restraint. Yet, when a disembodied voice saying "Surprise!" is later heard in the empty room, viewers are reminded that Adrian *is* there, and doubting Cecilia is what fuels his abuse. It allows him to torment her, unstoppable, giving him the psychological power over her that he seeks.

In one final, ironic scene, Cecilia and Adrian reverse roles. After framing his brother for his crimes, Adrian (now visible) has dinner with Cecilia. At one point, Cecilia leaves for the restroom where she puts on an optics suit she hid earlier in the film. From the perspective of a security camera, Whannell shows Adrian slitting his own throat with a knife. Yet, viewers know it was Cecilia's doing when she later pretends to be distressed, only to step out of the security camera's view, smiling and telling Adrian, "Surprise!" Whannell shows that Cecilia has become the "abuser." She behaves like Adrian did, wielding both invisibility and a knife to shape others' perception of the situation, using the security camera to capture "evidence" of the scene. Cecilia knows that others will believe only what they see – and what they see is a man slitting his throat, not a woman murdering her past abuser. When a dying Adrian looks at Cecilia, the camera is pointed upwards, indicating she finally has power over him. Some may contend that the source of Cecilia's newfound power is the confidence she has in her beliefs, having now seen Adrian. However, Whannell shows that this power, the power of an abuser, comes out of knowing that others will not question the blatant evidence of the security camera.

With each deliberate camera shot, Whannell demonstrates to the viewer that people will only believe what they see. And in cases of victimization like Cecilia's, if people can't see evidence of abuse, they won't believe the abused. We learn through Cecilia the harrowing impact doubting victims has on them. Most importantly, we see that this doubt fuels abuse because it makes its very real pains feel imagined, pushing the victim to question themselves and continue to suffer. Ultimately, Whannell urges viewers of *The Invisible Man* to always believe in victims, even if the evidence of their abuse is not yet apparent.