

THE FIST IN GOD'S FACE

The Rapture (1991), directed by Michael Tolkin.

On the few occasions when Christian fundamentalism of whatever cast is addressed in mainstream cinema, its ministers are regularly mocked as mercenary hypocrites (e.g. Burt Lancaster's revival tent huckster in *Elmer Gantry*); its worshippers painted as yahoos, fools, or nutcases (e.g. *Carrie's* malignant ultrapuritanical mother).

But what if that toothy televangelist, flacking the coming Armagaddon in aid of copping your cash, were actually on the money about the End of Days? What if the well-scrubbed zealots in FBI suits, who've knocked on your door to save you from hellish Last Judgement, were also in the loop?

Shortly before scripting *The Player*, Robert Altman's acerbic send-up of Hollywood narcissism, Michael Tolkin wrote and directed *The Rapture*. It's an oddly compelling small picture in which Judgement Day indeed lies near at hand, and God is the Book of Job's capricious, implacably imponderable Yaweh.

Tolkin's heroine, Sharon (Mimi Rogers), is a jaded Los Angeles information operator passing deadened days in a hive-like office, and nights in anonymous, anhedonic sex. Frenetic orgasms with strangers in tawdry motel rooms have only escalated her dispirited alienation.

Then mysterious intimations of salvation begin to be manifested. Sharon overhears several co-workers whispering around the water cooler about impending Apocalypse. The classic pair of callow young missionaries do come to her door. Initially skeptical, she finds herself unexpectedly moved by the sincerity of their belief. After a

particularly sordid one-night stand pushes her to the brink of suicide, she has a dream of an immense, radiant pearl -- and awakens into luminous serenity.

Soon afterwards she is initiated into a cadre of the faithful, lead by a gnostic child prophet. Within several years she marries a man from her debauched past, now also a convert (the ever serviceable David Duchovny), and bears him a daughter. The family's blissful millenarianism pervades every moment of an obsessive, absurdly idyllic existence. Sharon fairly glows with a goofy rectitude.

Then her husband is savagely gunned down by an alcoholic ex-employee. The tragedy barely ruffles Sharon's preternatural calm. For she is confident all will be reunited at the Rapture, when Jesus summons the Elect to join Him in midair, and thence ascend to paradise.

(According to a controversial 'Dispensationalist' scriptural interpretation, first promulgated in the 19th Century, the Rapture will spare Christ's flock the seven years of global catastrophe attendant upon the rise of Antichrist, culminating in His triumph over Satan in the fields of Armageddon. Rapture eschatology is addressed at length in Timothy LaHaye's immensely popular *Left Behind* novels.)

The image of Sharon's husband image materializes in a five-and-dime photo machine. Other equally bizarre portents bid her abandon all earthly attachments. She voyages with her daughter into the wilderness -- actually a state park campground -- to await the Rapture. Days pass; as hunger and thirst assail them, Sharon's prayers and her youngster's cries to be reunited with her father go starkly unanswered.

Her defenses gradually worn down, she grows increasingly outraged at a Deity capable of afflicting such torment upon a child utterly innocent of sin. But she

cannot kill herself, since she still believes that suicide is an abomination which will deprive her forever of joining her loved ones at the throne of glory. I will not reveal the desperate extremity of the solution to her crisis of faith -- only that the Rapture does indeed occur, compelling an even more obdurate interrogation of divine purpose, rather than the mute acceptance of facile redemption.

Joblike comforters are denied her, but she would reject their dubious rationales in any case. In refusing passive surrender before the enigmatic powers shaping our ends, Sharon reprises Milton's defiantly unbowed Lucifer. Par Lagerkvist's *Barabbas* also springs to mind. In that searing novel, the thief whose place on the cross has been taken by Jesus wrestles with his incapacity for belief for years after Golgotha, until he dies on his own cross, consigning his soul -- "*to the darkness...*"

Tolkin's own intentions appear as through a glass darkly in this strangely moving film. I do not think his essential purposes are satirical. One looks in vain here for the devastating scorn he heaped upon the bloated Lalaland narcissists of *The Player*. Instead, he seems to be serving up an idiosyncratic take on the central ontological preoccupations of literature diverse as *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Enemies: A Love Story*: notably the desolating barrenness of a life bereft of faith in the context of the obscenity of a just God, who nevertheless permits a child's cruel death.

Tolkin ponders such agonizing spiritual dilemmas in a style by turns lurid, or coolly devoid of sensationalism. *The Rapture* is threaded with jangling references to the 'spilt religion' discovered in movies like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and the LaHaye novels; in tabloid TV and print journalism (Christ's image embedded in Twinkies), and on the odious Pat Robertson circuit. Out of this postmodern

pastiche, Tolkin weaves a gonzo vision of a proletarian Last Judgment -- Maurie Povitch meets the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse -- unsettling, but by no means ludicrous; ultimately rather terrifying.

The Rapture is wonderfully acted across the board. Its surprising revelation is Mimi Rogers's Sharon. Tolerably competent in previous appearances (e.g., *Street Smart*, *Someone To Watch Over Me*), Rogers here instills a not especially pleasant character with astringent intelligence and harrowing anguish. Her role permits few valleys; in other hands, its peaks could easily have provoked derision rather than sympathy. Rogers' eery intensity embraces cynical anomie; blissed-out grace; and a terminal xenith of furious indignation. When she shakes her fist in God's face, one could weep, or cheer, or both.

Addendum: several months before and after *The Rapture's* release, I would come upon two men in front of Gotham's Metropolitan Museum, leaping up and down with frenetic energy. They carried signs proclaiming that the Rapture was going to take place on October 22, 1991. An organization called The Mission for the Coming Days even furnished the local time for the event. I chose to sleep in on the dreaded day, and survived to tell the tale.

At least so far. Current predictions of Apocalypse, supposedly reaching back to Nostradamus and dolorous Mayan astronomers, propose that sometime in 2012, sinister celestial alignments, conflated with a congeries of man-made disasters will wipe us from the planet, perhaps burn Earth itself to a cinder. An eponymous Irwin Allen-esque disaster film, directed by Roland Emmerich and promising the guilty pleasures of *Armageddon*, *Independence Day*, and *Deep Impact*, sensibly debuts on Friday, November 13th. After which, *quien sabe?*