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Enraptured by Rapture: Production Context, Biblical Interpretation, and Evangelical Eschatology in *The Rapture*, *Left Behind*, and *This is the End*

Abstract

The Book of Revelation's place in the popular imaginary has been fueled by both its popularity within evangelical eschatology and its endless evocations within mainstream film and TV. Both evangelicalism and popular culture frequently equate the events of John's Apocalypse with the rapture, a selective reading of New Testament verses which envisions God's faithful being called to heaven in advance of the Tribulation. This paper analyzes three distinct films which mediate on both the rapture and Revelation: *The Rapture* (1991), *Left Behind: The Movie* (2000), and *This is the End* (2013). Analyzing these films within their respective modes of production reveals that each film's presentation of the end-times is informed by their narrative conventions and intended audiences. Of these three films, however, only *This is the End*, the mainstream studio comedy with the least intellectual pretensions, reflects the ethical rubric for salvation originally emphasized by John in Revelation.

Keywords

Book of Revelation, Film Studies; Production Studies; Biblical Studies; Evangelicalism; *This is the End*; *Left Behind*; *The Rapture*

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Introduction

More than any other Christian eschatology, the Book of Revelation remains prevalent within popular culture, especially in the United States. The four horsemen of the apocalypse, the whore of Babylon, and the mark of the beast are such recognizable signifiers that even audiences who have never read John's Apocalypse can easily identify them. The wide variety of popular media in which the Apocalypse's iconography appear, from apocalyptic songs (Johnny Cash, "The Man Comes Around") to novels (*Good Omens*) to Westerns (*Tombstone*) to horror films and TV (*The Omen*, *American Horror Story*, *Supernatural*) all attest to the long tail of this apocalypse's appeal and placement in the popular imaginary. The diverse media in which these ideas are appropriated also speak to the protean nature of John's iconography; death's pale horse has signified everything from a seemingly omnipresent hooded figure on a bike (*Good Omens*) to the living embodiment of pollution (*Supernatural*) to a vengeful Wyatt Earp (*Tombstone*).¹ One way of reckoning with the incredible appeal of this apocalypse in popular culture is to take a closer look at the different film forms in which these ideas have emerged and consider how those ideas are altered (or not) by those forms.

This paper focuses on three films which appropriate the Book of Revelation within distinct production contexts: Michael Tolkin's *The Rapture* (1991), Cloud Ten Pictures' adaptation of Tim LaHaye's apocalyptic novel *Left Behind* (Vic

Sarin, 2000), and Seth Rogan and Evan Goldberg's *This is the End* (2013). Past analyses of cinematic representations of Revelation have focused on how films interpret Revelation within a specifically American social context, with less emphasis on the specific production contexts from which those films emerged.² This analysis seeks to build off of this tradition by incorporating each film's sociopolitical context, along with how the intended audience of each film informs their respective productions and presentations of Revelation. Emerging from three different decades with distinct social contexts, the films are works of three distinct film movements: American Independent Cinema, independent Christian filmmaking, and the post-classical Hollywood studio system.

Comparing these films reveals that all three incorporate elements of the Rapture, an eschatological concept with roots in 1 Thess. 4:13-17 that does not appear in John's Apocalypse.³ When considering accurate reflections of Biblical thought in American film, preconceptions and cultural biases tend to favor the much-touted "authenticity" of American Independent Cinema, or the theological validity of Christian media, over big-budget entertainment made by a studio system viewed by both counter-cinemas with distrust.⁴ However, it is actually the theology of the "dumb" Hollywood comedy *This is the End* that most faithfully reflects the ideas of the earliest Christian apocalypse. This analysis demonstrates that, while the intertwining of Revelation and the Rapture remains widespread, the capacity

for mainstream studios to seriously engage with Christian theology can be found even in the most mainstream of popular entertainment.

Revelation and Rapture

Although rapture theology is commonly associated with appropriations of the Book of Revelation in film and the broader culture, this futurist eschatology deviates from the contents and rhetorical aims of the text.⁵ Ancient readers would have received the text of Revelation as a stand-alone text that employed familiar elements of myth and symbolism to craft a rhetorically powerful response to its present moment. In contrast, the hermeneutic of American evangelical dispensationalism understands the entire Protestant Bible as one, coherent text that does not contradict itself under any circumstances.

Revelation is typically dated to the late first century CE, likely 95 or 96 C.E. during the reign of Domitian, addressing Jesus-believers in Asia Minor under Roman Imperial governance.⁶ While seven specific assemblies are named as the divinely ordained audience, the symbolic significance of this number suggests a universal audience may have been intended.⁷ The author John was likely born Jewish, from Palestine, not a native speaker of Greek, and understood himself to be a prophet. It is probable that he had worked among each assembly he addressed, and he was likely exiled on the island of Patmos at the time of writing.⁸

In the prophetic messages to the seven assemblies, John calls for commitment to action.⁹ Repentance and good works are tied to the image of conquering (Rev. 3:5; 21). Christ, as the slaughtered Lamb, is the conqueror sitting on the throne (Rev. 5:1, 5-6). To become conquerors like Christ, have a place in the temple of God, and sit on the throne with Christ and the Father (Rev. 3:12; 21), Jesus-followers must do good works with love because such actions demonstrate faithfulness to divine authority in the sociopolitical context of the Roman Empire.¹⁰ In John's Apocalypse, good works are central to the prophetic exhortations for the salvation of these communities.

By contrast, the rapture theology popularly associated with the Book of Revelation has its roots in a significantly different hermeneutic. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a "new moral philosophy" took hold in the United States which placed its trust in "common sense moral reasoning," or the belief that moral truth could be discerned by human instinct alone.¹¹ Slowly, though not without opposition, the language of common sense reasoning was adopted by many Protestant leaders leading to "a fundamental reversal" of Protestant beliefs about the human capacity for ethical reasoning apart from grace.¹² Nevertheless, the linguistic shift gave rise to *theistic* common sense, which applied the "common sense" emphasis on individual self-sufficiency to the ability to discern theological truth. Dispensationalism, a stream of evangelicalism popularized by John Nelson Darby in the late 19th century, assumes this "common sense" principle as a Biblical

hermeneutic, which, in this context, means that every person is equally qualified to understand the Christian message.¹³ This hermeneutic has also been called a “literal” or “plain sense” interpretation of the Bible because, it purports, as Mark Noll concisely summarizes: “What Scripture really meant was exactly what it said.”¹⁴

At the same time, those who followed this approach clearly made choices regarding how to understand certain passages in order to create an allegedly harmonious and coherent interpretation. The “common sense” hermeneutic understands the Bible as a single text that does not contradict itself. Therefore it is at liberty to pull together other Biblical texts like 1 Thess. 4:14-17, Mark 13:26-27, Matt. 24:37-42, and Luke 17:34-35 with Revelation to create a prophetic narrative that will be imminently fulfilled in a way that ancient readers would not have done.¹⁵ This conflation of Revelation with the rapture has led to the widespread misconception, augmented by popular culture, that the Book of Revelation features a rapture event.

Dispensationalism’s literal interpretation of the Bible deviates significantly from Biblical scholars’ interpretations of Revelation as highly symbolic. Ancient authors were trained in crafting vivid descriptions through a rhetorical technique called ekphrasis to create novel images that are both strange and emotionally persuasive.¹⁶ Apocalyptic rhetoric, like that of Revelation, uses vivid imagery and allegory to draw the audience’s attention to the author’s perceived crisis.¹⁷ John’s

perceived crisis is the threatened social status of Jesus-believers in Asia Minor.¹⁸ His vision is an allegory that paints the present religio-political conflict as a cosmic battle. Each traumatic event raised in Revelation is connected with its historical situation and the relationship between Jesus-believers and imperial authority.¹⁹ The author raises awareness of a crisis, and, through strategic use of symbolism and allegory, promises victory through divine intervention after a period of perseverance amid suffering.²⁰ The rhetorical techniques found in Revelation suggest that its purpose was not to relay factual information. Apocalyptic ekphrasis done well leads the hearer to a predictable emotional and intellectual response.²¹ Thus, Revelation calls its audience to demonstrate their faithfulness to the Kingdom of God through their good works done in love.²²

American evangelicals who ascribe to the “common sense” hermeneutic approach the vivid imagery of Revelation quite differently. If the text contains simple truths that can be understood “clearly and without ambiguity,”²³ then the text is a yet-to-be-fulfilled prophecy of endtime events. In the dispensationalist view of history, the current dispensation will end with the rapture and the events of John’s prophecy will follow. When the rapture occurs, true Christians will disappear from this world, rising up to heaven.²⁴ Those left behind then experience the seven-year tribulation (Rev. 7:14) under the reign of the Antichrist (the antichrist is read into Rev. 13:11-17) in the next dispensation.²⁵ By the beginning

of the 20th century, dispensationalism was integral to much of conservative American Protestantism.²⁶

Evangelicals expect this prophecy to be fulfilled very soon; in fact, many have claimed that the fulfillment has already begun. Since the 19th century, American evangelicals have been claiming to observe this composite prophecy beginning to be fulfilled in current events like the Wilson Administration, the League of Nations, and the rise of Mussolini.²⁷ Evangelical preachers and writers like Oliver B. Greene, Leon I. Bates, and Hal Lindsey applied the imagery of Revelation to current events with an interesting mix of literalism and creativity to proclaim with urgency the imminent eschaton.²⁸ From William Miller in the early 19th century, who interpreted Revelation to predict that the eschaton would be in 1843 or 1844, to David Koresh and authors of the *Left Behind* book series Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins in the 20th century, the text of Revelation has continually been used to interpret the evils of the contemporary context as signs of the imminent end.²⁹ As dispensationalism gained ground in the United States, it would, by the late 20th century, also weave its way thoroughly into America's cultural imagination.³⁰ In the 20th and 21st centuries, film adaptations of endtime events have continued to spread futurist interpretations of Revelation.

Post-New Hollywood Film Movements and Christianity

For thirty years of American film history, Hollywood and Christianity were united in an uneasy but profitable alliance. Hollywood catered to mass audiences presupposed as Christian, and after the Catholic Legion of Decency was allied to the Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934 through the appointment of Catholic censor Joseph Breen, religious boycotts against Hollywood films were minimized.³¹ From the mid-1930s through the mid-1950s, popular Biblical epics existed alongside socially conservative secular fare as mainstream Hollywood entertainment. While creative end-arounds and challenges to the censors by boundary-pushing directors were commonplace, for the most part the Production Code's enforcement ensured that Hollywood's narratives adhered to a conservative Christian morality code. This family-friendly Christian hegemony would be undone by the erosion of the Production Code that started in the 1950s. Through evolving social mores and increasing court challenges from subversive filmmakers, the door was gradually opened for representation and narrative scenarios that defied conservative sensibilities.³² The box office failure of a series of 1960s Biblical epics such as *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (George Stevens, 1965) and *The Bible: In the Beginning* (John Huston, 1966) signaled to Hollywood studios that the market for explicitly Christian stories was no longer viable, further contributing to a wave of films targeting younger audiences with edgier themes and subject matters.³³ This era of films, which is often labeled "New Hollywood," produced more sexually

permissive and violent films within the mainstream, a movement away from the four-quadrant family fare that characterized Hollywood's preceding four decades.³⁴ Though Hollywood would continue to release "Christian" films, many of these, including *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) and *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), were horror films characterized by explicit representations of demonic violence and ambiguous, unsettling resolutions. This exploitative approach to Christianity proved more likely to draw scorn from Christian audiences than lure them to the theater.³⁵ Combined with an increasing secularization in the popular sphere, the overall effect was a Hollywood that was markedly less Christian after the 1960s.

As Hollywood shifted in the mid-70s towards pre-sold blockbusters characterized by (secular) action spectacle traditionally marketed to juvenile males, the industry alienated two distinct minority audiences: those favoring more sophisticated art, and Christians who desired entertainment reinforcing their spiritual worldview.³⁶ The former demographic would be appeased by American Independent Cinema, a nascent movement characterized by arthouse films with unconventional narrative structures, quirky characters, distinct visual styles, and ambiguity and intertextuality within the narratives.³⁷ American Independent Cinema would emerge in the 1980s alongside the political resurgence of American conservatism, with Ronald Reagan's mobilization of the Evangelical Christian vote giving rise to the "Moral Majority" that dominated American politics for the

remainder of the century.³⁸ Many evangelicals and other conservative Christians rejected Hollywood films outright during this era, with the occasional boycott of studio films deemed blasphemous like *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988) resurfacing old perceptions—long tinged by antisemitism—that Hollywood is politically liberal and hostile to Christians.³⁹ By the mid-1990s, through distribution and marketing made possible by home video and the Internet, a handful of Christian media companies emerged as a genuine cottage industry.⁴⁰ Though the films produced by Christian media outlets, which include Sherwood Pictures, Pinnacle Peak Pictures, and Angel Studios, vary when considered through the lens of traditional Hollywood genres, they are broadly defined by Terry Lindvall as “films made by Christians with a particular goal in mind that relates to the work and ministry of the church and religious community.”⁴¹ Distinct from the spectacle-laden religious blockbusters of Old Hollywood or independent art cinema that approaches metaphysical questions with ambiguity or ambivalence, contemporary Christian films are typically modest, low-budget productions designed to reaffirm the faith of the congregation. As a result, they tend to favor emotional over intellectual engagement with their audience.

It is worth noting that “Hollywood,” “Independent” and “Christian” are far from siloed categories, with points of industry overlap complicating any analysis of these movements.⁴² Despite these occasional overlaps between film form and distribution, it is still possible to discern a film’s intended audience by analyzing

its production context, and how a film's intended audience informs its formal and narrative characteristics. In the cases of *The Rapture*, *Left Behind: The Movie*, and *This is the End*, these characteristics, combined with the respective social contexts from which they emerged, shed light on how each film appropriates iconography from Revelation and the rapture in distinct ways.

The Rapture: Indie Complexity and God's (Transactional) Love

In *The Rapture*, Sharon (Mimi Rogers) alternates between her drone-like day job as a Los Angeles telephone operator and a hedonistic nightlife of picking up couples with a fellow swinger. After overhearing a break room conversation about the end of the world and being visited at home by two missionaries, Sharon becomes a born-again Christian, and sees a vision that aligns with the teaching of the young boy prophet leading her coworkers' doomsday church. She eventually enters into a relationship with Randy (David Duchovny), a man she met through a past sexual rendezvous, who initially rejects her religious convictions but agrees to accompany Sharon on her journey. After a narrative ellipsis of six years, Sharon and Randy are married with a young daughter Mary (Kimberly Cullum), all active congregants in the prophet's church. After Randy is killed in a mass shooting at his office job by a deranged former employee, Sharon sees visions of a desert interpreted by her prophet as signs of the impending apocalypse, and he advises Sharon and Mary to go into the desert to await Jesus's return.⁴³ After waiting for weeks at a campsite,

Sharon and Mary fall into despair, with Mary urging her mother to kill them so that they can be reunited with her father in heaven. Sharon eventually gives in and shoots Mary to death, but is unable to turn the gun on herself. She soon confesses her murder to Foster (Will Patton), a sympathetic sheriff's deputy, and is taken to custody. While in jail, Gabriel's trumpet blows and the apocalypse commences, and Sharon and Foster leave the jail together. They are soon transported into purgatory and approached by Sharon's daughter, who urges both of them to accept God's love. Foster does so and dissipates into Heaven, but Sharon refuses, saying that she could never love a God that let her kill her daughter. Mary dissolves away, leaving Sharon alone, doomed to wander the emptiness of purgatory for eternity.

The Rapture was released in theaters in October 1991 by Fine Line Features, a division of New Line Cinema specializing in particularly niche, low-budget indie films.⁴⁴ It was written and directed by Michael Tolkin, a novelist-turned-screenwriter making his directorial debut. A practicing Jew who majored in religion at Middlebury College, Tolkin notes that he wrote *The Rapture* during a period of personal mental distress when he was consuming a lot of Christian TV and radio, and was written as commentary on the spiritual malaise afflicting America in the early 1990s.⁴⁵ While released to strong reviews, *The Rapture* failed to turn a profit on its modest \$3 million budget, though it has amassed an ardent critical following in the decades since its release.⁴⁶

Beyond distribution and budget, *The Rapture* signals itself as an independent film through its highly stylized formalism, its unflinching representation of Sharon's hedonistic pre-conversion lifestyle, and the provocative choice to take Sharon's spiritual rebirth seriously, a far cry from standard Hollywood representations of evangelicals as delusional hypocrites or violent psychotics.⁴⁷ Even more reflective of the film's indie pedigree is Tolkin's approach to representing evil: while the Antichrist factors prominently into *Left Behind* and demons appear in *This is the End*, there is no Satan guiding Sharon's hand to kill her daughter in the film's climax. This deliberate evocation of Abraham's Binding of Isaac aligns with the tendency for independent screenplays to emphasize internal conflicts rather than external threats.⁴⁸

In sequences before, during, and after Sharon's incarceration, imagery from John's apocalypse is represented in a manner reflective of *The Rapture's* ultra-low budget, including the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse appearing, among other places, over a TV broadcast of a football game.⁴⁹ When the rapture is announced by Gabriel's trumpet, Sharon and her fellow prisoners are released in a highly stylized sequence in which the cell door bars fall to the ground. In the final scene, when Sharon and Foster are transported to purgatory and are confronted by Mary, the imagery is minimalistic to the point of resembling black box theater; while a misty river dividing purgatory and heaven is visible, heaven itself remains off-screen, its shining light only visible to the characters. As Roger Ebert notes in his

review, this minimalism is reflective not only of the film's low budget, but of independent cinema's emphasis on intellectual and emotional engagement over spectacle. As he noted, "no one would have risked that kind of money on a movie this daring."⁵⁰

However, when it comes to the expression of *The Rapture's* ideology, Tolkin's representation of Christian theology diverts significantly from the theology of both evangelicalism and Revelation. An interaction between Sharon and Mary works as a clear representation of this theology.

Mary: Mommy, Gabriel's coming. You have to make up your mind.

Sharon: There's nothing more to say.

Mary: You have to love God.

Sharon: I love you, Mary.

Mary: That isn't enough.

Sharon: Baby, it's all I have. If life is a gift, if it really is a gift, and there really is a heaven-

Mary: There really *is* a heaven!

Sharon: -then why should I thank Him for the gift of so much suffering, Mary, so much pain on the Earth that *He* created. Let me ask him why.

Mary: Tell God you love him!

Sharon: I can't.

Mary: If you can't tell God you love him, you can't go to heaven. Tell God that you love him! Mommy!

Sharon: No.

In this sequence, Tolkin attempts a critical reflection on evangelical theology, where even a woman who murdered her child can ascend to heaven if she pronounces God's love. Evangelical Christian theology emphasizes that God is love, and the necessity to submit to his authority through intellectual assent and verbal confession to ascend to heaven. Sharon's rejection in favor of an existential emphasis on interpersonal love and lived experience deems her unworthy of ascending to Heaven. Tolkin diverts from dispensationalist theology by giving lukewarm apostates like Foster a chance to repent through a verbal reciprocation of God's love mid-rapture, and giving Sharon the opportunity to ascend even after she has unequivocally denounced God. While this change allows Tolkin to interrogate the nature of God's love by granting Sharon a chance to essentially bluff her way into heaven (an opportunity Sharon rejects on principle), *The Rapture* defies the rhetorical function of the rapture for evangelicals, in which the *faithful* are assured *immediate* ascent into heaven before the Tribulation, exempting them from the worst of the suffering to be endured by the less worthy.⁵¹

While allowing tickets to the rapture to be purchased on the train (so to speak), Tolkin's critical lens also considers what happens when the rapture occurs with a God who sees love as purely transactional. At the start of the rapture, Mary appears to Sharon flanked by two angels, telling her mother that "God loves you because you love Him." In this scene, Tolkin departs from Jewish and Evangelical theology in making God's love conditional. In other words, if God loves us because

we love him, the implication is that the flipside—God does not love us if we reject his love—is also true. Finally, when compared to the theology of Revelation, in which all are judged in the Book of Life “according to their works” (Rev 20:12), Sharon’s willful choice to kill her daughter (Rev. 21:8 and 22:15 expressly forbid murder) would doom her to the lake of fire and second death (Rev 20:14-15), rather than the desolate purgatory implied by *The Rapture*’s final moments.

The Rapture approaches evangelicalism in unusually serious terms for a Hollywood film, demonstrating American Independent Cinema’s capacity for presenting intellectually challenging ideas to specialty audiences. Though Tolkin’s critique of evangelicalism through Sharon’s tormented spiritual journey is both intellectually and emotionally engaging, his representation of the titular event and presentation of God’s love as transactional distorts elements of evangelical thought, similar to how evangelicalism itself distorts Revelation’s emphasis on good works. Just as a film’s “indie” status does not guarantee positive representations of social justice or even progressive ideology, so is it no assurance of an accurate reflection of Christian ideology.⁵² Tolkin’s cinematic vision is challenging, but it reveals more about his artistic sensibilities than any specific Christian denomination, reinforcing the centrality of the writer/director’s authorial vision within American Independent Cinema.

Left Behind: “Faith is Enough”

Left Behind: The Movie (henceforth referred to *sans* subtitle) follows an ensemble of characters, including “Buck” Williams (Kirk Cameron), a crusading TV journalist, Rayford Steele (Brad Johnson), a married airline pilot having an affair with a flight attendant, his college-age daughter Chloe (Janaya Stephens) rebelling against her mother’s evangelicalism and her father’s frequent absences, and Bruce Barnes (Clarence Gilyard), an apostate Christian minister. While Buck and Rayford are on a flight from Chicago to London, millions of people across the world suddenly disappear, leaving only their clothes behind. It gradually dawns on the characters that those who disappeared are either true believers in Christ (including Rayford’s wife, another born-again Christian) or innocent children (including Chloe’s younger brother) who have been raptured to heaven. This rapture, combined with a mysterious global conflict centered around Israel, propels an obscure, charismatic Romanian politician named Nicolae Carpathia (Gordon Currie) to Secretary General of the United Nations. Carpathia, who is revealed to be the Antichrist, brings into motion a series of events that evoke the happenings prophesied in the Book of Revelation, including triggering the seven-year tribulation through global disarmament and a plan to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. The film ends with Buck, Rayford, Chloe, and Bruce realizing Carpathia is the Antichrist and vowing to endure the Tribulation as born-again soldiers of Christ.

Left Behind is an adaptation of the first book in a series of doomsday novels written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. The series remains popular with evangelical readers, reaffirming the tenets of premillennial dispensationalism while tapping into the widespread perceptions within the 1990s evangelical community that, through the forces of globalization and internationalism, American society was sliding further into moral decay.⁵³ While Tolkien presents his titular rapture as a narrative exercise, *Left Behind* is a product of evangelicals who believe that an increasingly globalized and secular world was signaling Christ's impending return.⁵⁴ Though *Left Behind* was directed by journeyman director Vic Sarin, its central creative is Paul Lalonde, a Canadian film executive who produced and distributed the first three *Left Behind* films through Cloud Ten Pictures, a Christian media company he co-founded with his brother Peter in 1994.⁵⁵ Cloud Ten Pictures specialized in apocalyptic films that, while made primarily for evangelical audiences, feature recognizable (if not exactly A-list) Hollywood talent and were marketed and packaged so that secular audiences might not realize they were purchasing Christian media.⁵⁶ *Left Behind* aligns with this trend, its home video packaging emphasizing the involvement of a popular TV star (Cameron), vaguely positive critic blurbs, and apocalyptic genre trappings.⁵⁷ With the largest reported budget in Christian media history (\$17.4 million) and a wide theatrical release planned, *Left Behind* was Cloud Ten's biggest attempt at a crossover hit. By every metric, the film was unsuccessful. Mainstream critic reviews were predictably

dismissive: Stephen Holden tellingly ended his *New York Times* review by recommending his readers go see *The Rapture* instead.⁵⁸ *Left Behind* grossed only \$4 million in its theatrical run, far less than previous Cloud Ten releases, though the box office was undoubtedly hurt by Lelonde's unusual choice to release the film on home video *in advance* of its theatrical run.⁵⁹ Despite the film's lack of box office success, two direct-to-video sequels followed, along with a more recent 2014 readaptation that beget a 2023 sequel, all produced by Lelonde.

The *Left Behind* books were written to emulate mainstream narrative conventions, and its first film adaptation follows several Hollywood storytelling patterns, including an action-driven narrative, external threats, and shallow characterizations. Even the eschatological event diverts from many dispensationalist doctrines in its allowance for second chances and redemption for the apostate, aligning with mainstream Hollywood narratives that emphasize self-redemption.⁶⁰ However, despite these mainstream trappings, a significant budget, and creative marketing, *Left Behind* is defined by its adherence to Christian media conventions outlined by Terry Lindvall, with multiple scenes structured around sermons directly targeted to its audience. In one such scene, the newly devout Pastor Barnes and Rayford attempt to convince the still-skeptical Buck and Chloe of the scriptural origins of these calamities by pressing play on a videotaped sermon made three years ago by a now-raptured pastor. The scene, featuring chapter-and-verse quotes from Daniel, Ezekiel, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians, outlines the tenets

of premillennial dispensationalism, with Barnes treating the Bible like a roadmap to the impending apocalypse. These frequent narrative breaks to proselytize to the audience distinguish *Left Behind* from mainstream apocalyptic films, and tips off audiences duped by the generic DVD packaging that they're not watching a knockoff *End of Days* (Peter Hyams, 1999).

This sermonic approach carries over to *Left Behind*'s representation of the rapture. After an older woman on the London flight notices that her husband is gone but left his clothes on his seat, Buck and Rayford attempt to calm the increasingly hysterical passengers—including parents of missing children—as they run through the plane looking for missing loved ones. On the ground, Chloe drives into a car accident, where a raptured trucker has triggered a multi-car pile-up. Unlike the unsettling, expressionistic rapture that concludes *The Rapture*, *Left Behind*'s rapture is conventionally staged and shot, and despite having a budget more than ten times that of the indie film, the rapture itself is not presented on-screen. Though it would be easy to linger on the cheesiness of Sarin's filmmaking (in one unintentionally funny moment, a melodramatic swell in the score precedes Buck opening an empty lavatory), the point of *Left Behind* is not to show what the rapture will look like, but to foretell its happening and how it will affect those left behind. This vision is not optimistic: on the plane, people descend into anarchy, including a hysterical man who tries to escape mid-flight via a cabin door and has to be restrained by Buck and Rayford. Only the deployment of the oxygen masks calms

the passengers. On the ground, a car accident victim whom Chloe tries to help steals her car, further underscoring the Hobbesian breakdown of the social contract that follows the rapture.

Establishing the beginning of the tribulation, Lelonde and Sarin's adaptation implicitly demonstrates that a world without God's followers inevitably descends into chaos, allowing the Antichrist to rise to power. In addition to inadvertently demonstrating the anti-humanist strain that has been observed within evangelical communities, this message emphasizes faith in God above all else.⁶¹ This is demonstrated through Rayford's arc: by presenting his infidelity as a response to his wife's conversion, he embodies the dangers of lukewarm Christianity, and the evangelical tenet that good works come *from* faith (after his wife's rapture, he returns to God's fold and ends his affair with the flight attendant).⁶² Like *The Rapture*, *Left Behind* underplays the importance of works emphasized in John's apocalypse: in Buck's voiceover that closes the film, he concludes that "I don't have all the answers, but for now, faith is enough."

While *The Rapture* presents premillennial dispensationalism in a critical light, as a work of Christian media *Left Behind* predictably reaffirms this evangelical tenet. In downplaying Christianity in the film's marketing, Cloud Ten attempted to broaden the film's appeal by essentially tricking secular audiences into watching the film. However, just as the book franchise largely appeals to evangelicals already committed to dispensationalist ideology, the franchise's

continued inability to break into the mainstream underscores how its message mostly appeals to evangelical audiences predisposed to rapture prophecies.⁶³ As such, *Left Behind* uncritically presents a future in which a predetermined rapture will call the faithful to heaven, using this event to preach to the film's passionate evangelical audience. In doing so, Lelonde's production offers a critique of secular culture which, while often unintentionally funny to secular audiences, continues to influence evangelical communities.

This is the End: Self-Redemption and Good Works

In *This is the End*, comic actor Seth Rogan (like every other major character, playing a heightened version of himself) drags his reluctant friend Jay Baruchel to a party hosted by James Franco in his Hollywood Hills mansion.⁶⁴ While the two are on a cigarette run, during which Jay expresses his desire to return to Seth's house and avoid the vapid celebrities that make him feel out of place, beams of light suddenly shoot out of the sky and rapture people around them into heaven. As the city descends into a hellscape, Seth and Jay return to Franco's house, where none of the party's guests are among the raptured or are even aware of the cataclysm. As partygoers flee Franco's house from what they believe to be an earthquake, a hellmouth opens up outside of the house, and the celebrity guests are rapidly killed off. Eventually, six remaining survivors—Seth, Jay, Franco, Jonah Hill, Craig Robinson, and Danny McBride—board up Franco's mansion and wait for help to

arrive. Tensions mount as supplies dwindle, leading, among other things, to Danny's banishment for wasting food and water, and a demonically possessed Jonah being burned alive during a failed exorcism. After fleeing the now-burning mansion, Craig is raptured after sacrificing himself to let his friends escape, and Seth, Jay, and Franco realize that they can get into Heaven if they commit a selfless good deed. Though Franco sacrifices himself to let Seth and Jay escape a Danny-led horde of cannibals, his invitation to heaven is rescinded after he obscenely taunts Danny, and he is promptly eaten alive. Seth and Jay are each raptured after Jay apologizes to Seth for his sanctimonious behavior and Seth commits an act of self-sacrifice for Jay. They are then reunited in Heaven with Craig (now an angel), where all three dance with the Backstreet Boys as they sing "Everybody (Backstreet's Back)."

This is the End was co-written, produced, and directed by Rogan and Evan Goldberg, two Jewish comedians and longtime friends making their directorial debuts. The film was released on the tail end of the "bromantic comedies" cycle: a run of irreverent studio comedies, often produced by Judd Apatow, centered on heterosexual male relationships within social outcast groups.⁶⁵ In addition to commenting upon the perceived crisis of 21st century heteronormative masculinity central to these bromances, *This is the End* also rides the wave of post-9/11 disaster movies prominently featuring cityscape destruction.⁶⁶ Released by Sony Pictures on a \$30 million budget, *This is the End* is also an increasingly rare example of a

mid-budget studio release not based on intellectual property, as risk-averse Hollywood studios by the 2010s were increasingly relying on blockbuster franchises familiar to audiences over original stories.⁶⁷ Some filmmaking choices underscore the film's relatively modest budget, including a CGI-enhanced New Orleans doubling for Los Angeles to take advantage of Louisiana tax credits.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, *This is the End* eventually grossed over \$100 million domestically, making it the only financial success of the three analyzed films.

Though an original story with a relatively modest budget, *This is the End* shares several characteristics with blockbusters, including major stars, an easily identifiable subgenre (apocalyptic action), a high-concept story (self-parodying Hollywood celebrities experiencing the apocalypse), and product placement opportunities (Carl's Jr. and In-n-Out, among others).⁶⁹ However, the most consequential blockbuster convention in *This is the End* for its representation of the apocalypse is the prominence of spectacle. Unlike *The Rapture* and *Left Behind* which feature minimalist presentations of the calamity, *This is the End's* rapture features not only prominent CGI but rapid editing, unstable camerawork, and objects flying at the screen: all characteristics of MTV and advertising-influenced spectacle that has dominated Hollywood from the 1980s onward.⁷⁰ As Seth and Jay argue in the convenience store about whether to return to Franco's party, they are interrupted by a startling explosion, followed by several beams of blue light emerging from the ceiling and pulling other customers into heaven. Jay looks

outside and observes the phenomenon happening across Los Angeles. This is followed by a sequence in which Jay and Seth run back to Franco's house while dodging multiple cars, including one that crashes through the convenience store. Once they get back to Franco's, after a brief period of false calm, other celebrities are killed in gruesome, spectacular fashions. Later, when the survivors leave Franco's house, the audience is treated to sequences that combine spectacle with comedy, including a giant demon traipsing across Los Angeles with a proportionally-sized penis.⁷¹ These special effects-heavy sequences contrast deliberately with the improvisatory comedy that fills most of the runtime. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Rogan noted that when he and Goldberg developed their vision of the apocalypse, they found that "the more seriously we treated it, the funnier the movie was," and that the thrilling action sequences only enhanced the effectiveness of the comedy.⁷² This balancing act reinforces the film's status as a comedy/action hybrid, its blockbuster conventions informing its visually impressive depiction of the rapture.

At first glance, this seriousness does not apply to the film's treatment of John's Apocalypse. For the scenes in which characters quote Revelation, Rogan and Goldberg fabricate passages, admitting on the film's audio commentary that "it's fun rewriting the Bible."⁷³ In an early scene in which Jay attempts to explain to his fellow survivors that the calamity is Biblical, he quotes selectively from Rev 8:8 and 13:1, but also reads a passage fabricated for the scene: "And the skies shall

open up, and the light of the Lord shall shine down, and those of good heart shall be brought into my kingdom of heaven.”⁷⁴ This quote conflates the rapture with Revelation, a mix-up avoided by *The Rapture* and *Left Behind*, both of which feature characters quoting directly from 1 Thessalonians. Rogan acknowledges his and Goldberg’s lack of interest in theological doctrine compared to those more niche productions: instead of having characters accept Jesus as their savior, the apocalypse is appropriated for a narrative of self-redemption.⁷⁵ Rogan and Goldberg rejected evangelical themes on both commercial and artistic grounds: narratives of self-redemption are standard Hollywood practice dating to the silent era, and the box office failures of *The Rapture* and *Left Behind* speak to the limited box office appeal of films with explicitly evangelical themes. However, despite Rogan’s claim that self-redemption is “not what Christians really believe in, for the most part,” his and Goldberg’s presentation of these redemptions is paradoxically more in line with John’s Apocalypse than the more evangelical-oriented eschatologies.⁷⁶

After Jay and Craig discover a demonic beast in a neighboring house while scavenging for food, the remaining survivors realize that Jay is right about the apocalypse, and they were all left behind for a reason. The discussion turns into a confessional, with Craig admitting that he gouged a man’s eyes out in a bar fight, and Franco disclosing that he had sex with an impaired Lindsey Lohan while pretending to be Jake Gyllenhaal.⁷⁷ Later, as Craig, Jay, and Seth are each raptured,

the actions that precipitate their redemptions (Craig charging at a demon to let his friends escape; Jay confessing to Seth that he hasn't been a good friend; Seth letting go of Jay's hand so that Jay can ascend to Heaven) are not verbal or intellectual submissions to God, but acknowledgments of sins against members of their community and attempts to atone for past behaviors. Despite having vastly different political contexts and audiences, this shared emphasis on good works and proper behavior aligns with John's concerns that the congregants of seven Asia Minor churches were not sufficiently divesting from Roman civic life. *This is the End* takes extreme liberties with both the text and apocalyptic imagery of John's Apocalypse: unlike *The Rapture* and *Left Behind*, neither the Four Horsemen nor the Beast appear, and its demons bear no resemblance to the monsters that populate Revelation. Rogan and Goldberg's comedy focuses more on self-deprecating jokes about Jewish cultural identity than a sustained interest in Christian theology, and they tone down the religiosity of their apocalypse to align with the artistic and market expectations of a Hollywood blockbuster. Yet Rogan and Goldberg's attempt at a less Christian apocalypse aligns closer with the actual tenets of salvation put forward by the Book of Revelation than those more "religious" films. Like in John's Apocalypse, it is ultimately good deeds (really, *one* good deed) that saves Seth, Evan, and Craig in the end, not a professed love for God. Rogan and Goldberg's film's narrative resolution (inadvertently or not) aligns closer to the

theology of Revelation than films more inclined to intellectual and spiritual engagement.

Conclusion

The equivocation of the rapture with the Book of Revelation is widespread: many of our undergraduate students have to be taught that the event never shows up in John's Apocalypse. These perceptions are undoubtedly shaped by popular media's deliberate conflation of the two apocalyptic visions: the majority of *This is the End*'s considerable audience almost certainly emerged from that film assuming that Revelation features the rapture. This phenomenon is the long tail of the decades-spanning evangelical project, from the preachings of Darby to *Left Behind*, of envisioning the end times through selective interpretations of 1 Thessalonians and Revelation. That apocalyptic films from the American Independent, Christian media, and Hollywood studio production practices all make this conflation is testament to the wider cultural influence of evangelical eschatology.

On the one hand, it is possible to conclude from this trend that cinematic depictions of theology are uniform distortions of Christian theology; *This is the End* in particular is a recent entry in a long timeline of post-1960s Hollywood films that appropriate Christian theology and iconography for seemingly empty spectacle.⁷⁸ However, our analysis demonstrates that popular dismissals of Hollywood as intellectually shallow lack depth themselves. While the intellectual, ambivalent

indie *The Rapture* and the faith-reaffirming Christian film *Left Behind* both emphasize faith in God above all else as requisite for entering heaven in their presentation of John's Apocalypse, only *This is the End* properly reflects Revelation's ethically oriented theology as central to John's message to the seven churches of Asia Minor. In other words, while the indie, Christian, and studio films all conflate Revelation with the rapture, only the studio comedy with a prolonged joke about how a character's dried semen ruined the pages of a pornographic magazine chanced on a vision of salvation more closely aligned with the Book of Revelation.

This reconsideration of the theological rigor of Hollywood films is part of a larger, ongoing scholarly project of taking the theology of mainstream Hollywood films seriously. As Hollywood continues to rely on big-budget blockbusters and many of these films continue to appropriate Christian iconography and theology, neither dismissing these films outright nor analyzing them outside of the context of their modes of productions are viable lenses for film or religious studies scholars. The presentations of Revelation and the rapture in *The Rapture*, *Left Behind*, and *This is the End* are direct products of the established modes of production from which each film emerged. In particular, Rogan and Goldberg's reliance on the Hollywood narrative convention of self-redemption in *This is the End* resulted in the film's alignment with John's message of ethics-based salvation. Given the prevalence of these self-redemption narratives in Hollywood spectacle, it is worth

considering how mainstream narrative conventions might align better with early Christian apocalyptic visions over most “challenging” or “Christian” cinematic visions.

¹ For more on Revelation’s relationship to *Good Omens*, see Amy Lea Clemons, “Adapting *Revelation: Good Omens* as Comic Corrective,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 28, no. 1 (2017): 86-101. For more on Revelation’s relationship to *Supernatural*, see Joseph M. Valenzano III and Erika Engstrom, “Homilies and Horsemen: Revelation in the CW’s *Supernatural*,” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 50-72. For a brief discussion of Revelation’s appropriation in *Tombstone*, see Hubert I. Cohen, “Wyatt Earp at the O.K. Corral: Six Versions,” *The Journal of American Culture* 26, no. 2 (June 2003), 219.

² Though studies of Revelation in film are too numerous to comprehensively cite, significant studies include Valenzano and Engstrom, “Homilies and Horsemen”; Lee Quinby, “*Southland Tales*, The Film of Revelation: Richard Kelly’s Satire of American Apocalypse,” in *Reel Revelations: Apocalypse and Film*, eds. John Walliss and Quinby (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 25-43; Richard Walsh, “Sanctifying Empire: The Hopeful Paradox of Apocalypsia,” in *Reel Revelations: Apocalypse and Film*, eds. John Walliss and Lee Quinby (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 112-139; Conrad E. Oswalt Jr., “Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation,” in *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, ed. Joel W. Martin (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 55-63; R. Barton Palmer, “From the Eternal Sea He Rises, Creating Armies on Either Shore: The Antichristology of the *Omen* Franchise,” in *Giving the Devil His Due: Satan and Cinema*, eds. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Regina M. Hansen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 86-102. Valenzano and Engstrom do give attention to the televisuality of *Supernatural*’s presentation of Revelation; this article extends that lens to the study of different film forms.

³ This concept is often interpreted alongside the final chapters of Revelation by premillennialists who see those chapters as a prediction of a physical second coming of Christ and a literal thousand-year reign. Although Augustine *City of God* 20.7-9 argues that these chapters of Revelation refer to a figural or spiritual reign of Christ, and most Christians have followed that theological move, premillennialist thinking has predominated among evangelical Christians. See also Barbara R. Rossing, “Prophecy, End-Times, and American Apocalypse: Reclaiming Hope for Our World,” *Anglican Theological Review* 89, no. 4 (Jan. 2007): 549-63 and Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁴ Michael Z. Newman, “Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative,” *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 16-34; James Russell, “In Hollywood, but Not of Hollywood: Independent Christian Filmmaking,” in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 186-197.

⁵ “The heart of Revelation and other apocalypses is a prophetic message very different from what we’re being told by the fundamentalist program of the *Left Behind* novels...” (Rossing, “Prophecy, End-Times, and American Apocalypse,” 557). For more on futurist interpretations of Revelation, see Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 210. For more on the literalist hermeneutics of fundamentalists, see Kathleen C. Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So: The Discourse of Protestant Fundamentalism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 39-60.

⁶ Regarding the use of the label “Jesus-followers,” the label “Christians” would be an anachronism in this ancient context. John’s Jewish identity was likely very important to him and his theology was also very Jewish. See Sarah Emanuel, *Humor, Resistance, and Jewish Cultural Persistence in the Book of Revelation: Roasting Rome* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 28. See also John W. Marshall, *Parables of War: Reading John’s Jewish Apocalypse* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001) especially “Narratives,” pp. 55-67. The audience for this text is most likely Jewish Jesus-followers who did not understand themselves to be a movement separate from Judaism. See David Frankfurter, “The Revelation to John” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 537-38. See also David Frankfurter, “Jews or Not? Reconstructing the ‘Other’ in Rev 2:9 and 3:9,” *Harvard Theological Review* 94, no. 4 (2001): 403-25. Regarding the context of the text, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 76. See also Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 135-151. David E. Aune argues that an early edition of Revelation was written between 64-70 C.E. and the final edition was completed near the end of the reign of Domitian in Aune, *Revelation 6-16, vol. 52b* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1998), lvii-lxx. For more on the socio-historical context of the text, see John Carey, *Elusive Apocalypse: Reading Authority in the Revelation to John* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 8-11; John Carey, *Ultimate Things: An Introduction to Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Literature* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 179; and John Carey, *Apocalyptic Literature in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 117.

⁷ Regarding the use of the term “assemblies,” the Greek ἐκκλησία is often translated as “church;” however, assemblies is a more literal translation and better reflects the ancient context. On the audience of the text, see Robyn Whitaker, “Victim to Victor: The Appeal of Apocalyptic Hope,” *Religions* 11, no. 9 (2020): 2 and Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 136.

⁸ Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 135-6. The author identifies himself as John who, scholars generally agree, is not the same man as any John identified in the New Testament. There is not a general consensus among scholars as to whether the text we have today is original to John or the result of later revisions of one or more editors to John’s manuscript. Scholars presumed that Revelation was written by a single author and spent centuries trying to reconstruct a single text that Juan Hernandez argues “exists only as a concept.” Juan Hernández, “The Greek Text of Revelation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. Craig R. Koester (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 343–360. Further, the name John only appears in the initial and concluding chapters, perhaps suggesting that the first iteration of the text was anonymous (Aune, *Revelation*, vol. 52a, xlviiii-xlix). Issues of authorship aside, the name John will be used here to identify the author of Revelation, and the text will interchangeably be referred to as “John’s Apocalypse.”

⁹ For more on the prophetic style of the author's rhetoric, see also Robyn J. Whitaker, *Ekphrasis, Vision, and Persuasion in the Book of Revelation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 66-9.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the emphasis on deeds versus belief in Revelation, see Adela Yarbro Collins, "Is Hershel Doomed to the Lake of Fire?," *BAR* 37, no. 1 (January/February 2011): 26; Meghan R. Henning, *Educating Early Christians through the Rhetoric of Hell: "Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth" as Paideia in Matthew and the Early Church* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 131-37. See also Carey, *Apocalyptic Literature in the New Testament*, 131-32. For more on the call for commitment to God over the Roman Empire see Rossing, "Prophecy, End-Times, and American Apocalypse," especially pp. 557-60.

¹¹ Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 94.

¹² Noll, *America's God*, 93, 97, 112.

¹³ Dispensationalism made its way to the United States by way of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) in the late 19th century. Darby "taught that God has dealt with mankind in a series of epochs, or dispensations – in each of which the means of salvation differed." Darby preached and wrote extensively, systematizing his prophetic interpretations and bolstering each claim with biblical prooftexts. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 87-88. See also Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 16. At a time when Darwinism challenged the authority and inerrancy of the Bible and the divinely inspired status of the Bible was threatened by German theologians were beginning to interpret the Bible as a historical collection of texts, literalist interpretations of Biblical prophecies were readily embraced by American evangelicals. See Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 89. See also Susan L. Trollinger and William Vance Trollinger, Jr., *Righting America at the Creation Museum* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 2.

¹⁴ Noll, *America's God*, 381.

¹⁵ Carey, *Apocalyptic Literature in the New Testament*, 113-14. See also Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 211 on primillennialist's confidence in knowing the future through the Bible. For more on this hermeneutic, see Friesen who explains: "interpreting the language literally and cross-referencing it with other biblical prooftexts, [readers] decipher the text and then construct a timetable for the end of history, which is usually imminent" (*Imperial Cults*, 210). By way of example, a specific timetable is given in the introduction to Revelation in the highly influential *Scofield Reference Bible* similar to that of Darby. According to Scofield, the church dispensation will end when 1 Thess. 4:14-17 is fulfilled. This will inaugurate the great tribulation (Rev. 11:3-19, 21), followed by the battle of Armageddon (Matt. 24:29-30; Rev. 19:11-21), then the kingdom (Rev. 20:4-5, next the "little season" (Rev. 20:7-15), and finally eternity (no scripture citation given); *Scofield Reference Bible*, ed. Rev. C. I. Scofield, D.D. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909; 1917), 1330. The *Scofield Reference Bible* was originally published in 1909. A revised edition with commentary from a committee of dispensationalists was published as the *New Scofield Reference Bible* in 1967 (Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So*, 40).

¹⁶ Whitaker, *Ekphrasis*, 41. Ancient examples show that ekphrasis was used in "a wide range of topics including the supernatural (in the form of dreams and visions), natural wonders and rural scenes, as well as human art and architecture," 44. According to the ancient rhetorical handbooks

these descriptions, if executed correctly, would make the audience feel as though they were “really there,” eliciting an emotional response by appealing to the audience’s senses (sight, smell, sound, taste, touch) with imagery that was familiar and believable. See Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 7.118–119; Nicolaus, *Progymnasmata* 11.68. See also, George A. Kennedy, ed., *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric*, WGRW 10 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 45–47, 166. In the Greek sources, the elementary exercise of “placing before the eyes” is called *ekphrasis* (in the Latin sources other terms are used for the same rhetorical concept). Quintilian, *Inst.* 4.2.34; 8.3.71; Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Burlington, VT.: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 125–26. As Lynn R. Huber has argued, in “Revealing Christ in Revelation” in *Narrative Mode and Theological Claim in Johannine Literature: Essays in Honor of Gail R. O’Day*, eds. Lynn R. Huber, Susan E. Hulen, and William M. Wright IV (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021), 108, the character of the vivid imagery invites interpretive play: “All of these images are metaphorical; however, the dissonance created in these images requires the audience member or interpreter to engage the text creatively.”

¹⁷ As crisis literature, the text offers a hopeful vision of redemption or vindication to a struggling community (Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 84). Collins argues that, to be crisis literature, “the crucial element is not so much whether one is actually oppressed as whether one *feels* oppressed” (emphasis original. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 84; see also 73, 77). Collins’s work is significant in reframing Revelation as a response to “incipient crisis.” Scholars have shifted away from arguments for persecution of Christians during the reign of Domitian and away from “crisis theories as a way of understanding Revelation” (Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 143). For more on the scholarly theories about persecution at the time of Revelation, see Friesen, 143-5. See also Meghan R. Henning, “Narrating the Future” in *Religion: Narrating Religion*, ed. Sarah Iles Johnston (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2017), 195. Building upon Collins’s argument that the crisis in Revelation is subjective, Meghan Henning argues that apocalyptic literature can function to raise awareness of a perceived crisis in order to incite a sense of urgency (Henning, “Narrating the Future,” 195). Carey also advances Collins’s thesis of the perceived crisis in terms of John’s critique of the corruption of Roman imperial authority (*Elusive Apocalypse*, 16). Frankfurter suggests that tribulation and persecution are motifs characteristic of apocalypticism and, therefore, not necessarily reflections of historical events (“Jews or Not?” 407).

¹⁸ Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 98.

¹⁹ Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 99. For more on the specific “traumatic events” of Revelation and their historical connection see Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 99-104.

²⁰ Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 152. For more on the ways in which Revelation inverts the social order, see Emanuel’s *Humor* which explores narrative as a means of confronting and coping with trauma. In particular, see her explanation of the relational model of mourning which invites a dialogical relationship with trauma and invites imagined alternative futures (71-2); similarly, for a discussion on Revelation as a postcolonial narrative or counterstory, see her chapter “I Pledge Allegiance to the Lamb, 167-200. See also Carey, *Elusive Apocalypse*, 154-8 for an analysis of the way John imagines the destruction of Rome and pp. 177-8 for a discussion of the role of the author’s sense of powerlessness in shaping apocalyptic rhetoric.

²¹ “Despite the general advice one finds in the *Progymnasmata* on how to create one’s own *ekphrasis*, there are no rigid or consistent stylistic restrictions. . . . Across these disparate contexts, the rhetorical function of *ekphrasis* remains constant. The primary function of *ekphrasis* is to persuade the audience, primarily by evoking emotion.” Henning, *Educating Early Christians*, 57-8. See also, Whitaker, *Ekphrasis*, 46, 59 and Robyn J. Whitaker, “Vivid Vignettes: Lakes of Fire, Grottesque Feats, and the Idea of Hell in Revelation 19:17-21” in *Vivid Rhetoric and Visual Persuasion: Ekphrasis in Early Christian Literature*, ed. Meghan Henning and Nils Neumann (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2024), 268.

²² For more on the call for commitment to action, see Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 144; emphasis original. See also Carey, “John’s Narrative Ethos: Representation of Opponents” in *Elusive Apocalypse*, 135-64, especially 163-4 for more on the power of John’s rhetoric in evoking a response from his audience. According to Barbara Rossing, “the core vision of Revelation for first-century Christians was a choice between two cities,” and the “plagues are not predictions but rather warnings” (Rossing, “Prophecy, End-Times, and American Apocalypse,” 559).

²³ Noll, *America’s God*, 381.

²⁴ See *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1228n1. The “rapture” text (1 Thess. 4:14-17) portrays the Lord returning to earth, the “dead in Christ” rising, and then those who are alive being “caught up in the clouds . . . to meet the Lord in the air; and . . . be with the Lord forever” (1 Thess. 4:17 NRSV). Scofield cross-references 1 Cor. 15:52 to further explain the timeline for the end of the present dispensation.

²⁵ *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1342-43n3, 1337n1. See also, Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 7-8; 273 and Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 18.

²⁶ Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 92.

²⁷ Sutton, 68, 76; 190-91; 213-14.

²⁸ Boone, *The Bible Tells Them So*, 39-43.

²⁹ Emanuel, *Humor*, 2.

³⁰Dispensational premillennialism is just one contemporary use of the text of Revelation. Tina Pippin has shown that the book of Revelation’s imaginative project allows it to be reinterpreted in other situations of colonial oppression. Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster, 1992); Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (New York: Routledge, 1999). Jacqueline M. Hidalgo has argued that Revelation’s social critique was particularly apt for the U.S. Chicano movement, offering a productive social outlook for minoritized communities Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, *Revelation in Aztlán: Scriptures, Utopias, and the Chicano Movement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). Archbishop Desmond Tutu has acknowledged the significance of Revelation in his anti-Apartheid activism (Carey, *Ultimate Things*, 192).

³¹ Russell, “In Hollywood, but Not of Hollywood,” 186; Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 192.

³² The History of early Hollywood is admittedly peppered with filmmakers who admittedly do not align with this neat image of Hollywood and Christianity in hegemonic lock-step, though even within this qualification, Preston Sturges and Otto Preminger stand out as exceptionally iconoclastic. Michael Slowik, “On Deadline and Reviewed in Pieces: *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek* and the Production Code Administration,” *Film History* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 32-58; Chris Fujiwara, *The World and its Double: The Life and Work of Otto Preminger* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008), 143-147, 183-194.

³³ Russell, “Independent Christian Filmmaking,” 187-188

³⁴ “New Hollywood” is a fraught term within film scholarship, used interchangeably to signify both the *auteur*-driven, thematically complex and morally ambiguous visions of the late 60s and 70s (*Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Godfather*) and the pre-sold, spectacle-laden blockbusters that would overtake those darker visions in the back half of the decade (*Jaws*, *Star Wars*). Though both of these trends ultimately contributed to the divorce of Hollywood and Christian audiences, the term “New Hollywood” is used here to signify the former trend of morally ambiguous fare. For more on this semantic debate, see Geoff King, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

³⁵ David Sterritt, “His Father’s Eyes: *Rosemary’s Baby*,” in *Giving the Devil His Due: Satan and Cinema*, eds. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock and Regina M. Hansen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 76-77; Amy C. Chambers, “‘Somewhere between science and superstition’: Religious Outrage, Horrific Science, and *The Exorcist* (1973),” *History of Human Sciences* 34, no. 5 (2021): 32-52.

³⁶ Thomas Schatz, “The New Hollywood,” in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (New York: Routledge, 2003), 15-44.

³⁷ Janet Staiger, “Independent of What?: Sorting Out Differences from Hollywood,” in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 23. Though independent cinema can also be defined solely by their distribution methods (see Tzioumakis), by this definition Christian media is technically a sphere of independent cinema. Therefore, a differentiation based on formal and narrative content is necessary.

³⁸ Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2001), 92-96, 193-217.

³⁹ Harold Brackman, “The Attack on ‘Jewish Hollywood’: A Chapter in the History of Modern American Anti-Semitism,” *Modern Judaism* 20, no. 1 (February 2000): 1-19; For a detailed analysis of the *Last Temptation* controversy, see Robin Riley, *Film, Faith, and Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of Christ* (Westport: Praeger, 2003).

⁴⁰ Russell, “The Independent Christian Filmmaking,” 188-189.

⁴¹ Terry Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press), 4.

⁴² Since the 1990s, most mainstream studios have at some point operated “specialty divisions” to acquire and produce “indie” films, with two of them (Fox, Sony) also operating divisions dedicated to faith-based films since the mid-2000s (Fox Faith, Affirm). There are also mainstream Hollywood films marketed to and embraced by conservative Christians, most notably Mel Gibson’s independently-produced *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), to say nothing of the films distributed by major studios aimed at indie (*Do the Right Thing*, Universal) or Christian (*The Blind Side*, Warner Bros.) audiences. These categories are further complicated by the recent emergence of films like *Sound of Freedom* (Alejandro Monteverde, 2023) which, while emerging from Christian media outlets, eschew explicitly faith-based narratives in favor of a message that more broadly aligns with Christian audience’s cultural values and worldview. Yannis Tzioumakis, “‘Independent’, ‘Indie’ and ‘Indiewood’: Towards a Periodisation of Contemporary (Post-1980) American Independent Cinema,” in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 28-40; Russell, “Independent Christian Filmmaking,” 194-195; Thomas Schatz, “Conglomerate Hollywood and American Independent Film,” in *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood and Beyond*, eds. Geoff King, Claire Molloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 129-130; Russell, “Independent Christian Filmmaking,” 194-195; Brandon Ambrosino, “Sound of Freedom: Is the Child Trafficking Drama a Watershed Moment for ‘Faith-Based’ Filmmaking?” *BBC*, July 16, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20230714-sound-of-freedom-is-the-child-trafficking-drama-a-watershed-moment-for-faith-based-filmmaking>.

⁴³ In this scene, the boy prophet notably refers to the Book of Revelation by the pluralized “Book of Revelations,” an unlikely mistake for a prophet of God. Either this is a subtle signal to the audience that something is amiss in Sharon’s vision, or (more likely) an unintentional mistake by the actor that was kept in the film. This latter hypothesis is supported by the fact that the original script has “Book of Revelation.” Michael Tolkin, *The Player, The Rapture, The New Age: Three Screenplays by Michael Tolkin* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 123.

⁴⁴ Yannis Tzioumakis, *Hollywood’s Indies: Classics Divisions, Specialty Labels and the American Film Market* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 7-8.

⁴⁵ Michael Tolkin, “No Other Gods: Walter Kirn’s ‘My Mother’s Bible,’” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 30, 2013, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/no-other-gods-walter-kirns-my-mothers-bible/>; Michael Tolkin, “The New Age,” in *Screenwriters’ Masterclass: Screenwriters Talk about Their Greatest Movies*, ed. Kevin Conroy Scott (New York: Newmarket Press, 2006), 199-200; Michael Tolkin, Mimi Rogers, David Duchovny, and Patrick Bauchau, audio commentary for *The Rapture* (1991; Burbank: New Line Home Entertainment, 2004).

⁴⁶ David Sterritt, “The Rapture (1991),” in *1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider (New York: Barrons, 2005), 805; Scott Tobias, “New Cult Canon Ends with the End Times of Michael Tolkin’s *The Rapture*,” *AVClub*, April 11, 2013, <https://www.avclub.com/new-cult-canon-ends-with-the-end-times-of-michael-tolki-1798237462>; Bruce LaBruce, “Bruce LaBruce’s Academy of the Underrated: *The Rapture*,” *Talkhouse*, February 16, 2017, <https://www.talkhouse.com/bruce-labruces-academy-underrated-rapture/>.

⁴⁷ Todd Rendleman, “‘I know y’all think I’m pretty square, but tuh, I believe what I believe’: Images of Evangelicals in American Film,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 7, no. 4 (2008): 271-291. Rendleman does lump in Sharon with more overtly negative portrayals of evangelicalism

found in *M*A*S*H* (Robert Altman, 1970) and *Carrie* (Brian De Palma, 1976), a categorization that gives short shrift to *The Rapture*'s representational complexities.

⁴⁸ Tolkin, Rogers, Duchovny, and Bauchau., audio commentary for *The Rapture*; J.J. Murphy, *Me and You and Memento and Fargo: How Independent Screenplays Work* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 21; 265.

⁴⁹ David George Menard interprets this commencement of the apocalypse on TV as "a possible metaphor for the downfall of American consciousness, the deterioration of its culture, including its entertainment industry." David George Menard, "The Rapture (Michael Tolkin, 1991) and Spiritual Malaise," *OffScreen* 24, no. 3 (March 2020), <https://offscreen.com/view/the-rapture-michael-tolkin-1991-and-spiritual-malaise>.

⁵⁰ Roger Ebert, "Review of *The Rapture*," Rogerebert.com, originally published October 27, 1991, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-rapture-1991>.

⁵¹ David Harrington Watt, "The Private Hopes of American Fundamentalists and Evangelicals, 1925-1975," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1991), 158-159; Douglas Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: The Evangelical Quest for Power in the Early Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1986), 80-84.

⁵² Staiger, "Independent of What?," 24-25.

⁵³ John Walliss, "Celling the End Times: Contemporary Rapture Films," in *Reel Revelations: Apocalypse and Film*, eds. Walliss and Lee Quinby (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 98-99.

⁵⁴ Craig R. Koester, "Revelation and the *Left Behind* Novels," *Word & World* 25, no.3 (Summer 2006), 278-279.

⁵⁵ Cloud Ten Pictures is no longer an active production company; LaLonde produced the 2014 franchise reboot through a newly formed company, Stoney Lake Entertainment.

⁵⁶ John Walliss, "From *The Rapture* to *Left Behind: The Movie* and Beyond: Evangelical Christian End Times Films from 1941 to the Present," *Journal of Religion & Film* 13, no. 2 (Oct. 2009).

⁵⁷ Though Kirk Cameron is now best known as a prominent figure within evangelical media, in the early 2000s he was still best known as a former teen heartthrob and associated with his role as Mike Seaver in *Growing Pains* (ABC, 1985-1992), a long-running sitcom that maintained popularity through the 1990s via syndication. It was this association that led one of the authors to watch this film as a child with his non-evangelical family, an admittedly subjective experience that nonetheless affirms the effectiveness of Lalonde's marketing strategy at the time.

⁵⁸ Stephen Holden, "FILM REVIEW; A Biblically Inspired Tale about Dying and Surviving," *The New York Times*, February 2, 2001.

⁵⁹ Walliss, "From *The Rapture* to *Left Behind*."

⁶⁰ Robert von Thaden Jr., “Apocalyptic America: Buying the End Time,” in *Apocalypses in Context: Apocalyptic Currents through History*, eds. Kelly J. Murphy and Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 423-424.

⁶¹ Omri Elisha, “Faith Beyond Belief: Evangelical Protestant Conceptions of Faith and the Resonance of Anti-humanism,” *Social Analysis* 52, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 56-78. Elisha’s ethnography, which is limited to one Tennessee megachurch, does not account for evangelicals that embrace humanist-strained social activism. For more on these evangelicals, see George Yancey and Ashlee Quosigk, “Progressive Christians as Theologically Flexible and Politically Optimistic” in *One Faith No Longer: The Transformation of Christianity in Red and Blue America*, 137-62 (New York, NY, 2021; online edn, NYU Press Scholarship Online, 20 Jan. 2022), <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479808663.003.0007>. For a discussion of the tension among American evangelicals regarding the priorities of evangelization and social reform and the Social Gospel movement, see Sutton, *American Apocalypse*, 13-14, 33-39. See also Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 169, 188-92.

⁶² Rayford’s arc contrasts notably with *The Rapture*’s humanistic depiction of Foster, who is portrayed as good-hearted despite his agnosticism and is allowed to enter Heaven at the rapture by professing his love for God.

⁶³ Von Thaden Jr., “Apocalyptic America,” 428. A 2014 remake of *Left Behind* (Vic Armstrong) starring Nicolas Cage also failed to catch on with critics or audiences, forcing Lelonde to crowdfund the sequel with Christian media mainstay Kevin Sorbo recast in Cage’s role.

⁶⁴ In the article’s recounting of *This is the End*, all of the characters will be referred to by their first names, not only to differentiate actor from performer but also “Seth” the character and “Rogan” the director. The only exception to this is James Franco, who is referred to as “Franco” by other characters throughout the film.

⁶⁵ The catalysts for this film movement were *Old School* (Todd Phillips, 2003) and Apatow’s *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005). These comedies had sustained box office success through the mid-2010s, when audience tastes evolved and comedies largely gravitated to streaming platforms. Miles Surrey, “Bring Back the Studio Comedy,” *The Ringer*, June 26, 2023, <https://www.theringer.com/movies/2023/6/26/23771721/no-hard-feelings-jennifer-lawrence-bring-back-comedy-movies>.

⁶⁶ Ken Feil, “Post-Closet and Post-9/11: The Bromantic Imagination of Disaster in *This is the End* and *I’m So Excited!*,” in *Representing 9/11: Trauma, Ideology, and Nationalism in Literature, Film and Television*, ed. Paul Petrovic (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 143-151.

⁶⁷ Tara Lomax, “The Franchise Era: Blockbuster Hollywood in the 2010s...and Beyond,” *Senses of Cinema* 92 (October 2019), <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2019/cinema-in-the-2010s/the-franchise-era-blockbuster-hollywood-in-the-2010sand-beyond/>.

⁶⁸ Seth Rogan and Evan Goldberg, audio commentary for *This is the End* (2013; Culver City: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2013); Vicki Mayer and Tanya Goldman, “Hollywood Handouts: Tax Credits in the Age of Economic Crisis,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 52 (Summer 2010), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc52.2010/mayerTax/>.

⁶⁹ Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 8-13. Though Nutella and a Milky Way bar factor prominently into several scenes, Rogan and Goldberg insist on the audio commentary they didn't receive money from those companies for product placement.

⁷⁰ Geoff King, "Spectacle, Narrative, and the Spectacular Hollywood Blockbuster," in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (New York: Routledge, 2003), 117.

⁷¹ On the performance of masculinity in Revelation and ancient and contemporary tours of hell, see Lynn R. Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Lynn R. Huber, "A Queer Tour of Hell," *Ancient Jew Review*, May 2023, SBL 2022 Review Panel, <https://www.ancientjewreview.com/read/2023/5/14/a-queer-tour-of-hell>.

⁷² Kate Atkinson, "'This Is the End': Seth Rogan on the Film's Warm Welcome and the Subconscious 'Ghostbusters' Vibe," *Entertainment Weekly*, June 17, 2013, <https://ew.com/article/2013/06/17/seth-rogen-this-is-the-end-interview/>.

⁷³ Rogan and Goldberg, audio commentary for *This is the End*. According to Rev. 22:18, adding these false words to Revelation means Rogan and Goldberg will be subject to the plagues described in the apocalypse.

⁷⁴ Jay also calls John's Apocalypse by its pluralized "the Book of Revelations," a far more believable snafu from a secular slacker like Jay than when the boy prophet makes the same mistake in *The Rapture*.

⁷⁵ Atkinson, "This is the End."

⁷⁶ Atkinson, "This is the End."

⁷⁷ In the aftermath of the allegations of abuse against James Franco that emerged during the #MeToo movement, this already tasteless joke about raping a woman unable to give proper consent takes on a much darker implication than the filmmakers intended. For an incisive look how *This is the End's* presentation of rape aligns with the sexual violence present in Revelation, see Meredith J.C. Warren, "Rape Jokes, Sexual Violence, and Empire in Revelation and This is the End," *Journal of Religion & Film* 27, no. 1 (April 2023): Article 59.

⁷⁸ Sterritt, "His Father's Eyes," 76-77.

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