



10-1-2009

From The Rapture to Left Behind: The Movie and Beyond: Evangelical Christian End Times Films from 1941 to the Present

john walliss

Liverpool Hope University, UK, wallisj@hope.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

walliss, john (2009) "From The Rapture to Left Behind: The Movie and Beyond: Evangelical Christian End Times Films from 1941 to the Present," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 13: Iss. 2, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.13.02.04>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol13/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

From The Rapture to Left Behind: The Movie and Beyond: Evangelical Christian End Times Films from 1941 to the Present

Abstract

This article traces the development of evangelical Christian 'rapture films' from the 1940s to the present day, focusing in particular on the place of the *Left Behind* series. In doing so, it locates the series within its genre; highlighting the ways in which it drew on, developed, and in some cases rejected earlier tropes, motifs and dramatis personae. Following on from this, the article will discuss the release of *Left Behind: The Movie*, its failure at the box office and critical panning, and the consequences that these have had on the rapture film industry. Finally, it concludes by discussing two recent releases by the mainstream production company The Asylum/Faith Films and what these mean for the future of the rapture film genre.

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Two Films

The year 2001 saw the adaptation of two multi-million selling novels to celluloid. Both were the work of committed Christian authors and dealt with ordinary individuals struggling to live in extraordinary times; individuals, often unheroic in nature, taking part in a momentous clash between the forces of good and those of absolute evil. In both cases, the source of this evil was personified in a demonic figure who, from his centre of power in the east, sought to bring the whole world under his terrible dominion. Both films were also followed shortly after by sequels, again based on subsequent books in their respective series of novels. One of these films, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), directed by Peter Jackson, would eventually gross \$871,368, 364 and earn four Oscars and over seventy other awards.¹ The other, *Left Behind: The Movie* (2000), directed by Vic Sarin, did not fare so well; making only \$4,221,341 at the box office after an arguably ill-thought-through marketing campaign and being panned by the critics as, to quote one *Washington Post* reviewer, a “blundering cringefest”.² Indeed, such was the film’s failure that one of the series’ authors, Tim LaHaye, went so far as to actually sue the filmmakers for not giving him the End Times blockbuster that they had allegedly promised.

Left Behind: The Movie represented a milestone within the genre of evangelical Christian filmmaking from which it emerged. On one level, it

represented a summation of trends and themes within its particular genre stretching back over half a century.³ On another, it represented a watershed moment. After the failure of *Left Behind* and its sequels – *Left Behind: Tribulation Force* (2002) and *Left Behind: World at War* (2005) – to achieve mainstream success, evangelical Christian filmmaking has seemingly stalled. The production company behind the film, for example, has not produced another movie in the intervening three years since releasing the third *Left Behind* film, and several of its mooted projects, such as a *Left Behind* television series and a fourth film appear to have never left pre-production. The stream of evangelical films released before the advent of the new millennium has also slowed to a trickle, with only one – *The Moment After II* (2007) – being released since *Left Behind: World at War*.

In this article, my aim is to trace the development of rapture films from the 1940s to the present day, focusing in particular on the place of the *Left Behind* series within the development of the rapture film genre. In doing so, I will locate the series within its genre; highlighting the ways in which it drew on, developed, and in some cases rejected earlier tropes, motifs and dramatis personae. While acknowledging that the film series is, of course, inspired by the literary series of the same name, I will show how the ways in which these ideas were translated into celluloid may be understood within both the context of a particular genre and also the aesthetic of a particular production company, Cloud Ten.⁴ Following on from this, I will then

discuss the release of *Left Behind: The Movie*, its failure at the box office and critical panning, and the consequences that these have had on the rapture film industry. Finally, I will conclude by discussing two recent releases by the mainstream production company The Asylum/Faith Films – *The Apocalypse* (2007) and *2012: Doomsday* – and what these mean for the future of the rapture film genre.

From *The Rapture* to *Left Behind*

As far as can be ascertained, the genre of rapture filmmaking began with the release of the ten-minute, non-fiction presentation, *The Rapture* by Carlos Baptista in 1941. Baptista, an Illinois businessman of Venezuelan descent, had produced his first film, *The Story of a Fountain Pen*,⁵ two years before and *The Rapture* was released on 16mm through his Scriptures Visualized Institute. Despite both its brevity and simplicity, the film nevertheless set up a number of themes and motifs that still find echoes in contemporary rapture films. *The Rapture*, for example, introduces the viewer to the social chaos caused when vast numbers of Christians are taken up into the clouds with Jesus. “Speeding trains”, we are told by the film’s narrator, “will plunge unsuspecting passengers into a black eternity as Christian engineers are snatched from the throttle”. Families will also be torn apart, “with fathers missing from some, mothers missing from others, babies snatched from others”. It also introduces the motif of many ‘unsaved’ individuals being left behind, and beseeches the viewer to “accept [Jesus] as your saviour” before it is too late. The

film is, however, silent regarding the fate that awaits those left behind; there is, for example, no emphasis beyond referring to ‘unspeakable torment’ of the horrors of the tribulation period. Nor is there any mention of the Millennial Kingdom; an omission that continues within the genre right down to the present day. Indeed, for Baptista, the only tragedy of the Rapture is that the removal of Christians from the earth will mean an end to evangelising, giving to missions, and praying for ‘the lost’.

However, it was the 1972 film by Russell Doughton and Donald Thompson, *A Thief in the Night*, and its three sequels, *A Distant Thunder* (1977), *Image of the Beast* (1980), and *The Prodigal Planet* (1983), which really defined the contours of the rapture film genre. Indeed, in many ways all subsequent rapture films may be seen as variations on the themes and motifs, and sometimes characters, developed in the *Thief* series. Like *The Rapture* three decades before, the *Thief* series were shot on 16mm film and were shown predominantly within churches and at evangelical youth camps, where they were invariably followed by an altar call; the films’ shocking and often gruesome portrayal of the Tribulation, it was hoped, being sufficient to convince any undecided viewers to accept Jesus as their saviour.⁶

The *Thief in the Night* series’ main contribution to its genre was primarily within two areas; firstly, its post-rapture salvational economy and, second, its portrayal of the post-rapture geopolitical rule of the Antichrist through a reborn

Roman Empire. Whereas *The Rapture* had implied that all Christians would be taken away in the rapture, leaving only ‘the unsaved’ behind to face the Tribulation, the *Thief* series introduces the idea that many Christians will also be left behind. These nominal Christians, the films claim, may believe themselves to be Christians, but they are instead practicing a form of ‘apostate’ religion. Consequently, they will be left behind while genuine – understood to be ‘Bible-believing’ Christians who have undergone a born-again conversion – are taken in the rapture. In *A Thief in the Night*, for example, the viewer is introduced to the character of Patty, a young woman who believes she is ‘a good person’ and a Christian. She is, however, terribly wrong and finds herself left behind after her husband, Jim, and her best friend, Jenny, both of whom had recently become born-again, are taken in the rapture.

The first film in the series also sets up a similar binary opposition between two Christian leaders – Pastors Balmer and Turner – who again represent respectively this distinction between genuine and apostate Christianity. Turner, for example, is presented as almost a caricature of a mainline Christian; a man who rejects a literal reading of the Bible (believing it instead to be “the poetic expression of those greater principles by which man lives with man”), is critical of evangelicals, and is only concerned with maintaining his position among his flock by not rocking the theological boat. In marked contrast, Balmer is shown as an

archetypal true evangelist; a pastor who preaches the Bible from his pulpit without adding his own interpretation, who is well versed in the ‘signs of the times’, and who warns his congregation constantly that they are living in the End Times. Consequently, Balmer is taken up in the rapture – the viewer seeing him disappear while putting up a ‘the end is near’ notice on his church sign – while Turner is left behind, ultimately going insane in *A Distant Thunder* at the realisation that he has led his flock astray.

The *Thief* series also differs from its predecessor by emphasising more explicitly both the fate of pre-pubescent children left behind within the salvational economy. Whereas *The Rapture* had made a passing reference to how ‘babies’ would be ‘snatched’ from some homes at the rapture, the *Thief* series portrays a salvational economy, based on a particular reading of 1 Corinthians 7:14, wherein children would only be taken if they had at least one parent who was born-again. Similarly, the series introduces the idea that it is possible for individuals to be saved during the Tribulation, a scenario that has, again, become a central trope of rapture films. From *A Distant Thunder* onwards, every rapture film has featured at least one post-rapture conversion as a central plot device. This ‘second chance’ is, however, shown not to be open to all, but, rather, drawing on a reading of 2 Thessalonians 2, only those who either did not hear the Gospel before the rapture or who heard but did not reject it. As one of the main characters in *The Prodigal*

Planet puts it: “if anyone before the rapture heard and understood the plan of salvation from a friend, a pastor in church, or in a movie or TV and rejected it, the opportunity for a second chance now would be about zero”.

Finally, the series was also noteworthy for its portrayal of the rule of the Antichrist and the rise of the reborn Roman Empire during the seven-year Tribulation period. Creating a template that, again, would find echoes through to the present, the series interprets the Books of Daniel and Revelation through the lens of geopolitics by showing the Antichrist, Brother Christopher, rising to global power as head of UNITE (United Nations Imperium of Total Emergency). Claiming to want only to bring the world together, UNITE quickly decree that all ‘citizens of the world’ should receive an electronic barcode (the ‘Mark of the Beast’) on their foreheads or right hands, all those refusing to do so being arrested ‘in the interest of world safety’. Going further, the series also portrays how those who convert during the rapture, quickly become martyrs at the hands of UNITE; their deaths at the guillotine becoming yet another much repeated motif within the genre.

It would be difficult, then, to underestimate the importance of *A Thief in the Night* and its sequels in the development of the rapture film genre. Indeed, one commentator has gone so far as to claim that it would not be too much of an exaggeration to argue that the impact of the series on the evangelical film industry

was akin to the advent of sound and colour technologies in Hollywood.⁷ Not only did it define the contours of the genre, providing in the process some of its recurring motifs and tropes, it also influenced a subsequent generation of filmmakers to present End Times visions in celluloid. The most significant of these being the Lalone brothers, who saw *Thief* while children and who formed Cloud Ten Productions in the mid-1990s.

Cloud Ten's major contribution to the genre has been predominantly in its attempt to bring higher production values and more mainstream appeal to rapture films. Whereas *A Thief in the Night* was shot on a budget of \$68,000, featured a cast of willing amateurs, and preached a message explicitly aimed at Christian audiences, Cloud Ten has self-consciously attempted to market its films to mainstream audiences by bringing in name actors and utilising larger and larger budgets (at least by the standards of what had gone previously in the genre). Their first film, *Apocalypse: Caught in the Eye of the Storm* (1998), for example, was shot on video and cost \$1,000,000 to produce; a figure that was subsequently dwarfed within a few years by the production costs of their fourth film (*Judgement, 2000*: \$11,000,000) and their first *Left Behind* release (\$17.4 million). From their second film, *Revelation* (1999), Cloud Ten began to shoot on 35mm film and also began to cast name actors in its productions. *Revelation*, for example, starred Jeff Fahey of *The Lawnmower Man* fame alongside Nick Mancuso (*Under Siege*), and

the model Carol Alt, while *Tribulation* starred Gary Busey (*The Buddy Holly Story*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Point Break*, *Under Siege*, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*) and Margot Kidder (Lois Lane in the original *Superman* trilogy of films). Finally, again in an attempt to reach a more mainstream audience, who would arguably be put off by the label ‘Christian film’, Cloud Ten have sought to market its films as ‘supernatural thrillers’, or simply as exciting films that also happen to be produced by Christian filmmakers. Thus, in their DVD blurbs, for example, *Revelation* is described as a ‘Supernatural-Thriller’, *Tribulation* promises ‘danger, deception, and intrigue’, while *Left Behind: The Film* describes itself as the “Best-Selling Independent Film of the Year!” Cloud Ten’s DVD packaging is also often indistinguishable from other ‘secular’ films in the same genre, and often contain similar kinds of ‘extras’, such as ‘making of’ features, deleted scenes and the like. It is only when one looks more closely, and, indeed, begins to watch a film, that it becomes apparent that one is dealing with a Christian product.

In terms of their actual content, Cloud Ten presentations follow on from *The Thief* series, focusing on both the reign of the Antichrist and the fate of individuals in the post-rapture salvational economy. The *Apocalypse* series depicts the post-rapture rise to power of the Antichrist in the form of the ‘European Union President’ Franco Macalusso. Claiming to be none other than “the God of your fathers”, Macalusso promises humanity “a new age of peace and

prosperity...[and]...human enlightenment!...Heaven on earth!” and establishes a unified global order, O.N.E. (One Nation Earth; motto *Mundus Vult Decipi* – The World Wants to be Deceived), with himself at its head. Like Brother Christopher in the earlier series, he then instigates the Mark of the Beast, using Virtual Reality technology to lure humanity into taking the Mark in what is called ‘The Day of Wonders’. All those who refuse to do so are executed by guillotine in the VR world, their bodies also somehow dying in reality as well. Each film also traces the path from often-militant non-belief to belief of their principal characters, with each receiving a post-rapture second chance to undergo a born-again conversion.

The series also continues in the tradition of the *Thief* series by deluging the viewer with scare tactics, particularly in its portrayal of the Antichrist’s persecution of those who become Christians after the rapture. *Apocalypse*, for example, draws clear parallels with the Holocaust by showing Christians (referred to as ‘Haters’ due to their opposition to the new order) being assaulted by mobs before being rounded up and put in cattle trucks to be sent to concentration camps. Indeed, the film’s dramatic finale is the televised execution of one recent convert as a lesson to others. Similarly, *Revelation*, shows O.N.E. agents tracking down a group of Christians who are accused of various heinous crimes, such as blowing up school buses, orphanages and old peoples’ homes; crimes that are actually, the viewer soon discovers, committed by O.N.E itself in an attempt to discredit the Christians in the

eyes of the world. Indeed, in *Judgement* – which centres around the show trial of a leader of the Christian community for ‘crimes against humanity – we see that O.N.E. has gone so far as to establish a ‘Haters Hotline’, where concerned citizens can report those they suspect of being Christians/’Haters’ to the authorities.

In other ways, however, the *Apocalypse* series breaks significantly from its predecessor. Rejecting the former series’ distinction between ‘genuine’ and ‘apostate’ forms of Christianity, *Apocalypse* portrays all Christians being taken in the rapture, leaving behind only non-believers. Similarly, all pre-pubescent children are also taken in the rapture, a shift arguably reflecting the growing influence of right-to-life rhetoric within the evangelical community.⁸ Also notable are the series’ treatment of the Antichrist’s creation of a one world religion, a motif that was underdeveloped in the former series. In the later films in the *Thief* series, for example, the ‘World Church’ is portrayed briefly in one scene as pro-Corporation and anti-Israel; more concerned with secular matters – particularly making profit from war – than with the spirit. In contrast, in the *Apocalypse* series, the Antichrist’s one world religion is linked explicitly with the New Age Movement and forms of ‘self spirituality’ more generally, a shift again arguably reflecting a growing critique of such spiritualities among contemporary evangelical Christians over the last two decades.⁹ Thus, in the series, the Antichrist is portrayed as a form of New Age guru, offering humanity the key to unlocking their hidden potential in

exchange for loyalty. In one of his first telecasts, for example, after announcing that he is God, he declares to the world in a speech replete with New Age buzzwords that “we are ready to take the next great step of evolution” and that “he will show [humanity] the wonderful powers that lie within you, waiting to be unleashed; powers that have been your birthright from the very beginning”.

The most commercially successful rapture film to date is, however, not a Cloud Ten production, but rather the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) release, *The Omega Code* (1999). Costing \$7,200,000 to produce, *The Omega Code* brought together veteran British actor Michael York (*The Four Musketeers*, *Logan’s Run*, *Austin Powers*)¹⁰ with Casper Van Dien (*Starship Troopers*), Michael Ironside (*Scanners*, *Top Gun*, *Total Recall*) and Michael Biehn (*The Terminator*, *The Rock*, *The Abyss*, *Aliens*), and, crucially, was the first rapture film to receive a theatrical release. Whereas *Apocalypse* and all the subsequent films in its series were released straight-to-video, *The Omega Code* opened at 305 US cinemas and eventually grossed \$12,614,346 at the box office.¹¹ This success, however, came at a theological price. Although the film contained a number of expected themes and motifs, such as the rise of the Antichrist at the head of the United Nations, a number of elements were notably absent, arguably in an attempt to win over mainstream audiences. Conspicuous by their absence, for example, were any references to the rapture, the Antichrist’s persecution of Christians, or the Mark of the Beast. Also

absent were the extensive scriptural quotations or attempts at exegesis that have become a hallmark of the genre from *Thief* onwards. Indeed, as a number of Christian critics bemoaned, *The Omega Code*'s conversion narrative was reduced to its lead character saying 'Save Me Jesus'.

Left Behind: The Movie and its Aftermath

The cinematic release of *Left Behind: The Movie* in early 2001 may thus be understood as the summation of various trends in rapture filmmaking. At the time of its release, *Left Behind* was the most expensive evangelical Christian film ever made, costing more than the first three films in the *Apocalypse* series and over twice as much as *The Omega Code*. It also opened at three times as many screens as *The Omega Code* had the year before; a clear development, again, from the straight-to-video *Apocalypse* series.¹² *Left Behind: The Movie* and its sequels may also be located clearly within the context of both the rapture film genre and the aesthetics of Cloud Ten Productions. Like the *Apocalypse* series, *Left Behind* and its sequels focus on the Antichrist's rule through the United Nations and the ways in which recently converted Christians try and resist him. Crucially, drawing on a motif that goes back to *Image of the Beast* and *The Prodigal Planet*, the series focuses on the ways in which Christians use the Antichrist's own technology against him. The series, in particular, portrays the media as a site that, although under the Antichrist's control, may still, nevertheless, be subverted by his opponents in order to promote

a Christian counter-discourse; a theme arguably reflecting evangelicals increasing use of media technologies over recent decades.¹³ Similarly, the series continues the *Apocalypse* series' critique of alternative spiritualities, portraying the Antichrist's one world religion as replete with New Age images and phrases such as 'God is in us. God is us. We are God'. Like the *Apocalypse* series, the *Left Behind* series also portrays children being automatically taken in the rapture; *Left Behind: The Movie*, in particular, features several shots of parents crying over empty pushchairs or pleading for information on their children's whereabouts.

In other ways, however, the *Left Behind* series diverges from Cloud Ten's previous releases. Taking influence from the novels, for example, the film series reintroduces the distinction between 'genuine' and 'apostate' Christians, showing how even a pastor may be left behind. More importantly, the *Left Behind* series eschews almost completely Cloud Ten's previous penchant for portraying the Antichrist's persecution of Christians. Also absent are any references to the forced imposition of the Mark of the Beast. Instead, the violence is typically left very much at the implicit level – alluded to in several places – but left off-screen.¹⁴ It is only in *Left Behind: World at War* that the persecution of Christians is shown, but even here it is not only emphasised much less than in the *Apocalypse* series, but the manner of the persecution (the Antichrist infecting Bibles with chemical agents to poison believers) is much less gory than in previous Cloud Ten releases.¹⁵

Despite Cloud Ten's high hopes for it, in commercial terms, *Left Behind: The Movie* was an almost complete failure; grossing around a third of that earned by *The Omega Code*. Indeed, such was the film's failure at the box office that Tim LaHaye – who had signed over the rights to the novels in 1997 before they became immensely successful – attempted to sue Cloud Ten, claiming that he had been promised a big budget production to rival Hollywood apocalypse films such as *End of Days* (1999).¹⁶ Although a variety of factors may have contributed to the film's failure, arguably the most important was the way in which Cloud Ten chose to market the film. Lacking the marketing and distribution budget of a major Hollywood studio, it decided to promote the film instead via word-of-mouth among evangelicals, a strategy that had seemingly paid dividends for *The Omega Code* a year or so before. It also decided to pre-release the film to video, hoping that viewers would not only enjoy the film enough to go and see it on its cinematic release, but would also, again, promote it among their social networks. This strategy, however, backfired badly; with most of those who purchased the video seemingly happy to watch the film at home rather than pay again to see it at the cinema.¹⁷

Left Behind's attempt to achieve mainstream success was also arguably undermined by the mostly critical reviews it received. While most reviewers chose to ignore the film, those who did review it were typically scathing of what one

reviewer referred to as its “‘apocalypse on a shoestring’ aesthetic”.¹⁸ One *Washington Post* reviewer, for example, bemoaned *Left Behind* as “a blundering cringefest” characterised by “unintentionally laughable dialogue, hackneyed writing and uninspired direction”, as well as poor special effects. In particular, he goes on to note how the film’s “relatively modest budget...shows all too obviously when it’s time for large scale scenes”:

A fleet of warplanes streaking across the sky at the beginning of the film look like what they are: cut-rate, computer-generated effects. And it’s obvious that the various scenes of ‘mass hysteria’ rarely involve more than a dozen hired extras. At one point, when Buck leaves Steele’s house to find that private pilot, Chloe offers to join him. ‘No’ says Buck. ‘I can’t let you go outside. It’s madness out there’. Uh, no, Buck, just a few extras outside. Really, she’ll be fine.¹⁹

Similarly, *Variety* reviewer Joe Leydon noted how *Left Behind*’s “dialogue is stilted, the characters are one-dimensional and the performances bland, even when judged by the standards for this niche-market genre”. Going further, he noted that although the film’s special effects are “unremarkable...there’s nothing here that looks as laugh-out-loud cheesy as some f/x shot in ‘*The Omega Code*’”.²⁰

The failure of *Left Behind* and its sequels to achieve mainstream success has impacted on the rapture film industry in a number of ways. Primarily, the flurry of rapture films released in the late 1990s has slowed to a trickle, with Cloud Ten seemingly having completely abandoned making End Times films. Indeed, it would appear that the Californian production company, Signal Hill Pictures, has usurped

Cloud Ten's position as the principal evangelical filmmaking company in North America: a shift that in many ways represents a return to the low budget aesthetic of early rapture films. Signal Hill's first release, *The Moment After* (1999), for example, was produced at a cost of \$90,000 and, in the tradition of *A Thief in the Night*, features a number of the producers' friends in acting and producing roles as well as several properties belonging to them, while *The Moment After II* (2007) and *Six: The Mark Unleashed* (2004) cost \$456,974 and \$600,000 respectively.²¹ Moreover, again in marked contrast to Cloud Ten's desire to crossover into the mainstream and 'send the message to Hollywood', Signal Hill's releases are marketed almost exclusively to the evangelical community and released straight to video/DVD and/or exhibited in Churches.²²

Conclusions

In contrast, then, to their printed word equivalents, rapture films have not achieved any real level of mainstream success. Whereas the *Left Behind* novels have sold in the tens of millions and generated significant revenue for both their authors and publishers, their celluloid equivalents have, by and large, made little or no impact on the mainstream. Consequently, contemporary evangelical filmmakers have not only abandoned their attempts to break into the mainstream, but have in fact gone full circle and returned to their low-budget, niche-market roots. Thus, whereas Cloud Ten once spoke about breaking through into the mainstream and 'sending a

message to Hollywood’, it now offers its films exclusively to what it terms ‘Cloud Ten Church Cinemas’ and exhorts its viewers: “Don’t let Hollywood win the battle for the souls of society”.²³ Indeed, it would appear that evangelical filmmakers might even have given up on the rapture and the End Times completely. The major studio producing rapture films in the 1990s, Cloud Ten, have seemingly abandoned them to distribute more general Christian releases, such as *The Genius Club* (2006), *Smugglers Ransom* (2007), and *Saving God* (2008). Similarly, Signal Hill’s next project will be a re-release of *Lay it Down* (2001), a film that is set not in the Tribulation, but among street racers in modern-day California.²⁴

It is thus somewhat ironic that in the last year or so one non-evangelical film company has been bringing the rapture – and an evangelical message of sorts – into the mainstream. Beginning in 2007, The Asylum – a studio well-known for their low-budget, straight-to-DVD ‘mockbusters’²⁵ – has released two End Times films, *Apocalypse* (2007) and *2012: Doomsday* (2008) through their subsidiary, Faith Films. Both films attempt to graft elements of rapture films – most notably the rapture, water turning to blood, and conversion narratives – onto mainstream ‘End of the World’ film plots (*The Apocalypse*, for example, draws obvious comparisons with the Hollywood blockbusters *Deep Impact* [1998] and *Armageddon* [1998], while *2012: Doomsday* draws on the Mesoamerican Long Count calendar and various New Age prophecies that the world will end in 2012).²⁶ Thus, for example,

in *The Apocalypse*, a mother and father race across America to be with their daughter in Los Angeles as a giant asteroid heads towards the earth. The mother, a Christian, tells her husband that the asteroid is part of “His plan” and beseeches him to look for salvation, before she is killed by a falling beam and disappears, or “goes home” as it is referred to in the film. In the closing moments of the film, he finally reaches his daughter, after undergoing an off-screen conversion experience - and asks her to pray with him as the asteroid enters earth’s atmosphere (and presumably wipes them out along with the rest of humanity).²⁷

The film’s evangelical message and presentation of End Times content is thus, at best, muddled. As one evangelical reviewer on Amazon.com noted;

Theologically [*The Apocalypse*] may appeal to most of evangelical America, but will leave those with a deeper interest in Biblical teachings on salvation and eschatology...wanting. There is a lot of emphasis on ‘having faith’ and ‘making your faith stronger’, but little is said about what one needs to have faith in or believe. There is no clear exposition of the Christian gospel...the writers sprinkle in some evangelicalese here and there, along with some references to ‘God taking back his own’ and so forth. But for people seeking answers to the real questions of life, death, the afterlife, and what the Bible teaches about salvation, the story does not deliver. We hear more about Lord Krishna saving a small bird in the midst of a battle than we do about Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and God’s plan for reconciliation with man.²⁸

Individuals in the films disappear in the rapture, but this happens as each person dies, rather than them being “caught up together”. Similarly, there is no Tribulation period or millennial kingdom in either film, only the mass extinction of humanity

or, at the conclusion 2012, the notion that, as one character puts it, “this isn’t the end, it’s just the beginning”. Indeed, perhaps most damningly, the aetiology of the apocalypse in both films – references to ‘His plan’ aside – is fundamentally a naturalistic one, with no evidence whatsoever of supernatural entities of any kind.²⁹

Arguably this situation stems from the fact that the filmmakers, who are themselves not evangelicals, do not have either portraying a theologically-accurate version of the End Times nor “winning souls for Christ” as their primary aims. Rather, as one of The Asylum’s partners, David Michael Latt, stated in an interview with the New York Times, the decision to produce End Times films with some evangelical content was motivated largely, if not exclusively, by financial considerations:

We were planning on making ‘*The Apocalypse*’ as a straightforward doomsday movie...but certain buyers told us that they wanted a religious film. So we consulted priests and rabbis [sic.] and made it into a faith-based film about the end of the world...Whether it’s giant robots attacking the earth or something from the Bible, we’re just happy to be making movies.³⁰

How, then, should The Asylum/Faith Film’s output be seen in terms of the argument of this article? Should *The Apocalypse* and *2012* be seen as evidence of rapture films breaking into the mainstream? While it might appear at first glance

that The Asylum/Faith Film's bringing of some degree of evangelical content to the mainstream may challenge my claim that the genre has little or no chance of breaking through into the mainstream, I would argue that this is not the case. Indeed, I would go further and argue that, ironically, there is also a good chance that evangelical audiences may also reject the films. The Asylum/Faith Films releases are, as discussed above, neither fish nor fowl; on the one hand their evangelical content, although weak compared to other rapture films, is still too explicit to appeal to mainstream audiences (a fact borne out by, for example, Amazon.com reviews),³¹ while on the other, as noted above, their evangelical content is too heterodox and evangelically-unconvincing to appeal to evangelical audiences. Not only this, but it is also likely that the films may also not be taken seriously or even ignored by audiences through their association, albeit as a subsidiary, with The Asylum; a studio notorious for its low-budget, often critically savaged,³² straight-to-DVD 'mockbusters'.

The future for the rapture film genre does not, therefore, look good. Seemingly abandoned by evangelical filmmakers looking for new stories and the (arguably futile) possibility of crossover success, and now surviving alone through the theologically heterodox and evangelically tokenistic releases of The Asylum/Faith Films, the genre is currently a million miles away from where it was a decade ago. Then, Heather Hendershot predicted that the future of the genre lay

in one of two directions; mainstream success at the expense of theological content and evangelical intent, or a rejection of such theological and evangelical compromises at the expense of alienating mainstream consumers.³³ Instead, a third, arguably much worse, possibility seems to have come to pass: evangelical filmmakers have lost (if not abandoned) the genre and now see it cross-pollinated by non-evangelicals with Mayan cosmology read through New Age prophecy, the story of Krishna and the lapwing, and Hollywood doomsday epics, and yet *still* denied mainstream success. Whether this situation will change in the near future is open to speculation, but my own sense is that, in marked contrast with its textual equivalent, the celluloid rapture is still very far from achieving any real mainstream success any time soon.

¹ Source: www.imdb.com

² Howe, D. (2001) "'Left Behind': Heaven Help Us", *Washington Post*, Feb 2nd, [available online for subscribers]. *Left Behind* box office source: <http://movies.yahoo.com/movie/1804383520/info>

³ For an in-depth discussion of these themes, see Walliss, John 'Celling the End Times: The Contours of Contemporary Rapture Films', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, forthcoming

⁴ It is also, of course, equally plausible that earlier films, such as *A Thief in the Night*, inspired the writers of the *Left Behind* series. This is a reasonable hypothesis considering the former film's almost cult-like status within the US evangelical community (see Balmer, R. 2006. *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*. Fourth Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press)

⁵ Hess, B. (n.d.) "A Brief History of Christian Films, 1918-2002", http://www.avgeeks.com/bhess/christian_film_history.html. *The Rapture* is available to view and download at <http://www.archive.org/details/RAPTURE>

⁶ Balmer, *ibid.*, Hendershot, H. (2004) *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁷ Balmer, *ibid.*, 64.

⁸ See, for example, Mason, C. (2002) *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press; Marsden, G.M. (1991) *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Marsden, G.M. (2006) *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New Edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press. See also the excellent HBO documentary *Soldiers in the Army of God* (dirs. Marc Levin & Daphne Pinkerson, 2005)

⁹ Similar themes are also explored in *Tribulation*, where two characters are shown becoming unsuspecting conduits for malignant forces by ‘meddling’ with the occult (specifically, in the case of one, by using a Ouija Board and, in the other, by running an evening course in ‘psychic phenomena’). For evangelical critiques of New Age spiritualities, see Lindsey, H. with Carlson, CC. (1971) *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, chapter 10; Cumbey, C.E. (1985) *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow: The New Age Movement and our Coming Age of Barbarism*. Lafayette, LA: Huntington House; Groothuis, D. (1988) *Confronting the New Age*. Downers Grove, IL: InverVarsity; Baer, R. (1989) *Inside the New Age Nightmare*. Lafayette, LA: Huntington House; Noonan, M. (2005) *Ransomed from Darkness: The New Age, Christian Faith, and the Battle for Souls*. El Sobrante, CA: North Bay Books.

¹⁰ York subsequently published his diaries of making *The Omega Code* and its sequel, *Megiddo: The Omega Code 2* (2001). See York, M. (2001) *Dispatches from Armageddon: ...A Devilish Diary*. Hanover, NH: Smith and Kraus.

¹¹ Indeed, it was the top grossing film per screen on its opening weekend in the US, earning an average of \$7,745 per screen. See Stack, P. (1999, November 6) ‘Decoding Success of Christian Thriller: “Omega Code” a Hit, But it wont Play Here’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/1999/11/06/DD39063.DTL&type=movies> (accessed 28th May 2008).

¹² Hendershot, *ibid.*

¹³ See, for example, Hoover, S.M. (1988) *Mass Media Religion: The Social Significance of the Electronic Church*. London: Sage Publications; Bruce, S. (1990) *Pray TV: Televangelism in America*. London: Routledge; Schultze, Q.J. (1990) *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie Books; Peck, J. (1993) *The Gods of Televangelism: The Crisis of Meaning and the Appeal of Religious Television*. Cresskill, NY: Hampton Press Inc.; Kintz, L. & Lesage, J. (eds. 1998) *Media Culture & the Religious Right*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹⁴ In *Left Behind: The Movie*, for example, the character Bruce Barnes bluntly tells the other members of the Tribulation Force that “admitting you’re a Christian during the Tribulation is just like marking yourself for death”. Later in the third film he reflects in a prayer how:

Father, if we do nothing but admit to knowing you and loving you they send us for re-education. If we lift a finger to spread your word they sentence us as terrorists. Even if we make it to court, it's a dark and fearful world...

¹⁵ It is interesting to note that this plot development is not found in the novels but is, instead, a Cloud Ten addition (possibly inspired by the murder device in the semiotic murder-mystery novel [and subsequent film], *The Name of the Rose*, by Umberto Eco).

¹⁶ See Smith, M.R. (2001) "Left Behind: Author LaHaye Sues Left Behind Film Producers", *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/april23/14.20.html>

¹⁷ Hendershot, *ibid.*, Guyatt, N. (2007) *Have a Nice Doomsday: Why Millions of Americans Are Waiting for the End of the World*. London: Ebury Press.

¹⁸ Hendrix, G. (2005) 'The "Left Behind" Films: How to End the World on a Budget', *Slate Magazine*, (December 1), available online <http://www.slate.com/id/2131365/>

¹⁹ Howe, D. (2001) "'Left Behind': Heaven Help Us", *Washington Post*, Feb 2nd, [available online for subscribers]

²⁰ Leyden, J. (2001) 'Left Behind', *Variety*, Feb 5th, available online <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117797221.html?categoryid=31&cs=1&query=leydon+%22eft+behind%22> (accessed 24th May 2007).

²¹ Two-thirds of the funding for the latter film came from TBN (email correspondence from Christiancinema.com CEO, Bobby Downes, 22nd May 2008).

²² 'Church Theatrical Releases', where a church pays for a licence from the production company to show a particular film for a certain period of time (typically its 'opening month'). For an overview of how this process works, see the webpage for *The Moment After* and its sequel: <http://www.momentafter.com/>

²³ <http://www.cloudtenpictures.com/churchcinema/boxofficeinsouls.php> (accessed 21st May 2008). Similarly, Doug Phillips, the founder of the San Antonio Independent Christian Film Festival, speaks of his ambition "to build a replacement industry", and to see Christians "break[ing] up the monopoly of Hollywood" (quoted in Wayne, R. (2008) 'San Antonio Film Festival Richly Rewards Movies with Biblical Worldviews', Crosswalk.Com, <http://www.crosswalk.com/movies/11573167/>)

²⁴ Whether this represents an evolution in the evangelical film industry or an acceptance of market forces and audience demand is an interesting question. Bobby Downes acknowledged both as salient factors to me, claiming that, although he would not rule out releasing a *Moment After III* at some point in the future, he felt that "there are so many other stories we are wanting to tell through film and now have the opportunity to do so and are equally important to share". He also added:

Where in the past, films about the End Times would be sure to be accepted by the church and would (on the business level) get investors their money back. Investors (although believers) do really care about getting their investment back. They will not invest in future films without getting their original investment back (email correspondence, May 22nd 2008).

²⁵ ‘Mockbusters’ are low-budget films with titles and often plotlines derivative of a successful film in the same genre. The Asylum, for example, has released *I am Omega*, *Transmorphers*, *The Da Vinci Treasure*, and *Pirates of Treasure Island*. See Potts, R. (2007, October 7) ‘The New B Movie’, *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/07/magazine/07wwln-essay-t.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

²⁶ For a discussion of these prophecies, see, for example, Sitler, R.K (2006) ‘The 2012 Phenomenon: New Age Appropriation of an Ancient Mayan Calendar’, *Nova Religio*, 9 (3), pp. 24-38.

²⁷ This scene is reminiscent of the finale of *Deep Impact*, however in the Hollywood version although the father and daughter die, humanity is saved the apocalyptic consequences of a direct hit.

²⁸ http://www.amazon.com/review/R1T32U8D8NKJJ3/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm (accessed 27th May 2008)

²⁹ Interestingly, The Asylum has also released two films drawing on antichrist motifs: *666: The Child* (2006) and *666: The Beast* (2007). These, however, are devoid of evangelical content and are, instead, a derivative version of the *Omen* trilogy (1976, 1978, 1981).

³⁰ Quoted in Potts, *ibid*. This lack of evangelical belief is also manifested in the audio commentaries on each film where, in contrast to those found on evangelical releases, both director and actors typically ignore or gloss over scenes with evangelical content.

³¹ See, for example, the reviews of 2012:
http://www.amazon.com/review/product/B000YV2EFY/ref=cm_cr_dp_all_summary?%5Fencoding=UTF8&showViewpoints=1&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending

³² Again, the Amazon.com site is arguably the best evidence of this.

³³ *Op. Cit.*, pp. 208-9.