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The Rapture: A Challenging Vision of Horror

Abstract

Can horror characterize a religious experience? Can God today still be terrifying (*tremendum*) as well as attractive (*fascinans*)? The Rapture presents a horrifying view of an apparently malevolent God. Can such a view be tolerated in today's Western culture? Can Sharon's be an authentic religious experience? The film suspends the viewer between a variety of interpretations. Is the story of the experience a prophetic religious statement, the biography of a madness, or simply a satire? The text and imagery of the film make this question a potent stimulus for discussion and reflection.

"The transition from religious hope to religious alienation is a horror both in its content (separation from that which one most loves) and in its permanence (a fate not ended by death)."

Introduction

The Rapture, a 1991 film by Michael Tolkin, is a provocative and demanding film. It not only proves difficult to categorize as action, drama, psychological narrative, theology, or horror. It also challenges the viewer to re-evaluate one's view of suicide, infanticide, and divine vengeance. Whatever else it may be, and from a variety of perspectives, it is indeed a work of horror.

Typically, horror is associated with the traditional slash and gouge film. However, horror can also reflect an individual's view of everyday life, of world history, or of the ultimate. In an interview, Michael Tolkin credited Melville as a source of his inspiration. Intriguingly, he quoted from Melville's Pierre, a particularly dense and bleak work, in which Melville seems to equate God with a depressing sense of fate.

Horror focuses on the deepest fears that people encounter. The entrance into the world of horror can be through seemingly ordinary events (as in Hitchcock's *The Birds*) or from an awful turn in happily anticipated events (as in Steven King's *Carrie*, where the group shames the designated homecoming queen).

Horror is sometimes associated with psychotic episodes. Psychologists and psychiatrists have high-lighted persistent human fears associated with loss of identity, loss of a beloved person, loss of a love object, or loss of regard for oneself.

Religion traditionally has served an important role against such fears, by providing comfort and solace in times of loss. What happens, however, when one experiences a transition from religious hope to religious despair? Isn't this in fact the most horrible horror of all? It is horrible both in its content (separation from what one treasures above all else) and in its permanence (a separation not to be ended by death).

Two approaches to *The Rapture* prove instructive. The viewer may see it as the *psychological biography* of a disturbed woman falling into psychosis. Or one might view it as a maddening and *prophetic tale* of damnation. The lingering question throughout the film is one of perspective. Are we seeing reality through the afflicted eyes of an individual woman, or is the director bringing us to see reality as he and a powerful American tradition have seen it in the past? The film is ambiguous enough to make credible each of these explanations.

The film is daring in content, as in its presentation of infanticide, mental confusion, and a (re-)vengeful God. It is an unnerving and demanding visual experience, delivering to its audience a sense of dislocation, question, and horror. I personally approach this film as a psychiatrist, a person of faith, and a student of myth.

The Film

The Rapture is set in contemporary Los Angeles and focuses on Sharon, a telephone operator who attempts to compensate for general boredom with casual

sex. As she is depicted, the boredom becomes revealed as a desperate emptiness. Her engagement with her lovers involves little more personal involvement than her job: answering incessant phone calls. Amidst this boredom she hears fundamentalist co-workers talking about "the pearl," which suggests a spiritual awakening, a secret and important knowledge. As her own emptiness escalates to despondency, she steals a revolver from a new lover and plans to shoot herself. Despite a serious plan of suicide, she cannot carry out the act.

A conversion now occurs during the darkest moments of her life. After falling to the depths of despondency, she visualizes "the pearl" and feels a special connection with God. The viewer might interpret this either as a further state of psychological decompensation (disorientation) or as an epiphany.

Sharon makes a radical change in her life, ends her promiscuous behavior, and marries a former lover. The couple has a child, forms a business, and leads a settled life with an anchoring point in a fundamentalist spiritual group. At a series of group meetings, Sharon hears dire prophecy about the upcoming end of time. Then her recently calmed life is disrupted by a disgruntled employee's murder of her husband. As a woman of faith, she continues to manage her life with some joy and contentment. As she becomes convinced "the rapture" (the end of time, the apocalyptic end of the world) is approaching, she goes to the desert with her daughter to wait for God and to be taken into heaven with the chosen. God does not appear. Her daughter becomes despondent about the delay in going to heaven and

pleads to be with her father. Sharon kills her daughter but cannot bring herself to shoot herself. After the murder, she confesses to a policeman and is taken to jail. While she is in jail, the prophecy of The Book of Revelation (6:1-8) unfolds on the screen with the angel's trumpet and the arrival of the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse. She finally has her meeting with God who demands both love and unconditional submission. Still distraught with God's abandonment of her in the desert and her daughter's death, Sharon refuses God's demand and is left in alienation, unable to cross the divide into Heaven.

With this brief retelling of the plot, we find ourselves confronted with a troubling story of infanticide, an individual's desolation, and a less-than-sympathetic God. What are we to make of this story? I will outline two explanations.

A Tale of Madness

Psychiatrists recognize that psychotic decompensation often borrows religious language to describe the state of distress. Following this view, Sharon has a precarious self that she is trying to stabilize with sex and excitement. This emotional strategy fails and, consequently, a more serious psychiatric illness ensues. With the onset of seeing "The Pearl," Sharon has regressed to a frankly psychotic process manifested by a grandiose sense of being in a special relationship to God, visual hallucinations, and a fragile ego stabilization based on her sense of a destiny.

There is not an exact psychiatric condition that is characterized by the symptoms identified in the film. There is a resemblance to both delusional disorder and paranoid schizophrenia. A contemporary psychiatric textbook notes that paranoid patients lack trust in relationships which may have been generated from a hostile family; defenses often include reaction formation, denial, and projection. In the context of the film, the reaction formation would be the transformation of "life is terrible" to "life is wonderful with God"; denial would be involved in the disavowal of her suicidal impulses and cloaking them behind a peaceful new life; projection would be the creation of an external God that is actually her own intrapsychic sense of being godlike (a typical intrapsychic attempt to combat feelings of profound inadequacy).

If the reader were to accept this possible formulation, Sharon would be seen as having a projected God that would also carry her unacknowledged destructive impulses. The wrathful judgment of God would simply be her own destructiveness crashing back on her as her psyche has a further decompensation. It is important to note that in the absence of a detailed history and review, such psychiatric explanations would be regarded as speculation only.

The problem of destructiveness has been remarkably explored by W.W. Meissner, a Jesuit psychiatrist. He has made significant studies of both religion and paranoia. In The Paranoid Process, he offers the following explanation:

Projection is a defense that pertains primarily to object-relations. The content of projection derives from introjects which are in turn derived from object-relations....It is interesting in this regard that paranoid patients are terribly threatened by any attempt to confront them with their rage and disappointment against significant (particularly primary) objects. The paranoid position often seems to be calculated to preserve these objects and to preserve the object-relation. The ambivalence in the relationship is too difficult to tolerate and the rage against the object cannot be faced.

We are not privileged with specific background regarding Sharon's family history or prior mental state. Certainly, if we had a clear history of severe sexual and physical abuse from her father (a "primary object" in psychoanalytic language) when she was a child, her presentation would be more classic. Presenting her unconscious rage at her abusive father as projected into a merciless God would allow her both to express her rage and preserve whatever tolerable images she had of her father. The projection would protect the father as Meissner indicated; it is God who is to blame not her own father.

As in the progress of *Lady MacBeth*, there is a further unraveling of Sharon's personality in attempting to deal with her intense guilt and shame. In this understanding, the damnation is entirely an intrapsychic punishment of psychotic proportion. The apocalypse would be Sharon's distorted perception which is then projected as the end of the world.

Although the film offers a predominantly literary version of madness, it has the convincing quality of portraying Sharon's psychic disintegration. The film would provide a psychiatric horror story of the ego's vulnerability and the bleakness

of a psychotic state. The predicted rapture would have been generated and projected from her familiarity with the Bible. There would be no specific implications for the general viewer except a vivid picture of ego dissolution: psychiatric horror occurring in one woman's life.

A Tale of Prophecy

There is a second explanation of the events in the film. Here the story relates the "rapture" (or Apocalypse, the end of the world) as an actual event based on the New Testament *Book of Revelation*.

Two preliminary qualifications must first be mentioned. There is substantial theological controversy about the meaning of the Book of Revelation. Some critics argue that the text is the poetic description of events at the time of its own composition, not a prediction of future events. Secondly, the term "rapture" is not itself biblical. There is no clear standard of what constitutes a "rapture."¹

Presenting Sharon's "rapture" as an actual event would be more radical than presenting it as a psychiatric horror. The focus would be on a malevolent divine intervention. One is reminded of Kierkegaard's "Fear and Trembling," or the problem of God's call to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Tolkin's God would be making destructive demands and taking actions in violation of our ethical sensibilities.

A destructive presentation of the sacred is an uncommon film event. The presentation of the plagues in Egypt in the *Ten Commandments* has some

similarity, but that was destruction with benefit for some. A more recent example would be in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, where the Nazi attempt to control the Ark of the Covenant leads to their own destruction. This destructive use of power by the sacred presents classical questions about the goodness of God and the experience of evil that have received conflicting answers in the Western tradition. MacLeish's *J.B.* contained a telling observation: If God is God, He is not Good; and if God is Good, He is not God.

Despite our experience of evil, contemporary Mainline theology avoids assigning evil to God. It emphasizes God's love (the Great Banquet imagery in Luke 14: 15-24) and grace. Even sin and guilt can lead to truth and forgiveness. The God of the West is presented as a source of goodness, with little attention to biblical passages displaying judgment and wrath. Attempts are made to dismiss such biblical statements as reflections of primitive views from ancient times.

A prophetic interpretation of *The Rapture* presents God as sovereign, wrathful, coercive, judgmental, and demanding submission. In the course of the film, Sharon's guilt leads to her condemnation. Within an older American tradition, there was attention paid to such a wrathful God. Jonathan Edward's famous 1741 Puritan sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," gave witness to the darker view. The film presents us with a similar kind of grim portrayal of the relationship between God and man.

If we were to accept such a "prophetic view," God's bringing contentment and peace to Sharon early in the film would be ironic. By the end of the film, God is "totally other" and remorseless. Tolkin appears to have God provide a spiritual "bait and switch". In a way similar to the psychiatric interpretation (a literary version of madness), he may be presenting not a technical but a literary formulation of damnation.

If the "prophetic version" is accurate, we confront a horror more devastating than the psychiatric one. One might be reassured that a psychiatric illness is limited to a lifetime and that the afflicted one would be released by death. *The Rapture*, however, would provide a disturbing sense of "what if...?" Perhaps only a medieval morality play or alter triptych would approximate the devastating theme. This explanation presents a soul that has entered eternal torment and alienation.

There remains a problem in crediting Tolkin with a sacred story. The great religious symbols have profound elements that require extended meditation, reflection, or practice to approach. Tolkin may have appropriated the symbols without a coherent awareness of the deeper content. It appears that he is presenting an archaic sense of the fates/Fate as a remorseless and unfathomable presence, but cast these forces as God. Tolkin's vision would be closer to the ancient Greek notions of either the chthonic deities (the gods of the underworld) or the Fates (Clotho, Lachesis, Atropos). The intermingling of the imagery of Fate with God produces a confusing religious combination. Differentiating Fate from the God of

the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition is a recurring challenge to Western scholarship.

Summary

Horror can be derived from content, intensity, expectations, the crisis of categories, or emotional dread. *The Rapture* can qualify as horror in the genre of either psychology or religion. There are substantial differences between a statement of damnation as a spiritual fact and psychotic personality dissolution where damnation is a metaphor. Using religion as a way to horrify is a particularly effective because of the elements of permanence and surprise. The religious vocabulary of damnation today has limited currency.

Most impressive about this film is the way in which the simple "God is love" approach in contemporary life is undone. What makes the film challenging is that such a grim theme does not play well in the organized, rational universe of educated people. The goals of much contemporary religion appear to be closely aligned with psychiatric and social work in offering endearing notions of reconciliation and peace. What is to be done with the subtext of non-reconciliation and exclusion?

Tolkin could be taken as offering an image of ontological exclusion: Sharon would be separated from husband, daughter, and God for eternity. At most, usual horror films limit the terror until one dies. Even the "undead" (vampires, zombies) have some frailness which could result in their ultimate demise. Being cast into "hell" is remorseless. Such a fate places the individual in the most helpless

imaginable situation, one without hope. Even though Sharon could possibly have "offered up her love" to God, it would be at the cost of her integrity.

Whether the film is viewed in terms of intrapsychic conflict or ontological conflict, the religious motifs can carry a heavy load of despair. In this film, there is not the catharsis of vanquishing that which is fearful. The viewer is left with an image of an individual being vanquished; the source could be from either a psychiatric decompensation or religious events. The film will require most viewers to go to the unused corners of experience to articulate a response. It can be recommended for that enterprise.

¹ A fundamentalist fascination with "the rapture" can be found on The Internet. One can locate a Rapture Index which provides a potential "weather report" on the likelihood of the Second Coming. An Internet listing is Don Smart's review of Marvin J. Rosenthal's *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* in 1991. In Rosenthal's presentation, the seven year period includes the beginning of sorrows, abomination of desolation, the great tribulation, pre-Wrath Rapture, the Day of the Lord, and the End. As part of his television ministry, David Breese outlines the upcoming "prophetic wars" which emphasizes the ongoing war between man and God. These points of view are so alien to university discussion and the lives of educated Americans as to be unimaginable. Yet in the "prophetic tale" interpretation of The Rapture, the unimaginable becomes visible.