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Chapter Four
A Failed Final Girl: Apocalyptic Misogyny in The Rapture

The Apocalypse is not a tale for women.
Tina Pippin, (“The Heroine and the Whore” 78)

Introduction

The provocative epigraph of this chapter is derived from the work of feminist theologian Tina Pippin. She demonstrates throughout her work that the story of the Apocalypse, in its different versions, cannot be understood as anything other than a misogynistic male vision about violence and power. I subscribe to Pippin’s estimation, among others, of apocalyptic discourse as misogynistic. The root of apocalyptic misogyny resides in Revelation, particularly in its use of violent imagery directed at the female characters in the book. As I pointed out in the introduction to this study, the misogynistic streak of this core apocalyptic text is carried over into contemporary representations of disaster. The Hollywood version of the Apocalypse links femininity with catastrophe. In order to prevent catastrophe, femininity needs to be contained and subjugated. More than the previous chapters, this chapter is concerned with the representation of the Apocalypse proper. The film I analyze, The Rapture (USA: Michael Tolkin, 1991), endeavors to stage a cinematic enactment of the Apocalypse. The other main theme of this study, martyrdom, also figures in the film, but is signified differently than discussed so far. Contrary to the three previous chapters, the act of martyrdom, or rather, the attempt at becoming a martyr by the film’s heroine, does not save the world from disaster. At best, the film represents an act of misunderstood, and therefore failed, martyrdom.

The main character of The Rapture Sharon, (played by Mimi Rogers), works as an operator at directory assistance. To
compensate for her mundane daytime existence, Sharon cruises airport hotels at night together with a male sexual sidekick, Vic. They pick up other couples and engage in casual, anonymous sex. Sharon’s routine, however, is interrupted when she overhears a coffee break conversation between several of her co-workers. They talk about “a boy and a pearl.” After this, Sharon encounters the image of the pearl once again, this time in the form of a tattoo on the back of Vic’s partner. The pearl indicates spiritual knowledge, bringing about a major change in Sharon’s life. After another night of anonymous sex, Sharon breaks down, steals a gun from one of her lovers, and attempts to shoot herself. However, at the final moment, she is unable to pull the trigger.

This failed suicide attempt leads to Sharon’s conversion. She gives up her old life and marries a former lover. Sharon and her new husband Randy (David Duchovny) have a daughter named Mary, and become active members of a Christian fundamentalist group. Their calm and settled life is disrupted when Randy is shot dead by an angry ex-employee. This tragic incident strengthens Sharon’s nascent conviction that the so-called “rapture,” the end of time, is at hand. Sharon and her six-year-old daughter Mary flee into the desert to wait for God, expecting to be “raptured,” that is, taken into heaven together with the other chosen people. When God does not arrive, Sharon decides to kill both herself and her daughter, who pleads to be with the father they both believe to be waiting for them in heaven. After she has shot her daughter, Sharon once again finds it impossible to turn the gun on herself. She confesses the murder to police deputy Foster (Will Patton) and is sent to prison. While imprisoned, Sharon’s wish for the end of the world is fulfilled. The signs of the Apocalypse, described in Revelation, such as the angel with the trumpet and the Four Horsemen, appear before Sharon’s eyes. Finally, she meets God. Sharon stands between Heaven and Purgatory, as God makes His demand for love and total submission.
Unwilling to meet this demand, Sharon is deprived of God’s permission to traverse the divide into Heaven.

My argument in this chapter focuses on three aspects. First, I address the violent and misogynist characteristics of The Rapture. My reading is based on Tina Pippin’s notion that biblical apocalypses are similar to cinematic sequels. The notion of the sequel functions as an interdisciplinary tool that facilitates a reading that situates itself between the biblical text and the cinematic text. I suggest that the film’s protagonist and victim Sharon can be interpreted as what feminist film theorist Carol Clover describes as a “Final Girl.” Designated as such because she is the sole survivor of murder and mayhem in the genre of horror, this character is the indispensable condition for the production of a sequel. Reading Sharon as a Final Girl enables me to substitute the film’s malevolent ending with an alternative, perhaps less misogynistic, ending.

Second, I focus on the film’s incorporation of fundamentalist ideas, especially the notion of the rapture. I argue that The Rapture’s cinematic depiction of the end is problematic. I compare The Rapture with Rex Ingram’s 1921 silent film The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The two films deploy the same photographic technique to represent the Apocalypse; yet, the effect this technique invokes differs dramatically in each film. The comparison between these two films uncovers the limits of The Rapture’s literal depiction of Revelation’s apocalypse. This literalness, I argue, resides in the film’s direct translation of biblical words into cinematic images. In addition, I draw a tentative conclusion with regard to the representation of the Apocalypse in Hollywood cinema.

My third and final goal in this chapter is to offer a preposterous reading of The Rapture’s depiction of its female protagonist. This reading brings to light an alternative to the fate of Sharon. This requires, on one hand, to be attentive to a number of core elements in apocalyptic texts, in particular Revelation, that
can be traced in *The Rapture*’s secular representation of the role of the woman in the Apocalypse, while it requires, on the other, being equally attentive to the preposterous nature of these historically older traits in their contemporary re-configuration. Familiar and unbending as these recurring traits may appear to be, their placement in a new context, the Hollywood film, opens up a possibility of reading them against their traditional and normative meanings. My preposterous reading is driven by a twofold conception of the metaphor of (sun)light. That is, “light” and “seeing the light” can be understood in the (religious) sense of a revelation of wisdom and belief. This metaphorical use of light is, I argue, concretely represented in the film’s mise-en-scene, specifically in the lighting of several scenes. The question, then, is whether or not and, if so, to what extent, religious and cinematic “illumination” establishes the same or similar sets of meanings. Thus, in the concept of light or lighting, religion and cinema come together.

The Critical Reception of *The Rapture*

At its release, *The Rapture* received mixed reviews. Although some critics, such as Janet Maslin of *The New York Times*, praised writer and director Michael Tolkin for the “brazenness of making a mainstream film about religious faith,” the majority of reviews were damning. The film was not a success at the box office.¹ Particularly the climax of the film, the literal depiction of the end of the world, was met with disapproval. The most common complaint was that the film lacked the necessary budget to pull off a realistic and credible depiction of the Apocalypse. The question of what constitutes a realistic, cinematic representation of the end of the world is addressed below.²

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¹ According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), the film grossed less than $2 million at the US box office.
Despite the film’s limited budget, Tolkin pushed his film to its apocalyptic ending. Tolkin, a practicing Jew, has admitted a profound interest in the idea of the Apocalypse in several interviews. He was one of the nonacademic speakers at the Third Annual International Conference on Millennialism, held at Boston University in December 1998. In an interview with the Boston University newspaper, he introduced his idea that entertainment culture is akin to the Apocalypse: “I think a strong case can be made that the culture of entertainment is a calamity of apocalyptic scale, tantamount to a comet or a tidal wave or God’s final judgment.”

Although Tolkin does not elaborate on this notion of “entertainment-as-apocalypse,” at least not in this particular interview, his apocalyptic mindset can also be found in one of his later screenplays, which became the basis for the film Deep Impact (USA: Mimi Leder, 1998). In this film, a comet heading toward Earth threatens to cause a tidal wave, which would destroy large parts of the globe. In this film, in contrast to The Rapture, the destruction of Earth is not complete. Yet, a recurring aspect of these two films is the theme of salvation and escape from impending disaster. In Deep Impact, a small number of people is able to seek refuge in special shelters, making the odds of survival a matter of logistics, managed by the government of the United States. In The Rapture, however,

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2 Among those critics who did not condemn the ending of the film is America’s most famous film critic, Roger Ebert. In his review, first published in the Chicago Sunday Times, he argues: “It has been accurately observed that Tolkin’s special effects in the closing sequences leave something to be desired. True, George Lucas or Ridley Scott could have done more with the River Styx, given several million dollars. But the budget necessary for those special effects would have compromised the film—no one would have risked that kind of money on a movie this daring. Besides, it isn’t how the effects look that’s really important, it’s what they say.”


4 The similarities between DEEP IMPACT and the other film about a comet hitting planet Earth released in 1998, ARMAGEDDON, are obvious. For a comparison between the two films, see Geoff King (2000), 164-173.
the issue of who (and how many people) will be saved is treated in a different manner.

In this film, salvation is represented by the notion of the rapture. In the biblical conception of the term, the rapture is defined as “the final assumption of Christians into heaven during the end-time according to Christian theology.” Salvation will only be offered to those who believe in God and, even then, salvation may not be certain, as Sharon is to find out. This blatant depiction of God’s cruel judgment of mankind, combined with a straightforward, what can be labeled a Christian fundamentalistic, interpretation of the biblical Apocalypse makes THE RAPTURE an extraordinary and disturbing film. Tolkin’s film could be seen as an early and partially, at least financially, unsuccessful precursor to the unprecedented popularity the Rapture narrative has gained in the last decade. While Tolkin’s film failed to deliver the notion of the rapture to the masses, the popular evangelical novel series Left Behind succeeded gloriously.6

Margaret Miles provides a relevant discussion of the film’s depiction of Christian Fundamentalism in particular. The representation of fundamentalism in film is exceptional. Despite Tolkin’s self-professed intentions, Miles argues, his efforts to tackle

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5 This definition is taken from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary.
6 The Left Behind series, consisting of twelve books in total, is conceived by evangelical prophecy writer Timothy LaHaye and written by evangelical fiction writer Jerry Jenkins. The first book, entitled Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days, was published in late 1995. This book opens with the crucial moment of Rapture: Jesus secretly returns to earth to gather his believers. The true believers are taken to heaven and the world they leave behind is plunged into chaos. In the remainder of the series, which spans a seven year period called the tribulation, the world suffers plagues, famine, and the emergence of the Antichrist (in the guise of a world leader). After this, Jesus triumphantly returns to earth, defeats the Antichrist and establishes his kingdom. An estimated 60 million books have been sold (estimates of the number of potential readers vary between 80 million and 120 million), making the series only second in popularity to the Bible itself. For a short review of the first two films based on the Left Behind book series and its connection to THE RAPTURE, see Lucius Shephard’s review (2003) in Fantasy & Science Fiction. In a recent study on the book series, Amy Johnson Frykholm argues that the rapture narrative is popular in both religious and secular circles and is thus “a fluid part of the broader culture” (2004: 4).
the subject of fundamentalist rapture belief are misguided. The film presents a distorted picture of fundamentalism. The main reason for this is located in the scene in which Sharon kills her daughter Mary, resulting in an “implicit equation of fundamentalism with murderous insanity” (Seeing 104). The Rapture’s depiction of religion’s influence on behavior, Miles argues, can be summarized as follows: “religious commitment motivates [...] pathological compulsiveness and murder” (103). In her overview of the negative reviews of The Rapture, Miles notes that only one reviewer picked up on the child murder. The film, in contrast to, for instance, Martin Scorsese’s 1988 film The Last Temptation of Christ, which caused great controversy at the time of its release, was critically trashed and subsequently forgotten.

I re-examine this film, not because it should be redeemed, but because it represents the doomed position of a woman at the center of an apocalypse. Sharon’s terrible fate echoes that of a biblical predecessor, the “Woman Clothed with the Sun” from Revelation. In The Rapture’s representation of the Apocalypse, in contrast to Alien3, the woman does not fulfill a heroic and martyrlike function, which would enable her to escape victimization through the voluntary act of martyrdom. Sharon is a failed martyr at best. Instead, the film forcefully taps into the misogynist spirit of Revelation. I pursue a more nuanced account. My reading of The Rapture may ultimately not be capable of saving the heroine and her biblical counterpart from their poor destiny; yet, the issue of misogyny needs to be addressed.
Surviving the Apocalypse: The Final Girl

According to feminist theologians, the defining characteristic of apocalyptic discourses is their malignant representation of women. A particularly spiteful passage is Revelation 17:16: “And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire.”

In her evaluation of Revelation, Susan Garrett, in The Women’s Bible Commentary, emphasizes that the book consistently uses metaphorical language based on feminine imagery (377). With regard to the passage quoted above, Garrett writes that the author takes great pleasure in “describing the gory destruction of the woman Babylon” (381). There are three main female figures in Revelation: Jezebel, the Whore of Babylon, and the Woman clothed with the sun.7 The first two are sexually impure, since they are no (longer) virgins. This unchecked sexuality is dangerous and must be constrained through the use of violence. The Woman clothed with the sun, is a stereotypical representation of feminine purity and virginity, despite the fact that she is pregnant. None of the three women, however, escapes physical or mental punishment.8 The objection that Revelation deploys metaphors, and as such cannot be

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7 All three figures are symbolic. Jezebel, however, is probably based on an actual historical figure, most likely a false prophet. See, Van Henten (2003: 745-759).
8 For a close analysis of the basic female archetypes in Revelation, see Tina Pippin (1992). The crucial exception to the negative feminist interpretation of Revelation is Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, whose work is characterized by attempts to redeem the text and (re)interpret it positively from a feminist perspective. This takes the form of a socio-historical reading of biblical texts, coupled with an attempt to undermine the patriarchal stance of the Bible. Schüssler-Fiorenza seeks to read biblical texts as useful guides for dealing with present, often political, situations involving inequality and injustice. Interestingly, Pippin’s dissertation follows Schüssler-Fiorenza’s proposed liberation hermeneutic. Pippin applies a Marxist hermeneutic to reveal the narrative of Revelation as “resistance literature.” As she states: “The Apocalypse was the literary equivalent to a book burning or a food riot or a violent revolutionary takeover” (1987: 158).
held responsible for its horrible depiction of femininity, is a fallacy, as Garrett points out. The text creates a problem for women readers, Garrett argues, and the “dehumanizing way in which [John] phrased his message will remain deeply troubling” (377).

Catherine Keller formulates it as follows: “Here is the paradox for feminist meditation on ‘the end of the world’: while innumerable women have found means of private resistance and public voice in the symbols of the Apocalypse, overt or subvert, the toxic misogyny of much of its imagery cannot […] be flushed out of the text or its tradition” (Apocalypse Now and Then 29, emphasis added).

The premise that apocalyptic discourses are violent, oppressive, and misogynistic supplies the motivation, for women in particular, to deal with these types of texts and representations. As Keller points out elsewhere, the cultural and religious grip apocalyptic discourse has on Christianity and Western culture should not be underestimated (“Why Apocalypse Now?”). Pippin displays a similar awareness, and endeavors to read the Apocalypse differently. I focus here on her study Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image. Crucial for Pippin’s analysis of Revelation and related apocalyptic texts, ranging from Hollywood cinema to apocalyptic theme parks in the US, is the reading method she deploys, coupled with her unease about the issue of gender and sexuality that these apocalyptic texts convey. Pippin situates herself as a postmodern, interdisciplinary reader of texts (Apocalyptic Bodies 118), albeit with a solid background in biblical studies. As Pippin states in her conclusion, in her work she is “resisting the master (pun intended) narrative and the traditional reading strategies, not in order to set up yet another master narrative but to create another site/space for a resisting reading” (118).

Pippin’s “resisting reading” takes into account strategies adopted from semiotics, Marxist feminist critical theories, and
deconstruction. Taken together, her postmodern approach to biblical narrative engenders a reading “unattainable by historically grounded biblical exegesis” (118). Nevertheless, Pippin’s starting point for her reading of the Apocalypse necessarily originates from the biblical texts.

I start with Pippin’s interpretation of the several apocalyptic texts in the Bible and the ways in which these texts can be understood as sequels. According to Pippin, they should be read in relation to each other. Pippin’s connection of Bible and film, via the idea of the sequel, leads to her reading of The Rapture. I will take that reading as the starting point of my own analysis of the representation of the end of the film.

In her introduction, Pippin puts forward the idea that the Apocalypse (or any Apocalypse, since the Bible contains more than one apocalyptic story) should be understood as a sequel. A sequel refers to “a work which follows another work and can be complete in itself and seen in relation to the former and also what follows it” (Apocalyptic Bodies 1). The use of this metaphor from contemporary cinema culture enables Pippin to address two important characteristics of the apocalyptic genre. First, if the Apocalypse is to be understood as a sequel, then what constitutes the predecessor of the Apocalypse? Where can one find the original, first apocalyptic story ever told? Pippin’s answer is unequivocal: “the chaos of apocalypse cannot be essentialized” (1). The disorder found in the text mirrors its disorganized hermeneutical history. Pippin opts for an understanding of apocalyptic discourse as never-ending and open.

Yet, in a rhetorical move, Pippin departs from her anti-essentialist stance to outline the history of apocalyptic sequels that can be found in biblical as well as extra-biblical texts. This outline serves to bolster her contention that apocalypses adhere to the rule of the sequel, understood here in the frame of the sequel in cinema. Hence, Pippin reads the notion of the sequel preposterously: the
contemporary, cinematic concept of the sequel is transposed onto an older, non-cinematic discourse, the Bible. This transposition gives the notion of the sequel its particular appropriateness. Sequels, for instance, those in the genre of the horror film, and the indeterminate sequence of biblical apocalypses, Pippin argues, share a common denominator: as a viewer, or reader, of those narratives, “one expects [...] a replaying of the violence in a grander scale” (3). She writes

The Apocalypse of John is a sequel of the Hebrew Bible and Pseudepigrapha; its details of the end time violence are more extreme. Sequels only produce more horror. Much of the Apocalypse of John (like Mark 13) comes from Daniel and other Hebrew Bible apocalypses. New Testament apocalypses are thus sequels of sequels. Some of the apocalypses in early Christianity (sequels of the earlier apocalypses) are even more descriptive than the Apocalypse of John (3).\(^9\)

Pippin’s historical sketch underlines her argument that apocalyptic discourse evades essentializing regulation and classification (“sequels of sequels”).

I surmise that Pippin’s inventory functions to denounce apocalypse as a genre. The phrase “more descriptive” euphemistically points to the sliding scale of extremes the biblical and extra-biblical apocalypses display. Like the sequel of a horror film, which adheres to the unwritten rule that the sequel needs to have a higher body count than the previous installment(s),

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\(^9\) Pippin opts to name what is generally known as the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse of John instead. By doing so, both the nature of the narrative (“apocalypse” means “revelation,” but by naming it “apocalypse” instead of the more euphemistical “revelation,” the violent connotations of the word “apocalypse” are put to maximum use) and its authorial source (a man named John) take center stage.
apocalypses tend to get bloodier and more violent.\textsuperscript{10} Revelation, a text of horror, is the final chapter in a sequence of apocalypses. Incidentally, the phrase “the final chapter” is often used as a subtitle of film titles.\textsuperscript{11} The phrase is also explicitly used in marketing campaigns for film sequels: the last installment that will make all the previous ones seem trivial in comparison.

However, biblical apocalypses, particularly Revelation, also deviate from the cinematic template of the sequel. Unlike cinematic sequels, Revelation's biblical horror is absolute: “nothing and no one survives on the earthly plane” (2). Destruction is complete, as Pippin suggests with reference to Revelation 21:1: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” Revelation is the equivalent of the final sequel in film, the one that will end all sequels. Because of Revelation’s total destruction, an important prerequisite for a successful sequel as it functions within the context of cinema is missing: there are no survivors.

I want to expand on Pippin’s observation on the absence of survivors. Although she mentions a few examples of “postmodern horror [films where] the female protagonist survives” (2), the full reference to this notion is missing. Carol Clover’s 1992 study of gender in the horror film titled, \textit{Men, Women, and Chain Saws}, argues that every horror film follows the same murderous pattern: a killer massacres a group of people, but one resourceful young

\textsuperscript{10} In another chapter, Pippin compares the Apocalypse to horror literature and remarks, “the Apocalypse is less like the shower scene in \textit{PSYCHO} than the all-out killing in \textit{THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE}” (83). Both films have spurred an impressive list of sequels. In the case of \textit{PSYCHO}, four sequels, a remake, and a television spin off. \textit{THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE} has three sequels, one prequel, and one recent remake. It should be noted that \textit{PSYCHO} is generally regarded as the starting point of the “slasher flick.” Moreover, there is an obvious intertextual connection between the two films. Both \textit{PSYCHO} and \textit{THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE} are based upon the true story of serial killer Ed Gein.

\textsuperscript{11} For instance, \textit{FRIDAY THE 13TH: THE FINAL CHAPTER} (USA: Joseph Zito, 1984) and \textit{PUPPET MASTER 5: THE FINAL CHAPTER} (USA: Jeff Burr, 1994).
woman, who Clover has famously typified as “the Final Girl,” is able
to outsmart the killer and survive. The survival of this Final Girl is
the narratological condition for one or more sequels, in which the
ciller returns to finish the job.\textsuperscript{12} Pippin proceeds to delineate the
apocalyptic logic and its “no survivors” mentality.” The surviving
“winners” may suffer martyrdom on earth but gain eternal life in
heaven. The losers survive in a sense, so they can suffer eternal
torture” (2).

Survival is to be experienced in either heaven or hell. The
winners and losers are set apart by the strength of their belief in
God. This apparently simple requirement for eternal life, a steadfast
belief in God, proves to be difficult in the case of The Rapture’s
Sharon. Pippin criticizes the “us versus them” logic implicit in rapture
belief. The notion of the chosen insider, the “us,” in opposition to the
damned outsider, “them,” is represented in the ending of the film.

Pippin discusses the film’s notorious ending briefly. Her
observations serve as the springboard for my analysis of the
character of Sharon and, particularly, the ending of the film. Sharon,
according to Pippin, “panics at the end [the moment of rapture],
refusing the grace of God and opting instead for hell” (2). I take issue
with this reading. Sharon might have panicked before, when she was
unable to kill herself but, at the moment of rapture, she is anything
but scared. Sharon does not “refuse the grace” of God, as Pippin
suggests. God’s “grace” is exemplified by his method of persuading
Sharon to bear witness to her love for God and be raptured. He
sends Sharon’s deceased daughter Mary, and the six-year-old
girl argues the case on behalf of God. Mary functions as a divine
messenger and attempts to convince her mother to love God despite
everything. God himself is conspicuously absent.

\textsuperscript{12} The classic example is HALLOWEEN (USA: John Carpenter, 1978) and its series of
numerical sequels, HALLOWEEN II (1981) to HALLOWEEN 5 (1989), plus three ad-
In the final scene of the film, Sharon resolutely declines being raptured, saying: “No, I don’t want to go.”\textsuperscript{13} Mary begs her mother to confess her love for God, so she can join her in heaven. Although heaven can be glimpsed in the distance, the prospect does not change Sharon’s mind. To the contrary, she persistently refuses God’s instant grace: “Why should I thank Him for so much suffering, Mary. So much pain on the earth that He created. Let me ask Him why.” In a final attempt to change Sharon’s mind, Mary asks her: “Do you know how long you’ll have to stay here?” When Sharon answers, “Forever,” she has accepted her condemnation to solitude. The film leaves her standing alone. The closing shot of the film, in which the camera slowly tracks out before the screen fades to black, underscores Sharon’s position as an apostate outsider.

In the apocalyptic logic of the chosen and the damned, Sharon’s fall from grace is now complete. Recall how Sharon ended up in the desert to begin with: she was initially the only member of her congregation “called” to go on account of the vision of her deceased husband Randy. This vision was so much an insider’s vision that, when Sharon asked the other members to join her in the desert to await the Apocalypse, the answer was, “We weren’t invited.” Yet, when she denounces God for making her kill her own daughter, Sharon chooses apostasy over salvation. She shifts from being a privileged insider to an outsider and is left standing at the gate, presumably forever. The God of \textit{The Rapture} is not merciful, but implacable in His final judgment. I cannot help but wonder: could Sharon be considered a Final Girl? Or, and this question I cannot shake off even after repeated viewings: Why can’t she

\textsuperscript{13} The film \textit{BOOK OF LIFE} (France/USA: Hal Hartley, 1998) deploys a similar scenario. Only here, it is Jesus Christ himself who gets cold feet and refuses to open the final seals of the Apocalypse. Instead of passing judgment on mankind by opening the book of life that contains the names of those who are saved, Jesus decides to give mankind another chance. The book of life, in this film cleverly represented as an Apple laptop computer, is kept closed for at least another thousand years.
be a Final Girl? The film leaves us with an image of her as the last woman standing, triggering the reflex of a possible cinematic sequel. According to Pippin, The Rapture has allowed no space for a possible way out for Sharon, or for her eventual triumphant return in a sequel. Biblical apocalypses have no Final Girl.

Irreconcilable Endings

I contend this is so because the two discourses at work, apocalyptic and cinematic, and the narratives they formulate, are ultimately irreconcilable. A cinematic depiction of the end is impossible. Precisely because The Rapture unveils, in the truly apocalyptic sense of the apocalypsis, the uncovering, the revelation of a truth, a cinematic representation of the end, it is difficult to come to terms with that end. There is a discrepancy between the literal and fundamentalist apocalyptic discourse and a cinematic one. It

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14 When read according to Carol Clover’s theory, the character of Sharon could never function as a Final Girl for the simple reason that Sharon is not a virgin. Strictly speaking, within Clover’s model this would be unacceptable, yet she herself mentions Ellen Ripley from the ALIEN saga as an example of a Final Girl (1992: 46). I would, therefore, venture a slight broadening of the category of the Final Girl. The attribute of feminine virginal purity would still be an important, but not an exclusive trait. By enlarging the category, a memorable character such as Ripley can be included. Kristin Thompson also argues for the inclusion of Ripley into the Final Girl category, “Ripley’s final solitary escape from the ship and conflict with the alien in the shuttle may owe something to the travails of the Final Girl” (1999: 386, note 2).

15 According to Michael Tolkin, there was an alternative ending. In an interview with Film Comment, he explains, "The original ending as written was, after the Seventh Call Sharon says, ‘Oh, I get it now, it’s all clear to me, how could I have been so stupid, please take me.’ And Mary says, ‘you can’t come, you have to see it before the Last Call. Anyone can see Heaven after the Last Call. You have to take it on faith.’ Every woman working on the film […] came to me privately and had a long talk with me why she thought that if we kept that ending I was selling Sharon out and her entire life was a shaggy dog story and she had learned nothing, she was compromising at the moment when it was really important for her not to compromise. So I wrote another ending. And then when we shot the original ending, we shot something that was really beautiful using a very complicated special effect. A $100,000 later, the effects house scratched the negative, so we had to throw it out. […] I came across some stills of it a couple of weeks ago and I was just crushed, because it was really great-looking" (58-59). Gavin Smith (1994) in Film Comment.
is, of course, possible to believe in the divine fulfillment of God’s judgment as it is written in Revelation. Yet, the concrete visualization of this judgment is impossible within the medium of cinema. The two discourses cannot be combined. This leads to the paradox that the technologically most advanced of all visual arts, cinema, is incapable of representing the most extreme event imaginable.

This incapacity, I argue, is expressed both on the level of narrative and on the level of the image. The film’s ending exemplifies that cinema can only express the Apocalypse in a restricted manner. In the introduction to this study, I mentioned the paradox of apocalyptic anticipation followed by cancellation. This contradiction is the first reason why the completion of the end is impossible: it goes against the structural nature of these narratives. The apocalyptic narrative desires and prophesizes an end, but thrives on the actual delay of that end. Hollywood’s desire for the end does not so much suggest “apocalypse now” as “apocalypse never.” Or perhaps, “apocalypse later,” since the event is perpetually announced, yet perpetually postponed. Technically, and on the condition of a large enough budget, film should be able to visualize the Apocalypse. Yet, it seems that the story about the ultimate end is better told without

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16 Schüssler-Fiorenza argues that a forward movement that is neither linear-logical nor linear-temporal characterizes Revelation (1981, 1991). As such “it can best be envisioned as a conic spiral moving from the present to the eschatological future” (1981: 25-26). She rephrases this argument slightly in a later book, claiming “the author’s numerical interweaving of visions combines a cyclic form of repetition with a continuous forward movement” (1991: 33, emphasis added). However, Schüssler-Fiorenza adds, “paradoxically, this forward movement of the narrative leads not to a flight into a utopian future but anchors the reader in the present” (35). Ultimately, after Revelation has disclosed its “symbolic drama,” the reader is “returning and goes back to the starting point” (37, emphasis in text). This leads me to the conclusion that, even though Revelation is characterized by a cyclical, conical structure, which creates a forward movement, the end itself is never actually fully and conclusively reached.

17 In this sense, I cannot help but invoke Slavoj Zizek’s suggestion (following Lacan) that the prime purpose of desire is not fulfilment, but the replication of desire itself: desire seeks not its consummation, but its eternal prolongation. The desire of desire is to remain unconsummated for, once it is sated, desire ceases. Besides, the object of desire, in this case the end, the apocalypse, is empty, a void. Therefore, the end remains unfulfilled, destined to repeat itself perpetually. See for instance, Zizek’s reading of VERTIGO in Looking Awry.
that ultimate end included.\textsuperscript{17}

The apocalyptic climax becomes more complicated when it is represented visually. The film stays true to its fundamentalist core, and portrays a literal depiction of the events that are prophesized in Revelation. Mick Broderick argues that precisely the literal depiction of the Apocalypse is unsettling: “What is so discomforting and disconcerting about the film is its deliberate evasion of metaphor, allegory and allusion to signify the eschatological events, particularly since both Christian and Jewish apocalyptic is (un)ambiguously expressed in this manner.”

Refusing the symbolic realm, the film’s ending is not just bewildering but, I think, also unconvincing. The problem lies in the literal depiction of biblical scenes, in the sharp transition between the realistic diegesis of The Rapture and the fantastic events of the Apocalypse. These apocalyptic images, which originate from text, words, are bluntly translated into image. The imagery of Revelation, when read, is complicated and fantastic. As Schüssler-Fiorenza argues, the strength of its imagery lies in the fact that it invites “imaginative participation.” However, she adds: “The symbolization and narrative movement of Revelation elicit emotions, feelings, and convictions that cannot, and should not, be fully conceptualized” \textit{(Invitation 18)}.

Expressing this imagery in a visual manner is not only nearly impossible, given that Revelation’s bizarre images often affront logical-rational sensibilities, but also robs it of its persuasive power \textit{(18, 31)}. Yet, despite Schüssler-Fiorenza’s doubts about the representability of Revelation, the fact remains that the book has engendered countless works of visual art. One of the most famous examples of apocalyptic art, the woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer, is discussed below.

The literal visualization of Revelation is the weakness of The Rapture. Initially, the film situates the events prior to the Apocalypse
in a realistic mode of representation, carefully maintaining the impression of reality. According to Elsaesser and Buckland, realism in film should be understood as “nothing more than an effect of the successful positioning of the spectator into an imaginary relation to the image, a position which creates a sense that the film’s space and diegesis is unified and harmonious” (202).

The realistic mode, which strives to uphold the logic of unity and harmony, is violated by the advent of the Apocalypse. Though the fantastic nature of the Apocalypse is initially represented in a realistic and non-metaphorical manner, conforming to the film’s established impression of reality, for a viewer, THE RAPTURE’s cinematic depiction of the Apocalypse does not convince. A shift occurs halfway through the apocalyptic sequence, which triggers this particular feeling.

THE RAPTURE’s treatment of the Apocalypse begins with the manifestation of Revelation’s four horsemen.\footnote{The relevant verses are Revelation 6:1-8. “Then I saw the lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out, as with a voice of thunder, ‘Come’ I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer. When he opened the} They appear in the middle of the diegesis, chasing Sharon and police deputy Foster down the road. \[Rapture1\] Their sudden appearance in the diegesis is shocking, yet effective. The established realism is inter-penetrated by the supernatural. This intervention is seamless, and forfeits a gesture toward a symbolic representation. The human and divine characters unequivocally share the same frame. This part of the sequence is effective, because it capitalizes on this seamlessness: Revelation’s third horseman, the one on a red horse carrying a huge sword, chases Sharon and Foster. Through the conventional methods of editing a chase, human and divine agents interact in the same frame.

In the second part of the sequence, however, incredibility takes over. The impression of reality is broken by the use of a
special effect. A figure seated on a cow, holding a chandelier in his hand, appears in the sky. [Rapture2] The representation is ineffective because the superimposed figure is hopelessly out of scale in relation to the film frame. There are two types of special effects, invisible and visible. The first type simulates events in the actual world that are too expensive or inconvenient to produce. The visible special effects simulate events that are impossible in the actual world. The crucial aesthetic point, Elsaesser and Buckland point out, is that, while this type of special effect is clearly visible, they “attempt to hide behind an iconic appearance (or photographic credibility); that is, they are visible special effects masquerading as invisible effects” (210).

In other words, the visible special effects attempt to confer realism upon an object that does not exist in the actual world. In The Rapture, the appearance of a cow in the sky is created through superimposition, a technical process through which two separately filmed events are printed on the same strip of film. Elsaesser and Buckland discuss second seal, I heard the second living creature call out ‘Come!’ And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword. When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, ‘Come!’ I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, ‘A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!’ When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out ‘Come!’ I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.”
this particular type of visible special effect in detail. Theoretically, they argue, superimposition fabricates a “spatio-temporal unity, giving the impression that the two separate events are taking place at the same diegetic space and time” (210). However, this process has technical shortcomings that are difficult to disguise. Apart from the disparity in scale, which I have mentioned above, there is another problem. The most common setback with superimposition, which can be observed in The Rapture, is the loss of resolution and grain. The image of the cow is noticeably “softer” than the surrounding image. Furthermore, the lighting of the cow, which seems to come from above, does not match the lighting pattern of the landscape on top of which the cow materializes. As Elsaesser and Buckland conclude, even though superimposition may “give the impression that two separate events share the same screen space, they eventually fall short in convincing the increasingly sophisticated spectator that the separate events occupy the same diegesis” (210-211).

The evaluation of superimposition as an unconvincing special effect is felt in the climax of The Rapture. Contrary to the beginning of the sequence, the chase, the second part of the sequence is unable to convince the spectator that the human and the divine characters share the same diegetic world. Consequently, the initial seamlessness is lost and, with that, the credibility of an emerging Apocalypse. For that reason, The Rapture's representation of the Apocalypse, despite its use of sophisticated cinematic technology, falls flat. This strengthens my contention that, despite the medium's general technological prowess, representations of the Apocalypse are impossible.

The Rapture's depiction of the Apocalypse is exceptional. There is, however, an intriguing precedent. The silent film The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (USA: Rex Ingram, 1921) offers an intertextual connection with The Rapture on the levels of content matter as well as technology. Although The Four Horsemen of the
APOCALYPSE is not a religiously themed but an anti-war film, the imagery of the Apocalypse is remarkably similar to THE RAPTURE’s images of the four horsemen. I compare the two films’ employment of a literal vision of Revelation. I argue that the earlier film, oddly enough, succeeds in its depiction of the Apocalypse, where the contemporary one fails.

The film, situated during the years preceding World War I, tells the epic tale of a family torn apart between nationalistic sentiments, as one part of it is French and the other is German. The main character Julio, played by Rudolph Valentino, is the protagonist. Unlike his two brothers-in-law, who choose to fight for the German and French armies, Julio just wants to dance the tango in the salons of Paris. His indifference is challenged when, on the eve of France’s mobilization, he meets the mysterious character called “the Stranger.” This man, who strongly resembles a Christ-like figure, opens a book and begins to prophesize: “The Revelations of St. John as conceived by the great master—Albrecht Dürer.”

[FourHorsemen1] When the stranger proclaims that the “age of fulfillment” has begun, a shot of a female angel holding a scroll is shown. I focus on the transition between the realistic and the fantastic in this scene. Contrary to THE RAPTURE’s depiction, the arrival of the Apocalypse is framed through the narrating act of a character. Moreover, this act is embedded by the use of Dürer’s woodcut. The use of the woodcut of the horsemen has a double effect. First, since this work is probably one of the most recognizable depictions of
the Apocalypse, an immediate intertextual association is established. The woodcut signals the Apocalypse. [FourHorsemen2] The film follows Dürer’s representation faithfully. As Kovacs and Rowland point out, Dürer was the first artist to depict the four horsemen as a quartet. After that, many artists have closely linked all four horsemen (93). In The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the horsemen appear as a tightly knit quartet, strengthening the influence of Dürer’s work on the cinematic rendering of the horsemen. Second, the woodcut serves as a transition between the realistic and the fantastic. The static insert of the woodcut temporarily breaks the flow of images and “opens the door” to another dimension. The apocalyptic events do not break into the diegesis by themselves, but are mediated through the woodcuts of Dürer and the story of the stranger. The Apocalypse is a representation of the stranger’s inner vision, a representation of his mental subjectivity. This is underscored by the editing, which emphasizes the narrator’s point of view through the use of close-ups of his face as he tells the dreadful story of the four horsemen.

In a smooth transition, the film shifts from a mental representation to a literal one. After the stranger has concluded his story, he suddenly points out the window where, indeed, the four horsemen emerge riding in the sky. [FourHorsemen3] + [FourHorsemen4] The presence of the four horsemen in the diegesis has now become literal. The stranger, Julio, and his servant look out the window and see the horsemen. The four horsemen
appear three more times at crucial moments in the film. The final scene of the film, which drives home its pacifist theme, shows the stranger at a massive burial site commemorating the countless dead soldiers of World War I. There the stranger again points to the sky to the retreating four horsemen.

I argue that a specific narrative device is responsible for the smooth shift between the realistic and fantastic realm. The narrator, who appears to be simultaneously of this world and of another, functions as mediator between the two modes of representation. In addition, on a stylistic level, one can argue that the film’s black and white photography is effective as a way of portraying the fantastic. The recurring shot of the four horsemen in the sky is an instance of trick photography, namely superimposition. The image of the galloping horsemen is laid over another, in this case an image of the sky, either by double exposure in the camera or in laboratory printing. Contrary to *The Rapture*’s similar use of superimposition, here the result is effective. The special effect does not disturb the tenuous balance between the film’s established impression of reality and the unexpected, yet in this case credible, appearance of the fantastic.

*The Rapture*’s discordant rupture of filmic reality gives the viewer an unconvincing encounter with the Apocalypse. The impossibility to render the events of the Apocalypse in a credible manner partly lies in *The Rapture*’s debatable artistic choices. Technical flaws further weaken these choices. Specifically when viewed alongside *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, *The Rapture* points to the manifest and relentless dichotomy between biblical words and images. Whereas *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* manages to overcome this dichotomy by means of specific aesthetical choices, namely the use of black and white photography (which was, granted, a technological inevitability at the time) and a narratological device, the film’s persistent use of a realistic mode of representation signals its cinematic collapse. *The Rapture*’s one-on-
one translation of biblical words into cinematic images results in a materialized, yet disappointing, Apocalypse.

In spite of an Apocalypse fulfilled, The Rapture does not end in Apocalypse. As I argued above, what interests me most is what happens to the female protagonist after the Apocalypse has taken place. Reading the character of Sharon as a possible Final Girl has proven to be unproductive, despite the fact that she is the sole survivor. The survivor theme leads to an association with a female figure in Revelation, the woman clothed with the sun, whose predicament echoes Sharon’s. They share another metaphorical characteristic: they are characters of light and wisdom. In what follows, these two female figures are subjected to a preposterous reading.

A Possible Sequel? The Woman Clothed with the Sun

The assessment of apocalyptic discourse by means of a preposterous analysis is paradoxical and warrants elaboration. Whereas the former, by definition, assumes teleology and a historical linearity that culminates in a final ending, the latter problematizes these aspects altogether. A preposterous approach is characterized by temporal loops, rather than causal linearity. Preposterous time is not linear, but presupposes time to be “folded.” The concept of the fold works as a way of conceptualizing time as infinite and curvilinear. Since the two conceptions of history, apocalyptic and preposterous, are driven by diametrically opposed conceptions of temporality, the coupling of the two seems problematic. Yet, a preposterous analysis of The Rapture can counter and reinterpret misogynist readings of the Apocalypse, exemplified by the fate of The Rapture’s female character Sharon.

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I attempt one final encounter with the Apocalypse. In order to do so, I return to the source text, Revelation, and its problematic representation of female figures. The woman clothed with the sun is unmistakably a mother figure. In Revelation 12:5-6, her crucial role is spelled out: “And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and his throne; and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.”

In common interpretations of this passage, attention is focused on the figure of the son. Many scholars assume that the son should be identified as Jesus Christ. James Resseguie argues differently; he claims that the son should not be interpreted as Jesus Christ, but as a representation of “those who remain faithful” (144). The mother is thus the mother of the group of people who will be saved. After giving birth, a dragon, Satan, chases her but, through the protection of God, she manages to escape “into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time” (Revelation 12:14). David Aune emphasizes that this flight “into the wilderness,” or rather, the flight from “desert to desert, occurs in a variety of apocalyptic contexts” (Aune, “Revelation 6-16” 691). The desert should not be understood as a geographical place, but as a symbolic place of refuge.

The figure of the woman clothed with the sun can be read through the character of Sharon, making the former a preposterous manifestation of the latter figure. This reading focuses on the features that become observable when the woman clothed with the sun is considered though the character of Sharon. The film emphatically points out the connection between the two women.

21 Compare Resseguie’s interpretation with David E. Aune, who states that the male child should be read as “the Messiah of Jewish eschatological expectation” (1998: 688).
After Randy’s death, Sharon receives a vision of her husband in the desert. This vision is conveyed to her through a photo-developing machine, which shows her photos of unknown people in a desert and the miraculous apparition of Randy on these pictures. On the soundtrack, functioning as a sound bridge, we hear the voice of the boy, the young prophet of Sharon’s congregation. He reads Revelation 12:6: “and the woman fled into the desert, where she had a place prepared for her by God.” The quotation serves as an explanation for the privileged knowledge and subsequent task Sharon has been assigned, possibly from God.

A comparison of the similarities between the two characters strengthens this reading. They give birth to a child who is endowed with specific powers, and both are incapable of raising that child, as it is taken away from them. The two texts share the motif of seizure (of the child), which leads to the apotheosis of the child of the woman clothed with the sun as well as Sharon’s daughter Mary. Apotheosis should be understood as the elevation of someone to a divine status, which is precisely what happens to Mary after Sharon shoots her. I understand Sharon’s killing of her daughter as an act of supreme faith in God and, more importantly, as an act of faith ordered by God. At least, that is the way Sharon initially perceives it.

Like Abraham who almost sacrificed his son Isaac in order to prove his faith, so Sharon is willing to sacrifice her daughter. Sharon’s unconditional faith in God and the imminent rapture enables her to grant her daughter’s wish to be reunited with her father in heaven, though it means Sharon has to kill the person she loves the most. By shooting Mary, the little girl is instantly deified, taken up to God. In the remainder of the film, Mary returns twice to act as His messenger, urging Sharon to demonstrate her faith in

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22 Aune mentions this recurring motif in his commentary on Revelation 12:5 (1998: 689).
God. Sadly, Sharon has lost her faith because of her supreme act of motherly love. The problematic concept of deadly, motherly love is represented differently than in the previous chapter on *Alien*3. In that film, the mother’s infanticide results in her elevation to the ranks of the martyr.

Another similarity is the decrease of the women’s role in the narrative with the birth of the child. As Pippin remarks with regard to the woman clothed with the sun: “after her reproductive activity she is no longer useful” (“Heroine” 72). She gives birth to a son, who is immediately “snatched away” and taken to God. After that, a dragon chases her to a place in the wilderness. There she is to remain for an amount of time. For her as a character, the part has ended. A similar diminishing in narrative importance happens to Sharon.23 The first half of the film sets out to portray Sharon as a loose woman, a whore if you will, leading to the sequence where she begins to despair of the life she leads.24 After her intensely desired conversion, the narrative takes a six-year jump, during which Sharon has married Randy and has given birth to Mary. Crucially, the event that disrupts Sharon’s blissful life as a good Christian housewife is the violent death of Randy. This tragedy leads to Sharon’s vision of Randy in the desert, which she interprets as a sign that she and Mary should flee to the desert to be reunited with him. Sharon is no longer an active agent in the narrative; to the contrary; she has handed over her agency to God (and, to a lesser extent, to Randy).

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23 The marginalization of female characters recurs throughout the Bible, that is to say, it can be observed in the Old Testament, Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament. As Athalya Brenner remarks, “In the Bible, in biblical interpretation and in theology, in religion and in religious texts, women and femininity and female sexuality may be loved; however, they are also and habitually marginalized into foreign Others” (2001: 243).

24 Here Revelation’s other female figure, the Whore of Babylon (Revelation 18), comes to mind. As such, one could argue that THE RAPTURE charts the transformation of Sharon from a whore to a true believer (woman clothed with the sun) to an apostate, robbed of the light of belief.
Both the woman clothed with the sun and Sharon are denied access to the realm of the chosen ones. At first, Resseguie remarks, the woman clothed with the sun is a source of light in the narrative but, after the Apocalypse, when the new heaven and the new earth are installed, “her role of illuminating a darkened world is accomplished” (143). She is no longer needed. Compare this with Sharon’s conversion and her role as a literal and metaphorical source of illumination and enlightenment. Immediately after her conversion, Sharon begins to spread the word of God: “God made me an information operator for a reason. I’m in the position to spread His word to hundreds of people everyday, personally. One to one.” The film underscores Sharon’s pure belief, visually expressed in the lighting of her character, rather bluntly. One critic observed that, after Sharon finds God, this faith is cinematically expressed in pronounced backlighting of her character, resulting in a kind of aureole.  

This reading of Sharon as a “source of light” is strengthened by a close analysis of the mise-en-scène, principally the film’s use of lighting. Indeed, the presence or absence of light is the key to understanding the character of Sharon. The mise-en-scène cues the spectator to take notice of and invest meaning in the evolving lighting patterns that surround Sharon. The scenes leading up to Sharon’s conversion are situated in either the grey and blue setting of the workplace or various bedrooms at night. Obviously, the mise-en-scène suggests that, as a result of her sordid lifestyle, Sharon lives her life in (semi) darkness.

The conversion itself, preceded by the scene in which Sharon attempts to shoot herself, is almost comic in its literal deployment of the expression “seeing the light.” When Sharon opens the Bible and begins to read, we first hear music, and then a light

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25 This element of the mise-en-scène did not elude Caryn James of vv, who somewhat cynically remarks with regard to Sharon’s conversion, “by now Sharon is usually seen with a halo of light around her head, which suggests the final message of THE RAPTURE: Come the Apocalypse, there will be a lot of backlighting” (1991).
shines on her face. She has found God. From that moment on, Sharon constantly bathes in light, specifically sunlight. She is clothed with the sun. An example of this parallel between sunlight and religious belief is the scene where Sharon is sunbathing with a friend. Despite Sharon’s fervent attempts at persuasion and conversion, this friend remains a skeptic. The scene’s mise-en-scene is dominated by sunlight, which charts Sharon’s development as a believer. Contrary to her skeptical friend, who does not wear a hat and is directly exposed to the sun, Sharon wears a sun hat. The presence of the hat could be interpreted as a metaphor: Sharon is a devout believer, but one who takes caution not to get sunstroke. In other words, at this moment, Sharon is not yet blinded by her belief.

When Sharon and Mary flee to the desert, the light metaphor becomes more pronounced and the sunlight takes on an increasingly ambivalent meaning. On one hand, it signifies Sharon’s strong belief; on the other, the abundance of light is dangerous; it is now too strong. This is delicately accentuated by the fact that Sharon has forgotten to pack a sun hat. The strength of the desert light foretells the extent to which the light of belief becomes blinding and, ultimately, deadly. After the killing of Mary, Sharon has lost the light. She has killed the thing she loves the most, the light of her life, her daughter. Moreover, after the act, Sharon has lost her faith, her guiding as well as blinding light. It is no coincidence that she flees from the desert at night, while the signs of the Apocalypse emerge. From that moment on, the light of the sun is absent from the diegesis. Sharon is to await her fate in various shades of darkness.

In light of all this, I take a closer look at the final scene of the film and its play with light and darkness. This close analysis strengthens the connection between the biblical woman clothed with the sun and her secular counterpart, Sharon who, as I argued above, is also clothed with the sun. The sequence begins immediately after Sharon and police deputy Foster have been partly raptured. They
find themselves in an undefined place, somewhere between earth and heaven.

The beginning and ending of this sequence mirror each other. The sequence starts with total darkness and ends with total darkness. However, the darkness at the beginning is significantly different from the darkness at the end. In the beginning, the darkness leads to an increasing amount of light, whereas the final darkness is irreversible. The extra-diegetic marker of the credit sequence, the most obvious sign that the film is over, emphasizes this permanent darkness. It functions as the way to terminate the narrative irrefutably. In general, the distribution of light across the frame and directed at the characters in the frame is even. In the realm of the rapture, each character supposedly has an equally strong belief, which is visually expressed in even lighting. This sequence can be divided into two parts. The first part consists of thirteen shots.

1. Fade-in from a black frame. Long shot of Sharon’s daughter Mary. The girl is emphatically lit from behind; the outline of her body is highly contrasted with the dark surrounding her [Rapture3]

2. Plan Américain of Sharon and Foster, who walk toward Mary. They are also lit from behind [Rapture4]
The first two shots parallel each other in lighting the characters from behind. As such, one could interpret these two shots as establishing a relationship of equality between the three characters. However, the fact that Mary is framed by herself in each shot, until the end of the sequence, hints at her singular status.

3. Possible point-of-view shot of Mary by Sharon and Foster. This shot is subjective because, like Sharon and Foster, it is tracking in on Mary [Rapture5]

4. Medium close-up of Sharon and Foster, still approaching Mary [Rapture6]

5. Medium close-up of Mary. The background behind is slowly illuminated [Rapture7]

Shot 5 is the first indication of a change in lighting: Mary, contrary to Sharon and Foster, is framed against an illuminated background.

The next five shots, 6 to 10, call attention to two points: first, they confirm Mary’s special status and, second, by placing Sharon and Foster in the same frame, stress the latter two’s shared situation, by means
of the so-called same-frame heuristic. This widely used heuristic posits that, if characters appear in the same frame, they are united. Conversely, if cutting separates them, they are in conflict (Elsaesser and Buckland 89-90).

6. Medium close-up of Sharon and Foster [Rapture8]
7. Medium close-up of Mary [Rapture9]
8. Repeat of shot 6
9. Repeat of shot 7
10. Repeat of shot 6
11. Close-up of Mary [Rapture10]
   Shot 11 breaks the pattern. This is the first close-up of the sequence.
12. Close-up of Foster, who declares his love for God and is instantly raptured [Rapture11]
   The next two shots, 12 and 13, ostensibly function as a reverse shot to shot eleven. They are balanced according to Hollywood narration, which dictates that close-ups are matched by close-ups and so forth, but the significance of shots 11 to 13 resides in the breaking up of the same-frame heuristic. Foster chooses God, Sharon does not.
13. Close-up of Sharon, screaming “No!” [Rapture12]
   Shot 13 is the closing shot of the first part of the final sequence.
14. Sharon and Mary enter the frameeft. Medium close-
up of the two of them walking. Sharon gets down on her knees to talk to Mary [Rapture13]
Between shot 13 and shot 14, which I mark as the beginning of the second part of the sequence, sits a peculiar transition. The editing does not skip a beat; yet, suddenly Sharon and Mary are walking.

This shot is odd, because the previous shots were all static. Shot 14 is a so-called match-on-action shot, but the preceding shot that necessarily sets in motion the action, in this case walking, is missing. It is possible that between shots 13 and 14 an indeterminate amount of story time has elapsed, although this cannot be argued decisively. This strange transition signals the timelessness to the state of being raptured, which corresponds to the notion that, after the Apocalypse, human time no longer prevails.

15. Close-up of Mary, frame left [Rapture14]
16. Close-up of Sharon, frame right [Rapture15]
17. Repeat of shot 15
18. Repeat of shot 16
19. Repeat of shot 15

Shots 15 to 19 are balanced shots, in which Mary still attempts to persuade Sharon to love God. The two characters are equally lighted and surrounded by darkness, implying equality in religious belief. Or, put differently, at
this moment Sharon could still be saved. The climax of the sequence starts with shot 20. Despite Mary’s ferocious arguing for God’s case, Sharon refuses to choose God. Mary already knows that this means that the two of them can no longer be together and begins to say goodbye.

20. Medium close-up of Mary, who embraces Sharon [Rapture16]

21. Frontal close-up of Sharon’s face [Rapture17]

22. Sideways close-up of Mary’s face [Rapture18]

23. Repeat of shot 21

Shot 21 and its repeat shot 23 are forceful close ups of Sharon’s face. These two shots favor Sharon’s emotion over Mary’s, hence the difference between a frontal close-up and sideways close-up. The use of close-ups aligns the spectator with Sharon and the difficult decision she is about to make.

24. Medium close-up of Sharon and Mary still locked in their embrace. They stand up and turn their backs to the camera, away from the viewer. They are facing the light of heaven [Rapture19]

25. Frontal medium close-up of Sharon and Mary. Mary disappears [Rapture20]

26. Close-up of Sharon. She is lit sideways. As the camera tracks out slowly, the light fades and the screen
In the final three shots of the sequence, the emphasis is again placed on the movement of the light. In their final moments together, shot 24 and 25, Sharon and Mary face the emerging light of heaven. Even this does not persuade Sharon to abandon her apostasy and only Mary disappears into heaven. The final shot is a frontal close up of Sharon, surrounded by darkness; she is dimly lit from behind and from the left side. The movement of the light matches the movement of the camera. The light as well as the camera retreat from Sharon and leave her alone in the dark. This final shot drives home the irrevocability of Sharon’s fate: she is swallowed up by the darkness—a darkness that represents the loss of her belief, and with that the people she loves the most, her husband and her daughter.

The character of Sharon is preposterous in the sense that she illuminates a number of similarities between herself and the woman clothed with the sun. These features illuminate the woman clothed with the sun from the perspective of Sharon, the later character. Reading from the present back to the past uncovers connections between these two female characters that the older text in itself would not reveal. Unsettlingly for the contemporary figure, eventually
the similarities are radically canceled. The film denies Sharon the possibility of an “afterlife” in Heaven. Initially, she is endowed with the light of the sun and the light of belief, only to be progressively stripped of that light in the end. This is in contrast to the woman clothed with the sun, who is given an afterlife with God. **The Rapture** is a radical interpretation of Revelation. It denies its main protagonist such a reward, while almost sadistically presenting that denial as her own choice. Sharon’s denial, her refusal to accept God, could be interpreted as an empowering act, yet the price she pays for this refusal is high. In the end, Sharon is the loser in a high stakes game with God. **The Rapture** closes the book indefinitely on both a possible sequel and a possible afterlife for Sharon, thus making it the most far-reaching Apocalypse imaginable.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have drawn attention to two recurring aspects of apocalyptic narratives: the malevolent estimation of women and the narrative’s need for an ending. I have attempted to challenge these persistent traits by undertaking three oppositional readings. The first reading attempted to counter the film’s misogynistic disposition. I used the interdisciplinary concept of the sequel (and the affiliated idea of the Final Girl) to argue against the misogynistic fate of Sharon. I extended Pippin’s idea that biblical apocalypses are governed by the cinematic concept of the sequel by arguing that Sharon, as a survivor of the Apocalypse in **The Rapture**, could be seen as an example of a Final Girl.

My second reading concerned the representation of the Apocalypse, specifically the idea of the rapture. I argued that the
film’s treatment of the fundamentalist notion uncovers the difficulty of cinematically representing the Apocalypse. I compared *The Rapture* with *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* on the basis of the photographic technique, superimposition, the two films use. Unexpectedly, the older film’s use of superimposition results in a credible depiction of the Apocalypse, whereas *The Rapture*’s representation falls flat. I concluded that film in general is reluctant in representing the Apocalypse. The reason for this reluctance lies in the paradox that cinematic apocalypses strive to reach the end, only to have that end canceled at the last moment. The cinematic representation of the end is persistently deferred and, as the example of *The Rapture* shows, for good reason since the representation of the Apocalypse proves to be difficult. The question of what constitutes a realistic, cinematic representation of the end of the world, cannot be answered.

Finally, I added a third, preposterous reading of *The Rapture*’s female protagonist. This reading underscores *The Rapture*’s apocalyptic misogyny. This analysis focused on the notion of light and on lighting as an instance of interdisciplinarity between religion and film. In the shot analysis of the final sequence of the film, I emphasized that the presence and absence of light should be understood in both a biblical and a cinematic sense. By using light as a guiding principle, the likeness between the woman clothed with the sun and Sharon is uncovered. However, the similarities between them are ultimately ruled out in the contemporary manifestation. The cinematic use of lighting, which initially strengthened the connection between the historically older figure and the newer figure, renders the heroine powerless once it is stripped away. In my readings, I have tried to empower the female character of *The Rapture*. However, in the end, the Apocalypse is still not a tale for women.