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CAST

Henry Czerny Frederic Mason

Mark O'Brien Aaron Smith

Mayko Nguyen Mary Hutton

Mimi Kuzyk Ethel Mason

Kate Corbett Doris

Nigel Bennett Graham

CREW

Directed by **Mark O'Brien**

Written by **Mark O'Brien**

Produced by **Mark O'Neill and Allison White**

Director of Photography **A.A. Scott McClellan**

Edited by **K. Spencer Jones**

Music by **Andrew Staniland**

Production Design by **Jason Clarke**



WASHED IN THE BLOOD: SPIRITUALITY IN THE MODERN HORROR FILM

by Sean Hogan

Given the continuing commercial viability of horror cinema, the heavily cyclical nature of the field is hardly surprising. Whenever a new genre movie hits it big, scores of money hungry producers inevitably start lining up to copy it. Ever since Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996) resuscitated the then-moribund horror film and gave rise to a wave of neo-slashers, we have seen a steady procession of such trends.

But one of the more notable developments of recent years has been the divergence between mainstream horror and the type of genre film commonly represented by the output of US indie studio A24: the so-called “elevated” or art house horror movie (in its own way, as much of a definable sub-genre as literary fiction is). Whereas popular mainstream genre films from bygone years—*Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Shining* (1980)—can easily stand alongside such allegedly elevated contemporary works as *It Follows* (2014) and *Hereditary* (2018), much of what comprises commercial horror cinema today has largely been stripped of any particular thematic relevance in favor of providing nothing more than a scary fun house ride—let's call it the Blumhouseification of horror. That isn't to deny the undoubted craft of some of those films—a director like James Wan knows exactly how to choreograph a suspense sequence—only to bemoan the fact that so much of today's mainstream horror has no more lasting substance than a trip on a roller-coaster. (Perhaps Jordan Peele is the only current director to successfully straddle the two, managing to offer up both well-crafted multiplex scares and incisive commentaries on race and class in modern-day America.)

More specifically, the problem with this dichotomy is not necessarily the fact that good horror films *must* possess any particular degree of subtext—after all, what is John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) actually “about”?—but that any genre, in order to remain vital, needs to bring in outside influences in order to develop and grow. However, the Blumhouse school of films are only really ever about themselves, providing audiences with an Ouroboros loop of self-devouring scare sequences. And sooner or later, there’s only so high or so fast your roller-coaster can go.

On the other hand, one of the more interesting aspects of the A24 model is the willingness of those directors to cite influences from far outside the horror genre. While such claims might run the risk of pretension, I would nevertheless argue that drawing upon such fields as world cinema or the avant-garde is one of the things that made the seminal genre films of such crossover directors as Roman Polanski and David Lynch truly great. Polanski took the existentialism of the 1950s explosion of European art cinema and fused it with horror, much as Lynch did later with experimental film, and the lasting effects of their work can still be seen in the field today. Why, in the 1970s, even a thoroughly disreputable grindhouse film like Craven’s *The Last House on the Left* (1972) could cite Ingmar Bergman’s Academy Award-winning *The Virgin Spring* (*Jungfrukällan*, 1960) as an influence, because watching foreign cinema was just what you did back then.

Ironically enough, given that his anguished inquiries into faith and spirituality are commonly considered to be hugely out of step with today’s audience tastes, it is Bergman’s name that one sees cropping up time and time again in discussions of current art house horror movies. In a 2019 edition of the official A24 podcast, directors Ari Aster (*Hereditary*) and Robert Eggers (*The Witch*) spent much of the time discussing the influence of Bergman’s work on their own, calling his *Cries and Whispers* (*Viskningar och rop*, 1972) “way scarier than any horror film.”¹ They also

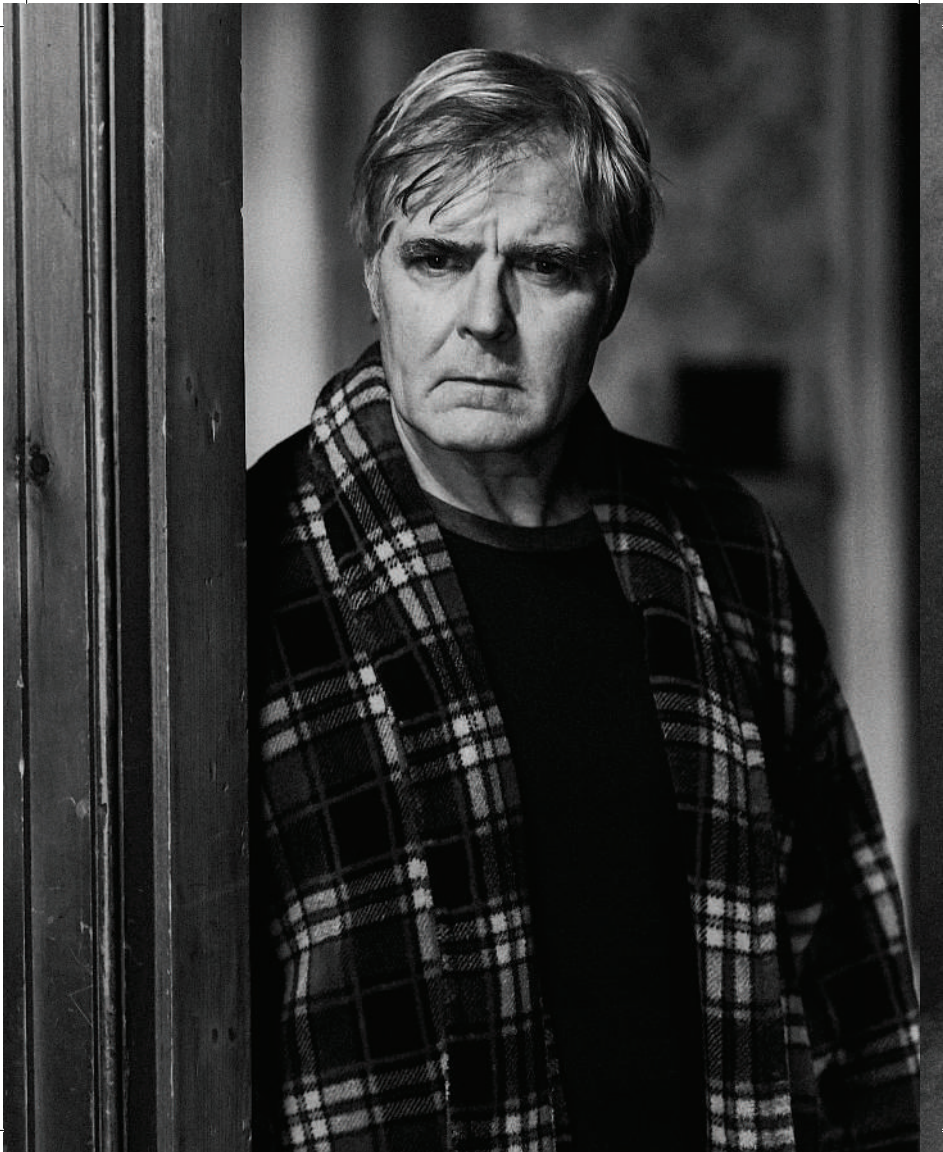
¹ “Deep Cuts with Ari Aster & Robert Eggers” *The A24 Podcast*, 2019.

note the Swedish auteur's evident impact on David Lynch—who himself looms large over the contemporary genre field—drawing parallels between the appearance of Death in *The Seventh Seal* (*Det sjunde inseglet*, 1957) and Robert Blake's terrifying Mystery Man in *Lost Highway* (1997). (Anyone familiar with the proto-Lynchian nightmare sequences in Bergman's *Hour of the Wolf* [*Vargtimmen*, 1968] will doubtless have noted this particular kinship already.)

And now we have Mark O'Brien's remarkable debut feature *The Righteous*: a chamber piece shot in austere black and white, concerning a man's struggle with his religious faith after the senseless death of a loved one. So far, so *Winter Light* (*Nattvardsgästerna*, 1963). (Indeed, the filmmakers are not shy about mentioning Bergman's influence in their press notes themselves.) Many early reviews have also noted that Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968), an enigmatic account of a (fallen?) angel's visit to a bourgeois family, provides another clear antecedent to *The Righteous*. Such claims obviously risk offending high-minded critics who would prefer genre films to stay in their box: one review of O'Brien's debut sniffily dismissed it as “a compelling forgery.”² (Thankfully, art house directors themselves are often less particular about such cross-pollination: look at the direct line that can be traced between the angelic-looking but malign child ghost in Mario Bava's 1966 gothic *Kill Baby Kill* [*Operazione paura*] to the representations of Satan as a young girl in both Fellini's “Toby Dammit” episode of the Poe anthology *Spirits of the Dead* [*Histoires extraordinaires*, 1968] and Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* [1988].)

Still, what are we to make of such seemingly lofty ambitions? Can a serious inquiry into faith and spirituality co-exist with the requirements of a horror film? *The Righteous* is certainly deeply disquieting at times, although that has as much to do with the unnerving battle of wills between the characters as it does with its

² Warner, Steven, “The Righteous” *In Review Online.com*, August 2021. (<https://inreviewonline.com/2021/08/20/the-righteous/>).



occasional genre flourishes. It should also be noted that, for all its Bergmanesque trappings, O'Brien's film is hardly the first horror movie to concern itself with matters of faith. The important difference is that many genre films treat the struggle between belief and godlessness as a rather reactionary battle between white hats and black hats: take Hammer's *Dracula Has Risen From the Grave* (1968), where the forward-thinking and proudly atheistic young hero can only finally conquer Dracula by embracing his heavenly Savior. Even a film like *The Exorcist*, hailed upon its release for the grittily unflinching realism director William Friedkin brought to the horror genre, ultimately rests on a similarly dogmatic last-act reaffirmation of faith; not so much the Chekhovian pistol on the wall as the Bible in the bedside drawer. In more recent years, we've seen this tendency replicated in the likes of *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005) and James Wan's *The Conjuring* (2013), which, in their willful distortion of actual events and shameless elevation of real-life hucksters Ed and Lorraine Warren into Hollywood heroes, represent a particularly dispiriting conservative horror trend.

But *The Righteous*, with its doubting, unreliable protagonist, constantly shifting ideologies, and bleakly apocalyptic finale, belongs to a less prevalent, but far more subversive group of spiritually-themed genre films. Michael Tolkin's underseen *The Rapture* (1991), takes the climactic semi-hallucinatory cataclysm of O'Brien's film and presents it entirely literally, as Mimi Rogers's bereaved Christian bears witness to a series of Biblical portents signaling the advent of the End Times. And yet, when faced with the undeniable proof of the Divine she has craved for so long, Rogers turns her back on Heaven, condemning herself to eternal suffering. The point here is not to question the existence of God; rather, as Tolkin stated, "[the film] is about how a person can believe in God and reject God at the same time."³ Or to put it another way—as Rogers bitterly demands to know in the movie—"Who forgives God?"

³Rowlands, Paul, "Michael Tolkin on *The Player* and *The Rapture*" *Money Into Light.com*, 2016. (<http://www.money-into-light.com/2016/03/michael-tolkin-on-player-and-rapture.html>).

Bill Paxton's *Frailty* (2001) reaches some similarly queasy conclusions by its close. Putatively the story of a religiously-inspired serial killer and his two sons, the film initially leads us to expect that the man will be revealed as a delusional lunatic, only to pull a climactic switch confirming that the murderer really was acting according to the Word of God all along. In more devout hands, this might be viewed as a divinely triumphant denouement, but at *Frailty's* final fade-out, the audience is left feeling rather more ambivalent than exultant. Once again, the question seems to be: is the proven existence of a vengeful Old Testament God really much cause for celebration?

This sort of skepticism proved to be an uneasy fit in mainstream Hollywood, which, despite its largely secular bent, is primarily concerned with not offending mass audience sensibilities. (Given that polls suggest some three quarters of the US population believe in God, with only 2.4% identifying as atheist, this is perhaps understandable.) Both *The Rapture* and *Frailty* picked up some approving notices but not much in the way of box office success, while the God-fearing likes of *The Conjuring* has spawned (to date) two sequels and a further four spin-offs.

That said, there are signs that the recent popularity of art house horror might provide a refuge for directors that, much like their idol Bergman, are interested in examining issues of faith without being entirely in thrall to them. In Robert Eggers's bleakly unsparing *The Witch* (2015), an outcast Puritan family attempt to eke out a hardscrabble existence on the border of a witch-haunted New England forest, only to discover that their religious belief is worthless in the face of unspeakable evil. Whereas in Bergman's *Winter Light*, the doubting pastor cannot reconcile the notion of his deity's perpetual silence with the reality of a world that teeters on the brink of Armageddon, God's absence here consigns the family to madness and death. Not only that, but the grinding misery of her Puritan faith is such that the young heroine of the film finally embraces Satanism, thereby finding an ecstatic freedom that has hitherto always been denied her. Even Oz Perkins's *February* (2015), which initially seems content to adhere to the black hat/white hat opposition favored by



The Exorcist and its ilk, is ultimately about the unbearable loneliness of a vulnerable young woman who cannot find succor in any kind of religious belief, be it in God or Devil alike.

And so now we have *The Righteous*, which manages to be both a ruthless expose of Catholic hypocrisy and unsettlingly ambiguous in its conclusions. Is Mark O'Brien's visitor angel or devil? Is Henry Czerny's sinful ex-priest simply the victim of a malign plot, or the all-too deserving recipient of divine wrath? And if we are to take his apocalyptic visions at the film's climax entirely literally, what manner of deity condemns an entire world to destruction because of one man's sins?

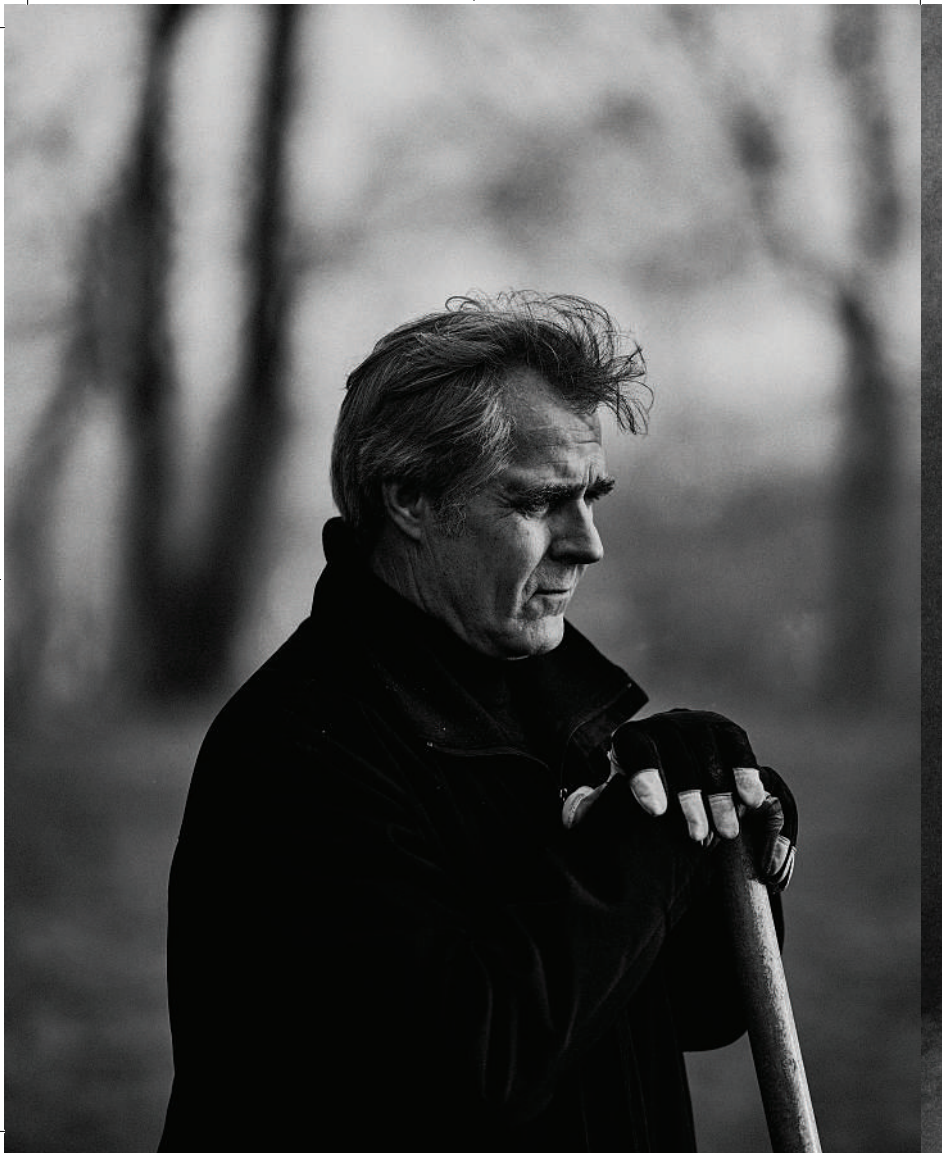
Finally, what is most interesting about *The Righteous* and its predecessors is their avoidance of easy atheist dogma. Reasoning that simple yes/no rhetoric is as dramatically uninvolved when preached by a non-believer as it is when espoused by the rather more devout likes of *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, these films choose instead to accept the existence of a Creator as a given. The question they posit is not, *Is there a God?* but rather, *What sort of a God is He and what on earth does He want?* These sorts of questions used to be the province of art house auteurs such as Bergman and Pasolini; now, it seems, they are more commonly dealt with by genre films aspiring to something more than the next jump scare. That might not always be considered cause for celebration by some critics, provoking the usual accusations of pretension and overreach, but nevertheless, isn't it good that some films are still attempting to ask them? One might reasonably debate how relevant such questions are in an increasingly secular Western society, but given that the evangelical population of the United States still numbers some fifty million people, a demographic that was all too happy to throw its voting weight behind the rather less-than-saintly figure of Donald Trump, it appears that the answer is that, yes, they are depressingly relevant.

And while there is certainly a danger that some art house horror movies might end up being far *too* respectable—produced by canny wannabe auteurs who

understand the commercial upsides of making a genre film but not the genre itself, producing work heavy with mock-profundity and light on effective scares—if it's a choice between that or yet another noisy fairground ride lionizing a couple of shameless frauds like the Warrens, then it's a risk that seems well worth taking, especially when it produces films of the quality of *The Righteous*.

Sean Hogan is a UK writer and filmmaker. His feature credits include Future Shock! The Story of 2000AD, The Borderlands, and The Devil's Business. He has written two award-nominated books of cinema metafiction, England's Screaming and Three Mothers, One Father. A third volume in the sequence, Twilight's Last Screaming, will be published in May 2022.

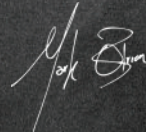




DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

If you've watched this film, I thank you for your time. If you've enjoyed it, even better. If not, it happens. If you've watched it with a friend and extracted some meaning from it that is different from theirs, then I can die happy and without fireballs in my orbit, for art should be personal and varied. For better or worse, this is the film I wanted to make, without compromise. I can't imagine doing it otherwise. A privilege and a blessing. Now go create something!

—Mark O'Brien



PRODUCER'S STATEMENT

I believe a film is all about everything... by that I mean it's about the elements that make up the entire production... cinematography, the score, characters, storytelling, locations, lighting, editing, and so on. All these elements materialize through teamwork—and this professionalism helps us slip inside the pages of a well-honed script.

When the production and crafts of cinema are performed with passion and a desire to bring a story to life, these separate professions blend into one wonderful package that we see on screen. You can call it a film or a movie, content or escapism, but when this magic happens I call it the most wonderful experience a producer can have! I hope you call it *The Righteous*... Enjoy the show!

—Mark O'Neill



ABOUT THE TRANSFER

The Righteous is presented in its original 2.39:1 aspect ratio with 5.1 surround sound. The High Definition master was provided by Vortex Media.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Jasper Sharp**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

Technical Assistant **James Pearcey**

QC **Aidan Doyle**

Production Coordinator **Leila El-Khalifi Hall**

Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**

Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**

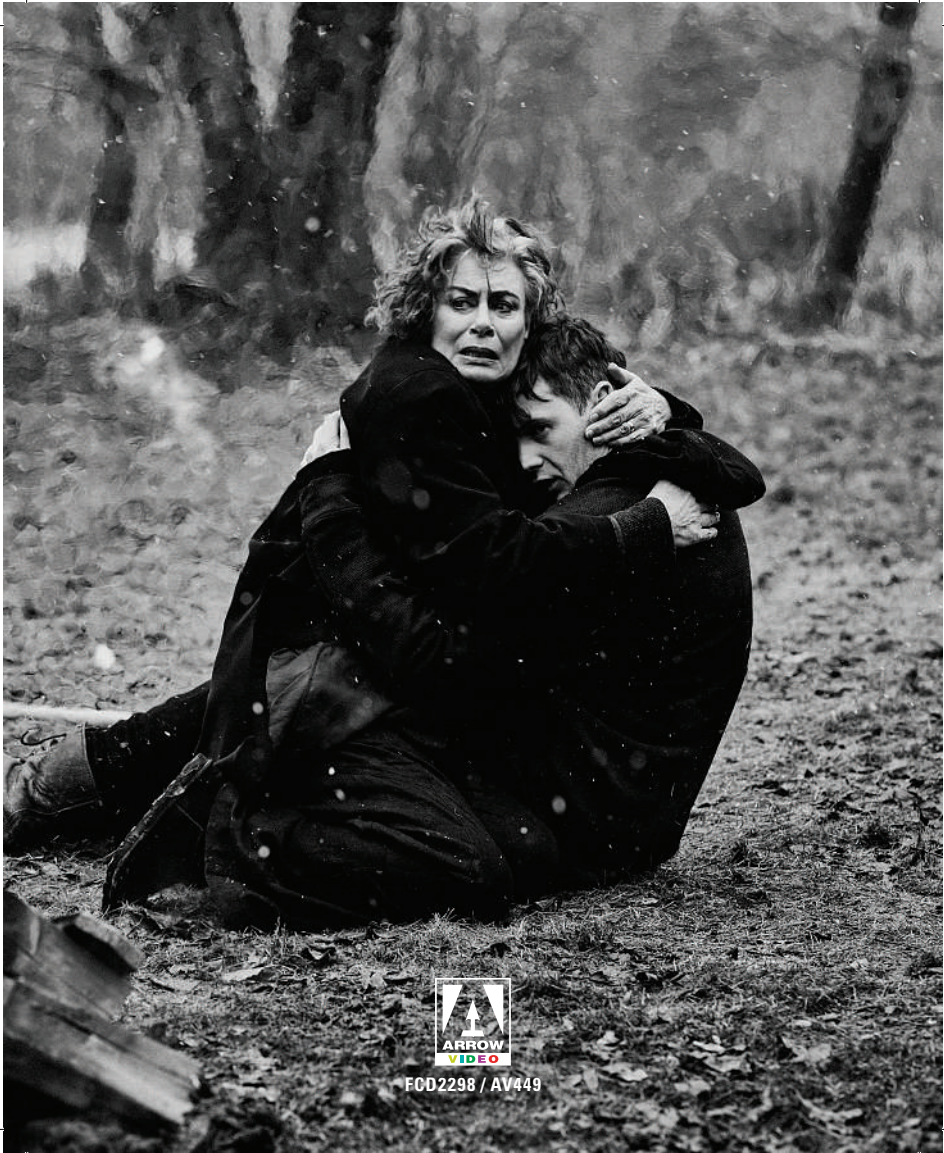
Artists **Grant Boland and Oink Creative**

Design **Scott Saslow**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Matt Bettinelli-Olpin, Kate Corbett, Henry Czerny,
Matt Fore, Tyler Gillett, Sean Hogan, Spencer Jones, Jim Kunz,
Mimi Kuzyk, Scott McClellan, Mayko Nguyen, Mark O'Brien,
Mark O'Neill, Chad Villella





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