



The Gods of Times Square

Director: Richard Sandler
 (2000) Rated: Unrated
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by [Stuart Henderson](#)

Much has been made about the transformation, mostly taking place during the late '90s, of New York City's Times Square. For some, the rapid disappearance of the homeless people, the sex- and sin-trades, and the mom-and-pop diners at the confluence of Broadway, Seventh Avenue, and 42nd Street, represents a key victory in the much-touted municipal battle to "clean up" Manhattan. Indeed, former mayor Rudolph Giuliani has often bragged that much of this transformation happened on his watch.

The "broken windows" campaign he emphasized while mayor – a policing philosophy which advocates throwing the book at petty criminals in order to "take back the streets" – is now routinely praised by middle class New Yorkers (and tourists) for its apparently magical effect. The homeless are gone! The hoodlums! The fanatics! The graffiti! But, are we really so foolish that we don't concern ourselves with *where* these people might have gone, and *why*?

Among observers who have asked themselves that difficult question, it is widely believed that Giuliani's victory was won at the expense of the character of the place itself. In this argument, the "cleaning up" of Time's Square has scrubbed it bare, exposing the ugly corporate realities that, perhaps always, lay in wait underneath the democratic grime. As many recent visitors to the Square have been heard to complain, replacing seediness with corporate sheen has rendered the once fascinating intersection merely safe, humdrum, and sterile. This *Disnification* – as it is often dubbed – of Times Square was an exercise in cutting off the nose to spite the face.

The Gods of Times Square photographer and filmmaker Richard Sandler's ode to the former, weirder incarnation of the scene, relies on a certain foreknowledge of the above debates. A mostly *vérité* documentary shot over six years (and completed in 2001), Sandler's film tells the story of this transformation through a collection of the musings, ravings, and rants of a certain stripe of former denizens of the Great White Way: its religious zealots.

From every walk of life, representing a diversity of races, ethnic-backgrounds, and religious leanings, these once-ubiquitous proselytizers of salvation and revelation populate Sandler's vision, and ours, for nearly two hours. They speak of love, of hatred, of hell, and of visions; one claims to be Jesus himself, while another admonishes us that if you don't believe in God, then you yourself are God.

These people rant nonsensically at times, but with passionate lucidity at others. They often strike as paranoid, delusional, obsessive, and edgy, but never as dangerous or insincere. There is something kinetic about watching them, yet there is something pathetic, as well. And, armed with the knowledge (a kind of dramatic irony) that they have since been driven from this, their hallowed ground, we feel quite rightly that we are witnessing a record of the end of an era.

However, Sandler's film fails to move us beyond this basic point. Offering little insight, no narration, no explanations whatever about the context to these pseudo-interviews, we are left to watch as random fanatics ramble about their beliefs. While Sandler likely meant to humanize these people, to give them a forum to discuss their idiosyncratic (and occasionally perceptive) visions of the role of faith in the modern world, his film treads much closer to exploitation than celebration. Precisely because there is no attempt to analyze what is happening here, because the film relies so completely on the audience's foreknowledge of the events that shaped the new Times Square, it is depressingly easy to watch this documentary as a black comedy about lunatics and the wacky stuff they say.

But, who wants to watch a film where we find ourselves, safe in the privacy of our living rooms, laughing at the deranged rantings of a man suffering from an appalling mental illness?

It should also be noted that Sandler's filmmaking style is highly amateurish. Shot on inexpensive video, his documentary has the look of an artsy home movie (replete with frequent video tear and other "noise"). Moreover, Sandler relies on a maddening, persistent use of cutaways to advertisements, huge billboards, mannequins, and skyscrapers. We get the (fairly obvious) point after the first two or three times: commercialism is here juxtaposed with religion, sinners and the blessed walk side by side,

Marky Mark looks good in briefs. But, by the time he uses this trope for the 13th time, it just feels like lazy editorializing.

The film otherwise relies almost exclusively on tight close ups. Eschewing establishing shots for some reason, Sandler again leans on the assumption that his audience knows where we are, what it looks like, and why it matters. However, even though I have been to Times Square many times, I was often left wondering just where the shot was constructed, just what I was looking at, and even, in a couple of different sequences, if the shot was taken in Times Square at all. Perhaps this was a result of the limitations of his equipment, perhaps not. But, either way, everyone needs a wide shot every once in a while.

To be sure, there are stretches of *The Gods of Times Square* – especially the touching section detailing the closing of a beloved walk-up diner – that succeed very well. But too much of the nearly two-hour running time is taken up with what amounts to short clips of random, fervent people shot on cheap, scratchy video with negligible audio quality, and no sense of just what, exactly, we are seeing. This two-disc DVD release boasts a full second disc of extras, outtakes, and featurettes.

RATING:  4

EXTRAS:  4

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