

# 7 *Dark and Golden*

Of course I'd heard the rumors. The studio had picked up a book before publication for a cheap price but never really intended to make the movie. They'd made a movie like it a few years before and it was a flop.

Then the book became a bestseller and they had to make it. Then all the best directors in town turned it down. They eventually talked a young hotshot director into making it, and more than once they nearly fired him. The studio hated the rushes. The release of the film was delayed from December to the following March—always a bad sign. Even before it opened in New York, it was announced that it would be released nationwide in more theatres more quickly than normal. This was before the days of wide first releases, and it was usually a sign the studio knew it had a turkey and wanted to make as much money as quickly as they could, before word-of-mouth killed the picture.<sup>1</sup> But then when it opened in New York, the reviews were ecstatic. Could the reviews possibly be right?

The day the film opened in Los Angeles in 1972, I took a bus up to Westwood—by then *the* first-run area in Los Angeles—and managed to find a seat down front on the left in the crowded theatre. As I was wondering if the film could live up its reviews, the lights went down. The curtains opened, the title of the film came on, accompanied by a few notes on a trumpet, and then out of the darkness came the first line of dialogue. “I believe in America. . . .” One hundred seventy-five minutes later, *The Godfather* ended.

I was not entirely convinced it had lived up to its critical hype. It seemed a little longer than it needed to be, and Brando gave one of the most god-awful technical performances in the history of movies, but the performance seemed to work within the picture. I have since seen the picture several times, of course, shown it in my film history classes a few times, and grown to like it better than I did the first time, although I still think Brando's performance is abysmal.<sup>2</sup>

I had not read the novel when the film came out, so I came to the film with no expectations. (I subsequently read it and thought it was a lot better than

many people give it credit for.) Donna Crisci had read the book and “was so pleased with what they had done with it. I was moved and angered and awed . . . [Francis Ford] Coppola had all these little touches (peas in the spaghetti!) which brought back memories of my own Italian grandmother.” Nancy Lathrop was only in junior high school when she read the book, but it was, “in junior high, one of those books that around page twenty-four, everybody’s copy of it opened right up, because that’s that scene with Sonny and the bridesmaid [having sex]. Nobody really read the whole book. So going to the film, I couldn’t wait for page twenty-four to come up on the screen. Better in the book, as most things are.”

Carlos Aguilar was slightly older than Lathrop at the time, and he and his friend had one copy of the book, which they traded off with each other, and told each other the story as they went along. *He* remembers the Sonny and the bridesmaid scene as being on page twenty-seven. “From the opening frame I knew that Coppola had captured the emotions of the book. It was like watching old friends. I knew everyone so well. I felt like I was watching old Super-8 movies of past family outings.”

Marion Levine was an acting student in New York when the film came out, and it was her first look at Al Pacino, whom she had heard about in class. She enjoyed certain aspects of *The Godfather* but “didn’t understand the complexities of filmmaking. Although I was caught up in the grand emotional sweep and physical spectacle of the film, I didn’t truly understand the incredible vision and ambition that went into its making. For me, it was a movie about wonderful scenes and set pieces. Perhaps it’s asking a lot for a twenty-two-year-old girl to identify with a pack of money-hungry, cold-blooded killers. With the exception of Brando’s performance in the last sequences of the film, I was left pretty much unmoved.”

For all the hype about the film, some went without any particular anticipation. Scott Hemmann “only went because a friend wanted to see it, and I had nothing better to do that weekend. I didn’t really know much about it except that it was a gangster picture (which I had no interest in) and it starred Marlon Brando (whom I didn’t like). I hadn’t seen Marlon Brando in anything since I’d watched *A Streetcar Named Desire* on TV, and because his appearance had changed so much, it wasn’t until the final credits rolled that I knew which part Brando had played. I was very impressed with the movie.

For many viewers, *The Godfather* was so overwhelming an experience, it changed their thinking and behavior. Francisco Checa, now a forty-year-old electronic engineer, remembers “thinking about organized crime in a whole different way from before. I saw these gangsters in particular as good guys, when before all gangsters were bad guys to me.” Tandy Summers was eighteen when she finally saw it on video and it “made me feel like becoming a cold-

blooded gangster. Their whole honor code and respect I wanted to emulate.” So far she has not become a gangster. Olufemi Samuel saw the film, and he and his friends went to school “to start our own Mafia organization in junior high. I was the don, and we would beat other kids just to get respect. One of my boys turned against me, and I tried to tell him that he’s not supposed to touch the don, but he still beat the daylights out of me.” Steven Krul, a student in his twenties, “grew up in Rhode Island, and I can’t tell you how many people I knew were influenced by this movie. From wanna-be mobsters to the real thing, they all had that coolness and cockiness that you know they got from the movie. This movie is to mobsters as the Grateful Dead is to Deadheads. Except the mobsters bathe more.”

Debra de St. Jean and Lam Yun Wah first saw some of *The Godfather* on television as kids but in different circumstances. De St. Jean saw it in America.

I remember when *The Godfather* was aired on television. I was sent to bed early so that my parents could watch the movie. Of course, I didn’t stay in bed; curiosity had gotten the best of me . . . I had to sneak a peak. So I snuck into the living room to catch a glimpse. I walked in on the part of the film that the one Mafia member [it’s actually the head of a movie studio] finds the head of his prized horse in his bed—needless to say I was scared to death. I had not seen anything so horrific before. I had nightmares for weeks and kept a close eye on my dog. As an adult, I finally did see *The Godfather*, which was good, but once was enough—violence is not my genre of films.

Lam Yun Wah was eleven years old, living in Hong Kong and going through his movie phase when one of the local TV stations ran both of the first two *Godfather* films one Sunday night. “Although it was dubbed in Chinese, I simply fell in love with the images. Because I had to go to school on Monday morning, I’d only watched about three-fourths of the first episode. I didn’t know then it was such a great film. The next time I saw them was a few years later when Francis Coppola released a TV version called *The Godfather Saga*. I went crazy.”

Like me, other viewers found the film worked better for them as the years went by. An extreme example is Lawrence Dotson, who liked gangster movies in general, but the first time he tried to watch *The Godfather*, “I couldn’t. It was too long and dark and boring. I guess after growing up in a violent city like L.A., I became jaded by the violence, so it became easier for me to sit down and appreciate *The Godfather* for what it was: a cold-blooded gangster flick. It is now one of my all-time favorite movies.”

Another fan of the film, who saw it when it was first released, is Virginia Keene.

I heard the hype, and I read the book and was braced for disappointment, but this time the movie far surpassed the novel for me. It was one of those unforgettable cinema surprises! The whole package worked in every way for me—there were new stars for our generation—Pacino, Keaton, Duvall, Coppola! It was really very exciting. This numbered among my favorite films of all time the first time I saw it . . . and it still does, in all of the same ways, except that I can no longer separate it from the whole saga. I knew this was a great movie the first time I saw it, and I feel the same way now, though my respect has deepened with the addition of two films and the passage of over twenty years.

Keene of course went to see the sequel, *The Godfather Part II* (1974) and was pleasantly surprised.

I saw this one the instant it opened, of course. I had my fingers crossed, but sequels are sequels. I never dreamed it was possible: this film was even better than the first! It filled in the gaps and added depth and new dimensions. The history was wonderful; De Niro was wonderful. This was movie heaven. . . . I've seen it often since then, and I can't separate I and II in my mind. They blend and flow together as a single piece and take on a certain grandeur and dignity that I don't associate with many films of my generation. If anything, they've gained stature with the passage of time, not merely "held up well."

Keene is right that the first two *Godfather* films have "gained stature" with viewers over time, whereas we have seen that *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider* have not. Part of that increase in stature is the depth and artistry of the films, but another part of it is the way they have become part of our culture. When I showed *The Godfather* to my film history class in 1996, it struck me how much of what we think we know about the Mafia comes from this film. The film has to explain what a consigliere is, but we all know, and the reason we know is because of the film. And is there any one of us who has not used the phrase "Make him an offer he can't refuse"?

Another person who was looking forward to the sequel was Marion Levine, who had been taking acting classes with Lee Strasberg, the legendary acting teacher of the Actor's Studio. For Levine, "The most exciting thing about this film for me was seeing Strasberg acting. . . . He discussed working on the film, relating it to our work in class, so it was a thrill to see. The filmmaking is brilliant and perhaps unequalled in modern American cinema, but I never got truly swept up in it on an emotional level—there was no one to identify with." Jon Conrad also saw *The Godfather Part II* when it first came out and

found it “not the visceral experience the first one was, but highly affecting and memorable.”

Javier Rodriguez saw the first film and liked the story and the music, but did not like the second film because of “its story. And the way it went from past to future. And the way there was not one main character, but two. But the music was so beautiful and full of life. Also, I liked how the story went more in depth than the first movie.”

Aubrey Solomon had seen the first *Godfather* at a prerelease screening at USC, but *The Godfather Part II* is “one of the few major pictures I saw on video first. Big mistake. I can’t remember much about it except the scene in the boat [where Fredo is killed].” Eva Mahgrefthe originally saw both of the first two films on television, and “the magic, created by the story and enhanced by Coppola, pulled me right in. When an injustice was done to the Corleones, I cried for revenge.”

In 1977, Coppola cut the two films together, added several sequences cut from the theatrical films, cut some of the violence and nudity, and the result was shown on successive nights on NBC under the title, *The Godfather Saga*. Al Gonzalez was still a kid at the time and “caught glimpses of it, having known (even as a kid) that this was a ‘big’ film.” Jack Hollander was in high school when the original *Godfather* came out and is grateful he did not see it at the time. “I would *never* have appreciated it.” By the time he did see them, they had been shown as the *Saga* on television, but at the insistence of his older sister, he watched the films

as they were released [as two films]. I’m sure that I saw them on the big screen for the first time (again, at the revival houses) and possibly together as a double bill. Perhaps it was because it was too much to handle, but it took several viewings for me to rate these films (especially the first one) as one of the greatest films of all time. I think that it is the compelling nature of the movies. I can remember watching the first film on cable one night when I was working in Pasadena. I knew that I had to turn the TV off and go to bed (to go to work the next day), but I couldn’t reach for the “off” button. It was almost as if someone would know that I turned off *The Godfather* and that I would be visited by strangers in the night who would make me pay for my indiscretion. It’s so *compelling!* I am breathless each time I see the movie. The second movie has the greatest performance of all the films—Robert De Niro as a young Marlon Brando. We *know* what the young Brando was like at that age, and De Niro isn’t it, and yet we are absolutely convinced that that man on screen will grow up to be the Don Corleone that we are, by now, so familiar with.

Needless to say, like many fans of the first two *Godfather* films, Hollander went to see *The Godfather Part III* when it was released in 1990, sixteen years after *Part II*.

Perhaps it is my absolute devotion to the first two films and the compelling urgency conveyed in each that leads to my reaction to the third installment. . . . We just don't care. Most importantly, we don't care about [director Francis Ford Coppola's daughter] Sofia Coppola as Michael's daughter, so that when she dies, we're not agonizingly crushed (which we *must* be in order to make this film work). . . . I kept waiting for the only music I know from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, the "Intermezzo." I was initially disappointed (and surprised, frankly) when the opera was over and this music hadn't been heard. I was pleasantly surprised when this music was utilized (and quite appropriately I felt) for the final scene—it is *so* gorgeous a piece of music that I couldn't imagine it not being utilized.

Al Gonzalez saw *Part III* "at the theatre the day it came out. I was disappointed. The cinematography and the settings were the only things that I liked about this film, and that's not why I went to see it. The cast just seemed lighter, the plot was lame, and casting Sofia Coppola finished off what was already proving to be another ordinary film. It was nothing to compare to the previous two." Jon Conrad avoided the Sofia problem by not seeing *Part III* at all. He had noticed Sofia Coppola in an earlier Francis Coppola film, *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), did not think she was that good, and deliberately did not see *Part III*. Angela West also did not like Sofia Coppola but did "think Andy Garcia gave a good performance, and I must say I was extremely interested in his acting when he took his clothes off. Oops! Who said that?"

The industry audiences for the film were even harsher than the public. Aubrey Solomon saw it "at an Academy screening at Paramount, and many people in the audience (viewing it for nomination consideration) started laughing when Sofia got shot at the end."

Some viewers not only liked the movie but liked Sofia Coppola as well. Laurel Jo Martin "thought Sofia Coppola was wonderful; maybe she can't act, but she was a welcome change from the plastic kids you see in a lot of movies. When she was shot, I thought it was tragic."

I was disappointed in the movie, having had the first two films—especially the first one—grow on me. However, I felt the problem with Sofia Coppola was not so much that she was a bad actress but that she was badly directed. Her father often shoots her in loving close-ups but does not give her any direction as to what to do. He was directing her more as a father than as a director, but he

has often not been good with actresses. Two years later she was charming and delightful under Jeffrey Levy's direction in the low-budget film *Inside Monkey Zetterland* (1992), and her own directorial debut, *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), shows she has some of her father's directorial genes. And she is even better than he is with actresses.

D'Arcy West thought the film was so bad, "I apologized to my boyfriend after the movie for making him come see it with me," but when Virginia Keene "first saw this in the theatre, I was quite ambivalent. I felt disappointed that it was confusing and that Coppola's sweeping story seemed to lose its way in Rome. I also ached for poor Sofia, and so she was an enormous distraction. Still, the story did captivate me—especially the Vatican intrigue—and it was a joy to see old friends again. I've seen it twice on video since then, and I've warmed to it more each time. Now it does seem a continuation of the *Godfather* world, and I don't think it could have stood alone."

Wendi Cole loves all the *Godfather* movies, even *Part III*, and "If they made a *Godfather IV* (God forbid!) I'd go see it." Most of us who have now spent over twenty-five years with the Corleones probably would, whether we would admit it or not. They keep pulling us back in. . . .

One reason audiences continue to be drawn toward these films is their seriousness, typical of the early seventies. If the films of the late sixties, such as *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*, struck nerves in the audiences—especially the younger audiences—the films of the early seventies went deeper and became more complex and found an audience. As we have seen, it was a smaller audience than in preceding decades, but it was also a more intense audience. Marion Levine says that her "addiction" to movies "first took hold in my twenties, when movies were of an age (in the 1970s) that I can only describe as golden. Informed by intelligence and subtlety—where having a message was the point—those movies of my early adulthood still burn in my brain when I rub up against life's more uncomfortable challenges. I think to myself, what would the Jack Nicholson of *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) do in a situation like this? If he could tell that diner waitress where to put the chicken salad, couldn't I tell off all the assholes making problems in my life?"

Levine is not the only person to suggest that that this period in American films was something of a golden age. I implied this in my 1988 history of screenwriting, *FrameWork*,<sup>3</sup> and in 1993, the magazine *Movieline* had a special issue on the seventies. The article began with David Thomson's article "The Decade When Movies Mattered" and included an article on the twenty movies of the seventies "to kill for." The magazine also noted that it was not all perfect in an article called "The Squalor of the 70s."<sup>4</sup> The squalor and the richness of the period were sometimes combined.

Richard Morales was about twelve when this period in American films started.

The Fox Theatre (in Orange County, California) used to show movies for ninety-nine and sometimes forty-nine cents. The best movies I'd seen there were *Woodstock* (1970) and *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970)—good music, good laughs, and pubic hair. We'd seen plenty of G- and GP- [the early version of what became the PG rating] rated movies, but it was the double thrill of finding an adult stranger to accompany us into an R-rated movie that was most memorable. At night we would walk into the drive-in by our house to watch movies, very often without a speaker and in the cold. It was this way that I saw the first scene of *Clockwork Orange* when it was still rated X. Besides the nudity, I was intrigued by the whole movie, and for the longest time, for whatever reason, I called it my favorite movie. What little I heard of the sound track had sparked an interest in classical music, and shortly after I was checking out the Time-Life records of Beethoven.

Other movies of the time had serious messages. Patrick O'Leary saw "*Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and *Taxi Driver* (1976) when I was younger [in California]. But after living as an adult in New York for a number of years and seeing them again, I understood different things in them and recognized subtle details that had truth about living in New York." Even a piece of sincere schlock like *Billy Jack*, struck a social chord in the then-teenage Lisa Moncure.

*Billy Jack* was probably the first film that had my mind thinking about social injustice. I really identified with the people in it. Probably because there were lots of young white women in it with long hair like mine. I'm convinced that all people are narcissistic and really like looking at themselves in movies. Regardless, this movie stirred me up, and the song that came with it ["One Tin Soldier"] kept reminding me of its message. "Go ahead and hate your neighbor, go ahead and cheat a friend. Do it in the name of heaven, you can justify it in the end. . . ." Since I lived in the middle of the Southern Baptist belt, this really hit home.

The seventies combination of schlock and seriousness often showed up in its scarier movies. Hollywood had always made movies that scared people; they generally had no more serious pretense to them than scaring the audience. *The Exorcist* seemed to connect with the audiences' feelings about religion, children from hell, and green pea soup. Even the *trailer* for the film was so scary that when he saw it at age twelve, Peter Albers "didn't sleep for years because of it. In fact, when I finally saw it—on the same night as I first saw *The Shining* [1980], for god's sake—I was twenty-three, and I slept with my light on for days."

The early screenings of *The Exorcist* became legendary for their effects on audiences. Scott Hemmann remembers one.



The film that had the most profound emotional effect on me was *The Exorcist*, simply because it scared the hell out of me. I remember seeing it as clearly as I can remember any film I've ever seen. I saw it with a girlfriend at the Cinerama Dome [in Hollywood] shortly after it opened. I had read the book a year or two before and enjoyed the story, but reading it in no way prepared me for the sensory onslaught that bombarded me. The film was like a roller-coaster ride through hell for me, and I was totally drained by the time the final credits rolled. I recall the sound being turned up so high that it kept me in a constant state of anxiety. I was literally on the edge of my seat from the beginning of the film to the end. I was twenty when I saw the movie, and I lived alone at the time. I slept with the light on and the radio playing for months afterward to help me sleep. I didn't sleep very well for a long time, and if "Tubular Bells," the theme from *The Exorcist*, were to start playing on the radio, I'd wake up immediately and have to turn it off. This film made me realize the power there could be to a movie. I've never been a fan of horror or monster movies, but there was something in that one that struck a chord deep inside my dark subconscious. I've never seen the picture since that first time. It's not because I'm afraid it would have the same effect on me; I know it wouldn't anymore. I don't want to see it now, because I'm afraid I'd be disappointed in it, and I want to remember it as the affecting film it was for me twenty years ago.

Virginia Keene saw it early in its run as well as many years later.

I remember every detail of the first time I saw it—at the Coral Theatre in Miami. We stood in line in the hot sun for a long time, and we were shocked at the admission price. It was the first time we'd every paid five dollars for a ticket! The movie scared the daylights out of me. I couldn't sleep alone for several days and needed a night-light for a long time, but it was a roller-coaster scare, not the nightmare psychic wounding of *Catch-22* (1970). This was the best horror since *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and before that, *Psycho!* Now, on video it seems even better than it did then. The novelty of the sensational special effects has worn off, and the sexuality and language aren't quite so shocking any more. With the cheap thrills skimmed off the top, the raw power of a truly fine movie shines through. I love the preface now, and its stylistic difference works well for me. Twenty years ago it just seemed weird. The screenplay is far better than the novel, the acting superb. I really care about these characters. This is a finely crafted movie, and I think it's another one that looks even better with the passage of time.

Marilyn Heath had not planned to see *The Exorcist*.

I was dragged to it by my boyfriend and his religious fanatic chess partner. All my friends said it was great. That afternoon the UCLA Bruins were on their eighty-second game of their eighty-one-game streak [in basketball] that I was following avidly, even though I am not a sports person and do not even know the rules. This streak had me completely swept. [But] I saw *The Exorcist* instead of the game. From the beginning, it was so sick I watched the audience instead. A young black woman next to me was so frightened she asked me to hold her finger. My religious friend was frantically shaking his fists at the screen with a gruesome almost strychnine-like grin. I looked behind me—a child of about five years was looking traumatized at whatever was going on. I heard a noise I could not identify and looked at the screen—it was her neck snapping while her head spun. Yuck. There was too much subliminal stuff in this flick, oughta be against the law. The Bruins lost, and I will always blame *The Exorcist*. I had to go get apple pie à la mode at the Bright Spot restaurant to shake it off.

Donna Crisci also saw *The Exorcist* in its first run in Westwood. She had been “riveted” by the book. “The lines in Westwood for the film were enormous; it was raining and the then-new McDonald’s near the theatre did a booming service in the line. The media at the time was reporting people sick in showings and running out in hysteria: I saw the film many times at the theatre and never saw any such thing. People did react and scream with horror at the events on screen. But they left admiring it.” There were people who did throw up, although perhaps not as many as legend and the media of the time had it. William Peter Blatty, the author of the novel and the screenplay, as well as the film’s producer, attended the press preview in New York. “At a certain point, a young woman came up the aisle and, walking by me, was a little unsteady, and I heard her saying, ‘Jesus, Jeeeesus,’ and I thought, ‘Oh, boy, we’re dead. She hates the picture.’ But I marked the point at which she left. And that’s the point at which *everybody* got ill and at which I always have to lower my head: it’s when they’re giving Regan [the possessed girl] the arteriogram and the needle goes into her neck and the blood comes out. *That’s* the moment it’s always been.”<sup>5</sup>

Because the film dealt with Catholic theology, however shallowly, it had a particular impact on Catholics. Rocio Vargas grew up Catholic in Costa Rica, hearing stories about exorcisms. She saw the film in a theatre there.

*The Exorcist* not only scared me, but also caused me to become much more interested in understanding the whole mark of the beast. However,

looking back, I remember that when I was watching the movie, my intellectual mind shifted back and forth from that of a well-collected super-achiever to that of a very scared little girl. I remember nodding my head in approval when the priest and principal actor were quoting a passage from the Bible, which to my surprise was somehow connected to the idea that the anti-Christ will be born into a family involved in politics. I was just ready to indulge on the idea, when my analytical mind was jolted by the horrifying sensation of eternal entrapment and helpless persecution of a priest running desperately back and forth inside his room trying to escape from an unseen force that he could not control. I can still close my eyes and see him trying helplessly to protect himself from this evil with Bibles and crucifixes.

This movie for me also had some offensive moments, such as the time in which a crucifix was used by the possessed girl in very sexual ways, or the times in which profane and very blasphemous language was used against God. However, I did understand that these scenes were necessary to make the point of the movie. Anyway, what else can you expect from someone who is possessed by the devil? What is very interesting to me is that a movie designed to scare the audience half to death would have such an intellectual impact on a young person such as myself at the time.

Anthony Thompson was just “glad I was going to a Catholic School at the time, so the priest could protect me.” For Skylaire Alfvigren, the movie was “frightening beyond belief—particularly because I had a fervently religious mother who had given me detailed accounts of possessed people she had come in contact with in her work for the ministry.”

Given that the film was so scary and was rated R, it is surprising the number of kids who not only went to the film, but whose parents or family members took them. Al Gonzalez was in the fifth grade when he saw it.

Me, my older brother, and a cousin begged my father to take us to see it. Having already seen the movie, my father advised us against it. Despite this the begging continued, and my father eventually took us, with the warning, “You’re sleeping in your own room tonight.”

“Okay, okay, let’s go.”

What I remember of that experience is that I watched half of the movie through my fingers. I also remember green vomit, shaking beds, a cracking neck that twisted in the night, slamming doors and drawers, and the girl’s messed-up face. Father knew best. I had trouble sleeping for the next two weeks.

Gonzalez saw the film later on video and enjoyed it as a horror film, but “it had nowhere near the effect on me it did as a kid. In fact, I remember laughing at some if it.”

When Bridget Sweet was ten, her best friend Shelly went to see the film and told her friends about it at school the next morning.

I could not believe the things she was telling us. I’ll never forget that day on the school bus. There were about thirty kids around her just listening to seedy details. Shelly was the only kid in school who had seen that film, and that made her the most popular girl in class. I wanted to be popular, too. I also wanted a large crowd of people surrounding me, so I asked my mom if she would take me to see *The Exorcist*. She said, hell no!

I was so jealous that my friend got all that attention from viewing a grown-up film like that. I got so tired of kids saying things like “Shelly, tell us about the devil girl” or “Did her head really turn around backwards, Shelly?”

From that time on, I have always wanted to see movies that were not for viewers under eighteen. I felt I was missing out on something. And to this day, I tend to view films that are naughty and violent.

Nancy Lathrop was in junior high when the film came out and says,

Who can forget being in junior high and having the ultimate experience of going to see *The Exorcist*, which you had to talk your parents into, or lie about? It was not so much about the movie. It was about going and waiting in line. . . . It was on the news about the lines. Going to it and going with your little junior high school friends and trying not to be grossed out and feeling like you’d really gotten away with something by getting into that film. I will just never forget the notoriety of it. I remember having seen an ad for it—probably for the book—and did not know what an exorcist was, looked the word up, went out and got the book, read the book. If I had gone to that film the first week it opened, I would have had to have lied to my parents to get to it, and then suddenly the thing exploded. That was something you had to do. You had to do it. But it was a lot of fun, and I wasn’t grossed out.

Wajeeh Khursheed was twelve years old when he saw the movie. He and his parents were visiting Pakistan to attend his grandfather’s funeral.

*The Exorcist* was just released and my thirteen-year-old cousin wanted

me to go along with him to watch it. The theatre was only a block away from my grandfather's house, so we both walked to the show, which was at about 9:00 P.M. On the way back home after the show, my cousin, who did not watch many films, had a very tough time walking home without looking over his shoulders. He was really scared, and surprisingly I wasn't. I found it very funny the way he was behaving; he couldn't even go the bathroom at night alone and had to wake up his mom to go along with him. That was the time that I really got him by sneaking over to the window and making all sorts of scary noises. The entertainment of that movie did not end after the show for me, but went on for days as I scared my cousin every night. I still laugh about it whenever it comes across my mind.

Michael Thomas's Catholic mother refused to let him watch it as a child. "After seeing it, I finally understood her reasoning." He finally saw it in college and felt then it was "just good scary fun." James Ford had read the book and finally saw the film "in a theatre filled with sailors, while I was stationed in Australia. Pretty scary, but I was in a fairly macho state of mind. Still, Mike Oldfield's "Tubular Bells" make[s] me look over my shoulder."

Aubrey Solomon kept "waiting for the scares, but they were more of a freak-show variety than anything terribly shocking. I couldn't help but think how *Mad* magazine would lampoon this." Jon Conrad felt it was not "much more than a scary movie that sometimes tripped over into the ludicrous. I recall that at times I was the only one in the theatre giggling."

Scott Hemmann was right about the sound being cranked up very loud in the first-run engagements. Both the sound effects and the volume the film was played at had a huge role in *The Exorcist's* success during its first six months in theatres. When it eventually moved out of first-run theatres and into subsequent-run theatres, where the volume was not kept as high, the box office take declined somewhat.<sup>6</sup> In the late seventies, I ran the film in my film history course and deliberately kept the sound at a "normal" level to test my theory. The class did not find it as scary as original audiences had.

Nat Segaloff, the biographer of William Friedkin, the director of *The Exorcist*, noted that the film "has also, understandably, not played widely on television and loses most of its impact on video."<sup>7</sup> Given the kind of collective audience experience the film became known for, he might think so, but even on TV the film retains its impact for some viewers. John Slipstone saw it on TV and "literally pissed my pants. Once again, my Catholic upbringing played into my fear." As for Peggy Dilley, "I was too chicken to see [*The Exorcist*] until years later, tamed by the small screen. All that talk of people barfing and passing out, and there probably are real demons, and if you see that movie they'll get inside you,

and not even an exorcist will be able to get them out. Hysteria. My mom came to visit me, saw I had read the book, thought I was demon-possessed . . . (no ma, just schizophrenic—it's a fad we're going through) and took the book home and burned it."

David Bromley was twelve and had just successfully seen *Poltergeist* (1982) when his brothers (the ones who used to get him to swap his dime for a nickel) "dared me to watch *The Exorcist* with them on TV. I said 'Sure, I love scary films!' thinking I was being cool. It scared the shit out of me! That night while I was lying in bed, wrapped like a mummy, sure that Regan was under my bed, I decided mom was right and therefore was done with scary films. Needless to say, I slept with my mother for about three months after that. Oh yeah, my brothers, the evil twins, [were] grounded for a month." When Bromley saw it again, he was twenty, "It still scared the hell out of me! I can't imagine seeing it in a theatre; man, that would be intense. Of course, I would have to go and see it in theatres even if it would be intense."

Angela West was too young to see *The Exorcist* in the theatre. "I probably wouldn't be alive today if I had gone to see it in a theatre." A few years later, the movie was shown on commercial television, considerably censored. "I was still too young, so my parents sent me to bed early. I remember sneaking out of my bedroom and peeking quietly into the living room. Unfortunately, I peeked right when Linda Blair did her incredible head-turning sequence. It was the scariest thing I'd ever seen in my life. My mother had to sleep with me every night for the next week, because every time I closed my eyes, all I saw was a greyish-green head staring back at me."

Once, when Wendi Cole was a child, "*The Exorcist* came on TV. I would *not* turn the TV on the channel that movie was on. I would turn the knob *backwards* just to avoid *any* glimpse of that movie. I saw it later on videocassette, and I just laughed all the way through it. . . . The things that the demon (was it Satan?) did were hilarious." For Lilia Fuller, *The Exorcist* was the kind of movie she liked in her mid-teens, "especially the vomiting scene and the one with the turning head. Wonderful, full of mystery and secrets, occultism and surreal beings." Terrence Atkins couldn't sleep for weeks after seeing it, and then "I met Linda Blair years later and kept waiting for her to vomit on me."

Dorian Wood first saw the film on video, with his entire family, "in broad daylight. . . . My mother had unsuccessfully objected to renting this film for my sister and me, but my dad, being the deranged lunatic he is (well, at least when he wants to be), brought it home. I had nightmares for weeks, and my mother's efforts in trying to laugh through the movie to make it seem a lot tamer than it was, proved to be unsuccessful as well. Ironically, years later, my mother told me that her favorite book back in high school was, in fact, *The Exorcist*, and that I should read it as well. Go figure."