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REMEMBERING
"THE SCARIEST MOVIE OF ALL TIME":
A GROUNDED AUDIENCE STUDY
OF *THE EXORCIST*

M I SMITH

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Remembering "The Scariest Movie of All Time": A Grounded Audience Study of *The Exorcist*

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Abstract

This study of the forty-six-year history of *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973) uses grounded theory methodology to investigate how audiences have engaged with and now remember what is still repeatedly voted as "the scariest movie of all time" (Bailey, 2018). Original data from 746 survey respondents and 32 interviewees form the basis for new theories of the importance and meaning of physical and social place in cinema-going, processes of parental regulation over children's viewing habits and their associated meanings, and the relationship between memories of film experiences and intra-family dynamics.

Since its inception in 1965 in the field of medicine and patient care (Gla ser and Strauss, 1965), grounded theory methodology has provided an insightful, flexible, and participant-driven method of producing research which rejects extant concepts and theories to produce findings which are thus "grounded" in original data. This thesis represents the result of the first study of media audiences to fully employ grounded theory methodology, taking Kathy Charmaz's (2014) constructivist iteration as its basis. Its findings are contextualised within theorisations of place, censorship, and memory from New Cinema History (Jancovich, Faire, and Stubbings, 2003; Kuhn, 2002; Biltereyst, Maltby, and Meers 2011), censorship studies (Kuhn, 1988; Smith, 2005; Barber, 2016; Smith, 2019), and oral history (Portelli, 1981; Thompson, 2000; Thomson, 2006).

The overarching theme of this study to emerge from participants' accounts is how memories of *The Exorcist* are defined not by the film itself, nor by any factor which can be measured with demographic information, but by participants' relationships with other people. This particularly includes their families and, often, their past selves. In adapting grounded theory for audience studies, this thesis conceives of and provides an outline for grounded audience studies as an alternative approach to researching audiences which can better reflect the complexity of everyday life.

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Acknowledgements

Author's declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas, and contributions from the work of others.

An article was produced from this research project concerning its methodology, printed as 'Researching memories of *The Exorcist*: An introduction to grounded audience studies' in *Participations*, 16(1), pp. 844-864. I was the sole author. The article is included with Appendix IV on the enclosed CD.

Ethical clearance for the research has been approved. Approval was granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on April 12th, 2017 (submission reference: 679).

I declare that the word count of this thesis is 79, 844 words.

Name: Martin Ian Smith

Signature:

Date: 23/09/19

Chapter 1

Introduction

It's been reported that once inside the theatre, a number of moviegoers vomited at the very graphic goings-on on the screen. Others fainted, or left the theatre, nauseous and trembling, before the film was half over. Several people had heart attacks, a guard told me. One woman even had a miscarriage, he said.

- Judy Klemesrud, *New York Times*, 27 January 1974

After twenty-five years, I still wake up sometimes in the middle of the night worrying that my bed is shaking...

- Participant #700, survey, USA

The Exorcist became a cultural phenomenon upon its release in the USA on December 26th, 1973. It was the most successful horror film ever and became the highest-grossing "R"-rated film to date, taking, in all, $441.3 million (Mumford, 2017; Box Office Mojo, 2019). It was a uniquely religious blockbuster at a time when people were drifting away from the Church in record numbers (Brown, 2009: 1). *The Exorcist* played everywhere, from thousand-seater "supercinemas" to converted village halls. It terrorised families at American drive-in theatres and became an enduring favourite of Halloween events and horror festivals. *The Exorcist* may be forty-six years old, but it is a film that has refused to fade into cinema history.

With the rise of home video in the early 1980s, *The Exorcist* entered the home. A public outcry about an unregulated influx of horror videos in the UK, the "video nasties" panic, brought about the implementation of the Video Recordings Act 1984 (VRA) and the requirement for all video releases to be approved by the British Board of Film Censors (now Classification) (BBFC). While the film was still available in the USA, *The Exorcist* fell foul of British censors' concerns about child audiences' accessing the film unsupervised in their homes and it was effectively banned on home video. This was not an easy decision for the Board, evident in their reviewing it for a video release a number of times between 1984 and 1992. It was recommended for release with two cuts by an examiner in May 1984 (BBFC, 1984a) and was deemed acceptable in its uncut form in December of the same year with secretary James Ferman's blessing (BBFC, 1984b). Nevertheless, it was not officially certified. The video disappeared from British shops in 1986 when Warner Home Video, at the BBFC's request, pre-empted the Board's 1988 deadline for certifying all videos and removed it from sale (BBFC, 1988).

Cursed to haunt market stalls and schoolyards as a poor-quality bootleg, *The Exorcist* did not see an official British home video release until thirteen years later with the retirement of BBFC Secretary James Ferman. It enjoyed a twenty-fifth anniversary cinema re-release in 1998 and the worldwide release of a "Director's Cut" in 2001, titled "The Version You've Never Seen", accompanied by marketing claims – which have been substantiated by many reader polls, as recently as 2018 (Bailey, 2018) – as being "the scariest movie of all time". Through its many incarnations, and in spite of (or perhaps because of) its many battles with the censors, *The Exorcist* has arguably touched more lives than any horror film in cinema history. It was, in 1973, a film without precedent. Today, *The Exorcist* remains one of the most famous examples of the power of film over its audiences and a defining story in the history of cinema-going.

The Exorcist's rich folklore is built on decades of sensational stories of a "cursed" production and extreme audience responses. Billy Graham, the Evangelical Christian pastor, famously claimed that there was evil living in the very fabric of the film's reels (Kermode, 1998: 112). The enduring legend about the film's power is

inescapable. From New York came tales of vomiting, blackouts, heart attacks, and miscarriages (Klemesrud, 1974; Van Gelder, 1974). In London, an 18-year-old girl was 'left sleepless, shocked and screaming' and was unable to sleep for three weeks (Bilton, 1974). Two deaths were initially attributed to the film: young Christopher Gengam fell to his death from an open window two days after seeing *The Exorcist,* having been reportedly haunted by nightmares of the film (*Times* reporter, 1974; *Daily Mail* reporter, 1974a); sixteen-year-old John Power suffered a seizure and died the day after his own experience with *The Exorcist* (*Daily Mail* reporter, 1974b). (Power's death was later attributed to an on-going battle with epilepsy; Cliff, 1974.) American clergymen were overwhelmed with requests for exorcisms from those who had seen the film (Aris, 1974; Fiske, 1974). The Church of England prepared itself for an increase in exorcism requests by issuing instructional pamphlets on the "Christian ministry of deliverance and healing" (read: exorcism) in response to 'the news that the film called *The Exorcist* was about to cross the Atlantic, tornado-like, leaving a trail of damage behind it' (Diocese of York, 1976 [1974]). Canon John Pearce-Higgins and other clergymen claimed that the film was a threat to audiences' sanity and that it constituted blasphemy (Smalldon, 1974; Gilchrist, 1974). A spokesman for the Church Army in Birmingham took the film's popularity as indicative of the dawn of a new age of Satanism (Woodhead, 1974). The Christian pressure group, The Nationwide Festival of Light (NFOL), campaigned to have the film banned in the UK by local councils, succeeding in Ceredigion, Dinefwr, Bradford, Worthing, Torbay, Restormel, Rochdale, and Wakefield (*The Cambrian News* reporter, 1974; *The Guardian* reporter, 1974; *South Wales Guardian* reporter, 1974). Where unsuccessful, the NFOL took to the streets and lobbied cinema-goers in person, distributing pamphlets which stated, 'This film bears the power of evil!' (Nationwide Festival of Light, 1974; *Evening Chronicle* reporter, 1974). The deaths of Gengam and Power, together with those of cast member Jack MacGowran, the brother of Max von Sydow, and the grandfather of Linda Blair, cast a long shadow over the film in the popular imagination (Reed, 1973). Reports of *The Exorcist*'s audiences have, almost without exception, embraced the spirit of Carleton Young's words in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford, 1962): "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." *The*

Exorcist, in the process, became a menacing, threatening presence. For some, as this study will show, seeing the film dispelled this. For others, it did not.

Academic considerations of *The Exorcist* are almost exclusively rooted in textual analysis, relying on authors' interpretations of the film based on psychoanalytic theories which are then attributed to the film's audiences. Even Julian Hoxter's (2000) analysis of *Exorcist* fan sites of the late 1990s succumbs to the lure of psychoanalysing his subjects. Hoxter relies on psychoanalytic concepts to "explain" fans' attachment to the film as a cult object (2000: 178). Andrew Scahill's account of *The Exorcist* focuses on the "horror/pleasure/embodiedness of the film" (2015: 62), but his attempts to present his insights as the processes of real audiences oversteps the boundaries of textual analysis as a research method. Carol Clover's (1987) and Barbara Creed's (1993) textual analyses of the film provide fascinating interpretations relating to gender and sexuality, but they speak only to the experiences and interests of academics. Nowhere in participants' accounts in this study – even from fellow academics – do audiences discuss the psychoanalytic readings with which they have been associated by academic researchers. While not all academics are making claims for audience experiences in their research, it is inexcusable to not engage with audiences if one intends to make claims for them, as Martin Barker argues (2013: 115).

A first step in moving away from textual determinism is to acknowledge the wider context in which audiences encountered (and encounter) *The Exorcist.* This means accounting for the role of the places and social situations in which film-viewing occurs. With the inter-war period dominating the focus of investigations into memories of cinema-going (Kuhn, 2002; Stubbings, 2003; Smith, 2005), home viewing has been completely overlooked in this regard, though Barbara Klinger (2006) has investigated it in a contemporary setting, free of memory work. The rise in popularity of New Cinema History has produced fascinating works from all manner of perspectives, except for that of the home. This study offers an examination of film-viewing memories in all environments.

Historical studies of cinema-going are presented often as a response to the dominance of the history of *films*; that is, a historical narrative consisting only of

accounts of film production and critical appreciation. Researchers work to counter the dominance of industrial narratives in film history by speaking only of exhibition and consumption and by insisting that individual films matter little to audiences within a habit of cinema-going (Kuhn, 2002; Stubbings, 2003; Anderson, 2013). However, what transpires from such a radical approach, contra to a history without accounts of audiences, is that we are left with histories without any reference to films at all. Research designed to investigate the social event and habit of cinema-going by its nature – its research questions – precludes the discussion of individual films. Although this has been suggested as a possible reason for this bias, it has not been explored (Kuhn, Biltereyst, and Meers, 2017: 10). This bias is compounded by studies of "cinema memory" which largely source their data from the same demographic, being people over the age of sixty-five; the lack of studies of more recent memories of film experiences means, inevitably, that broadly accepted theories about cinema memory are, in reality, only applicable to this older age group. This study seeks to redress that imbalance by using a single film as the organising principle of the research design, by studying memories of people of all ages and, subsequently, bringing films back into the fold of cinema history.

Due to the predominance of the battle against the "effects tradition" – the tabloid-favourite "common sense" theory that violent media encourages violence in its audiences – controversial and violent films have been almost exclusively studied as a present-day phenomenon with an eye to "disproving" claims made by sensationalist newspaper articles. Audiences of controversial films, therefore, in the past tense, have yet to enjoy much attention. These film experiences have not been investigated as lived moments, holistically, but rather only in terms set by the actions of censor boards. Our understanding of how people make sense of controversial films in the long term, how they come to terms with, perhaps, the shock or the disappointment of them, is wanting. Also wanting is our understanding of any long-term processes of reception. We have no picture of audiences' experiences with such films in a holistic sense. While they have been theorised (Barker, 2004; Klinger, 2006), only Helen Taylor's (1989) account of female fans of *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1940) has provided any real examples of audiences

discussing how a film ages with them and how it may mean different things to a person at a different time in their life. It became a point of order for this study to attempt to theorise this process for the first time, presenting the parts that make up the whole.

Situating experiences with *The Exorcist* is of particular importance where it concerns people's changing religious beliefs. Many participants discussed how the film seemed different to them in the past as children in religious households, especially for those who have since lost those beliefs. The importance of religious beliefs for audiences in meaning-making processes has never been explored. The power of religious belief in guiding one's worldview, actions, and even personality is such that, particularly for an overtly religious film like *The Exorcist*, any study of its audiences without accounting for it would surely fall short. I hope that by addressing religiosity as a factor for audiences, it opens the door for further studies in this much-neglected area. Here, the loss of religious belief is used as part of a wider project of illustrating and theorising on-going reception. As people change, so do their feelings about films.

The processes investigated in this thesis which make up audiences' experiences with films are not limited to a particular religion or country or by anything else. Neither are they limited to *The Exorcist*, which was chosen for study here due to its nature, often, as an extremely unusual and emotional film experience. Processes theorised in this thesis of meaning-making, remembering, and re-evaluating one's relationship with a film can be just as true of any film. *The Exorcist*, as an extreme case, sketches the outlines of what is possible. Very few people will experience decades of night terrors after seeing a film, as did Johnnie (interviewee, Canada), and very few will be inspired to discover new religious belief by a film, as did Laura (interviewee, UK), but it is through the extremes we can come to better know the ordinary. The age of *The Exorcist* places it at a point where the youngest members of its early audiences are available for questioning and where intergenerational differences in the film's reception can be explored. There are other films which provided extreme experiences (e.g., *Night of the Living Dead*), which are steeped in religious iconography (e.g., *The Wicker Man*), which were widely debated in the

press (e.g., *Straw Dogs*), which have endured as favourites where other films of its era have been forgotten (e.g., *Citizen Kane*), and which have had the kind of wide success that ensure they have touched the lives of millions (*e.g., Jaws*, *Star Wars*). *The Exorcist* does each of these things at once. Playing to the strengths of purely qualitative research, this study does not look for an "average" film-viewing experience. Instead, it uses the extreme highs and lows and everything that makes *The Exorcist* unique to theorise what is happening when audiences watch films, wherever and however they may watch them.

Together with the need to pose these unasked questions, there is also a need to break free of the echo chamber of more recent promotional materials and sensationalist retrospectives if we are to reach a better understanding of the life of such a controversial film. Such materials recycle the wilder claims about audience reactions to *The Exorcist* to present an image of 1970s cinema-goers as a homogeneous, panicked mass of God-fearing innocents shocked into submission. Mark Kermode's introduction for the British television premiere advises adults to 'proceed with caution [as] there are many reported cases of viewers having been seriously traumatised' (Kermode, 2001). In his history of the film's production, Kermode's (2003: 84) discussion of the film's audiences begins and ends with a mention of how 'a man threw himself at the screen in a misguided attempt to "get the demon"', and Kermode frames audiences' extreme responses only insofar as they relate to Blatty's disappointment that people seemed to miss his intended positive message about Christianity (2003: 84). Beth Kattelman's (2011) short history of the marketing campaign of *The Exorcist* focuses entirely on the "ballyhoo" surrounding the film. Although it serves as a useful history of the film's marketing strategies, the most widely sensationalised and mythologised film audiences in cinema history have still remained unexplored.

This study consists of the recollections of just under eight-hundred people who watched *The Exorcist* at various points in its history, ranging from those who saw it upon its release in 1973 to new-comers who found themselves with nothing else to watch on Netflix. Participants' accounts of *The Exorcist* here feature encounters with protesters, stories of fainting or fleeing the cinema, and troubling memories of

night terrors. However, these are only part of the life of the film, and they do not encompass the richness and variety of audiences' experiences.

Grounded audience studies

This study is the first of its kind, not only in its engagement with international and intergenerational audiences of *The Exorcist*, but in the manner in which this audience study is conducted. Grounded theory methodology, which has provided solid, actionable research in the field of medicine and patient care since its creation in 1965 (Glaser and Stauss, 1965), is used to its full extent here for the first time in conjunction with the aims of audience research. The methodology, outlined step-by-step in Chapter 2, is an iterative, flexible approach to research which is, above all, participant-driven.

Grounded theory methodology sees a researcher begin with loose research interests instead of specific questions or hypotheses for testing. The focus is on generating new theories and concepts, not reaffirming old ones. Here, the initial interests were the reception of a controversial film, the workings of cinema memory, and diachronic processes of meaning-making. 746 people were surveyed with a simple questionnaire featuring only two qualitative questions, and their answers drove further enquiries in interviews and focus groups. The project's key concerns developed as data analysis was conducted concurrently with further data generation. As data analysis raised new questions, these were taken back to data-generating processes. This concurrent analysis and generation of data, as opposed to generating all of one's data before beginning analysis, is the cornerstone of grounded theory methodology.

A key tenet of grounded theory methodology is that one does not take one's research concerns from existing literature. The borrowing of concepts and theories is strictly forbidden, as the entire raison d'être of grounded theory methodology is the generation of new theory which is driven entirely by and hence *grounded in* one's own data. The working definition for the word "theory" in this grounded audience study is the *systematic explanation of a process.* Hence, the theory of personal censorship offered in Chapter 5 is a systematic explanation of the process

of censorship on a personal level rooted in original data generated by this study's participants. Independent analysis is still possible in a grounded theory study, whereby a researcher draws their own conclusions from participants' words. Findings are treated as a co-creation of researcher and subject, rather than purely being collected from the subject and described by the researcher. However, a study's concerns must originate in data generated with participants, rather than being taken from previous studies or being simply the product of a researcher's own interests. This grounded audience study utilises this innovative research method to ask overlooked questions and launch expeditions into undeveloped areas of audience studies. This study, then, is grounded in the data generated for this project, forgoing the testing or application of decades-old theories and concepts. The impact upon this study of employing grounded theory methodology cannot be overstated. This decision affected every facet of its design. This thesis provides a template and guide for researchers for how to conduct a grounded audience study.

A grounded audience study begins deliberately on a small scale so that specific research concerns grow out of early data. Participants actually *participate* in the research, fielding questions about developing theories and directing the research questions based on information they provide about their own lives. A grounded audience study produces research in which the participants can recognise their own processes. This is audience studies from the "bottom up". Whereas studies which employ pre-existing, borrowed concepts involve researchers bringing their own interests and definitions to bear on participants, a grounded audience study gives up as much of the control of the direction of the research to participants as possible. Utilising the approach of "constructivist grounded theory" (Charmaz, 2014) and relying on traditions in the field of oral history (Thomson, 2003; Thompson, 2000; Portelli, 1981, 2011), there is no pretence of scientific objectivity and instead there is an embracing of the subjectivity inherent to qualitative studies.

There is an overarching theme of the study which bears mentioning here, as it will be, perhaps, the key takeaway of this thesis. From the near-800 participants who volunteered their memories of *The Exorcist*, memories involving family, friends, and

personal moments of childhood vulnerability, there comes a concern about the everyday and the individual. When one listens to what one's participants are saying and allows that to further the research narrative, instead of using participants' words as fuel for one's own favoured narratives which fit pre-concieved categories or concepts, it becomes clear that the world of the audience is not as big as previous researches would have one think. Despite the field's insistence on trying to find commonalities in audience responses rooted in nationality and language (see Hirsjärvi, Kovala and Ruotsalainen, 2016; Veenstra, Kersten, Krijnen, B
iltereyst, Meers, 2016) participants here did not speak in these terms when given control of the direction of enquiries. Martin Barker (2006: 129) states that the now-popular concept of "interpretive communities", borrowed from the work of literary theorist Stanley Fish (1980), is the key to the future of audience studies. This concept holds that people with similar backgrounds have at their disposal the same interpretive tool set and will, as a result, often interpret texts in a group-defined way. This has led to a focus on differences in audiences' interpretations of popular texts based on nationality, language, gender, and fandom and a trend towards international, survey-based projects (Barker, Mathijs, and Trobia, 2008; Barker, 2016; Hirsjärvi, Kovala, and Ruotsalainen, 2016; Veenstra, Kersten, Krijnen, Biltereyst, and Meers, 2016). Yet, as much as audience researchers wish to pigeonhole their participants by demographic data, little in audiences' actual responses – certainly not in this study – warrants the imposition of such researcher-defined divisions.

This study ascertains that the everyday and the individual, including one's immediate surroundings, friends, and family, is a defining factor of film-viewing experiences. However, there is a key difference between this work and the historical studies of cinema-going by Annette Kuhn (2002) and others (including Anderson, 2013; Lacey, 1999; Lozano, 2017; Stokes and Jones, 2017). That difference comes down to the initial focus. It comes down to the strength of the grounded theory methodology. Whereas many researchers determined previously that films were of no particular importance to audiences in their memories (Kuhn et al., 2017: 10), they were dealing exclusively with people over sixty-five years old and as such could be said to have found that individual films are not important to

people at that stage in their life, rather than what is asserted which is that individual films are not important to cinema memories in general. The design of their studies was also from the outset, as stated, of a study *about* cinema-going, which, of course, favours answers which do not delve into the specifics of individual films. This is discussed in more detail in the chapter concerning methodology, but it is worth highlighting this difference at the outset. Participants in this study were initially asked about their memory of *The Exorcist,* not their memory of a social activity. These participants, also, were of a wide variety of ages and had seen the film at any point over the last forty-six years. The focus of this study on the family, on the home, on direct relationships, and on the social nature of film experiences in all environments grew from participant responses. The organising principle of this study is the film itself, *The Exorcist*, rather than researcher-decided demographic categories or researcher-defined time periods, ensuring that it better serves to give voice to participants' concerns and interests.

Chapter 2 presents a full methodological description of this grounded audience study, beginning with an overview of grounded theory methodology. Due to disagreements about conducting a literature review in a grounded theory study, a review of literature relevant to this thesis is presented after the methodology chapter. This allows for a full discussion of these disagreements between grounded theorists before describing the process of conducting a literature review for this study.

Grounded audience studies presents a fresh, alternative method for investigating audience processes and the place of film-viewing in everyday life. It offers a more collaborative approach to audience research where the participants have as much agency to shape the research as academics have long been claiming audiences have to shape their film-viewing experiences. Barker (2006) stated, over ten years ago, that it is time for audience researchers to be bolder and more ambitious. He outlined a series of challenges for the field. Of Barker's five suggestions for future pathways, his first three related to interpretive communities and the first, to 'make the concept of an "interpretive community" empirically measurable and testable', has yet to be done (2006: 129-130). Barker's fourth suggestion relates to simply

providing a counter-argument to the "effects tradition" (2006: 130). These four pathways all relate to logically deduced ideas that are not based in any audience data; the concept of interpretive communities is based on the work of literary scholar Stanley Fish (1980) and the effects tradition is based on the "common sense" of the British press about media and copycat violence (see Barker et al., 2001). None of these concerns come from audiences, but from researchers speaking *for* audiences. Barker ends his call to action for audience researchers thus:

> Like the researchers twenty-five years ago, we need to
> explore tougher forms of research. Ideas currently semi-
> sacred may have to be held up to hard, very hard scrutiny. It
> may hurt. But the pain is worth it. (Barker, 2006: 137)

No idea is more sacred, states Barker in the same article, than interpretive communities (2006: 129). In this thesis, I argue that it is this very concept which must be discarded. Whereas Barker's project is to provide a through-line for theories of audiences, connecting studies from all over the world from different periods and with different agendas, I argue that grounded audience studies provides the only way forward: we must leave as much of audience studies' collected wisdom behind as possible and use as our guide, instead, the audiences themselves.

The three reputations of *The Exorcist*

Through examining archival materials relating to *The Exorcist* throughout its history, three distinct phases of its life became clear. These period-specific identities of *The Exorcist* represent the popular image of the film at given points. It is around these three phases that the first three analysis chapters are based, with a fourth offering a theory of how these experiences are remembered. This conception of the life of the film is useful in considering how audiences were introduced to it. This is a brief attempt, after the fashion of reception studies and the works of Janet Staiger (2000) and Barbara Klinger (1997), among others, to 'illuminate the cultural meanings of [the film] in specific times and social circumstances to specific viewers' (Staiger, 2000: 162). It is beyond the scope of this study to provide an in-depth

reception study of *The Exorcist*, but the following, instructed by archival materials, is presented as the guiding structure of the thesis.

This model of the reputation of *The Exorcist* was drawn from the following sources: local and national newspapers from the USA, the UK, Canada, and Australia; censorship campaign materials; public debate and promotional materials on national television programmes; specialist magazines; and marketing materials. The materials used to make the distinctions between these three phases were rarely academic texts, due to their lack of popular readership. In brief, these three phases, the three distinct reputations of *The Exorcist*, are as follows:

1) The cultural phenomenon

Upon its original theatrical release, *The Exorcist* was perceived as a potentially dangerous, possibly blasphemous adaptation of a best-selling novel that had already terrified hundreds of thousands of people in its own right. A firestorm of hysterical news coverage about the film's "cursed" production and accounts of audiences' extreme reactions, including fainting, vomiting, suicide, and miscarriages, formed the first wave of press coverage that established this first identity. Its reputation began in the USA but travelled well, with coverage in the UK and elsewhere anticipating the film's arrival by reporting on American experiences. This, by far, was the strongest impression the film made in any period, not only based on the kind of coverage but the amount. The film's theatrical debut was accompanied by responses from critics, powerful word-of-mouth around the film's record-breaking success (including Oscar nominations), and press tours with the cast and crew.

2) The video nasty

This second phase is largely confined to the British context. After being available since 1980 on Warner Home Video, *The Exorcist* was removed from shelves in 1986 and became illegal to sell in the UK. This was a result of the implementation of the VRA which outlawed many horror films, labelled the video nasties by the press, which were the targets of a censorship campaign. While *The Exorcist* was not on any of the lists of prosecutable video nasties produced by the Director of Public

Prosecutions (Petley, 2011: 213), the VRA required that the BBFC classify all feature film releases for home video. *The Exorcist* was refused a certificate and, through its ban, became associated with the video nasties, the most notorious of which were *Driller Killer* (Ferrara, 1979), *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980), *Faces of Death* (LeCilaire, 1978), *Last House on the Left* (Craven, 1972), *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (Fulci, 1979), *The Evil Dead* (Raimi, 1981), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974). Although studio films made the list – such as *The Thing* (Carpenter, 1982) and *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980) – many of the video nasties were low-budget, internationally produced films with no recognisable stars. Some featured documentary footage (including unsimulated acts of animal cruelty and death) or a documentary style, lending the illusion of reality. *The Exorcist*, like the video nasties, was available only on bootleg VHS or via imports in the UK (Kerekes and Slater, 2000: 296). Despite previously being associated with a sense of danger, *The Exorcist* in the cinema was still a major studio release. This association with cheap, now-illegal exploitation films and "shockumentaries" was not part of its original reputation. While *The Exorcist* was available in the USA and elsewhere during the 1980s and 1990s, the power of this association with the video nasties in the UK cannot be overstated.

3) The scariest movie of all time

The Exorcist achieved "classic" status and, in the late 1990s, the film became an historical artefact. It was the subject of popular retrospective documentaries, such as *The Fear of God* (Jones, 1998), and annual Halloween screenings framed the film as an influential founding father of the modern horror genre. The film's developing reputation as a classic was helped in no small part by marketing itself with the accompanying quote "The greatest movie ever made" (from Mark Kermode) during a theatrical re-release for its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1998. It secured an eventual release on home video in the UK in 1999. The ability for younger audiences to now see the film easily for themselves through official channels of distribution dispelled the myths around it. While it attracted new admirers, some saw *The Exorcist* was not the film they were led to believe and others were disappointed by it. The lure of the unknown was removed, with anyone who wished

to see the film now able to do so. A 2001 internationally released Director's Cut announced itself on its posters thus: "The scariest movie of all time has returned in a version you've never seen". By this point, the film had long-since entered the cultural imagination and become a shared point of reference, even for those who had not seen it, after years of influencing and being referenced and spoofed in other media. These included the film *Repossessed* (Logan, 1990) starring Leslie Nielsen and Linda Blair herself, portions of *Scary Movie 2* (Wayans, 2001), and countless references in a diverse range of popular television shows such as *French and Saunders* (BBC, 1990), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1999), *South Park* (Comedy Central, 2003), and *The Simpsons* (Fox, 2017). A well-received but short-lived television show, *The Exorcist* (Fox, 2016-2017), became the latest entry in what has become a multi-media franchise that includes *Exorcist II: The Heretic* (Boorman, 1977), *Exorcist III* (1990), and a pair of prequel films which resulted from a disastrous single production, *Exorcist: The Beginning* (Harlin, 2004) and *Dominion: Prequel to The Exorcist* (Schrader, 2005). 2012 saw the Los Angeles premiere of the stage adaptation of *The Exorcist*, which enjoyed long engagements in the UK from 2016 to 2019. 2017 also saw the release of a virtual reality game, *The Exorcist: Legion VR*. This phase of the film's reputation is defined by a sense of cultural familiarity.

There is inevitably cross-over between phases. For instance, while most British participants experienced *The Exorcist* as a forbidden text in the late 1980s and early 1990s due to its association with the video nasties, this is not true of participants in other countries. There are those who experienced the film as a classic, handed down from their parents in this period, thus skipping a phase. Of course, there are also many participants who arrived at the film with no fore-knowledge whatsoever.

The structure of the first three analysis chapters (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) follows this three-phase model of the reputation of *The Exorcist.* In Chapter 4, the cultural phenomenon is examined through participant accounts of attending the cinema and the drive-in theatre and the importance of place as a factor in meaning-making processes is theorised. In Chapter 5, memories of *The Exorcist* as the video nasty are analysed to present a way of thinking about censorship that accounts for the

individual within the family dynamic. Chapter 6 presents accounts of *The Exorcist* as a classic, the "scariest movie of all time", and examines how the film is passed down from parent to child and how it functions as a lynch-pin of film-viewing routines. Finally, Chapter 7 examines participants' accounts as processes of presenting memories, as being "memory texts" (after Kuhn, 2002: 9), and theorises the function of memory and on-going reception.

The individual, within their own direct environmental and social context, is the focus of this study. This grounded audience study has developed the themes of this research concurrently with the generation of data and the co-operation of participants. In the process, it has become clear that for audiences of *The Exorcist* in this instance there is an overwhelming concern with factors which they can see, hear, touch, taste, smell, and remember. Participants here care about people they know, people with names. They do not care about Benedict Anderson's (2006) "imagined communities" of people they will never meet. Badly fitting concepts borrowed from other fields about how they each might be interpreting the film "subconsciously" do not speak to participants' lived experiences. Conducting this study using grounded theory methodology meant abandoning the search for explanations of how broad demographics may each experience the film differently. There is no attempt to provide a neat hypothesis of how certain people may feel about *The Exorcist* based on categories into which I have placed them. There is only the analysis of general processes. This focus on analysing processes rather than outcomes, on *how the meanings of film experiences are formed* rather than *what the experience of The Exorcist means*, allows this study to go beyond mere description. Theories of how meanings are affected by one's environment, one's relationships, memory processes, and the course of one's own life, as offered in the following chapters, lend themselves to well to a holistic understanding of film experiences in their everyday context. This study presents a narrowing of focus for audience studies and a much-needed *grounding* of its concerns. For what is the use of studies of audiences which speak only to those doing the studying and not to the experiences of audiences themselves?

Chapter 2

Methodology

Discovering what *The Exorcist* meant to people the first time they saw it may sound like an exercise in cultural archaeology. However, this study is firmly rooted in the present. Although it deals in the currency of memories, it is not a work of history. It is concerned with audience processes, the process of remembering, and with personal identity and language. Here, I discuss the steps taken in the design and undertaking of this project.

This investigation into audiences' experiences of *The Exorcist* employs grounded theory methodology using mixed qualitative methods to generate theories on audiences' experiences and memories rooted in their everyday lives. These broad concerns prompted the research and informed its design. However, in keeping with grounded theory methodology, these research interests were kept deliberately loose and were honed as analysis progressed, growing from and being directed by incoming data (Urquhart, 2013: 103). I avoided testing hypotheses and imposing extant theoretical frameworks on data.

Grounded theory has not featured in audience studies to date, with only Stefanie Rauch's (2017) study of Holocaust films employing the methodology to generate but not analyse her data. Rauch cites a "vagueness" to grounded theory methods of analysis and instead employs "hermeneutic dialogue analysis" to focus more on interactions and on the situations in which the contributions by participants or interviewers occur' (2017: 16). However, this approach departs little in practice

from Kathy Charmaz's (2014) emphasis on researcher reflexivity. Rauch also relies heavily on extant concepts, such as Fish's (1980) interpretive communities, which undermines her grounded theory approach.

This study adopts the powerful methods of analysis from grounded theorists, particularly Charmaz (2014). This aids clarity and stops descriptions of analysis methods overpowering the study's findings. This is a criticism which Barney Glaser levels at recent studies (Glaser and Holton, 2004). Grounded theory methodology is a pragmatic, flexible approach which has a great deal to offer audience studies in both its methods of data generation and analysis. It is here used to its full extent.

The project was organised around three separate but concurrently run stages of data generation, with analysis being performed as data was generated:

1. An international, online survey which mixed quantitative and qualitative questions.
2. Semi-structured interviews.
3. Focus groups.

Each stage informed the others and was conducted as near as possible to simultaneously given the research team of one. The project was designed to be flexible and iterative, using early analysis stages to ensure the generation of data which would best aid in the generation of theories. The aim was to specifically generate new theories in reference to the reception of *The Exorcist*. These theories are designed to explain processes and to therefore be more widely applicable to other circumstances. In this chapter, I discuss the design of the project and each of these three data generation phases.

Research design

Grounded theory

In the key, foundational text, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss's mission was to close 'the embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research' that had become a mainstay of the social sciences by the 1960s (Glaser and Strauss, 2008 [1967]: VIII). Driven by increasing sophistication in quantitative research methods, Glaser and Strauss noted in 1967 that, at the cost of

new theories, 'verification of theory is the keynote of current sociology' (2008 [1967]: 10). A consequence of this focus was that theories were applied to situations and experiences to which they were ill-suited. Theories were often applied after being transposed wholesale from other studies and "proven" with selectively chosen examples from their own data, resulting in research which was not fit for purpose (2008 [1967]: 4-5). Glaser and Strauss built upon their work together on death and dying in American hospitals (1965's *Awareness of Dying*) to develop an inductive process of doing qualitative social research in which resultant theories are intrinsically linked to, and thus "grounded" by, data (Glaser and Strauss, 2008 [1967]: 3). Grounded theory investigates a particular process, action or interaction in a systematic manner to explain it using only original data.

Grounded theory, as developed by Glaser and Strauss (2008 [1967]; Glaser, 1978, 1998; Strauss, 1987; Corbin and Strauss, 2015 [1990]), provides a highly structured methodology for qualitative research. The defining feature of a grounded theory study for Glaser and Strauss, as outlined by Kathy Charmaz (2014), is concurrent data gathering and analysis with constant comparisons between and within data and developing concepts. It also privileges the development of theories over a drive to prove or disprove an existing theory through a representative sample. A grounded theory researcher will conduct research in the following manner: there is original coding of data rather than a borrowing of preconceived hypotheses which were logically deduced (i.e., not from data); memo-writing throughout the research process; and the conducting of a literature review only *after* the independent development of the researcher's own concepts and theories (Charmaz, 2014: 7-8).

A grounded theory will meet the following criteria: 'a close fit with the data, usefulness, conceptual density, durability over time, modifiability, and explanatory power' (Charmaz, 2014: 8). These theories are produced by the process of the concurrent data-gathering and analysis stages led by theoretical sampling. Segments of data are then assigned codes (called "initial" or "open" coding). A code is a short phrase or word which labels a part of one's data, summarising it and capturing its relevant characteristics (Saldana, 2009: 3). In the traditional, Glaser-and-Strauss model of grounded theory, sub-categories are then coded ("axial

coding") – these are sought out by the researcher when returning to the data-gathering phase – before connections are made and the theory is developed through an extra stage of coding ("selective" or "theoretical" coding) (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 84).

A practical limitation of grounded theory that arose in this study is that it is best suited to studies of small numbers of participants, due to the emphasis on conducting interviews and allowing data to drive research interests. The flexibility required, allowing one to pursue leads as they presented themselves, prohibited using only an online survey. The online survey has become a staple of enormous audience research projects because of its ease of use and its incredible reach. With little effort and minimal cost, a researcher can obtain a global data set. Projects on *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* took 25, 000 responses and 36, 109 responses, respectively (Barker and Mathijs, 2016: 158-159). The age of *The Exorcist* and the popularity meant there was an enormous potential pool of participants too big for a grounded study to realistically handle. However, this was mitgated by the research design which led with a short online survey, providing as many responses as possible, from which interviewees were then selected based on their fit for developing theories. This will be discussed in more detail shortly, but, in this way, the limitations of grounded theory's potential scope in terms of participant numbers were successfully navigated. The smaller scope of this project fits well within the qualitative research tradition which does not seek representativeness and served to ensure that, as so often happens with qualitative audience studies, I was not tempted to make quantitative claims based on qualitative data.

Constructivist grounded theory

The most widely used incarnation of grounded theory, outlined in Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss's (2015, first published in 1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research*, is not without its detractors. In the 1990s, criticisms about the positivist underpinnings of this methodology drew attention to its perceived rigidity and in-built assumptions (Charmaz, 2014: 12). Kathy Charmaz developed constructivist grounded theory in response, to be less mechanical in the application of methods and draw attention to role of interpretation for both the researcher and the

participants (Charmaz, 2000, 2005, 2014). Constructivist grounded theory comes with a much more pragmatic two-stage coding process, allowing more flexibility and transparency.

Constructivist grounded theory, which is the school of grounded theory to which this research aligns itself, grew out of a necessity 'to acknowledge the subjectivity and the researcher's involvement in the construction and interpretation of data' (Charmaz, 2014: 14). The research is thus no longer defined by the positivism and "objectivity" of the work of Glaser, Corbin, and Strauss (Glaser and Strauss, 2008 [1967]; Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Charmaz rejects the idea of one fixed and knowable "truth" about a given process, action or interaction and focuses on subjectivity, emphasising research as a construction under particular circumstances (2014: 13). This study seeks to account for the role of myself as researcher in co-constructing data. Later in this chapter I discuss considerations of positionality.

As outlined by Charmaz (2014), constructivist grounded theory provides a strong methodological framework with an important emphasis on researcher reflexivity. However, it would be unfair to portray it merely as a modern upgrade of grounded theory of the past. Glaser (with Holton, 2004) responded to Charmaz's (2000) critique with a rebuttal. Glaser calls constructivism 'a backdoor approach to studying the professional problem in lieu of studying the main concern of the participants' (2004: 43). He argues that grounded theory is specifically about theory and therefore a focus on description of process does nothing to add to the applicability or otherwise of any theories which may emerge (2004: 41). Glaser's (2004) chief complaint is that Charmaz (2000) turns grounded theory, with constructivist additions, into little more than a descriptive method of qualitative data analysis. For Glaser, her additional structure is 'not consistent with [grounded theory], it is just a remodel erosion of pure [grounded theory]' (2004: 39).

While this research employs Charmaz's (2014) constructivist model to better account for the process, it attempts to avoid over-description of the research process during the analysis chapters. This is in response to Glaser's (2004) valid concerns about the in-built tendency of constructivist grounded theory studies to concentrate more on descriptive research narratives than on the generation of

theory. Glaser states, 'There is no need to preamble grounded theory to distraction with promises of legitimacy. Let the product legitimize itself, as it is doing in the health, education and business professions, where it is crucial to have relevant research that works' (1998: 16). Glaser's (1998, 2004 with Holton) criticisms do not negate the need for openness about the research process, however. His criticisms were minded in this research as a corrective against over-description, rather than as an excuse for a lack of reflexivity.

Theoretical sampling and data saturation

A common criticism of grounded theory studies, exacerbated by its increasing popularity, is that more researchers cite it as their methodological framework than actually use it as intended (Barbour, 1998: 358; Charmaz, 2014: 15). Charmaz outlines nine factors which are identifiers of grounded theory research, viewing factors one to five as being the most often evidenced with the remainder frequently neglected:

1) Conduct data collection and analysis in an iterative process

2) Analyse actions and processes rather than themes and structure

3) Use comparative methods

4) Draw on data (e.g., narratives and descriptions) in service of developing new conceptual categories

5) Develop inductive abstract analytic categories through systematic data analysis

6) Emphasise theory construction rather than description or application of current theories

7) Engage in theoretical sampling

8) Search for variation in the studied categories or process

9) Pursue developing a category rather than covering a specific empirical topic (2014: 15)

Charmaz states that the lack of theoretical sampling and of theory construction is the most common downfall in grounded theory studies, which often fail to maximise on the strengths of the approach (2014: 15).

The "comparative methods" cited by Charmaz above refer to the "constant comparative method", which is a core component of all variations of grounded theory. It is the practice of comparing data in one category to data coded into the same category. Eventually, this is done between different categories and, ultimately, concepts, feeding into the process of theoretical sampling. This helps to define which categories need fleshing out, preventing the collection of redundant data which merely echoes what is already known (Holton, 2007: 277).

Theoretical sampling is particular to grounded theory and is common to both the objectivist school of Corbin and Strauss (2015) and Glaser (1978) and the constructivist school of Charmaz (2014). Corbin and Strauss describe it thus:

> In theoretical sampling, it is concepts and not people, per se, that are sampled. So when researchers sample theoretically, they go to places, persons, and situations that will provide information about the concepts they want to learn more about (2015: 135).

The sampling becomes more specific later into the research process as new data adds to the concepts and theories being developed (Corbin and Strauss, 2015: 137). Categories created in the coding process take on more dimensions and become more nuanced as the research progresses. Certain elements can then be specifically targeted, after being identified through the constant comparative method, in further data generation efforts. This differs from "selective sampling", which is where a specific locale is sampled based on preconceived categories. Glaser states, 'The analyst who uses theoretical sampling cannot know in advance precisely what to sample for and where it will lead him' (1978: 37). The direction of the study emerges as data is generated and analysed and theoretical sampling is an invaluable strategy in this regard. Here, for example, parental censorship emerged as an important process for participants from open-ended survey questions. This was pursued in interviews to uncover the many aspects of the process.

When coding categories are fully developed and new data stops generating new ideas or aspects of a process, this is called the "saturation point" or reaching "theoretical saturation" (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 85). This is checked via the constant comparative method of always moving between data being generated and

data being analysed. It is at this point the recruitment and sampling is stopped. Theoretical sampling was invaluable here, when working with so many participants and multiple data generation methods, for reaching an understanding of when enough data had been generated.

Memo-writing

A key strategy in any grounded theory study, vital in the constant comparative method of analysis, is that of writing memos. Glaser defines memos as 'anything that captures the meaning of conceptualized ideas' (1998: 178). These memos are where the theory development occurs as a researcher records, in informal notes, that which stands out in data. Glaser and Strauss describe how memos act as both an important thinking-through process and a directive for the researchers when they return to the data gathering (2008 [1967]: 112). So important was memo-writing to the process that Glaser and Strauss saw it as a defining component of practicing grounded theory (cited in Charmaz, 2014: 7). 'Memos form the core of your analysis and record how you arrived at it', agrees Charmaz (2014: 19). Though they are rarely included in studies, they are integral to the final writing of the research report or thesis. Lora Bex Lempert describes how the process of memo-writing is one of 'discovery and theory development, not application' and how it is through these memos that analysis occurs (2007: 262). Lempert advocates for the continuous writing and re-writing of memos along with the creation of diagrams to aid the researcher in forming their theories (2007: 262).

Memos documenting questions, decisions, and developments were written throughout the course of this project. The process provided a vital space for thinking through categories and the coding process. Memos were written during and after interviews and during the collection of archival materials which provided the historical background described in the introduction to this thesis. In newly generated data, emerging categories were tentatively explored and notes were made on directions in which to proceed with further data generation. This proved helpful in suggesting avenues to explore in subsequent interviews. They were also invaluable in providing a space to reflect on the ways in which my own input and interests shaped the course of the interviews and the analysis of data.

The following is an excerpt of a memo taken during the initial coding of survey data:

> Coding: I'm using the "Social Viewing" code a lot. Sleepovers are incredibly common so far. Might be worth going back later to identify sleepovers within "Social Viewing". Again, though, what do they say about them? Are there implicit meanings for how people watch films at a sleepover? Don't just count instances. "Halloweening" seems like a decent code for people using *The Exorcist* for events or parties, or watching at a particular time to make it scarier, e.g., midnight showings. (December 16th, 2017.)

This memo served as a reminder of my thought process when creating new codes and a signpost for topics which may prove important later in developing categories. It is also an important reminder that codes are not automatically produced and that their creation involves interpretation.

In practice, the emphasis on memo-writing in grounded theory research equates to little more than a prompt for an organised system of note-taking. However, this system ensured the development of theory was always linked directly back to concrete data and that my own role in shaping the data was recorded as effectively as possible. All memos were made into a searchable database in an Excel worksheet for consultation. With grounded theory being an incredibly flexible methodology with themes emerging from the data rather that pre-formed, tightly worded research questions, this archive of memos built over the course of this project was invaluable when describing the development of theories for this thesis.

The research process

Charmaz (2014: 18) outlines seven steps in constructivist grounded theory research which were followed in the design of this project:

1. Determining broad research interests
2. The recruitment and sampling of participants
3. Data collection
4. Initial coding
5. Focused coding and categorizing
6. Theory building
7. Writing up

Memos are written throughout these steps and the constant comparative method drives theoretical sampling based on data already generated and coded. During the coding process, questions raised by the data are taken back into the recruitment and sampling stage as the researcher looks for ways to fill out the categories (codes) being created. Crosswell and Poth describe the process of moving back and forth between data generation and analysis as a zig-zag pattern (2018: 85). Included is a flow chart of the research process of this project (Figure 1). The chart is a modified version of a diagram offered by Charmaz (2014: 18). It visualises the steps involved in this study to develop the theories discussed in the analysis chapters.

As discussed in the previous chapter, an initial, broad literature review at the outset served to highlight gaps in knowledge and direct the first lines of inquiry. A more focused review of literature, which did not feed into the literature review chapter but instead informed the write-up of the analysis chapters, was undertaken after analysis was completed and theories were formed.

Data was generated via surveys, interviews, and focus groups concurrently, with the survey finishing earlier and the focus groups occurring later. A clear separation between each stage of data generation was not possible due to practical concerns,

Figure 1: The research process.
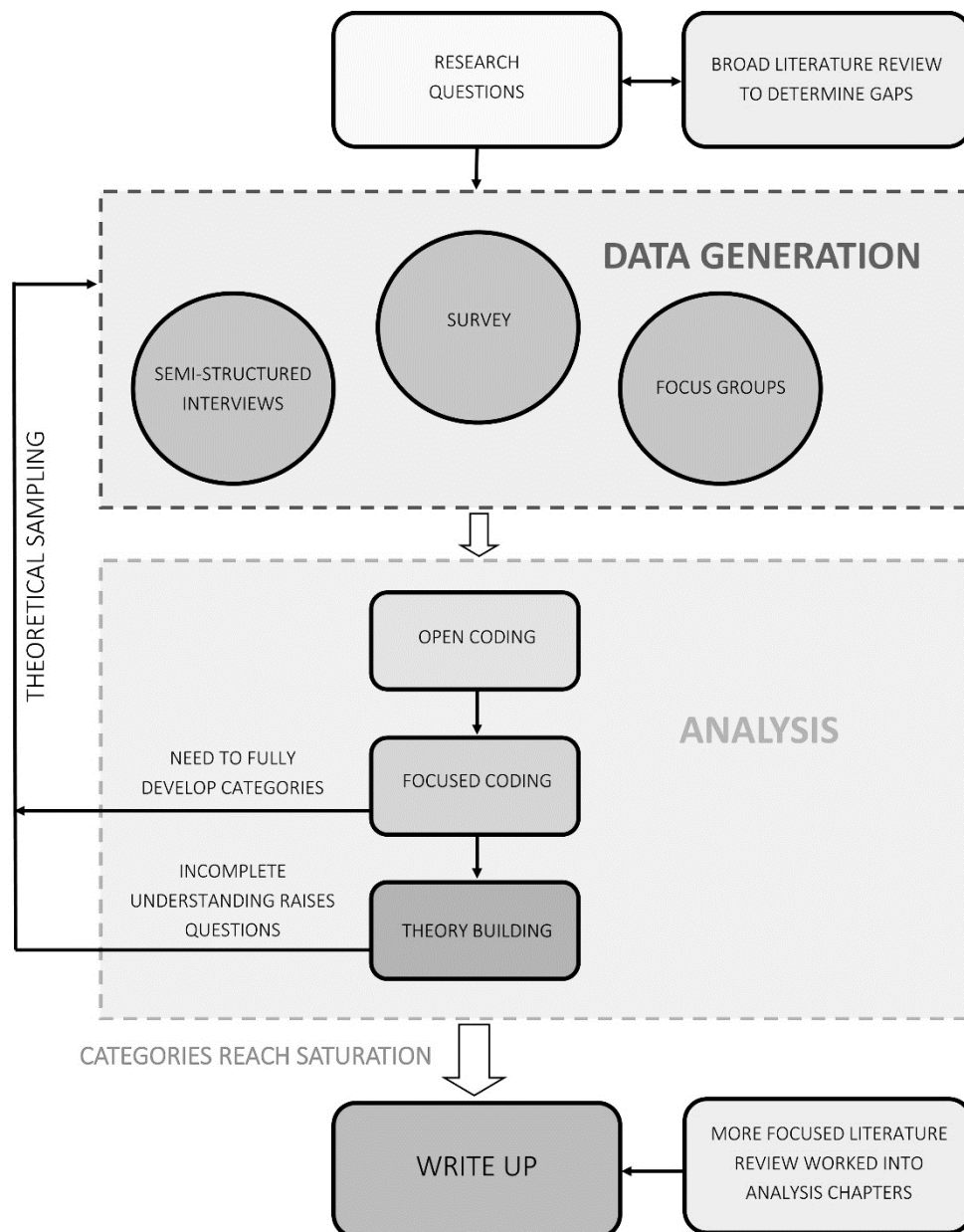
but neither was it desired. Each method generated a different kind of data which was useful in prompting avenues of exploration in the others.

The analysis of data occurred as the data was generated, rather than after all data was collected, to drive theoretical sampling. After focused coding, the need to fully develop categories informed the kinds of participants sought for further data generation. Survey responses were used to help recruit interviewees with the relevant experiences. As concepts and theories were developed, incomplete

understanding raised questions which were answered by going back and generating more data and fleshing out the categories. This loop repeated, returning to data generation after analysis raised more questions, until all questions concerning developing concepts and theories were answered. Once theoretical saturation was reached, the writing of this thesis began, drawing on memos written over the course of the project.

Mixed qualitative methods

Though this research employs a survey which uses mixed qualitative and quantitative questions, the quantitative input was merely a guide for recruiting a wide range of participants and providing contextual data for the survey. However, this research does employ three different qualitative methods: a survey; semi-structured interviews; and focus groups.

In the core grounded theory literature (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin and Strauss, 2015; Glaser and Strauss, 2008 [1967]), the issue of mixing qualitative methods is rarely addressed. Many grounded theorists are satisfied with Glaser's proclamation that 'All is data' (1998: 8). Rosaline Barbour's (1998) discussion of combining qualitative methods addresses an issue which she states is often presented as the primary concern to researchers quantitative and qualitative alike: the triangulation of data. Barbour states that the term triangulation is employed by qualitative researchers, despite its origins in quantitative research, as 'an attempt to claim rigor rather than a description of how this is to be achieved' (1998: 358).

Barbour takes issue with much of the language used in qualitative research which has its beginnings in quantitative methods. She criticises the use of concepts such as validity, reliability, objectivity, and generalisation in qualitative research. Instead, she argues for less positivist concepts of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (1998: 358). Barbour takes issue with the idea of triangulation being applied to qualitative work, discussing how in quantitative methods exceptions are used to disprove the rule, whereas in qualitative work it is more fruitful to use exceptions to fill out theories, to prove the rule (1998: 359). Barbour expresses a stance on mixing qualitative methods which is in concert with

approaches in grounded theory. Barbour states that a process of analytic induction, which naturally includes grounded theory, can allow for the analysis of data from different sources and the generation of theories which are all the more fully developed for it (1998: 360). Defining contradictory data from different qualitative methods as a boon rather than a burden, Barbour states: 'We need to be less apprehensive about apparent contradictions that emerge when we analyse data elicited using parallel methods from the qualitative stable' (1998: 360).

The combination of a three qualitative methods in this research was conducted in this manner. Data from each method was used to develop and lend nuance to findings from the others, rather than as a tool to disprove concepts in a quantitative manner.

Positionality

The acknowledged role of the researcher is central to the differences between the grounded theory of Charmaz (2014), which this research adopts, and the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (2008 [1967]) and Corbin and Strauss (2015). The latter approach is predicated on the assumption of researcher objectivity. Corbin and Strauss argue for the use of unstructured interviews as if they are free from researcher interference, neglecting notions of positionality, including the researcher's status and background (2015: 38). Charmaz states that 'the theory *depends* on the researcher's view; it does not and cannot stand outside of it' (2014: 239). Roni Berger provides a useful study of positionality wherein she identifies that having shared experiences and a shared background with participants in three different studies affected greatly the quality and nature of generated data (2015: 222-223). Considerations of positionality widely benefit the analysis of data in any study, as Charmaz rightly argues (2014: 239).

With many interviewees and all focus group participants being sourced in the UK, I shared a common background with most. My own position as someone with experience with and interest in *The Exorcist* also matched well with most participants. As a great admirer of the film since my first viewing of it in the late 1990s, I was conscious of not imposing my own views on those for whom the film

was less interesting and impressive. My fan status did change the nature of some interviews (e.g., Marco, Paul), making it more horror-oriented as they felt more comfortable talking about their love of special effects, for example. The four other most obvious potential differences between myself and participants were age, religion, social background, and gender. I am a 35-year-old Welshman from a non-religious, rural, working class background. Participants varied in these, and other, ways. Any differences which may have affected the interviewer-interviewee relationship were recorded in memos, though none proved significant enough to warrant discussion in analysis chapters.

Data generation

Participant recruitment

The Exorcist being forty-six years old meant that the majority of the film's first audiences had now passed away, skewing recruitment efforts in favour of recent viewers. This was mitigated somwhat by younger respondents passing information about the research to older family members. The function of *The Exorcist* as a shared cultural object between different generations within families – something which became apparent during this study – was a boon for participant recruitment.

Of 746 survey respondents, 459 were men and 271 were women. A more equal gender balance was sought in the first round of individual interviews. Further data was sought based on theoretical sampling, so gender no longer became a deciding factor in choosing participants. Regardless, seventeen interviewees were women and nineteen were men. A wider range of people with different religious beliefs may have proved interesting, but such participants were not forthcoming.

The survey was publicised on a self-made, project-specific website (theexorcistproject.com) and on the following sites: Facebook; Twitter; Reddit (including the Horror, *Exorcist*, Movies, True Film, and Christianity sub-reddits); Cult Labs forums; FanEdit.org forums; Fright Fest forums; on YouTube videos related to *The Exorcist*; and on academic mailing lists. Posting on Twitter and Reddit, which

have wide and varied user bases, helped to attract people with a variety of opinions of the film, to avoid this becoming a study only of *Exorcist* fans.

To only focus on devoted fans would be to misrepresent the nature of the audiences of this widely seen Hollywood blockbuster. The process of self-selection involved in any recruitment drive ensured that fans were more likely to participate, of course. The aim of a grounded theory study is to produce generalisable concepts and theories that are of practical use (Charmaz, 2014: 113). Ultimately, the data set generated was suitably diverse so as to not negatively affect the wider applicability of the theories developed.

Ethical considerations

I did not work with vulnerable people, being either the very young, people with mental illness or disability affecting communication or understanding, or people who may be at risk should their responses be attributed to them. All participants were offered the use of a pseudonym. All survey responses have been anonymised. Contact information was taken in the survey for following up with interview requests, but this was optional. Survey respondents were informed in the opening statement that their contact information would never be shared for any reason. The survey was hosted on Google Forms as the platform's stringent security measures fulfilled obligations regarding the protection of participant data. Participants had the right to withdraw their data at any point prior to the completion of the thesis. A copy of this thesis and any resultant publications is being made available to participants upon request. Northumbria University's Ethics committee approved this project on April 12th, 2017 (submission reference: 679).

Survey

The survey was designed and circulated online and took eight months, from April 2017, to generate 746 responses. It also served as an effective recruitment tool, providing a pool of interviewees with information about their history with and views of the film. This was invaluable for theoretical sampling. Knowing even a small amount about the participants' background and talking points helped to more

effectively source those with experiences relevant for the development of emerging theories.

The survey was short and simple, with just two open-ended questions, to allow respondents space to focus on any aspect of the film they desired. This allowed themes to emerge from the respondents by giving them less direction, as opposed to using a series of specific questions about individual elements of the experience. The two open-ended questions were as follows:

> What can you remember about that first viewing? Where did you see it? Who were you with? How much did you know about the film beforehand? Tell us as much as you can!

> How many times have you seen *The Exorcist*? Has your view of the film changed over the years at all?

The first open-ended question is based on language used by Barker et al. (2016) in their study of audience memories of *Alien* (Scott, 1979), for which they were able to obtain lengthy, detailed responses. The use of extra sub-questions provided prompts for those unsure of what to discuss. The language was informal, simply worded, and in short chunks to encourage responses and keep the power in the respondents' hands (after de Vaus 2014: 97-99). Barker et al. (2016) had similar methodological problems to solve to the ones encountered by this project, including accounting for memory and recruiting early audiences of a film from the 1970s. Their strategy involved using a clear and casual style of communication and adopting the role of a student, there to learn from the respondent (Barker et al., 2016: 61). This mirrors the attitude of the interviewer in oral history (Thompson, 2000: 222) and was effective in encouraging detailed responses here.

Seven closed questions filled out contextual data detailing the following: when the respondent first saw *The Exorcist*; how they would have rated it out of five at the time; how they would describe their relationship with films; and basic age, sex, location, and ethnicity questions. Whether there would be a pattern in differences in the film's reception between men and women, between ages groups, or between different ethnic groups was not a key research concern, but I needed to have the information available should such patterns have arisen. (They did not.) If I were to

repeat the process, I would surely add a closed question asking for participants'
religious backgrounds. However, those for whom this was important often
identified themselves in the open questions.

A pilot stage is essential to any survey design (de Vaus 2014: 114; Czaja and Blair,
2005: 121) and was, here, undertaken using friends and colleagues. The questions
underwent revisions to keep the survey brief but open-ended. Once it was
launched, questions were not altered. The survey is reproduced as Appendix I.

Interviews

Interview data consists of transcripts of twenty-seven semi-structured interviews
with individuals conducted from June 2017 to June 2018. Two interviews (Steve and
Paul) were conducted in person, seven were conducted via Skype, and fourteen
were conducted via a back-and-forth email process. Audio and in-person interviews
ranged from forty minutes to ninety minutes in length. Email interviews were
offered where a call was impractical due to time-zone differences or due to
participants' own busy schedules. All transcripts and emails are presented as part of
Appendix IV.

Glaser (2004: 25) states that taking field notes is preferable to transcribing audio
recordings for personal interviews in grounded theory research, but it was more
practical to record interviews for this project. It is difficult to effectively conduct an
interview when one is rushing to take notes. Recording and transcribing interviews,
in line with Charmaz's discussion of the matter, also helped preserve the tone,
tempo, and silences of the interview, which is difficult to capture in notes (Charmaz,
2014: 91). Transcription is discussed later in this chapter.

The first group of interviewees were selected based upon their survey responses
with a mind to having a variety of people in terms of their age, gender, and history
with the film. Later, as the data generation and analysis progressed, I was able to
better target participants based on the need to fill out tentative categories and
generate theories.

The first question invariably involved asking interviewees to describe their first
experience watching *The Exorcist*. As the broadest question, this opening prompted

the interviewee to direct the conversation. The interview schedule, which served only as a guide to keep conversation going, included sub-questions to draw out more detail, but these were rarely required. The question and sub-question template for Question 1 read as follows:

> 1) Can you tell me about the first time you watched *The Exorcist*?
>
>> a. Was it at the cinema?
>>
>>> i. What was the cinema like? Can you describe it?
>>>
>>> ii. Was it your usual one?
>>>
>>> iii. May I ask how old you were at the time?
>>
>> b. Did you watch it at home?
>>
>> c. Who was there?
>>
>> d. How did you feel about watching the film? (Excited? Nervous? Not bothered?)
>>
>>> i. How much did you know about the film before you saw it?
>>>
>>> ii. What drew you to the film?

The full question schedule is included as Appendix II, but this was altered for each interview to incorporate previous survey responses. As the project progressed, the questioning became focused on certain themes. Questions which were yielding few insights, such as a question about experiences with *Exorcist* sequels and similar films, were dropped.

Despite a loosely structured schedule, participants were encouraged to direct the interview, which would often take the discussion to unexpected places. Charmaz places great importance on ensuring the interview elicits discussion based on the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's interests (2014: 64). This results in data, and therefore theories, which are grounded in the participants' accounts, and interviews were here conducted in this fashion. While questioning did become more focused on specific topics further into the project, I was careful to select interviewees whose interests fit these topics, via theoretical sampling, rather than imposing these interests on participants who had not discussed them in their survey responses.

At the end of each interview, participants were asked if there was anything they wanted to discuss which had not come up. This was in response to Glaser and Strauss's argument for unstructured interviews, being that participants may not be able to discuss what it is that is most important to them (2008 [1967]: 38). This question and the semi-structured approach were sufficient to allow interviewees to direct the talk without having to resort to a complete lack of structure which may have halted discussions. A set of questions as a starting point served to prompt interviewees to open up more quickly. In both constructivist grounded theory and the field of oral history, there is an emphasis on the interview as a collaborative space, rather than an opportunity for a participant performance (Charmaz, 2014: 91; Thompson, 2000: 133). A researcher's questions are important in prompting this collaboration.

A process of conducting pilot interviews with three survey respondents (Gillian, Marco, and Paul, whose interviews are used in the main body of data analysed) helped to establish a question schedule and provide space to consider the research context. A defining feature of constructivist grounded theory is that 'grounded theorists attend to the situation and construction of the interview, the construction of the research participant's story and silences, and the interview-participant relationship as well as the explicit content of the interview' (Charmaz, 2014: 91). The pilot interviews helped to establish the influence of my own positioning and the research context on the interview, as previously discussed, and to trial different methods of transcription.

It became clear during the pilot interviews that quickly developing a rapport was the most effective way of getting participants to open up. Glaser and Strauss downplay the importance of rapport in interviews, stating that it is time-consuming to develop and unnecessary (2008 [1967]: 75). However, by framing questions around their survey responses and connecting with interviewees via shared experiences, I was better able to put them at ease. It helped defuse participants' nervousness about the research context, which many had little-to-no experience of previously. Participants seemed keen to develop a rapport, too, often making jokes at their own expense. Embracing the interviews as collaborations with equals,

rather than as encounters with "subjects", made them more productive for myself and more enjoyable for the interviewees. This was also helpful in that participants were enthusiastic afterwards to provide further materials or contacts. Of paramount importance to this interview process was respecting the participants, which, for Charmaz, includes building rapport with them (2014: 34).

Email interviews were predominantly used for overseas participants due to scheduling problems with phone calls and to lower the barrier to entry for participants who could more easily email their answers than dedicate an hour of their day. Two pilot interviews were conducted via phone and one was conducted in person, and there proved little difference in the nature of the interview dependent on which method was used. Differences between email interviews and phone or in-person interviews are negligible. Phone or in-person interviews involved more nervous joking and false starts and email responses sometimes took on an element of formality with participants trying to be as descriptive as possible. The formality of a few of the email interviews, however, was in keeping with many written responses to the survey. With the email interviews serving as a middle ground, methodologically speaking, between the survey and the in-person interviews, I felt it prudent to conduct them, especially when it significantly increased the chances of a person agreeing to being interviewed. In older studies of historical audiences, such as those by Stacey (1994) and Kuhn (2002), the combination of letters from participants and interviews resulted in no identifiable problems with the final research. As all quoted correspondences here are tagged to indicate whether I am quoting an interview or the survey, it is left to the reader to interpret any differences in tone in participants' responses. Body language does not factor into the analysis of in-person interviews and neither are pauses or false starts accorded any meaning by me. At no point in this thesis are participants' responses "decoded" in a way which may result in their being uncomfortable with my inferences. Out of respect for participants, I have always taken them at their word.

Focus groups

Two free screenings of *The Exorcist* were run in a small Newcastle venue as an aid for recruitment and to provide a fresh experience to drive potential group

discussions. Twenty people attended the screenings in May 2018, resulting in four focus groups conducted the following month with between two and four participants per group.

Focus group data provided insights into how the film is talked about and how different positions and attitudes interact and even shift in the process of discussion. The strength of focus group data is in the study of "talk-in-interaction" (Puchta and Potter, 2004: 2). There is an emphasis on back-and-forth discussion and the social context of expressed opinions (Tonkiss, 2012: 228). Such insights are not possible with individual interviews or survey data. Individual interviews are a collaborative space, but such interviews remain very one-sided and the interviewee's responses are not open to contestation in the same way. The more dialogic nature of focus groups, Fran Tonkiss states, 'make visible *how* people articulate and justify their ideas in relation to others' (2012: 228). Given the interest of this research in the social context of film-watching, including the sharing of experiences, this was considered a promising method of data generation.

Focus groups are useful in exploratory stages of studies when trying to generate new categories due to their flexibility and the sheer amount of data generated in a short period (Gray, 2014: 469; Barbour, 2007: 14). For this study, focus groups were conducted late in the data generation process after the survey and a first round of individual interviews. Previously generated data was used in the setting of a question schedule for focus groups. Themes that emerged in focus groups that had not previously been explored were raised as questions in the second round of individual interviews. In this sense, the focus groups were very useful as an exploratory tool.

In terms of participant selection, a variety of potential perspectives is ideal, but smaller focus groups are better for social researchers, Tonkiss states, to allow all members space to speak (2012: 228). Three to five separate group interviews are sufficient for smaller research projects, she states, as they can easily provide a wide range of interactions and insights (2012: 229). The consensus in the social sciences on sampling is that participants within a focus group should be homogenous in terms of their demographic but unknown to each other (Tonkiss, 2012: 239). This

avoids issues where there are pre-existing hierarchies within groups. However, such a sample is not always possible (Tonkiss, 2012: 239). Gray states that if the participants in a group are too similar, it is more likely to lead to answers which merely echo each other, but that too many differences between participants may lead to unproductive, cagey conversations (2014: 473). An approach Barbour suggests for ensuring participants feel able to talk freely, which diminishes the risk of participants merely saying what they think the researcher wants to hear, is to arrange interviews with existing groups (2007: 34). Here, there was a mixture of these approaches, with some friends and some similarly aged strangers interviewed together.

There were few questions – eight in all, presented as Appendix III – and they were only loosely followed, with participants encouraged to discuss things amongst themselves with as little direction from me as possible. Questions were presented with a statement of why I was interested in asking it. For example, participants were asked, 'Was the film different to what you were expecting the first time you saw it?' After asking, I stated that I was interested in the hype and the mythology around the film, in what they had heard and how that may have affected their expectations. The questions moved from the general to the specific, after Gray's suggestion (2014: 477). Each focus group interview began with participants being asked to give their general views on *The Exorcist*, allowing everyone an opportunity to speak.

Barbour states it is a mistake to use focus groups merely as a tool to collect individual opinions from multiple people at once (2007: 32). With this in mind, and having recruited some existing friendship groups to be interviewed together, the questions were designed to encourage debate and disagreement. This was encouraged further by asking for any disagreements during the interviews. Due to the nature of *The Exorcist* as a controversial film, it was hoped that there would be much more disagreement and productive discussion. However, this was not the case. Participants were all very much in line with one another and their good manners got the better of any potential disagreements. Despite not producing disagreements, the focus groups were useful in allowing me to step back more.

Participants spoke among themselves and set one another off on interesting tangents not covered in the question schedule. The result was a substantial data set which was driven even more by participants interests. This provided additional depth to the study and to resultant theories. While the focus groups may not be quoted in this thesis as often as individual interviews, conducting them allowed for the generation of data which also drove the focus of later individual interviews. In grounded theory, all data generated affects the direction of a researcher's inquiries.

Transcription

All transcription is interpretation, a representation, as Krista Woodley states in her description of transcription styles (2004: 57). The transcription process here involved first listening through the interviews and creating an index. Then, individual interviews were transcribed in full. Indexes of discussions and timestamps were created from focus group recordings and only relevant sections were transcribed. Quotations presented in the thesis are edited for brevity and clarity only. False starts and stutters and moments of thought (e.g., ums and errs) have been mostly omitted, save some which were deemed to represent participants working things out or hesitating. This is an attempt to remain faithful to the speakers' voices and retain the feel of the spoken word. This decision takes its cue from oral history work, 'leaving in enough redundancies, false starts, and colloquialisms to remind the reader that these words originated in dialogic oral performance, not a monologic text' (Portelli, 2011: 10). Where appropriate and practical, quotes include the questions asked of the participant before their response. This is a vital part of the context, as Alessandro Portelli states: 'when the researcher's voice is cut out, the informant's voice is distorted' (1981: 104).

Analysis

The greatest benefits of a grounded theory methodology are to be found in the analysis stage. Glaser and Strauss state that their project is to forgo the overemphasis on the collection of data in the social science work of their day; instead, they address 'the equally important enterprise of *how the discovery of theory from data*[…] *can be furthered*' (emphasis in original) (2008 [1967]: 1). Cathy

Urquhart stresses that the coding stage of a grounded theory study is where the deliberately broad research concerns (here: memory, identity, and language) develop through the analysis of data into specific research questions (2013: 102). The aim is, through coding, to arrive at a "core" or "central" category, one process which may account for the actions described in the data via codes (Saldana, 2009: 165). This is the backbone of the theory that is generated in a grounded theory study. Grounded theory rejects the academic model of testing the theories of others (many of which may not have originated in data). This section outlines how theories were developed through the coding process until theoretical saturation was reached.

Data was analysed using the two-stage coding process outlined by Charmaz for her constructivist grounded theory, consisting of "initial" (or "open") coding and "focused" coding (2014: 109). An additional layer of "framework analysis" (after Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) was conducted on focus group data to retain the discussion-based context.

The analysis of data began early in the project's life to facilitate theoretical sampling. Once a significant and varied data set was generated (500 survey responses and three individual interviews), initial and focused coding was performed as further survey responses continued to be generated. Then, further data was generated through interviews and focus groups to develop emerging theories. The results of early coding drove the focus of later interviews. In all, after initial and focused coding, the data set produced 197 individual codes within eleven parent categories, producing 3, 147 references (instances of codes being applied). (The codebook is included in Appendix IV.)

Initial coding

The process of coding systematically dismantles data to break it down into its constituent parts. This allows for comparisons between pieces of data, helping to uncover, through such comparisons, 'how people enact or respond to events, what meanings they hold, and how and why these actions and meanings evolved'

(Charmaz, 2014: 113). Practically, this involves reading through data and categorising pieces of it, by 'actively naming data' (Charmaz, 2014: 115).

In keeping with Glaser's (1978) preference, Charmaz advocates for phrasing codes as gerunds, "doing" words, rather than as topics or themes (2014: 120). This retains a focus on actions to categorise the process rather than the person (Charmaz, 2014: 120). It prevents imposing broad labels upon participants which may colour conclusions about what is happening in their responses. As Charmaz argues, 'assigning types to people casts them with static labels [which] make them one-dimensional although the behaviour on which you based the label may represent only a small part of who they are and what they do' (2014: 117). A phrase such as 'I'm an atheist' (#593) was therefore not categorised under the code "Atheist" or "Atheism". Instead, it was coded in terms of the action being performed, "Establishing atheism", which is what the respondent is doing. To categorise the participant as an atheist is to make an assumption about the importance of this non-belief for them. Coding for action places the emphasis where it belongs, on the language used and the actions described.

Survey responses were the first data to be coded. They varied from as short as one word to as long as several hundred. Charmaz (2014: 121) discusses the benefits of line-by-line and single-word coding during analysis, but a uniform approach to coding answers based on length seemed counterproductive. Coding line-by-line on data that varied so greatly in length would have overlooked a great deal of detail for the sake of methodological uniformity. Glaser's (1998: 8) assurance that "all is data" was taken to heart for this project, and no significant responses or moments within survey responses were overlooked in an attempt at preserving a veneer of objective scientific rigour.

Initial codes were kept short and simple to remain closely tied to the data, as advised by Charmaz (2014: 116). Where possible, "in vivo" codes – being codes which are direct quotes from participants, such as "Putting on a brave face" – were also used for this purpose (Urquhart, 2013: 103). Coding consisted of simply looking for the action being performed in the response, either in the language or in the content (as exampled by "Establishing atheism"). These codes were 'provisional,

comparative, and grounded in the data' (Charmaz, 2014: 117). There were many instances where words or sentences were categorised under more than one code. Figure 2 presents a selection of survey responses with initial codes to illustrate their simplicity, demonstrate the use of gerunds, and highlight how these practices kept the codes close to the responses with minimal theorising at this stage. The codes are designed to be short and self-explanatory. The quotations in the table are selections from within the full response, being the part that directly relates to the code. The "categories" into which these codes were placed will be discussed in the context of "focused" coding. These initial codes were not permanently fixed and some were later split or combined with other codes. They were coded for both content (e.g., instances of censorship) and language (e.g., the structure or past/present register of the response). The simplicity of the codes allowed room for further "focused" coding to later determine the relationships between them.

Interviews were similarly coded and the transcripts were then also printed and coded further by hand with line-by-line coding. Line-by-line coding of interviews helped to provide some much-needed critical distance from the data, providing the line-by-line framework of viewing it rather than the framework defined by the participants they shift topics (Charmaz, 2014: 127). This second run-through of initial coding for interviews limited the possibility of my overlooking interesting data and of my own biases guiding me to focus only on those specific sections of the interview I found most personally interesting. Figure 3, overleaf, presents an example of line-by-line coding recreated for this thesis. The text in bold represents the questions asked.

A short description in a memo, hosted in the NVivo 12 analysis software suite, was given for each new code. These memos included description of where the first instance of the code was found, an explanation (if necessary), and immediate questions about what the code meant and how it differed from other established codes. Figure 4, overleaf, provides an example of such memos which helped to track the process of coding and served as a point of reference for ideas and comparison purposes when deliberating how to code similar responses.

Memos served as a reminder of the logic of creating specific codes and questions I was asking of them. This was invaluable given the flexibility of grounded theory coding, with codes open to revision and recategorisation, especially during the second stage of coding, "focused" coding. The survey data and data from the first five individual interviews underwent both initial and focused coding before the findings were used to direct further data generation.

Figure 2: initial coding.

	Response quotation	Initial Code	Category
#87	My mother always forbade us from watching it.	Parental censoring	Family
#18	My father and mother both told me how it it scared the shit out of them.	Family hyping	Family
#188	I had lice at the time and my mom was applying medicine to my scalp as we watched it. When the time came to wash the medicine out, I sat at the top of the stairs for the longest time because I was too scared to take a shower by myself.	Autobiographing	Identity work
#639	I no longer find it as scary as I used to, or at least I'm not scared of the same things I was scared of when I was younger.	Contrasting selves	Identity work
#738	Once it was finished, despite considering myself a level headed and rational person, I was genuinely scared of leaving my friends living room and going in to the darkness of his hallway.	Creeping into reality	Post-textual
#167	I do remember the day after watching that I repeatedly told my grandmother "the power of Christ compels you" which she didn't find funny.	In-joking	Post-textual
#440	Mesopotamian demon possessing a 'precious' white American girl. While still frightening and fascinating in terms of its representation of Roman Catholicism in contemporary secular America, we must not ignore the potentially regressive politics that the film exhibits.	Intellectualising	Textual
#189	My brother was properly scared which was lovely.	Schadenfreuding	Social
#363	I didn't actually realise we were going to watch a horror movie because I didn't know what an exorcist was! I had seen the VHS cover and saw Merrin's briefcase and assumed it was about dodgy businessmen! I know absolutely nothing about the movie beforehand, not even the iconic scenes.	Flying blind	Pre-textual

Figure 3: line-by-line coding.

Text (Interview: Paul)	Code
Did it match up to how bad you expected it to be?	
No. The first time I watched it, no. Subsequent viewings,	Exp. disappointment
definitely, but that first time was a bit of a different one,	Contrasting times
because, as I say, I'm watching it with a group of mates. So,	Contrasting selves
you've got this kind of bravado in place. You're kind of	…brave face
trying to show, "Ah, this ain't no thing." It's a group of,	…brave face
probably, age range, 16 to 13, 12. I feel like my little brother	Questioning self
was there as well, so, yeah, about 12. I'm watching it, and,	Pre-teen viewing
there's large parts where it, actually, it's really nicely paced	Admiring technicals
because it doesn't rush anything, you know. It slow builds	Admiring technicals
and, on subsequent viewings, you're seeing just the	Two-timing
deterioration of the relationship between the mother	Shifting sympathies
and daughter, where they're playing – I think I'm	Questioning self
remembering it correctly – where she comes home and	Questioning self
she's chasing her round the house and its dead playful	Sunny-siding
and there's a warmth between them. You notice that. You	Projecting
can see that bond. And then as the possession progresses,	Sunny-siding
you can see that they're becoming more distant.	Expressing sympathy

Figure 4: coding memos.

Code	First example	Logic
"Rejecting genre label"	#199	He says, 'It's not a horror movie any more.' A lot of folks said this about the first time as well. What are they doing here? Legitimising the film? Legitimising their love of it? Slating horror? (That's another code. This as an aspect of that?)
"Re-confronting fears"	#61	He tried to rid himself of the scary memory by mastering the film through re-watching it.

Focused coding

After initial coding, focused coding was performed to place those initial codes in the larger context of the data set. This secondary stage of coding is common to qualitative research, its purpose being 'to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organisation from your array of [initial] codes' (Saldana, 2009: 149). The aim is to identify major themes and categories in the data (Saldana, 2009: 155).

The re-categorisation and comparison of initial codes helps to unearth patterns and determine which codes are most relevant or promising for developing theories, and which are less so. In Figure 2, "parental censoring" and "family hyping" are classified as both related to "family", which meant these codes were particularly important to any theories which may have developed along those lines. The promise of developing theories was decided due to their fit with the participants' interests and the number of variations of related codes.

Focused coding is where a researcher can make new connections between codes and lay the groundwork for producing larger concepts and theories and determining how they all are linked (Charmaz, 2014: 143). Glaser states with regards to this, the core category, 'If all data cannot be coded, the emerging theory does not fully fit or work for the data and must be modified' (1978: 56). Theories here were checked for their "fit" with data through constant comparison between and within codes and a core concern – the importance of personal and particularly family relationships in film experiences – did emerge.

Coding focus group data

Data generated by focus groups was coded in the manner described above, but with an additional step, "framework analysis", which draws on work by Jane Ritchie and Liz Spencer (1994). The strength of focus groups is that they provide different data to interviews and surveys, which deal only with individuals. Focus group data can be analysed in terms of individuals' responses, generalised group responses, and in terms of group interaction data (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009: 5). This additional step of framework analysis on focus groups, recommended by Barbour (2009: 131),

was taken to place participants' talk in the context of group discussion and to enable comparisons between different groups.

Framework analysis allows a researcher to construct a visual shorthand of what happened in each focus group. This allows for the focus group to be treated as a 'site of performance', rather than a method to quickly interview several people at once (Brannen and Pattman, 2005: 53). There is much crossover between framework analysis and the methods employed by grounded theory, including the constant comparison between and within data sets to highlight differences and similarities to develop concepts (Barbour, 2007: 131).

Ritchie and Spencer outline a five-step process in conducting framework analysis on focus group data, but only one of these steps, charting, was necessary in addition to the initial and focused coding described above (1994: 178). Their five steps are familiarisation, identifying thematic frameworks, indexing, charting, and finally mapping and interpretation (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994: 178). Whereas charting was incredibly useful, the other steps bring nothing to the analysis that is not present in grounded theory methodology. Charting, therefore, was conducted to produce contextual information about statements in focus groups. Charting of the focus groups was carried out after initial and focused coding of transcripts. It involved creating a table for each group and a table encompassing all groups. Figure 5, as an example, includes all focus group data for a select few codes. Along the top row are notable codes used to classify the talk. The left column lists the different groups with a brief description of constitution. Such tables provided an overview of the most discussed topics for each group. It lessened the risk of my concentrating on certain themes in a focus group over others and summarised the general content and variety of each discussion.

Charting was also carried out on the individual focus groups, with a table created for each one detailing the most common codes attributed to each speaker, as in Figure 6, with a total at the bottom. Recording the number of times participants' responses matched certain codes in this table form helped to show, visually, the direction of the discussion. This was important information to consider when analysing participants' responses, avoiding the pitfall of focus group analysis

Figure 5: Grouped focus group framework analysis.

	Hero-worshipping	Rejecting genre label	Disbelieving
FG1: 19m, 19m, 26m	ii	ii	ii
FG2: 19f, 19f		ii	
FG3: 19m, 19m		ii	ii
FG4: 19f, 25m	i		

Figure 6: single focus group framework analysis.

	Hero-worshipping	Rejecting genre label	Disbelieving
Robbie	ii	i	i
Kieran	i		
Nick		ii	i
Total references:	3	3	2

Barbour describes in which data is often removed from its context and reported as if it was taken from a one-to-one interview (2007: 147). The proliferation of talk of certain topics may have accounted for the lack of discussion of others. At the very least, the dominance of one topic in a time-limited discussion is important. Such tables provided a useful overview of contextual matters, helping in the analysis to determine the importance of different themes to different participants.

Focus group data coded at the individual level was still of use in analysis at the group level. As Barbour states, studying the individual can illuminate the patterns of a group, especially when there is some kind of consensus to which the individual in question may or may not belong (2007: 131). Barbour emphasises that intra-group analysis is an important consideration, in addition to the usual emphasis on inter-group analysis based on groups consisting of different demographics (2007: 131). When combined with the initial and focused coding of grounded theory, framework analysis aided the integration of focus group data with those of interviews and the survey.

Conclusion: building grounded theories

Constructivist grounded theory provides a new and highly structured yet flexible approach for generating inductive theories about audiences in a systematic manner. In short, for the first time, it provides *grounded audience studies*. This methodology is an effective and pragmatic framework for generating and analysing a large data set. This approach is incredibly valuable for individual researchers who can adopt participants as colleagues, almost, collaboratively forging research interests. This is a practical and participant-centric alternative to current trends in audience research, such as the international surveys with tens of thousands of responses to dozens of detailed questions. Such studies, including those on *The Lord of the Rings* (Barker, Martin, Ernest Mathijs, and Alberto Trobia, 2008) and *The Hobbit* (Barker, 2016a), involve teams of researchers (see Veenstra, Aleit, Annemarie Kersten, Tonny Krijnen, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers, 2016; Hirsjärvi, Irma, Urpo Kovala, and Maria Ruotsalainen, 2016) mining an enormous data set for very specific, research-defined interests. A solo researcher cannot hope to duplicate such a data set and would be at a distinct disadvantage in analysing it regardless, unless the majority of the data set is ignored and a single, researcher-defined interest is selected for investigation. A grounded audience study allows a data set to be flexible and to follow participants' often surprising concerns. Importantly, it does not require a narrowing of concerns in order to make a data set more manageable. The data set produced is, through theoretical sampling, entirely relevant to the entire experience of participants. Whereas a solo researcher following the footsteps of the aforementioned survey projects would need to focus on one element of an experience, lacking the manpower to sift through an enormous data set while focusing on the whole experience, a grounded audience studies researcher can co-create with participants a data set speaks to the film experience in a holistic fashion. There is, at the end, no enormous data set which can be interrogated by various researchers with various interests; instead, there is a smaller data set driven by participants' concerns, engineered to speak to experiences as they fit into audiences' everyday lives.

The refusal to employ extant theories and the focus on keeping developing theories tied closely to original data was invaluable in forcing this study into avenues of enquiry important to participants, rather than any imposed by the researcher. The integration of data generation and data analysis stages, moving between them both to fill gaps in developing theories using theoretical sampling, ensured that resultant data was fit for purpose as raw material for building grounded theories. Theories and concepts developed here are grounded in participants' accounts. Ideas from analysis were fed back into further interviews, producing a study which is much more a product of its participants.

A traditional linear progression from data generation to data analysis together with single fixed method of data generation, such as a survey or a series of structured interviews using the same template, produces a fixed, final data set from which the theory must grow. There will inevitably be gaps as a result of the research design due to the need for the writing of specific research questions before determining what is important to the audiences themselves. While no audience research project can hope to be completely exhaustive, the flexibility of grounded theory at least allows the full development of emerging concerns and ensures resultant theories are relevant and recognisable to participants.

A limitation of this study is the lack of a wider historical context which could have been provided via a study of archival materials. However, while such materials have provided structure for this thesis, their analysis would not contribute to the to theorisation of individual, everyday experiences, which is the core concern of this project. Rather than a historical study of *The Exorcist*, this thesis constitutes an examination of the everyday processes involved for its audiences.

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 present analysis of data and offer grounded theories produced by this methodological approach. They outline the steps taken to reach their conclusions and describe new theories of the role of the environment in meaning-making, the family dynamic and home viewing, personal censorship and parental regulation, and processes of remembering. The chapters are structured thematically, the first three guided by the three phases of *The Exorcist*'s reputation,

rather than dealing with one method of data generation per chapter, so that theories, not methods, are the guiding framework.

This research goes beyond the folklore and media sensationalism and forgoes the industrial or critical narrative in favour of the personal. It is the first audience study to make full use of the flexibility and analytic power of grounded theory methodology.

Chapter 3

Literature review

The role of the literature review is a point of contention in grounded theory methodology. Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss argue that it is unnecessary for a researcher to conduct a thorough literature review before a research task (2015: 49). They are concerned that a literature review may stifle the researcher's imagination and direct their inquiries (Corbin and Strauss, 2015: 49-50). Grounded theory methodology stands in stark opposition to verificational studies in which findings of other research projects or logically deduced (rather than data-driven) theories are put to the test, making a literature review redundant for some grounded theorists (Glaser, 1978: 2). There is resistance to using any extant theories or concepts that do not come from one's own data, and, for some, this extends to an insistence on avoiding all literature on the subject for fear of being subconsciously swayed.

Not all grounded theory scholars agree with such extreme measures. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz question the assumption that a researcher who has not read widely is a "blank slate": 'an open mind does not imply an empty head', they state (2007: 20). Experienced researchers often arrive at a project with a deep knowledge of their subject. Such claims about eliminating a researcher's influence on the study are part of the positivistic slant of early grounded theory which prompted Charmaz to develop her "constructivist" school (2014). Her approach, which this study adopts, acknowledges the subjectivity of qualitative research and

attempts to account for researcher interference and prior knowledge, rather than claiming to be able to eliminate it or that it does not exist (2014: 12). As famed biologist Louis Pasteur reportedly said, upon remarks about his discovery of germ theory in the 1880s being a "lucky find", "fortune favours the prepared mind" (Cullis, 2007: 304). One's prior knowledge of a subject will always influence what one may find in a given study.

A researcher must understand the current theoretical conversation in a field to be able to enter into it with any hope of generating useful theories, Lora Bex Lempert argues (2007: 254). She suggests researchers should be aware of gaps in current knowledge, though she emphasises caution to not to let the literature review define the research (2007: 254). This literature review was conducted in this manner, as a survey of the field and point of later comparison rather than as a source of concepts and theories to test. This follows the edict of grounded theory that all concepts and theories must come directly from the data and any extant data must earn its way into the study (Urquhart, 2013: 7).

An initial review of seemingly relevant literature was undertaken before the generation and analysis of data began. Becoming familiar with work in the relevant fields ensured I was more sensitive to nuances within generated data. A second, more focused review of literature was undertaken after the development of theories arising from the data. The second review informs comparisons drawn in analysis chapters where relevant to the theories developed as a result of the data. It served as a useful tool in comparison, seeing where the theories arising from this research fit with or contradict existing ideas. In keeping with the advice from Corbin and Strauss, the literature was used for comparisons at a conceptual level and was not treated *as data* (2015: 49, my emphasis). Only concepts that have been derived from data have been used (Corbin and Strauss, 2015: 50). Both of these literature review stages informed the writing of this chapter. The first broad review included studies which turned out to be irrelevant to the theories produced, and the second, more focused review, after developing my own theories, demanded assessments of different studies more pointedly related to my findings. With this being the case, I thought it sensible to have this chapter represent the combined reviews, so as to

neither include that which turned out to be irrelevant nor exclude important points of comparison which arise later in this thesis.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the theoretical underpinning of fields relevant to this study of the audiences of *The Exorcist*. The broad research interests began as the process of remembering, issues of personal identity, and the relationships between audiences and such a controversial, horrific film. More specific interests and research questions, such as parental regulation and the importance of place, emerged as data was generated and analysed (Charmaz, 2014: 18).

I begin here with a critical overview of audience studies and fan studies to explore how people's relationships with media have been theorised in the past. A review of the discussion of place in audience studies follows due to this study's interest in the sociality and environmental factors of film-viewing. A review of the traditional censorship studies paradigm follows, highlighting key issues in past studies of censored films. The chapter then presents an overview of relevant work in cinema-going memories.

Audience studies

The evolution of audience studies is covered extensively in the introduction of most book-length audience studies. It is a multifaceted discipline with a troubled past as a scaremongering tool of censorship and a promising future as more audiences and contexts are addressed. As technological developments allow for greater communication, there is little excuse to not engage with audiences when discussing responses to a film. As Martin Barker states: 'Audience research is *hard*, in many ways. Not doing it, however, and substituting untested "figures" to be stand-ins for us is becoming inexcusable' (2013: 115).

Viewing strategies

To begin at the beginning, with how audiences approach films, we must look at the concept of "viewing strategies", which originated in the work of Barker et al. (1998, 2001, 2008). It is an essential concept for any audience researcher seeking to understand everyday film-viewing. Such an endeavour is far removed from research

which simply examines responses to experiences with texts as if they occur in a vacuum, free of the social context, everyday decision-making, and interpretive practices which go into the act of watching a film (Barker, 2006: 124).

The concept of viewing strategies takes as its premise the simple idea that audiences *prepare* and *are prepared* to watch a film, with expectations, prior knowledge, and different levels of investment which inform how they approach, experience, and ultimately interpret a film. Martin Barker and Kate Brooks first developed this idea by drawing upon work in art history which describes the reception processes of Italian paintings from the 1400s in the time in which they were produced (1998: 137). They extrapolate from Michael Baxandall's theory of reception for such paintings to produce a model of what they call "practical logics", being the practical steps, or viewing strategies, audiences take in preparation of watching a film (Barker and Brooks, 1998: 137). This broadens the focus of audience research from contextless responses to a film to include the prior knowledge and decision-making processes that occur before watching and the meaning-making processes which continue after the film has ended.

There are three separate phases in constructing viewing strategies as described by Barker et al. (2008: 15-16). First, there is the *preparation* stage, which may last ten minutes or ten years, incorporating as it does prior knowledge, experiences, hopes and fears, and experiences with trailers, advertisements, reviews, and other critical and promotional materials. Experiences with "prefigurative materials" is a key component in constructing a viewing strategy. The term "prefigurative materials" includes Jonathan Gray's (2010) term "paratexts" and Thomas Austin's (2002) "satellite texts" – they each describe critical, promotional, and audience-generated materials and talk – but prefigurative materials are distinct from paratexts and satellite texts in function if not in form. All prefigurative materials are paratexts and satellite texts, but not all paratexts and satellite texts are prefigurative materials. Those classed as prefigurative are only those which have had *an impact upon meaning* for the audience member in question. Prefigurative materials feature heavily in work on the controversial film, *Crash* (Cronenberg, 1996) by Barker (2004; Barker et al., 2001), wherein it is described how certain materials promise a certain

kind of experience with a film (Barker et al., 2001: 33). The term "prefigurative materials" simply describes paratexts/satellite texts which influence meaning, often by promising a certain kind of experience. To determine their participants' preparation levels in their *Crash* research, Barker et al. asked participants if they had read the source novel, if they were familiar with the controversy in the press, and if they were familiar with the work of director David Cronenberg (2001: 157-158). Not all materials related to a film will be available to all viewers and they will not have the same bearing on meaning for all viewers. The only way to determine if certain materials are prefigurative for an audience member is to ask them.

A criticism of Barker's term, "prefigurative materials", which he has addressed himself, is that it is misleading in that *pre*-figurative suggests that any influence these materials have on audiences' meaning-making practices occurs only *before* viewing the film (2004). However, Barker explains that the "figuring" and the viewing are not the same event (2004). "Prefigurative" means *before settling on a meaning*, not *before viewing*. It is the understanding of the text, not the viewing of it, that these materials are prefiguring, so the use of this term still allows for the reality of meaning sometimes not being arrived at immediately upon a film's end. Even once someone has made sense of the film that first time, further materials or discussions could shift their viewpoint. This shifting of meanings is of great interest to this study given shifting discourses around and attitudes towards *The Exorcist*.

Phase two of a viewing strategy occurs in the *cinematic experience* itself, wherein audiences engage with the film based on those elements which are most important to them (Barker et al., 2008: 15). Participants' responses to *Crash* were examined to determine which aspects of the film they most emphasised in their discussions and what kind of person the participant may have seen him or herself as during the experience (more of which when we come to the concept of interpretive communities) (Barker et al., 2001: 157-58). A common theme with audience research on films is an almost exclusive focus on cinema-going, despite the importance and prevalence of home viewing, which Klinger (2006: 4) calls 'a crucial exhibition site for cinema'. The two experiences are vastly different in aesthetics, in

behaviour, and in levels of investment, and can account for other changes in meaning in this phase.

The final phase of a viewing strategy is *sedimentation,* where audiences make sense of the experience (Barker et al., 2008: 16). An interpretation may change over time, prompted by thinking about the film, talking about it with others, through repeat viewings, or through experiences with paratexts or other films. This settling and revision of meaning over time is of huge importance to a film as old as *The Exorcist*.

Audiences' responses cannot be discussed in isolation from their preparations and expectations, and these responses are not "finished" the moment the credits roll (Barker and Brooks, 1998: 137). The viewing strategy is a concept explored in rigorous audience studies (Barker et al., 2001; Barker, 2005; Egan and Barker, 2008; Barker et al., 2016) and is not logically deduced, allowing for its inclusion in a grounded theory study (Corbin and Strauss, 2015: 50). The term serves as a useful shorthand for a complex decision-making and interpretive process which goes into audiences' acts of preparing for and understanding a film text. From data generated by this project, it is clear that such processes are part of audiences' engagements with *The Exorcist* and, therefore, viewing strategies are discussed freely in this grounded study. This extant concept has earned its way into the analysis.

Interpretive communities

Just as responses to a film cannot be separated from audiences' preparations and expectations, neither can they be separated from the identities of those audiences. The concept of "interpretive communities" which tries to address this problem derives from the work of literary theorist Stanley Fish (1980). It describes how the meanings of a text are not entirely the product of its own design, but are instead intrinsically linked to the identities of the viewers (or, in Fish's case, being a literary scholar, the readers). Fish's (1980) seminal essay, 'How to recognise a poem when you see one', describes how a group of literature students in Fish's classroom were able, when prompted, to generate meaning from a list of names which had been left on the blackboard from a previous lesson (Fish, 1980: 323-326). After being told the list was a poem, the students were able to produce complex readings of an

inherently meaningless text due to their belonging to a shared literary community with shared knowledge and background. The identification of such communities is commonplace in audience research which seeks to investigate their properties.

Barker (2006: 129-130) states that the concept of interpretive communities is an indispensable middle ground between the extremes of textual determinism and complete individualism in theories of audience processes where no two instances of reception are alike. The concept was integral to Barker and Brooks's research into the audiences of *Judge Dredd* wherein they found that membership to interpretive communities factors into the formation of viewing strategies as audiences may approach a particular text as a member of a specific interpretive community (1998: 176-177).

Difficulties arise when trying to discern to which interpretive communities any one viewer may belong. A person always belongs to multiple interpretive communities at once and it is difficult to determine where one interpretive community ends and another begins (Graff, 1999: 39). Barker (2006: 130) echoes these concerns, stating that interpretive communities must not be examined in isolation from other such groups. The recent international project based on the *Hobbit* film trilogy presented an opportunity to examine the concept of interpretive communities. However, attempts by Hirsjärvi, Kovala and Ruotsalainen (2016) to classify participants in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden as an interpretive community of Nordic nations discovered no differences between this group and the global sample. Veenstra, Kersten, Krijnen, Bitereyst, and Meers (2016) also failed to find support for their notion of an interpretive community between Belgian, French, and Dutch audiences. The existence of interpretive communities, when explicitly sought, is not supported by data.

The concepts of interpretive communities and viewing strategies are linked by how they both seek answers regarding meaning making, but Fish's (1980) concept is logically deduced and does not originate in data. It is a hypothesis which has been adopted wholesale by audience studies researchers as a unit of study. The concept has been applied to data and worked into the design of studies, rather than being something which has grown from findings. As evidenced by Hirsjärvi, Kovala, and

Ruotsalainen's (2016) study which seeks and determines there is no Nordic interpretive community, this theory is not always a good fit for the studies in which it is used because of its nature as being logically deduced and originally presented only in anecdotal form (Fish, 1980). The idea has no place in my own study as a pre-formed concept from a logically deduced theory, despite its influence over audience studies past and present. The concept is discussed in detail in Chapter 4 as a point of comparison to this study's findings. The concept of interpretive communities is a useful way to think about audiences, but is more of a hinderance than a help in actual studies, particularly where this concept informs the entire design of the research, as so often is the case.

Barker convincingly argues (based on many studies) that one of the 'almost unarguable certain truths about audiences' is that 'there is no such thing as "the audience," rather, there are a great variety of "audiences" that display patterns and processes which bind them into researchable communities of response' (2006: 124). That many people have similar responses to texts is inarguable; it is the reasons for these similarities that need further exploration. This project investigated these processes through grounded theory by refusing to impose categories and logically deduced concepts on the data before they are analysed.

Fan studies

This research is interested in the personal experiences of a wide variety of audiences with all kinds of responses and levels of investment in *The Exorcist.* Naturally, this extends to the most enthusiastic audiences: fans. Fan studies has much to offer in terms of frameworks for understanding audiences of *The Exorcist*.

Fannish modes of reception

The fans discussed by Henry Jenkins (1992) in the seminal fan studies text, *Textual Poachers*, are very different from first-time viewers of *The Exorcist*, but there is still much to learn from them. Jenkins describes fans as viewers who watch 'with close and undivided attention, with a mixture of emotional proximity and critical distance', and who share and debate meanings with other enthusiasts (1992: 284).

For fans, Jenkins states, the experience with the text is 'the beginning, not the end, of the process of media consumption' (1992: 284). This echoes Barker's assertion that meaning is not fixed after the film has been seen (2004). Jenkins also makes a case for fans as "nomads" who have a particular mode of engagement but who are always searching for more texts of which they can become fans (1992: 36-37). This has been echoed more recently by Matt Hills (2014) who criticises a tendency within fan studies for fans to be studied as fans of one particular text. He states:

> The difficulty is that by "fixing" fans into rigid communities and object-based categories, academia frequently loses the capacity to consider how people can be fans of multiple texts at the same time, as well as how people might move through and between different fandoms over time. Contained by concepts of community and culture, fandom partially loses its lived connection with a "narrative of the self". (Hills, 2014: 9)

In both Jenkins's and Hills's claims, there is an acknowledgement that media experiences must be contextualised within people's everyday lives, that an audience study of a single screening which focuses only on audience responses to one film at one moment are falling short of representing audiences' experiences.

Fannish modes of reception, Jenkins states, results in fans creating a meta-text of their own which is beyond that which is presented explicitly in the original text (Jenkins, 1992: 284). Multiple viewings allow fans to bring texts under their control and they use particularly intense critical and interpretive strategies to fill gaps in narratives and explore further narrative possibilities (Jenkins, 1992: 284). These practices are not unique to fans, but it is this creation of a meta-text which is the perhaps the most significant factor. There is, in the watching, what Kate Egan and Martin Barker (2008: 99) call a "search for completeness". In their examination of *Lord of the Rings* fans' viewing habits with regard to the "Extended Edition" DVDs, they discuss how and why fans re-watch the films with added material. They notice new details with each viewing and fill out the imaginative world of the story (Egan and Barker, 2008: 99). *The Exorcist* arrived in cinemas from successful literary beginnings, having a large fan following, and, having a number of tie-in works, the film is also open to this mode of fannish viewing, of creating a metatext through

repeat viewings. An added feature of *The Exorcist* is its religiosity, its grounding in Christian culture, which, for some, gives it the largest possible metatext.

Helen Taylor (1989), using her interviews with female fans of *Gone with the Wind*, describes another mode of repeat viewings; she describes how women talk of viewing the film again on video when they needed "a good cry" (Taylor, 1989: 105). The film provides for them a dependable emotional outlet leading to the film to be described by a significant number of her correspondents as "a friend" or "part of the family" (Taylor, 1989: 219). The popularity of *The Exorcist* through retrospective screenings and Halloween events speaks to this idea of repeat viewings providing a specific and dependable emotional escape. In the case of *The Exorcist*, this may be related to fear or religiosity. Discussions of "scariness" came to the forefront during this study, making this notion of film-as-outlet important.

Fans as community

Fandom provides a social community, establishing for some viewers a common ground based on shared pleasures for discussion, productivity, and friendship (Jenkins, 1992: 287). Fan communities are claimed as an interpretive community in this way, using as they do similar modes of viewing and having shared knowledge of and affection towards particular texts. While Fish's (1980) notion of interpretive communities is logically deduced, Jenkins' observations of fan communities comes from audience data and is not and, importantly, it is dealing with communities of a limited size and a definable scope.

Discussion of fan communities often manifests in both critical and academic writings about films in straight-forward terms. The most common form of this is discussed by Peter Hutchings as he describes horror audiences who are treated as objects for either blame or praise, by either critics seeking to condemn a film or a genre or by academics seeking to rescue an audience from such condemnations (2014: 95). Both Hutchings (2004: 93) and Hills (2014: 96) describe a need for discussions of horror audiences to not only transcend this idea of them as a "homogeneous mass", but also to go beyond the level of the fan community which is a reductive concept.

Hills (2014: 93) draws on work by Annette Hill (1997) on a then-"new wave" of violent films, including *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino, 1992) and *Natural Born Killers* (Stone, 1994), which described of how audiences self-censor images based on their own thresholds for violent imagery. These examples of audiences negotiating their experience with a film physically (by looking away, for example), Hills suggests, are antithetical to the impulse to consider horror fans as a single community (2014: 93). Individuals come to films with personal fears and phobias (clowns, spiders, etc.). These anxieties, many irrational or uncommon, are based in personal experience and cannot be attributed to membership of an interpretive community.

Peter Hutchings (2004: 95) describes the horror audience as 'heterogeneous, mutable and decidedly elusive; just when you think you have it identified and neatly labelled, it has a habit of vanishing mysteriously into the dark'. This project approaches audiences of *The Exorcist* in this spirit. Horror audiences or not, fans or not, this study avoids forcing participants into pre-existing categories and recognises that fandom comes in many shapes and sizes and is not a single characteristic.

Fans, anti-fans, and non-fans

Looking at different kinds of personal experiences dictates that a study of fans alone is insufficient, providing a blinkered view of only the most positive responses to *The Exorcist*. Hills urges scholars to examine of a wider range of audiences, to go beyond the enthusiastic "embracers" or "cooperative spectators", to include "refusers" and ambivalent responses (2014: 96). The study of fandom allows for outlining the processes of (more) active audiences than the majority (Jenkins, 1992: 293). However, there is a danger that a concentration on fandom is to the detriment of said majority.

Jonathan Gray (2003) sought to address this imbalance created by a proliferation of fan studies work. Gray states, 'When one's relationship to the text is no longer one of close affect, the very nature and structure of that text changes' (Gray, 2003: 65). One may not infer other kinds of responses from the responses of media fans. Gray's (2003) subsequent categories, designed to prompt investigation into a wider

range of audiences, are the "fan", the "anti-fan", and the "non-fan". The categories are self-evident, with anti-fans strongly disliking a text and non-fans having no strong feelings. Gray states, 'It is not enough to pick one type of reader and tailor the text exclusively to this reader's measurements' (2003: 78). His concepts usefully widen the scope of audience research in a way that encourages the same intensity of study for other kinds of viewers that has been afforded, in a rather one-sided manner, to fans.

Anti-fans share many of the same practices towards a text as its fans (Gray, 2005: 845). Sarah Harman and Bethan Jones (2013: 952) describe how anti-fans of *50 Shades of Grey* (2015-2018) do not simply reject the text, they perform close readings of it and then share their evaluations with a community of like-minded individuals. This is a pleasurable activity and fosters a community spirit akin to that of fandom, but it also aids in the anti-fans' identity construction in allowing for taste distinctions to be made evident (Harman and Jones, 2013: 963). These close readings are described by Jacqueline Pinkowitz as an attempt at a "qualified rejection", as becoming an authority on why something is bad (2016: 12.3). *The Exorcist*'s branding as "the scariest movie of all time" led to viewing strategies which are more oppositional in nature, looking to be able to perform a "qualified rejection" of the film. This research was interested those who disliked the film and, as such, these studies of anti-fan engagement with media provided a way of thinking about these modes of viewing. The majority of work that goes beyond fandom has been concentrated on the figure of the anti-fan, perhaps due to the methodological difficulty of engaging with non-fan audiences, the 'comfortable majority', who simply do not care enough about the text in question to participate in research (Gray, 2003: 76). This is a methodological problem yet to be addressed.

A shortfall in Gray's model is that while it usefully prompted a focus on anti-fans, it runs the risk of assigning reductive categories to audiences' experiences: within these categories, a person either loves or hates the film or does not care. There is little room for nuance and it is easy to presume the experience of a non-fan is one in which they are unmoved or unengaged by the text. Gray's model says nothing of experiences which may move between fandom and non-fandom, for example with

films which may be uninspiring on the whole but with one or two highly affective sequences, or vice versa. This would also apply to films which attract people with high levels of investment who may be somewhat disappointed. The subsequent canonisation of *The Exorcist* as a "classic" played an important part of expectations set by, and potential disappointment for, contemporary first-time viewers.

Whereas the concept of the viewing strategy has explanatory power, Gray's (2003) concepts are too reductive for use here. These categories summarise an entire experience under a single label. For this reason, I do not employ Gray's terms in my analysis. These terms were useful for conceptualising the kinds of participants I wished to reach and for prompting the search for a wider range of experiences, but I was wary of the oversimplification. To talk of personal experience only to neatly group responses into "loved/no feeling/hated" is to undermine the variety and unpredictability inherent in any experience. A number of Taylor's female fans of *Gone with the Wind* as they aged found much to dislike about Scarlett O' Hara, even though they had aspired to be like her in their younger years (1989: 39). They demonstrate that one may love a given film like a member of the family, but still, as with all families, one may find things to dislike and criticise.

New advances

The nature of fandom has changed radically since 1974 with technological innovation and cultural shifts. Fan activities and communities have been co-opted by producers of film and television and huge advances in communication allow fans to congregate like never before. Together with the rise of fan studies only coming in the 1990s, this means that this research can discuss the nature of audiences' attachment to *The Exorcist* or the horror genre more broadly with an eye to seeing how descriptions of fandom from the 1970s and 1980s may challenge conceptions of the film, and of fandom, that came about in the 1990s. As Barbara Klinger (1997), Robert Kapsis (1992), and Russ Hunter (2010) have shown through work in reception studies, the meanings of a particular film, genre, star or director are susceptible to great changes over the years; so it is with the meaning of being a fan, which, itself, may vary wildly from person to person.

For this research, then, which is deliberately a study of *audiences*, including a wide range of responses to the film, and not just *fans*, there is no classification of participants as fans on my part where the participant concerned has not self-identified as such. This research will also, as Hills (2014: 93) and Hutchings (2004: 95) advocate, go beyond fans-as-interpretive-community to resist treating participants in this project as "the horror audience". This is important, also, given the original status of *The Exorcist* as a blockbuster for all audiences.

Place and meaning

Addressing viewing strategies informed by specific places is an important step in grounding experiences with films in the real world. Audiences are deliberate in their choices of how and where to watch a film and certain environments influence meanings. Part of the reason for this is that different types of films may be tied to particular sites of exhibition. A lesser-discussed context for film-viewing is that of the home. A study of a film's audiences is incomplete without a consideration of its presence in the home. I will here discuss the implications for meaning of these settings.

Cinema-going

The location of a cinema plays a large role in viewing strategies and meaning-making processes. Mark Jancovich, Lucy Faire, and Sarah Stubbings (2003) provide the most thorough study of the relationship between geography and cinema-going to date. Theirs is a diachronic study which looks at the changing meanings of different places in Nottingham and how this affected patterns of cinema-going (Jancovich et al.., 2003: 24). Jancovich et al. state, 'the meanings of different modes of film consumption are tied to their location within the cultural geography of the city' (2003: 241). David Cook describes Warners' booking strategy for *The Exorcist* in the US – 'four-walling it for exclusive runs in prestigious downtown theatres' – as one which marked the film as much more than a standard exploitation or horror picture (2002: 226). One approaches a film in a "flea pit" or a drive-in with a different viewing strategy than one approaches a film in a "dream palace".

Considerations of cinema interiors greatly aid understanding of audiences' experiences and the status of cinema-going as a habit or a routine occurrence. Louise Anderson conducted an historical audience study of patrons of long-closed newsreel cinemas in Newcastle upon Tyne and found that her participants focused more on talk of these elements, including the cinema's programming, which she termed the "cinematic surround" (2013: 71). Anderson's study involved little talk of the newsreels themselves as participants emphasised instead the cinematic surround rather than any specific films (2013: 73). This compliments the findings of Annette Kuhn (2002) whose participants could also not recall many details of individual films. While Kuhn argues that this is a recurring feature of cinema memories, it may also be taken as an indication of the importance of place in cinema-going (2002: 18).

Douglas Gomery (2002) draws attention to a number of features of the evolution of the multiplex which illustrate the potential for the direct environment drastically affecting audiences' experiences. He notes the concurrent development of multiplexes and Dolby sound systems as important, stating that a lack of sound-proofing often led to leakage from neighbouring screens (2002: 406). Not least of the new features Gomery describes is the sharp reduction in audience sizes. Gone were the thousand-seater auditoriums, replaced with more screens with fewer seats (Gomery, 2002: 406). A study of arthouse cinema audiences by Elizabeth Evans (2011) examines a shared "arthouse" mindset and describes it as an "indirect community" bound by taste, ideology and etiquette, a community tied by this single location that is defined in opposition to audiences of Gomery's multiplexes through their tastes and behaviour (Evans, 2011: 329). It is such differences that can define cinema experiences due to a decision as simple as where to see the film. The cinema's interiors, the other audience members, and the social contracts inherent in the act of cinema-going, can vastly alter a trip to see a film.

Home viewing

Memories of film-viewing may also be inflected, in the same way in which memories are tied to specific cinemas, by being tied to certain places in people's lives. This may be the childhood bedroom, the family living room, or memories of

someone else's house. Bringing to mind Gomery's (2002: 405) historical narrative of the closure of classic cinemas, Jancovich et al. (2003: 241) address the idea of the death of cinema-going and the privatisation of public life. They state that 'while more leisure has become home-centred, people not only still feel the need to get out every now and again but "going out" is defined by its alternative: "staying in"'. In any study of the life of a film, considerations of home viewing are essential, given television's role as a "subsequent-run cinema" (Gomery, 2002: 408) and that in the domestic sphere is where films will spend the rest of their days.

Analysis of the viewing habits of students by Janna Jones finds that memories of first viewing films for modern audiences invariably involve moments in front of the television (2013: 392). Jones states that there is a seeming taken-for-granted feeling towards viewing films on television, with accounts being less detailed than those of cinema-going (2013: 392). Her respondents use films on television in much the same way as Kuhn's (2002) cinemagoers did, 'as a backdrop for experimentation with the rules of the adult world; both groups focus on their own performances of independence and interconnection' (Jones, 2013: 392).

Barker et al. discuss "sneaky" viewings of the "18"-rated *Alien* (Scott, 1979) which served this function for respondents who were seven to seventeen years old when seeing the film for the first time (2016: 67-69). They note that circumvention of regulative censorship in the home is in defiance of adult authority and is discussed in such a way by respondents even when a parent was involved (Barker et al., 2016: 69). Similarly, Kate Egan also describes how experiences with video nasties at a young age may serve discourses of "becoming a man" (2007: 144). Egan examines the role of nostalgia for horror fans and collectors and finds that nostalgia for now-lost home viewing experiences, such as renting video nasties at now-extinct video shops, is one concerned with telegraphing their cultural heritage and presenting their "horror credentials" (2007: 144). These stories of childhood home viewing activities are presented in terms of personal development and self-discovery. A personal account of one's relationship with film which excludes home viewing, therefore, may overlook some of people's most formative experiences.

Viewing films, for Jones, whether at home or at the cinema, was an important, ritualized practice which improved familial relations (Jones, 2013: 392-394). As with other generations of film viewers, sociability was important to her respondents, with even accounts of solitary viewing in the home including accounts of relating their experiences with those of other people (2013: 290). Barker et al. discuss the importance of the family in their participants' first viewing of *Alien*, analysing the "gifting" of the film by older family members to their children/siblings (2016: 52). They conclude: 'There is a sense that the ritualised viewing of *Alien* helped to inform family dynamics and relations' (Barker et al., 2016: 52). Barbara Klinger also acknowledges that 'the home is a complex sphere distinguished by an extensive network of relations', and argues that the importance of the home as a site of exhibition needs further inquiry (2006: 16).

The role of family dynamics in home viewing is discussed by Jancovich et al. as they discuss the differences inherent in the acts of "going out" and "staying in", especially key considerations of the gendered meanings of the acts (2003: 20). As with the cinema, those in the home do not have the same exact experience as others in the same place. Jancovich et al. offer the example of the stereotypical "man of the house" for whom the domestic setting is relaxing, as opposed to the home being historically something of a workplace for "the wife" (2003: 20). This is just an example of how the home may have different meanings for different people and, of course, is based on large generalisations about gender roles. David Morley (1992: 134) found such a gender split in his research on television audiences, but what was true in 1992 will certainly be less so now. Another example, perhaps a more timeless one, could be the behaviour of children in the home, who are often very different around their parents than they are when at the cinema with their friends. Different identities within a person come to dominance at particular moments depending upon the context, and nowhere is this usually more accurate for children than around their parents (Storey, 1999: 135). Morley concludes from his own research that much can be learned from a family based on their television viewing practices (1992: 134).

It would be interesting to see how family dynamics may function differently for different kinds of texts, such as, here, a notorious and controversial horror film. Drew Beard discusses how the 1970s supernatural horror film, of which *The Exorcist* may be considered the progenitor, is a sub-genre which depicts the encroachment of the supernatural world on the family home (2015: 212). He states that the coming of home video and cable television in the 1980s brought such horrors, already determined to unsettle with depictions of everyday people under attack, into everyday life. Beard makes a fascinating case, drawing upon the work of Michael Shermer (1997: 101), that the combination of these technological advancements and the rise of home viewing, along with the nature of the films themselves, contributed to the "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s.

Work on place and the act of viewing a film is almost exclusively focused on the cinema, perhaps due to a belief of home viewing being the domain of television studies. Barker et al.'s (2016) study of *Alien*'s audiences delves into the family dynamic via discussions of gifting, as mentioned, and Barbara Klinger (2006) argues for the importance of the home in film studies, producing industrial-focused reception studies and some audience work. Klinger (2006) highlights the motivations for repeat-viewing and underscores the need for work on the home, though her industrial focus limits discussion to the effect on film texts rather than audiences. The focus on the home is invaluable, however, and Klinger's (2016: 16) argument for its inclusion in audience studies is echoed in this thesis. Shaun Moores agrees, arguing that an encounter with any media should not be viewed as a "placeless" event (2016: 140-141). The study of a film, removed from the context of the cinema, still warrants an investigation of the viewing environment and the many ways in which the experience may be shaped by it.

The place, with the features of the environment or the relationships of the people within it aside, determines a great many thing about the text: cinemas, as with television, have specific programming aimed at specific demographics; regulation states who can be admitted, or, more accurately in some cases, who has to try harder to negotiate access; and, as in the case of *The Exorcist* and its television showings in 1980s America, it results in very real changes to the text itself, such as

editing or dubbing. With the nature of places, as having identities that are always in construction which are never finally fixed once and for all, the range of meanings within a particular place can change over time. As a film may not be experienced in the same way for different people, so too may it find itself providing a different meaning when viewed in a different place. These are important considerations in this research given the rich theatrical and home video history of *The Exorcist.*

Censorship studies

Upon its initial release, *The Exorcist* came in for harsh criticism in the USA (Kermode, 1998: 45) and was engaged in censorship battles with local councillors across Britain, facing bans in Ceredigion, Wakefield, Dinefwr, and other counties (*Cambrian News* reporter, 1974; *The Guardian* reporter, 1974; *South Wales Guardian* reporter, 1974). The battle began anew when the film was released on home video, in Britain and elsewhere. The implementation of the VRA led to the withdrawal of *The Exorcist* on home video in the UK in 1986 and it remained unavailable for thirteen years. Due to the overwhelming, near-exclusive focus on the BBFC and the MPAA in censorship studies, *The Exorcist*, which was passed by both censor boards uncut, has received no attention in this area.

The focus on national censor boards in studies and histories of censorship follows the "prohibitions/institutions" model of study, as described by Annette Kuhn (1988: 11) in her landmark study of film regulation during the early 1900s. This framework for studying censorship focuses on how censorship works in terms only of cuts made by censor boards. In Britain, this results in studies largely concerned with the BBFC (see Barber, 2011; Petley, 2011; Mathews, 1994, Robertson, 2005). These studies present considerations of the societal context and the changing attitudes towards censorship at institutions with the remit to censor. The model of censorship offered by Kuhn (1988) rejects a singular focus on institutions and is concerned with investigating a wide range of relationships between a number of parties with their own influence. Censorship, in this model, is a process; it is the result of conflicting parties exercising their different powers, rather than just the result of decisions made by a single entity. Kuhn's understanding, based on her

analysis of archival materials from the early days of the cinema, presents a picture of censorship as a fluid process with each instance of censorship the unique result of a very different combination of various forces. This in no way negates work on individual institutions, much of which acknowledges political and societal forces, but her model reframes the process of censorship as a wider one of which these institutions are one moving part.

In the case of the censorship of *The Exorcist* in the UK, following Kuhn's model, there are multiple contributing and conflicting parties in a complex web of relationships which have changed a great deal over time. The parties for the prosecution have included the following: the BBFC under James Ferman, who in the 1980s and 1990s refused the film a video release; the Church, whose clergymen publicly condemned *The Exorcist*; councillors who banned the film from their local cinemas in 1974; Christian pressure groups, such as the Nationwide Festival of Light (NFOL); censorship discourses in the media; citizen-run petitions and letter campaigns; and public figures and politicians such as self-styled media watchdog Mary Whitehouse and Sir Graham Bright, the MP who introduced the Video Recordings Act 1984. Parties for the defense included: the BBFC, again, under then-Secretary Stephen Murphy who released the film uncensored and fended off subsequent criticism (BBFC, 1974b, 1974c, 1974d); the Church, again, with various clergymen somewhat aggrieved or confused by the hysteria in 1974 (*Report Wales*, 1974); academics and critics such as Martin Barker (1984), who opposed the video nasties censorship campaign, and Mark Kermode (1991), who decried the film's on-going unavailability in the 1990s; and, finally, the BBFC, yet again, which permitted the release of *The Exorcist* on home video upon the retirement of James Ferman in 1999. Due to the complex process produced by this unique mixture of voices and discourses and the unique societal context into which the film was released, the censorship of *The Exorcist* is not directly comparable to the censorship of other films. There are common themes and patterns between instances of censorship, but no two instances are identical. The incomparable character of *The Exorcist* as a film in itself, being the product of a deeply religious writer and a maverick director,

along with its taboo-breaking and then-record-breaking budget for a horror film, makes it even more of a unique set of circumstances.

Kuhn's (1988) conceptual model of censorship necessitates the study of the myriad factors which produce differences between instances of censorship. A study of *The Exorcist* only via the BBFC following the "prohibitions/institutions" model would be fascinating reading. The British censors passed *The Exorcist* uncut for the cinema, prohibited it on video in the 1980s, and a change of personnel led to its eventual release in 1999. This would make for a fascinating insight into the development of the role and nature of the BBFC's authority. However, such a study would produce only an understanding of the BBFC, rather than of this instance of censorship which includes the aforementioned competing parties. Of course, not all studies, including this one, claim to be a "total history" (after Klinger, 1997: 109) of a particular instance of censorship. This stated problem, this narrowness of focus on specific institutions, is a problem with the field of censorship studies as a whole and not with individual studies discussed here.

There has in more recent times been a slow move towards histories of local censorship within the field. This has been prompted by the development and growing popularity of New Cinema History, which places greater value in small, localised case studies, histories from the "bottom-up" perspective (a focus on consumers rather than producers) (Biltereyst and Meers, 2018: 23). There has especially been a tightening of focus towards censorship in the UK at the county council level. This has worked to move the focus of censorship studies away from an exclusive BBFC focus and presents accounts of other important parties in censorship. Recently, work by Sian Barber (2016) on *Last Tango in Paris* (Bertolucci, 1971) and Julian Petley (2015) on *The Devils* (Russell, 1971) has provided insights into how the distribution of these films was hindered at a local level and widened the scope of the field. In the case of *The Devils*, Petley describes how the reputation of the film developed during its production (2015: 516), much as *The Exorcist*'s did (Reed, 1973), and how the NFOL organised to petition councils using negative press coverage to have it banned. Petley studies an instance of local censorship and mainstream criticism as forces unto themselves but also as forces acting upon the

BBFC, demonstrating that the local and the national are linked (2015: 536). Barber usefully complicates the notion of having one narrative of censorship for the UK (or any country), by highlighting differing responses to a controversial film by three local authorities in three regions of the UK (2016: 14). As demonstrated by Barber (2016), something which Kuhn (1988) does not discuss, the scope of an instance of censorship must be considered. To speak broadly about censorship, in terms of exhibition and audience experiences across an entire country, is to oversimplify. Barber argues, as does Petley (2015), that the local and the national are both important, but emphasises that different regions of a country are not interchangeable and have their own relationship with a controversial film (Barber, 2016: 14). Regional differences ensure that there is not *one* instance of censorship, but *many* instances of censorship, each with their own contributing factors. The findings of Barber (2016) and Petley (2015) apply well to *The Exorcist*, which was banned by a number of local authorities, serving as a reminder that censorship is a complex process with many variations even within a single case.

Studies of local censorship are not the natural end point of the development of censorship studies, despite filling out a substantial portion of the previously incomplete picture. There is still an overwhelming concern with the actions of institutions. The draw of institutions for study is perhaps a consequence of the availability of archival material, with all examinations of local censorship, including Petley (2011), Barber (2011), and James Robertson's earlier work (2005) making use primarily of newspapers and censors' documents. However, such materials cannot speak to the experiences of audiences. Studies of institutions, large or small, all ask a similar question: "How did this censorship occur?" Censorship is still studied almost exclusively in terms of what happens to the film itself.

The focus of Kuhn's (1988) model of censorship is, similarly, an examination of how and why censorship happens, ensuring a crucial question of censorship is still all too rarely asked: what does censorship *mean*? This oversight comes at the expense of understanding the impact of censorship in the real world. There is an industrial focus which forgoes any investigation of what happens once a film is censored. Daniela Treveri Gennari and Silvia Dibeltulo, in one of the only censorship studies to

date to engage with audiences, state that 'film audiences' experiences of censorship have been virtually neglected' (2017: 236). In focusing on the industrial or the legal context, censorship is framed as the curtailing of artistic expression or journalistic freedom. Even in Kuhn's model, the search for understanding ends when the film is censored.

I have identified studies of audiences and censorship which seek to address this oversight, each focused on the individual to different extents, though with very different priorities (Smith, 2005; Barker et al., 2001; Buckingham, 1996; Smith, 2019; and Treveri Gennari and Dibeluto, 2017). These works serve as a point of comparison for theories developed in this grounded study. The importance of studying individuals is discussed by Sarah Smith (2005: 106) in the context of 1930s children's cinema-going. Smith states:

> It is also essential to recognise that audiences contain individuals, centrally active in the practices of censorship, who each have some ability to regulate their own viewing. Put simply, film-goers can effectively "ban" a film for themselves by refusing to watch it, or make "cuts" in a film's content by hiding their eyes, leaving the room, or engaging in some other activity.

The personal, especially in the context of the home and within family and other social dynamics, has been sorely overlooked in the study of controversial and violent films. An obsessive drive to simply condemn or rescue horror audiences from unfavourable stereotypes has driven much audience studies and fan studies research over the years. Between this overemphasis on institutional censorship and the spectre of the "effects tradition" looming over audience studies directing its lines of enquiry, our understanding of the impact of censorship has a distinct, person-sized hole in it. The complexity of censorship – its positives and negatives for individuals – is frequently smothered by protectionist avenues of research that seek to re-enter the fray of battles with the news media that are at least thirty years old. Sarah Smith makes a strong case for the consideration of the individual in the study of censorship and highlights a lack of understanding of the role of parents and their relationships with their children in the matter (2005: 106).

The first study of audiences and censorship I shall discuss, the study of the arthouse thriller *Crash* by Barker et al. (2001), investigates how audiences responded to the reputation of a highly controversial film, albeit an uncensored one. The primary questions of their work are how the reputation of *Crash* developed through a hostile press campaign in the UK and how this impacted upon audiences' viewing strategies. Barker et al. effectively complicate notions of a singular audience, demonstrating that people arrive at a film with different expectations and fore-knowledge and different levels of investment (2001: 158). Two important factors are absent from Barker et al.'s (2001) study of *Crash* which are integral to audiences' experiences with *The Exorcist*, however. These differences inform the personal model of censorship offered in this thesis.

First of all, their study is of direct responses to the film and it seeks to function, at its core, as a rebuttal of the "effects" model offered by the *Daily Mail* (Barker et al., 2001: 3). The narrative of the *Mail*'s censorship campaign, a textbook example of the "effects" model as described in the reception study chapters of the book, is that *Crash*, a story about a subculture of people who fetishise car crashes, would inspire copycat crimes of reckless driving and ram-raiding by young men (Barker et al., 2001: 14). The aim of the audience research by Barker et al. (2001) is to complicate this, to look at the ways in which people, affected by its reputation, *really* approached the film. In this way, the *Mail*'s narrative drove the design of this research. These are not everyday cinema experiences under investigation. The research has no interest in framing participants' experience as such. Since there is no conception of the cinema as a viewing space, there is certainly no interest in viewing in the home. The tendency for audience studies of violent and controversial films to focus exclusively on the anti-"effects" agenda has ensured a dearth of any discussion of viewing censored or violent films related to place. Historical audience research has been focused to a large extent on pre-television eras (Kuhn, 2002; Smith, 2005). Understandably, such studies do not investigate home viewing for a period when there was no home viewing of which to speak; also, the focus is on unsettling moments for children in mainstream films rather than experiences with illicit, possibly banned films, since no home video formats existed to easily bypass

official censorship. In an instance of censorship, a film which is unavailable at the cinema is likely to be encountered by curious audiences in the home – especially where a theatrical release has been denied – through piracy. This has never been more obvious than it is today with the Internet providing easy access to many pirated materials.

My own international audience study of *A Serbian Film* (Spasojevich, 2010) found that 78.2% of a total 307 respondents viewed the film via means of piracy (Smith, 2018: 126). Crucially, *The Exorcist*'s British home video ban in 1986 came after the enormous boom in popularity of VHS. Indeed, it was the VHS boom which was instrumental in the video nasties panic, leading to the ban on *The Exorcist* in the first instance. Many participants here encountered the film for the first time on a bootleg VHS cassette. The significance of home viewing and the role of place in meaning-making processes when dealing with a study of a censored film must be accounted for, particularly where piracy is involved.

The second factor not discussed by Barker et al. (2001) is the experiences of child audiences, who are one of the primary consumers of pirated media, at least as indicated by participants here and in Barker et al.'s later study of *Alien* (2016). Child audiences and home viewing are intrinsically linked with regards to viewing censored films or films classified "18" (or its equivalent) since it is difficult for children to see them at the cinema. There were no instances of parents forbidding their children (the participants here) from watching *The Exorcist* in the cinema, but it was by no means uncommon in the home. Of parental censorship and the cinema, Sarah Smith states that 'parental intervention was apparently the only really effective form of adult regulation of children's cinema attendance' (2005: 121). The same is true of the home, and it comes with associated meanings which are explored in this thesis for the first time. There are studies of how people make sense of violent films (e.g., Selfe, 2008; Barker, 2005) and of how a film's reputation precedes it (Barker et al., 2001; Barker et al., 2016), but considerations of the home environment have been limited. A person's family life is something which is carried within them wherever they may go, provided a real grounding, based in actual experiences (unlike "imagined communities" such as nationality, etc.), and it

therefore influences experiences had even outside of the family unit. Many participants here, whether they watched *The Exorcist* with their mother or not, would recall their mother's attitude towards the film, for example. Watching a horror film for a person who grew up in a house in which horror was banned brings with it associations, memories of disapproving stares, and a hint of illicitness. Such is the material that makes up a person's experiences. These two variables – age and viewing at home, either with or without parental consent – can make all the difference when viewing a censored text. Of all survey respondents here, most were children the first time they saw *The Exorcist*. This means that this study of memories of *The Exorcist*, which began as a study of all audiences, has in fact largely become a de facto study of childhood film-viewing, such is the draw of censored and controversial films for children.

Another study of censorship and audiences does include discussion of children. David Buckingham's (1996) work on children's' viewing habits and strategies was conducted in 1993 and 1994 in the UK. As a result, it was unavoidably framed by the debate around children and violent media following the tragic murder of two-year-old James Bulger by a pair of ten-year-old boys in 1993. Buckingham's (1996: 12) work with seventy-two children of varying ages on their strategies and preferences concerning violent media was not able to escape the intense national debate occurring at the time. His research, as with Barker et al.'s (2001), is therefore driven by its opposition to the "effects" tradition, concerned more with responses to violent scenes than with situating children's' experiences within their everyday lives. His research, which was funded by the Broadcasting Standards Council, concludes with recommendations for media education for parents and children (1996: 316). Buckingham's research, like Barker et al.'s (2001), is defined by its resistance to popular censorship discourse in the press.

Despite the "effects" tradition being the lynchpin of Buckingham's research design and the organising principle of his conclusions and recommendations, the study has much to offer in terms of insight into children's viewing practices and, importantly, the role of their parents in shaping them. Buckingham complicates generalisations about applying categories to children and to their viewing habits and family

dynamics based on class, race, and gender (1996: 313). He states that the blind application of demographic categories in such studies may 'end up reinforcing differences that it might be more productive to challenge and to deconstruct', finding no noteworthy patterns when analysing by such standards (1996: 313). In addressing questions about children and violent media in a nuanced manner, with open-ended and exploratory methods of questioning, Buckingham determines a great deal about systems of parental censorship and self-censorship. These findings provide a fascinating point of comparison here, especially due to the age difference in participants: Buckingham worked with children; here, I speak with adults about their *memories* of childhood. The distinction is important as it provides valuable distance and context for participants who have changed much, many becoming parents themselves in the meantime.

This study trades in memories and therefore provides a space where participants can reflect upon what experiences with *The Exorcist* meant to them at the time and, equally importantly, what they came to mean to them in later life. No studies of censored films to date consider the process of long-term reception, wherein the meanings of a censored film can be settled over time or re-evaluated for an individual. This has been a feature of certain reception studies and fan studies, for example in Cynthia Erb's (2009) *Tracking King Kong* and Helen Taylor's (1989) study of female fans of *Gone with the Wind*, but, again, there is very little of the context. These are studies concerned more with the influence of specific films than with generating theories as to the processes at work in experiences with such films. This study seeks to address these oversights while attacking the meaning of censorship from the opposite direction of Kuhn's (1988) industrial model of censorship. Where Kuhn discusses how censorship happens, this study asks questions of censorship to get at the heart of the impact it has on everyday experiences. This study theorises, for the first time, what censorship means for audiences, for individuals, and for families, when it does happen. And, crucially, it studies what censorship comes to mean to these people as time passes. A person's everyday experience is not static and undergoes great changes, especially between childhood and adulthood, and a question asked of one period in a person's life answers no questions about another.

While questions of diachronic reception have been asked in audience studies such as Taylor's (1986) and Barker et al.'s work on *Alien* (2016), these have not been asked of controversial films.

This brings me to the third study of censorship and audiences: my study of audiences of *A Serbian Film* (Smith, 2019). It focused, in particular, on participants' discursive strategies. *A Serbian Film*'s status as a controversial film was front and centre. My study investigated how discursive strategies helped participants to construct and maintain a positive self-image while criticising or defending the BBFC's decision to censor the film. Participants were not invited to a screening, as in the *Crash* study (Barker et al., 2001), and were recruited from those who had naturally seen the film on their everyday travels. The workings of memory played no part in the analysis of responses, the analysis being limited to how participants approved of or criticised the film's censorship. I found that 'there is a clear structure to censorship discourses that works for the good of the individual's self-image and anticipates contradictory opinions' (Smith, 2019: 209). I argued that the meaning of controversial films, as demonstrated by how different discursive strategies interacted with and anticipated others, is determined to a large extent by relations between audiences (real and imagined). Although the film in question had been studied by the BBFC in their Ipsos MORI-conducted research (Ipsos MORI, 2012) and concerns were raised about the film's "effects" on young men (BBFC, 2012), this study was not framed, as was *Crash* for Barker et al. (2001) and Buckingham's (1996) work, as directly responding to a controversy. The film itself was somewhat secondary to the aim of creating a working model of censorship discourses which would apply more broadly to other censored texts. This model is a useful point of comparison for analysing talk of censorship as it pertains to *The Exorcist*, and has been used as such in Chapter 5.

Daniela Treveri Gennari and Silvia Dibeluto's (2017) study of audiences and censorship in post-war Italy focuses on processes of remembering more than processes of interpretation (as do Barker et al., 2001) or communication (as in Smith, 2019). They use oral history methods to examine individual cinema-going memories and the role of cultural and collective memory, producing insights into

language construction as well as the history of Italian cinema-going. Their article describes how participants remember censorship in the 1950s in general, however, rather than related to any specific film. As with Kuhn's (2002) 1930s cinema-going project, a certain period is the organising principle of the research design and so Treveri Gennari and Dibeluto's participants are all of the same generation; their 1, 000-plus participants were all over the age of sixty-five. This allows for the analysis of patterns of a particular generation, though there is no comparison with other generations. Mark Jancovich (2011) argues that films are watched not only in a specific place and social context that adds meaning, but also a specific time in someone's life, and these memories of Italian cinema-going provide an excellent example, as does Kuhn's (2002) 1930s project, of how meanings may be affected for the older age group. The authors' analysis of participants' talk, identifying cultural memory processes and instances of identity maintenance through the telling, is particularly useful as comparison for recollections of *The Exorcist*, which is steeped in folkloric stories about its release. Treveri Gennari and Dibeluto's participants' experiences ultimately, however, are of being denied films, of being aware of films which were repressed by Catholic and State censorship (2017: 240). Consequently, there is little of the interpretation of censored films and talk concentrates largely on remembered knowledge of and attitudes towards censorship in general.

A look at the result of censorship for audiences of *The Exorcist* tells us much about how censorship works from the audience's perspective in everyday viewing scenarios, which is the perspective sorely missed in censorship studies and audience research to date. Participants in this grounded study discuss how the film's censorship impacted upon their expectations and their experiences. Kuhn's (1998) model of censorship needs a counterpart, a model which concerns the individuals for whom a film is censored. Kuhn (1988) focuses on wider social forces exercising powers and shaping an instance of censorship. The focus of Kuhn's model on broader censorship on a national level means that it does not acknowledge the role of individuals. Kuhn's model of censorship is a model which prioritises the film and is concerned with industrial and legal outcomes. Crucially, while we now

understand how censorship occurs and how it works, on a national level and increasingly on a local level, there is no understanding of what censorship actually *means*. There is no understanding of its impact on meaning for audiences or processes of individuals censoring the film for their children or even themselves. In the process of collecting audiences' recollections of experiences with *The Exorcist*, it became clear that the ramifications of censorship for individuals are complex and varied. In Chapter 5, I offer a personal model of the processes and meaning of censorship for audiences. This study presents an understanding of censorship, in the spirit of New Cinema History, from the "bottom up".

Memory studies

In her work on memories of female audiences, Jackie Stacey states that historical enquiries into personal experiences must account for the unreliable and constructed nature of memory (1994: 63). Australian historian Alistair Thomson describes memories as being constructed from personal experience and cultural spheres of language and meaning (2003: 300-301). Nowhere is the constructed nature of memories more pertinent than in Thomson's field of oral history, where questions of reliability have challenged its methods since the field's emergence after World War 2 (Thomson, 2006: 51). Oral history methods underwent a paradigmatic shift in the 1970s to address these questions. It led to oral historians regarding memory itself as an object of study, as a narrative form and a measure of the relationship between past and present selves, between individual and collective memory, and as an insight into subjective experience (Thomson, 2006, p. 54). Memories, as conceptualised after this turn, reveal more than facts for contestation; they reveal what events *mean* to people: 'They tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did' (Portelli, 1981: 99-100).

Remembering is an active process which differs depending on the stimuli and in what form and to whom the memory is recounted (Thompson, 2000: 133). Personal memories are intertwined with group identities and memories and are the product of the culture in which the act of remembering occurs (Halbwachs, 1992: 40, 51).

Maurice Halbwachs, an influential thinker regarding the functions and processes of memory, discusses memories as discursive constructions, relational to the rememberer's social groups, which are made and remade in response to the context of the act of remembering (1992: 51-53). In oral history, this is often reflected upon by historians who discuss their own role in creating oral testimonies which are seen as a collaboration between interviewer and interviewee (Portelli, 1981: 103; Thomson, 2006: 54).

Stacey states that any history text is a text about the present as much as it is a text about the past (1994: 63). Kuhn echoes this sentiment and treats audiences' memories as performative and staged discourses for interpretation which are 'mediated, indeed produced, in the activity of remembering' (2002: 9). Kuhn, like Stacey, emphasises that "memory work", the act of remembering, is rooted in the present (2002b: 10). She suggests that her participants memory texts 'may be interpreted as a bid to retrieve something that has been lost' (2002a: 35). Memory work is driven by psychological needs which ensure that it is never a neutral activity, never about simply recalling the past for data, and revisions and forgetting are an important part of this practice (Kuhn, 2000: 186). This concern, of memories as illuminating for both a person's past and the present, is prominent in much key work in historical audience studies. Joanna Lacey finds that 'memory and the material conditions of remembering are indissolubly linked in the placing of the need for popular culture within the story of a life' (1999: 56). It is this need which must be considered in any account of film experiences.

Memory texts as defined by Kuhn share formal conventions, including non-sequential time and repetitive or cyclical events, and she describes three kinds of cinema memory: remembered scenes/images; situated memories of films; and memories of cinema-going (2002b: 163; 2011: 87). Situated memories are of scenes or films which are placed within the context of the cinemagoer's life (Kuhn, 2002a: 90). Such memories are often in anecdote form and can be linked with David Pillemer's concept of a "personal event memory", being a narrative of single moment which serves a communicative function (1998: 3, 19). Pillemer discusses how the frequency of personal event memories is highest in early adulthood,

suggesting that this is due to the high frequency of novel events, which, in turn, suggests a directive function for memory as a guide for future behaviour (2001: 125-126). Barker et al. (2016: 63) encountered this phenomenon, christened the "reminiscence bump" (Rubin, Rahhal, & Poon, 1998: 13-14), in their study of audiences' memories of *Alien*. Kuhn's (2002b, 2011) descriptions of the structures of cinema memory texts and Pillemer's (1998, 2001) model of memory formation are the result of direct data analysis and are not logically deduced, making them immensely useful for thinking about how audiences of *The Exorcist* remember and describe their experiences.

In terms of the function of memories, Vanessa May's work on the use-value of nostalgia examines how they may function to foster a sense of 'belonging from afar', a temporal belonging (2016: 3). This demonstrates further how memory may be guided by present-day needs. These efforts at 'belonging from afar' are evident in cinema-going testimonies recounted in work by Joanne Lacey (1999), Sarah Stubbings (2003), and Louise Anderson (2013), and these studies fit with Kuhn's conception of memories of cinema-going as being more focused on the environment and activity of cinema-going rather than any one film (2011: 93). Anderson states that many memories of specific events in films in cinema-going memories may be the result of repeated exposure to the images in the years between the experience and its recollection in the present (2013: 71). Drawing on work in oral history, these historical audience studies demonstrate the necessity of engaging with memory studies to investigate audiences' subjective experiences within the context of their everyday lives not only in the past but also in the present.

Conclusion

To return to Barker's assertion, there is no longer any excuse to use hypothetical stand-ins when discussing film audiences (2013: 115). The process of creating of such stand-ins is demonstrated effectively in the introduction to Andrew Scahill's (2015) work on "the revolting child" in films such as *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* (Donner, 1976). Scahill opens with an account of a trip to see *Orphan* (Collet-Serra,

2009) at the cinema. *Orphan* deals with an evil child, much in the vein of *The Exorcist*. His interpretation of the meaning of the film rests on assumptions about the audience with whom he shares the experience and their interpretation (singular) of the film. First, Scahill concludes, from 'the intimacy, the subtle cruising, and the coupled body language', that his fellow audience members are all gay; second, he assigns to this audience feelings of parental protectiveness towards the film's villain, demonstrated by yelling for her to kill her school bully in one scene; third, these feelings of parental protectiveness are assumed to be a result of the audiences' presumed sexuality. Ultimately, the working assumption, based on this single viewing of the film with an audience, is that this (presumed) protectiveness by a (presumed) gay audience is exclusive to gay audiences (Scahill, 2015: 1-3). Scahill later provides an insightful reception study of the media circus surrounding *The Exorcist*, but he offers this weak characterisation of one audience as justification of work based on textual analysis and his own psychoanalysis-based interpretation. This does a disservice to his own insights (which would be better served without such apologies) and to the audience concerned.

Work in audience studies and New Cinema History, in particular, has been instrumental in informing the values and focus of this study. The emphasis on everyday experiences as an important element for histories of the cinema, as found in the work of Kuhn (2002), Jancovich et al (2003), and at the core of the New Cinema History movement, has propelled this study towards seeking understandings of the place of films in people's lives, in all their complexity. Martin Barker et al's (1998, 2001, 2008) invaluable conception of viewing strategies gives structure to this focus on practical matters and pushed the field of audience studies, and this thesis, usefully away from "psychoanalytic" readings of audience processes (often provided by film theorists with no background in psychology). The guiding ethos of work by oral historians such as Thompson (2000), Thomson (1998), and Portelli (2011), which places great significance on individuals' testimonies in understanding cultural moments, informed the way in which this study always sought to remain in participants' shoes, so to speak. It is in the manner of these

works – more humanistic and pragmatic, and egalitarian in their treatment of their participants – that this study was devised and conducted.

This chapter has considered the key theoretical underpinnings of studies of audiences, fandom, censorship, and memory in order to locate this project's concerns and highlight where its findings may prove useful. This project sought a diverse range of voices, as many varied interpretations of both the film and of watching it as possible. This approach has resulted in not one author-inflected narrative of experiences with *The Exorcist*, but rather an array of narratives to inform new theories of audiences' relationships with *The Exorcist* and film more broadly.

Chapter 4

Different days

The cinema and the drive-in

The Exorcist never completely left the cinema. After the initial theatrical release in 1973 through 1974, the film toured once again in 1979 in a special 70mm format with a new Dolby Stereo sound mix. It became part of a double bill with *Exorcist II: The Heretic* in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It has been a staple of Halloween events and film festivals ever since. It also enjoyed a long life at American drive-in theatres and was re-released in UK cinemas in 1998 to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary. In 2000, Warner Bros released "The Version You've Never Seen" worldwide and *The Exorcist* found new audiences.

The original reputation of *The Exorcist* from its cinema run in the 1970s underscores almost every experience had by participants in this study and, as a consequence, is a lynch-pin for the theories offered in the later chapters. Only seventy-one participants saw the film in the cinema and six saw it at the drive-in, but reports of its power over 1970s cinema audiences have remained with *The Exorcist* for forty-six years. This reputation informed nigh-on every experience recounted for this study:

> I had heard of the movie beforehand and I knew about the
> audiences fainting at viewings and this got me more excited
> to see the movie. (Participant #82, survey, Canada.)

> I grew up Catholic and my mother always forbid us from watching it. It made it more exciting for me to watch it. I had read that when it was first released that it was too much for people so they ran out of the theatres. (Participant #87, survey, USA.)

> Throughout my childhood I'd heard about it from my mum who was a horror fan. She'd seen it on its original release in '73 when she was fifteen. The lurid tales she told of people's reactions and how terrified her and her friends fascinated me. For my generation, the film had an almost mythic status. (Participant #106, survey, UK.)

Almost every participant can recount the folklore about audiences fainting and vomiting or stories of a "cursed" production. Where motivations for wanting to see the film were discussed by later audiences, the film's reputation of overwhelming its original cinema audiences was still cited as a motivating factor.

Features of the social and architectural space of exhibition often plays a large part in how film experiences are recalled. Louise Anderson highlights the importance of the whole context of cinema-going with regards to 1940s cinema programming, describing it as the "cinematic surround" (2013: 71). This useful term can account for much more than exhibition practices, however. The nature of cinema-going has changed dramatically within the lifetime of *The Exorcist*, so there is even more need to consider the importance of the physical space itself, including its architecture as well as the technology and the programming. This chapter contrasts accounts of 1970s cinema-going with those of the drive-in theatre to draw out specific qualities of these experiences, contrasted with more recent ones, before offering a theory of place and film-viewing experiences. The nature of these accounts as memories is discussed later, in Chapter 7.

The 1970s experience

The reputation of *The Exorcist* has been established using a three-phase model: 1) the original theatrical release in the 1970s, with accompanying hysteria in the press; 2) its association with the video nasties from the mid-1980s in the UK; and 3) becoming a widely available horror classic and "the scariest movie of all time" from the late 1990s. Broadly, these represent the popular image of the film and its

likeliest reputation for audiences in these respective decades. This construction is simply a starting point from which participants lead us into their experiences, contradicting it where necessary. No participants in the 1970s, save the very young, encountered the film with no foreknowledge of it, such was the prevalence of promotional and news materials upon the film's release. *The Exorcist* was newsworthy on both a national and local level in the US and the UK, thanks to an effective marketing campaign (including sales of Mike Oldfield's music and the success of the already best-selling novel), debates about censorship (e.g., *Report Wales*, 1974) and potential dangers (e.g., Woodhead, 1974; Smalldon, 1974), and news of the film's record-breaking successes elsewhere (e.g., Klemserud, 1974). When *The Exorcist* arrived in town, there was no avoiding it.

The Exorcist was the most financially successful horror film in history upon its release (Mumford, 2017), attracting many who had never seen such a film to the cinema and the drive-in theatre. Some people, after *The Exorcist*, would never again see another horror film:

> My parents had told me about it originally, and it is to date
> the ONLY horror movie my mother has ever watched.
> (Participant #739, survey, Sweden.)

> I grew up always hearing about *The Exorcist* from my
> parents as their reason as to why they wouldn't watch
> another horror film. Their descriptions always really vividly
> stuck with me. (Participant #582, survey, UK.)

The excitement at many cinema screenings was palpable, with some getting over-whelmed and being compelled (or carried) out of the building. Not everybody had this experience, but such audience responses were by no means unusual:

> We got into the cinema. We were sort of settling down
> there. There was kind of a buzz, you know. There was
> general sort of talking. It wasn't as loud as during the film.
> But there was this sort of air of expectation really. And the
> opening scenes come on, you know, the scene in the fog,
> the figure in the fog. And all of a sudden there was a
> disruption, and a woman had fainted, in one of the seats
> closer to the screen. (Gill, interview, UK.)

> Saw *The Exorcist* at the ABC Hull, East Yorkshire. I knew very little about the film except it was controversial. The Cinema queue was around the block. Several priests were giving out leaflets with helpline information in case you couldn't handle the movie. As we finally entered the cinema foyer, I saw St John's Ambulance people looking after what looked like three or four people unconscious on stretchers, carried out after fainting. (Participant #563, survey, UK.)

Younger participants relayed their parents' stories about such events (Kirsty J and Kirsty C, interview; participants #20, #47, #106, and others). From newspaper reports, in the US and the UK, such responses were certainly to be expected from other people, if not oneself, when attending *The Exorcist*, as stories from other towns and other cities reached one's own (Woodhead, 1974; Malcolm, 1974).

Discussing the lead up to *The* Exorcist's release in his hometown of Warrenton, Missouri, Owl described his fore-knowledge of and excitement for the film as a teenager in the USA in 1974:

> We didn't get to see the movie as quickly as people living in big cities. That probably helped build up the anticipation, because we had been hearing about *The Exorcist* on the nightly news: stories about people fainting, freaking out, getting sick, etc. The news reports about the movie really got me excited. I had read the book and was hoping the film was every bit as good as the novel. There were also rumours floating around that the movie was cursed, stories about strange fires on the set and the relatives of actors having accidents or suddenly dying. Some people believed just watching the movie could lead to possession or an unwelcomed visit from Satan. I had also read that author William Peter Blatty based his novel on a case of real possession which had happened to a boy in St. Louis, Missouri, a city only seventy miles away from Warrenton. (Owl, interview, USA.)

Much was made in the press, especially by Blatty himself (*Daily Mail* reporter, 1974b), of the story's basis in fact, and this is part of the film's original reputation being found less in talk from later periods. Many participants who first saw the film in the 1970s had read Blatty's novel in anticipation for the film. The film's status as an adaptation of a popular novel rarely appears in accounts outside of the 1970s. Kattelman's (2011: 69) report of *The Exorcist*'s marketing "hullaballoo" references

reports of a "cursed" production and audiences being physically or psychologically harmed by the film. Such ballyhoo had reached rural Missouri in 1974; while some viewers were too young to notice or understand the controversy before seeing the film, particularly in the USA where children could see the film accompanied by an adult, the furore was undoubtedly instrumental in the film's wider success as such tales followed *The Exorcist* around the world.

The original release produced substantially more reception and promotional materials than in later periods. Owl described how *The Exorcist* permeated daily life in Warrenton:

> There was a lot of talk about the movie on the local news out of St. Louis. We were hearing that *The Exorcist* was selling out everywhere it played. They showed people standing in long lines to buy tickets, and interviewed people who had gotten frightened, sick, or passed out while watching the movie. But it wasn't just the reports about the movie. Suddenly, because of *The Exorcist*, everyone seemed to be talking about possessions, exorcisms, the Catholic church, God and the Devil, Ouija Boards, and all manners of the occult. There were experts talking on television, and the local news stand was crammed with books and periodicals on the subject. It was a real phenomenon, and as a horror fan I was loving every minute of it. All my friends were dusting off their Ouija Boards and trying to talk to Captain Howdy. (Owl, interview, USA.)

A British participant, Jan (interview, UK), noted that some aspects of the film were already popular. Tubular Bells by Mike Oldfield, *The Exorcist*'s de facto theme song, was enormously famous in the early 1970s, especially. Jan remembers Oldfield's music being a part of her social life before the film was released. The impression of that first release, from participants' recollections, is one of a tidal wave of publicity and public debate. The importance of media coverage and promotional materials shone through in participants' accounts, with such materials crafting prior knowledge and later understandings of the film as well as triggering unpleasant memories of their experience. The proliferation of these materials has never been as intense as during the first release of *The Exorcist* and feature prominently in participants' accounts.

As evidenced in Owl's account, there was a feeling that the film was creeping into everyday life, making slow progress across the country. Images of other audiences queuing for *The Exorcist* played on the local news before the film had arrived in Warrenton. The same was true of the UK, where *The Exorcist* opened in London in March, 1974, and was only just arriving for the first time in cinemas in rural Wales in November. National media coverage of *The Exorcist* in Britain peaked with its London release in March and rural areas, such as Dinefwr, were still debating whether to allow the film in with Christmas lurking on the horizon (*South Wales Guardian* reporter, 1974). Sian Barber's study of local censorship usefully demonstrates the need to account for differences between local and national issues, which are of course linked, as well as for differences between specific regions which are by no means interchangeable (2016: 14). The same allowances must be made for discussing the theatrical release of a film. This particularly applies to historical studies where global or national simultaneous releases were not the standard, adding to the impression, as here, that a film begins life elsewhere, before audiences anticipate its arrival in their home towns.

The 1970s protests against *The Exorcist*, as it made its way across Britain, are a key feature of experiences in this era and, more than anything, set it apart from later experiences. Such widespread, organised protests against films are incredibly rare in recent years. Members of local chapels and churches, organised by media pressure group the NFOL, engaged with cinema-goers in 1974 Britain to dispense pamphlets and offer advice and support. The pamphlet (Nationwide Festival of Light, 1974) leads with, 'We can't stop you seeing this film – but you should know this film bears the power of evil!' Presented quotes warn of the film's dangers: 'Some people who never before needed mental treatment were falling apart after seeing this film'; 'Anyone who sees this film runs the risk of serious mental and spiritual danger and disturbance'. The pamphlet asks in large lettering, 'Are you treating this subject seriously?' Participants here were not. Massive queues and gathered protestors made for a sense of anticipation when arriving at the cinema, but overstating the importance of protests is to be avoided. Most participants were

entirely disinterested in them. They are described in survey responses in a short, matter of fact manner:

> Remember there were people handing out leaflets trying to stop us going to watch it. (#404, survey, UK.)

One respondent described how his older brother saw the film and told his family of the protests:

> I remember him telling mum and dad (not so much to me) of the queues and the faintings and the outrage from the local church. The film was banned by the local council in neighbouring Rochdale so everyone came to Oldham to see it. I also remember him saying spiritual counsellors used to hand leaflet out after the film for anyone needing help. I still have a copy of it. (Participant #615, survey, UK.)

Gill stated in her survey:

> Saw it in the cinema in Merthyr Tydfil, South Wales, UK with three friends (two male, one female). People were handing out leaflets warning us about demonic possession and giving a helpline number for the local chapel. (Participant #7, survey, UK)

Carol (interview, UK) recalled seeing reports of protests in Birmingham, but said that "that kind of thing" did not happen in the small English town in which she saw the film. This again highlights the necessity of accounting for regional differences. Despite being a good story and an important part of the press coverage of the film, there is a sense that the protests mattered little to participants here:

> Martin: You mentioned that people were handing out leaflets… Were they priests or were they…?
>
> Gill: No. As I recall it, they were members of a local chapel.
>
> Martin: Oh, OK.
>
> Gill: And the leaflets were handed out to us. There was quite a… Where the cinema's situated, there is… People were queuing… Let me see. There was about ten yards outside the cinema and round a corner as well.
>
> Martin: Oh, right.

> Gill: So, there was quite a queue. And people were coming and saying – asking us actually – not to go and see the film. And giving out leaflets, and, you know, a few people were kind of… I mean. I remember I took a leaflet. I glanced at it. But it didn't sort of affect me, and there was a general sort of air of, well, "You're just being stupid." You know? "This is nonsense." (Interview, UK.)

Gill's dismissal of the protestors is described in collective terms. She felt confident the other cinema-goers were unmoved: 'there was a lot of laughing and joking about it'. The marketability of stories of protest and uproar for media coverage does not match its level of importance for participants. Although participants in the 1970s were often drawn to the film by the controversy, as were later audiences, the reality of it and the reality of protestors' concerns were unimpressive, even silly.

Access, architecture, and technology

Within the cinema, there was a great deal of variety in the experience, both at the time and in contrast with modern cinemas. Popular "supercinemas" of the 1970s often had over a thousand seats and *The Exorcist* was so popular that it reached the most rural parts of the UK and USA to play converted village halls and other single-screen cinemas. Such numbers in a single screening as could be achieved in the supercinemas are almost unheard of now. The largest reported screen capacity today is 776 patrons (the Cineworld O2 in Greenwich) and the average number of seats in a modern cinema is 209 (UK Cinema Association, 2019). A supercinema in Brighton, the Astoria, housed 1, 374 patrons for one screen. These architectural trends of the day, together with a proliferation of now-defunct village cinemas, mean there was a greater variety in the size of cinemas than there is today (Jones, 2013: 395).

In a fascinating memo at the BBFC, it is evident that the architecture and physical space of the cinema played a part in those now-mythical extreme audience reactions. In an internal memo dated April 24th, 1974, a BBFC examiner relates a conversation with a St John's Ambulance volunteer working two nights a week at the Brighton Astoria. The volunteer described how 'between fifty and sixty people have fainted or been so severely affected by this film that they had to have

assistance in getting out of the cinema' (BBFC, 1974a). However, the volunteer emphasised three points, as summarised by the examiner (BBFC, 1974a):

> (a) The Astoria (1, 374 seats) can get very hot with a full house and an exceptional film like this can provoke a stifling emotional heat.

> (b) Even "nervous" laughter had relief effect. Gaffaws brought the temperature to mild for most.

> (c) He thought most "casualties" were genuine. But he suspected that one man who rushed out was a fake and exhibitionist. He was met outside by what [he] took to be a sort of "phoney priest" who handed him a leaflet.

The volunteer, despite emphasising the affecting nature of the film, pointed out that the temperature within the cinema was a factor in the number of patrons needing help. The enormous capacity of the cinema and its poor air-conditioning contributed to negative physical responses to the film. While this does not explain all reports of audience members fainting or requiring medical assistance, it demonstrates the extent to which the environment can greatly impact the overall character of a film experience.

Huge changes in cinema spaces and technological advancements since the 1970s are a significant feature in interviews with those who saw *The Exorcist* in its early years. Mark (interview, UK) saw *The Exorcist* in a theatrical run during the late 1970s. Over forty years later, he still recalls the poor quality of sound:

> I wasn't following the story terribly well. I wasn't– Dialogue wasn't necessarily something you'd hear clearly on speakers back then […] You'd have like one mono speaker at the front of the cinema and depending on acoustics, and how good the speaker was (laughs), you wouldn't always hear what was being said […] So, dialogue scenes tended to suffer.

The argument for places affecting meaning cannot be made more strongly than through technological factors which directly affect how much of the film audiences are able to understand. For Mark, this resulted in a disappointing first encounter with *The Exorcist*, which he described as "talky", which made the story hard to follow. A second chance with the film at a cinema in 2000 with improved sound,

along with the Director's Cut additions, made Mark appreciate the film much more, but that first encounter is defined by its illegibility and his subsequent boredom.

The aural experience of seeing *The Exorcist* at the drive-in theatre in 1973/4 America was different again from cinemas of the time: it sounded even worse. The system consisted of a small mono speaker which was hung from the driver's side wing-mirror. However, for one participant, this added to the atmosphere for *The Exorcist* and made it unforgettable:

> Another creepy aspect of seeing it at a drive-in (and in the summer) is that everyone's windows were open and the sound was so frightening as it came out of multiple loud, tinny speakers. And even in the snack bar! I think that would even be frightening to me today. (Participant #467, survey, USA.)

In the early 1970s, being surrounded like this by the film's soundtrack was a novel and rather eerie experience. For a particularly horrific film, poor exhibition technology actually added to the experience. Binary bad/good descriptions of technology, for audiences, are not sufficient, since the character of the film is a factor in whether something is good or bad for that one night out. There is less the issue of quality and more the issue of whether it is a good fit, of whether it adds to or subtracts from the desired experience. Johnnie (Canada, interview) describes the impact of the small speakers on his *Exorcist* encounter:

> It is exactly like they are portrayed in the Hollywood movies. However, one thing has changed over time and that is the sound. Earlier I mentioned that we were all in paralyzed state while we watched the movie? That was true, but there was a tiny little speaker that was attached to the driver's side window and the sound quality was not that great. So, really, if anyone wanted to really watch the movie then everyone had to be very quiet. Nowadays, you tune in a prescribed FM station on your car's stereo and all hell breaks loose inside your car. It really is an awesome experience.

This early drive-in visit, Johnnie discusses, was partly heightened due to everyone's having to be quiet to be able to hear the film. This forced concentration and led to a terrifying, paralysing experience. Despite the poor audio system, Johnnie, as will be

discussed later, had by far the most extremely negative and traumatic experience with *The Exorcist*.

The drive-in was not technologically impressive as a cinema spectacle in visual terms either:

> As a cinematic experience a drive-in certainly wasn't your best bet. Each space had a pole next to it with a speaker you'd hang inside the window. Just the one speaker with less than ideal sound quality. Watching from the back seat always meant the rear-view mirror was going to be annoying and hard to ignore. Or the back of someone's head. There was a certain atmosphere about them though, on those warm summer nights, that was almost magical. (Jim, Interview, USA.)

Jim's complaint about not being able to see as much from the back seat suggests that, even more so than at the cinema, "the drive-in experience" is not a single, measurable, reliably consistent experience which is the same for all audience members. With young Jim not being able to see clearly from the back seat and not being nearest to the speaker, his family trips to the drive-in recreated the hierarchy of the home with the children being in the back, the parents up front. The drive-in is still remembered fondly by Jim, and others, perhaps due to this borrowed homely feeling. It is certainly worlds apart from the cinema experience.

The drive-in replicates some of the environment of the home with its available distractions and ways of fragmenting the viewing if one is not taken by the film. The cinema, in contrast, has little in the way of socially acceptable distractions (the unacceptable ones being to play games, talk, and annoy other patrons). The drive-in's private-public space allowed children to drift away from the main show, either by sleeping under blankets, trying to sneak a look at another screen, or trying to catch sight of some of the illicit activities happening in the back row. They could even physically remove themselves from the show if there was a playground on site. Such disengagements were often expected.

These elements of the home and this expectation of some disengagement at the drive-in resulted, for Chris, in an excellent opportunity to sneak into *The Exorcist*: 'My parents went to see it at a drive-in, certain I would be fast asleep in the rear of

the family wagon' (participant #183, survey, USA). Chris later discussed how he only

pretended to be asleep and stayed awake to simply listen to the film, and in doing

so highlighted a number of issues concerning the drive-in as a unique setting:

> Back then, I recall the drive-in ran triple features. I can't
> begin to remember what ran first that evening. *The Exorcist*
> was on later and my folks were certain I would be "sacked
> out" in the rear of the family station wagon by that time. I
> pulled a fast one, feigning sleep and awaiting for the
> appearance of the devil. I must have come in and out of
> sleep. I do not recall any visuals of the movie at that time.
> But I DID listen to it. The voice of Mercedes MacCambridge
> terrified me. I distinctly recall the line, "And I'm the Devil!
> Now kindly undo these straps!" It sent me under the
> blankets and into another realm of imagined nightmares.
> (Chris, interview, USA.)

The different elements of the drive-in experience Chris mentions may greatly alter

the viewing experience for audiences, and certainly they set it apart from a trip to

the cinema. The first important factor is that drive-in movies were presented, for

Chris, as triple features; a film in this environment was only part of a wider

evening's entertainment. Also, pertinent to his feigning sleep and simply listening

to the film, is the matter of audio presentation, as discussed earlier. Of course,

there is also the station wagon and the blankets, providing a familiar and

comfortable surrounding in a public place (comfortable enough, indeed, to fall

asleep). Another story of the drive-in even highlights the importance of the

weather:

> The weather had a misty hue to it. All around the screen, the
> concession stand and even the cars – it appeared everything
> had been engulfed in the same type mist as when you add
> water to dry ice – you know that look that you see when you
> go to a rock concert and the smoke seems to be coming out
> of nowhere and the lighting through the smoke has an
> impact to the content of what it is you are watching. To say
> that the outside weather conditions were ideal for this
> particular movie would be merely coincidental, but never
> the less, the weather conditions were all part of the "mise-
> en-scène" that night and I am sure, if I were promoting such
> a film, one could not ask for better conditions. (Johnnie,
> interview, Canada.)

Of course, such weather was not on cue for every horror film and would not have had the same eerie effect produced for *The Exorcist*. Sometimes the weather would have a detrimental effect on the experience or, in the case of extreme cold or rain, result in the cancellation of plans altogether.

The practical matter of cinemas and drive-in programmes running double- and sometimes triple-bill shows is a crucial point, where a film was simply part of a larger evening's entertainment. The setting of a screening is an important consideration not only in terms of the environment and the social contract but also in terms of what else is showing. This applies just as much to home viewing, particularly at sleepovers where the film was played as part of an all-night film party. The programming presents a different experience. Where *The Exorcist* is billed alongside other horror films considered classics, such as *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980) or *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978), it will be approached in the same manner, as a classic. Where it is one of many bootleg horror videos along with low-budget video nasties, it may very well be received in that manner, as a form of illicit low art. This is demonstrated in a number of participant responses and shows how one must consider other films shown in proximity and the whole cinematic surround.

The social side

The social element of cinema-going is a key part of the cinematic surround (expanding on Anderson, 2013) and this has changed over the years. The drive-in provided a new kind of space sold on the extra privacy afforded in a public social setting, allowing audiences to enjoy films from the comfort of their own cars. While social contracts in cinemas were laxer than they are today, with talking being very common (as discussed by Gill, interview, UK), the drive-in allowed people to talk openly, the freedom to eat whatever snacks would fit in the car, and other distractions now that audiences were removed from the "loving darkness" of the cinema (Kuhn, 2002: 138):

> But, oh boy, the drive-in. When I was a kid going with my
> parents it was absolutely perfect. They loved it because they
> didn't need a babysitter just to go watch a movie and I loved
> it because there was always a playground at the front of the

> lot where you could go be a kid while they watched some
> boring movie. (Jim, interview, USA.)

One appealing feature of the drive-in for Jim's parents was that they did not need to pay for a babysitter, because rather than leaving Jim at home they could now bring him, and to an extent their home life, to the cinema. The environment of the drive-in permitted more people access to films in this way. Mary Morley Cohen describes how the rise of the drive-in, located often on the edge of town, provided cinema access to those previously excluded – including African-American audiences (drive-ins became popular in the 1950s when southern cinemas were largely still segregated), the disabled, and those with large families (Cohen, 1994: 479). This experience replicated the hierarchy of the home – parents in the front; children in the back – but it was one not afforded to them often without the environment of the drive-in as an option.

The drive-in brings elements of the home into the cinema environment, both practical (blankets, food, children) and otherwise (parent-child dynamics), but it is worth tempering the urge to draw too strong a line between the cinema and the drive-in, especially by simplifying the former. Overselling the home-ness of the family car as a cinema seat does a disservice to cinema experiences, particularly habitual cinema-going where the cinema itself is familiar. Treating the cinema as an empty, dark room filled with strangers ignores the lived-in status of the cinema in audiences' home towns. The biggest change from the cinema to the drive-in was the home atmosphere and the nature of communications in the car, being less restricted. Both have a sense of familiarity for participants.

In line with Jancovich et al.'s (2003) work on the affective meanings related to different sites of film exhibition, the drive-in had, for participants, a unique appeal, including this lack of restrictions on communication. The drive-in came with a different set of practicalities and associations from the cinema and from the home. So scandalous were some associations for authority figures in the early days of drive-in theatres that they were often described as "passion pits" and talked about as "a demoralizing influence leading to promiscuous relationships" (1947, quoted in Cohen, 1994). As in Kuhn's (2002: 138) research, stories about romantic trips to the

cinema and the drive-in were almost non-existent, present largely in jokey asides. Where romance was mentioned, it was in reference to the "back row" of the drive-in, showing how many of the organising principles of the cinema transferred wholesale into the drive-in even as this new setting changed the nature of these traditions.

Stories of the drive-in for this study are almost all stories of family outings. Family trips to the drive-in meant different things for different participants which echoes findings in studies by Jancovich et al. (2003: 20), Morley (1986), and Coates (2017) which discuss the gendered meanings of going out or staying in. Participants here noted conflicting motivations within families when attending the drive-in to see *The Exorcist*. Jim (interview, USA) described how he would often attend the drive-in with his family, but he was far more interested in the attached playground. Chris (interview, USA) noted that his father was fond of taking the family to the drive-in rather than the cinema because he could get some sleep in the comfort of his own car. Evidently, ascribing a single experience to a whole family unit is unrealistic.

Each member of the family may attend to the film with different levels of interest and engagement, may come with different expectations and hopes, and each has a viewing strategy of their own. In this way, there is a fragmentation of the family despite their physical closeness. As children came of legal driving age, the semi-privacy of the (usually parents') car for some came to supersede the cinema as a favourite movie-going venue. There is a move towards separation with all participants as they age who discuss the development of their film-viewing habits. This includes those who later at home obtained their own television and video player as their horror interests outstripped those of their parents, as well as adults who lost interest in the cinema and came to prefer watching films in the comfort of their own home.

Spaces of reception with their own rules, to an extent, could be created within the cinema, too, as demonstrated in Owl's recollection of seeing *The Exorcist* in Warrenton:

> There were a lot of kids in attendance. Not little kids, but
> those in middle school and high school still too young to get

> into an "R"-rated movie without an adult. The adults and
> kids came together, but they didn't sit together. I remember
> sitting with cousins and classmates, popcorn and soda in
> hand, waiting for it to get good and scary. Many of us had
> read the novel and were hoping our favourite scenes had
> made it into the film. All the teenagers I sat with loved the
> film as much as I did. And those who covered their eyes
> during the movie got royally teased afterwards. (Owl,
> interview, USA.)

Despite beginning as a family affair, this screening of *The Exorcist* fragmented the audience as children sat with their friends in another section of the auditorium. They brought with them a sense of bravado, an unspoken rule about conduct unbecoming a fearless teenager, making for a distinctly teenage experience.

Many participants expressed surprise and often frustration at the behaviour of other audience members at screenings of *The Exorcist*. For Steve, the audience behaviour distracted him enough to ruin the experience and tarnish his impression of the film, which he later enjoyed on a second viewing at home:

> I was kind of annoyed by the fact that people were laughing
> at it, not because they were laughing at the effects, because
> that's alright – I understand that it's not everyone's cup of
> tea (laughs) – but that it was quite disrespectful to what the
> film was culturally. (Steve, interview, UK.)

Different investment levels of audiences are discussed by Barker in his study of a screening of *Straw Dogs* (1971, Peckinpah), in which he concludes that differing investment levels may account for vastly different experiences with the same film (Barker, 2005: 34). Steve's fellow cinema-goers, in that instance, did not share his priorities. This is common to accounts of the UK theatrical re-release of *The Exorcist* in 1998 for its 25th anniversary, especially where younger generations are seen to be testing the film's reputation, as they were when Steve attended.

Since the 1970s there have been shifts in expectations of audience behaviour inside the cinema. Gill (interview, UK) expressed her disappointment during her most recent visit to the cinema at the almost "library" atmosphere, even during the light horror-satire, *Cabin in the Woods*:

> I quite enjoyed that film actually, but there wasn't the noise there that there was, obviously, with *The Exorcist* and certain other films. I remember there being... the audience was more... I don't know if the audience was more involved or whether they're told to keep quiet these days. I don't know.

In describing the silence, Gill expresses feeling restricted in how she could engage with the film and, particularly, with her daughter who was sat beside her. In Paul's account of his first viewing of *The Exorcist*, he discusses the differences between a first viewing with friends and a second viewing alone. While both were at home, the differences between watching with friends and watching alone, between a social viewing and one with no social interaction, is very clear:

> You know, it's not the same as if I watched it on my own, where I'm focused on every detail and you're kind of being drawn into the world. You're very conscious of the fact that you're watching that film and you're watching it with your mates. There was a lot of laughing about the head spinning and laughing at all of the swearing and all of that and I think people just thought it was funny[...] So, you're putting on a front with it, to make sure that you don't embarrass yourself. But you're watching it with your mates... (Paul, interview, UK.)

In his first viewing, during a sleepover with friends at the age of twelve or thirteen, Paul's responses to the film are described by him as being much louder, more performative and designed to entertain and join in with the entertainment the children were making of the film. The group response at a sleepover, including laughing at the scene where Regan urinates on the rug and the infamous masturbation scene, would have been socially unacceptable in a cinema at the time. Such a performative encounter with the film effectively distanced Paul from the disturbing imagery on screen that first time as he erected the "front" which protected him from getting too drawn in and potentially looking scared. This strategy was not available to Gill during *Cabin in the Woods*, who felt she must be silent. With *The Exorcist*, Gill remembers a great deal of noise during the screening in 1974, and the difference is notable to her. The code of conduct of a cinema, between 1974 and more recent years, contrasted also with that of a teenage sleepover (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6), has an enormous impact upon

the ways in which audiences can respond to, and manage in the case of something horrific, what is happening on screen. Gill's account of these codes of conduct changing must of course be factored into any historical audience-based research because the codes delineate what is an acceptable response and what is not. The American drive-in theatre is an unusual middle ground between a private and public space, providing the communal setting but also a semi-private space and a host of additional distractions.

The people present during a trip to the cinema or the drive-in influence a number of different factors, which goes some way to explaining why participants move away from family viewing towards more independence and solo viewing with age. Other people influence the manner of the viewing and consumption, from its sociality (the amount of talking and interruptions) to its setting, right down to something as basic as the initial choice in which film to see or whether to watch a film at all. Power dynamics of the home are replicated in family viewings with parents ultimately having the final say, with the money being theirs. For Gill, as a teenager her film-viewing choices were largely guided by the boys in the group, who would take the girls along:

> Martin: So was this kind of, did you normally watch this kind of film or was this kind of a one off because of the…
>
> Gill: Um, I've always, where I live, as I say, it's a village, and it's difficult to get back and forth into town. So, generally, I would read. I love horror books. I still do.
>
> Martin: Ah, right.
>
> Gill: You know, my father always had books around and I think I started off on Dennis Wheatley, you know, that kind of thing. And, yes. As I say, I'd actually read the book before I went to the cinema so I knew what was involved. But, going to the cinema was, as I say, once a week thing with these particular people.
>
> Martin: Yeah.
>
> Gill: And, um, no. I mean, our choice was mostly guided by the boys.
>
> Martin: (Laughs.) Ah, right.

> Gill: (Laughs.) As I say, *Bullitt* was the boys' choice. We just went, "OK." We went along. It wasn't generally (sigh)… It was usual that they would choose the film and we would go along with them.

This ended up with Gill and her girlfriends having to sit through films such as *Bullitt* (Yates, 1970) and the tear-jerker/eye-roller *The Champ* (Zeffirelli, 1979), both of which she described as being ones for the boys. At the drive-in, this was also common, as when Chris (interview, USA) got his first glimpse at *The Exorcist* by pretending to be asleep in the back of the car at the tail end of a triple feature his parents did not expect him to stay awake through. As well as considerations of the environment, accessing the environment also comes with its own limitations and meanings.

The British versus the Americans

Although the concept of interpretive communities has been addressed in the literature review chapter, its considerable influence over the field of audience studies means it warrants more in-depth discussion by contrasting it with the findings here concerning issues of environment and access. In the descriptive language used in qualitative survey responses, there was a clear difference in focus for British and American participants. This difference manifests in the point of view adopted when describing first encounters with *The Exorcist*. There were in total twenty-five responses from American participants who saw the film in the 1970s in the cinema and drive-in. Ten British participants saw the film in the same period at the cinema. From American responses, there is an overarching concern with how the film affected them personally. They describe how *The Exorcist* shocked them in the cinema and how the film stayed with them, prompting nightmares and making them anxious or afraid in their own homes. The latter is common to all responses, but the former, this emphasis on personal trauma, is unique to American accounts of *The Exorcist* in the cinema:

> I was not prepared for the crucifix scene. It was weird, and, honestly, it didn't make sense to my thirteen-year-old brain. The scenes that were frightening were the scenes in the hospital and all the tests. The foul language, spewing, etc.

weren't all that frightening. they were kind of funny. The Capt. Howdy face *was* frightening as hell! The other frightening thing was being thirteen and Catholic, and Italian – with a head full of superstitions that were part of the Italian Catholic belief system, which includes a belief in demons and "The Devil." I wasn't quite old enough, nor did I know enough about psychology, to know that things like demonic possession can be manifestations of psychological states vs. the devil. (Participant #467, survey USA.)

My dad took my sisters and me to see it in a movie theatre in the San Fernando Valley. I was eight (thanks, dad), didn't know anything about it beforehand. It was unbelievably scary. I had nightmares about it for weeks. My mom had the book and I hid it in the bookshelf because even the cover scared me. (Participant #236, survey, USA.)

I saw it with a friend. I was living in Illinois at the time. The movie got a lot of press ahead of time, so I had an idea what it was about. As you know, the movie affected a lot of people in many different ways. It was, simply put, terrifying. I couldn't even be alone, not even to shower, for quite some time. I would hear "that voice" in my head or replay a scene in my mind. (Participant #595, survey USA.)

In these narratives, participants put themselves centre stage. The important details here are the various perceived damages inflicted upon them by the film. Participant #467 emphasises his lack of preparedness regarding the film's sexual moments while highlighting how 'a head full of superstitions' from his religious upbringing had actually prepared him for a big fall. It was my impression that he felt he was failed by a religious upbringing, the victim of traditions which paved the way for *The Exorcist* to be a truly terrifying experience. The film does not escape blame, however, with the more realistic scenes in the hospital also contributing to the participant's misery. Participant #236 blames her father and describes the fallout, including her mother's efforts to protect her from further harm. Rather than describing the encounter as it happened, participant #595 concentrates on describing how she needed the help of others to cope, positioning herself as a survivor. The important narrative theme in these responses is that of suffering and victimisation, with the individuals positioned in this way as survivors.

Contra to American narratives of victimisation, British responses talk of witnessing of an important event. Where American participants turn inward in their description, talking of their own shock and terror and post-cinema suffering, British participants almost exclusively focus on matters outside of their own self. These are invariably details that add to the sense of their having witnessed a special moment, something which contributes to the reputation of *The Exorcist* as "the scariest movie of all time". They are accounts of other audience members fainting, running out of the auditorium, screaming, and generally acting in a manner appropriate for watching a uniquely horrific and momentous film. In these memories, the speaker is not the central character. The speaker is a witness. For example, participant #563 (survey, UK) describes how St John's Ambulance volunteers carried people out on stretchers, how protestors handed out leaflets, and mentions nothing of his own experience of the film, of how the film made him feel. Gill (interview, UK) describes audience member's over-reactions to gruesome scenes and recalls protests and a woman fainting. Participant #354 (survey, UK) describes the responses of *other* audience members. This discourse matches well Kuhn's discussion of "impersonal discourse" in memory texts (2002: 22).

This difference in focus in American and British responses suggests a separate American and a British interpretive community based on cultural differences, after Fish's (1980) concept. However, upon closer inspection, a different pattern emerged. The variable that accounts for this internal-external divide in descriptions from American and British participants is not a vague, undefinable, and unhelpful notion of Americanness and Britishness; it is the participants' ages when seeing the film for the first time. Reports of young children sneaking into screenings and negotiating admission into films far above what the censors would allow are common in audience studies (Kuhn, 2002: 53). However, for the British audiences concerned here, the "X" classification by the BBFC in 1974, permitting no-one under eighteen, was obeyed. American audiences of all ages were permitted to see the film, including those under seventeen when accompanied by a parent or guardian, when *The Exorcist* was rated "R" by the MPAA in 1973. These different ratings produced this difference in responses from 1970s cinema audiences by ensuring

different ages of children would be present. This is a small sample of the overall data set, but it is a clear difference: the average age of participants who first saw the film in British cinemas in the 1970s is eighteen; the average age of participants in the USA who saw the film in the cinema in the 1970s is twelve and three-quarters. This most basic environmental factor – whether or not one is allowed access as a child – is the root cause of these differences between the British and the Americans. The age of the participants upon seeing the film is the only key difference between these two groups of respondents, besides, of course, their being British and American.

Whereas attributing differences to Britishness and Americanness relies on undefined generalisations about national cultures, differences in ages, or at least in memories as they relate to specific ages, can be defined. The development of childhood memory has been clearly defined by studies into how this occurs, including the different nature of childhood memories, childhood amnesia, and autobiographical memory (see Rubin, Rahhal, & Poon, 1998; Pillemer, 2001, 2008; Peterson, 2002; Fivush, 2011). There is also the matter of familiarity; young children had little to no experience of horror films or scary special effects – they are the novel element of the experience for them – whereas eighteen-year-olds had much more experience with films, including scary ones, which meant the film itself was a less unique component of the experience, particularly where incredibly rare and novel protests were encountered. Importantly, these factors relating to age are evidenced during further analysis of other responses and interviews, particularly from memories of those who watched the film in their own homes.

The average age of all participants seeing the film in the UK, taking home video into account, drops from eighteen to the same twelve-to-thirteen point as the American cinema-goers. Firstly, this demonstrates that there were likely no cultural differences keeping British children away while American children watched *The Exorcist*. British children appear to have been kept away purely for practical reasons, because as soon as the "X" rating is not a factor the average age of British first-time viewers levels out to the same as the Americans. Secondly, and most importantly, when home viewing is taken into account, both in the US and the UK,

these differences in how that first experience is described *no longer exist*. The same patterns appear in the US, the UK, in Canada and Australia, and the rest of the world. Those who were very young upon that first viewing describe the encounter with discourses of victimhood. Older first-time viewers are much more often discussing the events or the film itself in a witness-mode of speaking.

The defining factor in whether a participant frames their recollection in terms of the event or the personal experience, then, can be convincingly be taken as the participant's age upon that first viewing. Age, unlike interpretive communities of nationality, is a clearly defined variable with clearly defined limits. There is little contestation about what it "means" to be three years old or how it feels, given that this is the domain of studies on childhood development. In this way, it is both safe and logical to say that memories of very young experiences with horrific imagery trade almost exclusively in discourses of victimisation and survival because of the participants' ages.

The fact that Fish's (1980) concept of interpretive communities is logically deduced and not grounded in data, as discussed in the literature review chapter, has not stopped this concept of interpretive communities becoming the 'central emergent concept' in contemporary audience research (Barker, 2006: 125). It has been employed in or underpins assumptions of many studies which make claims for how different demographic groups receive films. Studies such as those by Brigid Cherry (1999) and Helen Taylor (1989) separate out women as a unit of study at the design stage of their research and make claims for women – for example, that women dislike slasher films (Cherry, 1999) – that are not tested against data from men. While such studies often bring neglected audiences to the fore – Cherry's (1999) female horror fans were rarely acknowledged in the press – there is a flattening of individuals' experiences when broad generalisations are made based on such a large group of people.

Recent work on audiences of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, from two ambitious projects conducted by teams of dozens of researchers, generated an incredibly diverse data set with tens of thousands of responses from around the world. The concept of interpretive communities shaped the research design and the

direction of the investigations, but the sheer amount of data generated meant that comparisons between large groups were possible. The stated aim of Hirsjärvi, Kovala, and Ruotsalainen (2016) is to find a "Nordic mode of reception" across Danish, Finnish, and Swedish audiences of *The Hobbit.* Veenstra, Kersten, Krijnen, Biltereyst, and Meers (2016) investigate interpretive communities across France, Belgium and the Netherlands for the same. Barker (2016a) investigates audience responses to *The Hobbit* looking to define interpretive communities which may be delineated by respondents' fan allegiance either to the source novel's author, J.R.R. Tolkien, or to the film series' director, Peter Jackson. In these studies, the existence of interpretive communities is not questioned; researchers accept it as "common sense" – the concept is proscriptive – and they attempt to identify these communities and draw out their characteristics.

When comparisons are able to be drawn between large groups, as in these projects, there is no evidence of the existence of interpretive communities based on groups as large as those defined by nationality. With a global data set at their disposal, Hirsjärvi et al. found no evidence for the existence for the interpretive community they sought (2016: 284). Veenstra et al. also found no evidence of their different interpretive community (2016: 507). They make a case, instead, for an interpretive community based on language, but admit that 'observed differences are small' (2016: 507). The lack of evidence supporting their hypotheses was taken not as proof that the concept of interpretive communities needs to be re-considered, but merely that the community of the type they sought does not exist for the film under consideration (Hirsjärvi et al., 2016: 284). In the field of audience studies, there is a reluctancy to yield the concept of interpretive communities despite its lack of substance, perhaps due to its support from influential scholars (Barker, 2006: 129; Klinger, 2008).

David Buckingham's work on children and their processes of watching television and dealing with violent media argues against the 'mechanical application of given demographic categories' (1996: 313). Buckingham is wary of audience studies researchers' preoccupation with interpretive communities:

> While there was a range of ethnic groups within the sample, for example, there were no consistent differences here – and indeed, it would be hard to see what differences one might wish to hypothesise in the first place. (Are black boys more interested in violence, for example?) The danger of beginning with a search for such differences is that one can end up with a form of essentialism. Likewise, the notion that there are "masculine" and "feminine" genres – and that males read in one way, and females in another – can easily slip back towards biological essentialism, or at least a gloomy form of determinism. (Buckingham, 1996: 314.)

Buckingham's (1996) findings, from an extensive study of parents and children, come from a study of violent media conducted in Britain in 1993, during the height of the renewed video nasties debate in the aftermath of the James Bulger case (Kirby, 1993). His work is, essentially, with its basis in "effects" folk theories, a testing of interpretive communities; these communities in this instance are young boys and working-class parents, both of which were being vilified in the media as ticking timebombs for copycat violence with respect to horror videos (Buckingham, 1993: 313). That he found no such interpretive communities, despite an extensive and varied study, and indeed came out firmly against such a concept, has fallen on deaf ears in the field of audience studies.

Kim Schroder (1994) discusses the shortcomings of the uses of interpretive communities in media research using Janice Radway's (1984) study of female readers of romance books, the first study to use Fish's (1980) concept. Radway's interpretive community, Schroder says, is an actual community, 'well-defined and with finite membership', being women of the same town buying romance novels from the same store in town which acts as a forum (Schroder, 1994: 338). National communities – indeed, almost any community wherein its members are not nameable and belonging to a concrete place – are untenable in this regard. Without explicitly asking – which is not done in any testing of interpretive communities to date – we cannot determine whether the participants feel as if they are responding to the film specifically because of their membership to the community. We cannot even be sure that participants would define themselves as belonging to or being typical of the community to which the researcher has committed them. The

consensus is that people belong to many interpretive communities at once (Fish, 1980; Barker, 2006: 129). These are big problems when making claims for why these audiences interpret meaning in the way they do. Finally, we cannot determine how different interpretive communities may interact and which ones make take precedence for certain moments in certain films. People, also, do not stay the same. Assigning motivations for interpretation to base categories such as race or gender implies that the same response will be had on a repeat viewing, which this study shows is certainly not the case. Ascribing interpretive strategies simply to demographic categories robs people of their individuality and precludes the influence of people's personal experiences on meaning-making processes. People change over time and bring with them many life experiences. Labeling them with demographic-based interpretive communities does not allow for that.

One of Barker's goals for the field of audience studies in 2006 was to make the concept of interpretive communities measurable and testable (2006: 129). This concept, still, is neither. Where it has been tested in a global data set (Hirsjärvi et al., 2016; Veenstra et al., 2016), there has been no support for the concept. Issues of measurement remain unquestioned. Barker et al. called for caution during analysis on the *Lord of the Rings* project: 'The danger would be that we might take someone responding from, say, Denmark, to be in some simple sense responding as "Danish"' (2008: 217). This is a clear problem with placing audiences in enormous groups: these groups need to be defined. One can define "British" as someone with a British passport, for example, but it is implicit in the research design of such studies that there is something particular about a British cultural identity that may make British audiences receive a film in a different way to those from other countries. There is no way to define a national character without resorting to broad stereotypes that eliminate differences within these groups. There is not one mode of "being British". There is also no way to measure how important a person's "Britishness" is to their character compared to others, and there is no way to determine which of a person's many allegiances to different interpretive communities takes precedence at particular moments in a film. David Buckingham argues that making generalisations about demographic categories based on class,

race, and gender may 'end up reinforcing differences that it might be more productive to challenge and to deconstruct' (1996: 313).

Researchers, in trying to ascribe explanation to meanings made by audiences based on pre-determined, ill-defined categories, is akin to describing their "subconscious" processes in textual analysis. In this way, researchers rob participants of their agency. What began as a useful way to think about the huge variety of possible meanings of a given text in literary studies has, in audience studies, become proscriptive theory which is not *tested* but is *tested for*.

From data in this study, it is clear that there is a difference between responses from British and American participants regarding 1970s cinema experiences, but the evidence illustrates that these finding relate to place in a direct way, to the immediate environment. Cultural differences do not factor into it, since these differences disappear when everyone is the same age. The basic environmental factor of the law where the children grew up, which either allowed or denied them access to the film, completely transformed the nature of the experience by allowing it to occur at a particular age. Along with highlighting the specific trauma associated with seeing *The Exorcist* at a young age, this emphasises the context of film-viewing experiences as specifically occurring within the course of a lifetime. A participant's age, in this way, is in itself an environmental factor of sorts, worthy of consideration when determining viewing strategies.

Conclusion: a theory of place and film

Accounts of experiences with *The Exorcist* in the cinema and at the drive-in theatre in the 1970s attest to the need to account for the literal environment – architecture, technology, programming, access, décor – as it can utterly transform the nature of a film-viewing experience. The environment was consistently important for participants, in line with theories of cinema-going memories (Kuhn, 2002; Anderson, 2013). They were detailed when describing the cinematic surround of the viewing environment and social context. The cinematic surround for Anderson (2013: 71) is limited to the programming and particulars of the *business* of the cinema. I offer an extension to Anderson's useful concept, that the cinematic

surround also, crucially, involves other people and an audience member's relationship with them. The cinematic surround, as evidenced by participants, incorporates the social, as well as the technological. When poor quality speakers at the drive-in demanded silence and thus concentration, when sound made dialogue unintelligible at the cinema, when an eerie fog descended on the drive-in, when the corridor to the toilets was claustrophobia-inducing, and when a thousand people crammed into an auditorium with poor air conditioning started to feel faint, the environment was directly responsible for an entirely different experience than would otherwise have been possible. At the extreme end of the spectrum, being allowed access at a very young age enabled rather traumatic experiences for those unprepared for the film's horrors. *The Exorcist* in the 1970s is a unique and rather dramatic example of the importance of these factors, but it effectively demonstrates just how much power these factors have in everyday experiences.

Everyday experiences are also, importantly, rooted in a social setting. The drive-in brings with it the familial hierarchies of the home. The cinema cannot be described as merely an empty room in which one sits with strangers. The cinema, too, is often familiar, and one is with familiar people. The social setting often includes people with varying levels of investment in the experience, including other audience members laughing inappropriately, fathers sleeping in the front seat, and children running off to the playground. These are part of the whole which makes up a film-viewing experience. It is not enough to account for the viewing strategies of only the audience member in question, because the viewing strategies of the person beside them could entirely scupper their plans. Who that next person might be is defined by the environment, by where it takes place and the amount of isolation afforded.

Individual people are the most important part of a study of audiences. Direct relationships between these people are what often define film experiences. The only communities that matter to participants here are those with which they directly interact: families, friendship groups, school peers. To seek differences in how audiences experience films based on inconceivably broad, undefined national differences or other ill-defined demographics is to leave behind one's participants.

To understand audiences' experiences with films in their everyday context, one must accept that "everyday" means something different to everyone. One must, essentially, accept that only a limited understanding can be reached when one seeks a single narrative of how a film was received. Participants' accounts of experiences with *The Exorcist* featured a great many complex variables, including technological, architectural, and social factors. Audience studies has for years sought a theoretical bridge between the individual experience and the communal experience, and many have decided that the concept of interpretive communities is that bridge (Barker, 2006). To understand audiences' experiences one cannot speak of a monolithic "cinema experience" because of the innumerable important variables described in this chapter. There is no one cinema experience. More importantly, while researchers rush to treat cinemas and films as individual places with inherent meanings, the same courtesy must be paid to audiences. It should be unacceptable for researchers to speak of "the British" or "the Americans" under the protective academic umbrella of Stanley Fish's (1980) interpretive communities. Everyday cinema experiences here are defined not only by the film and the environment, but also by one's mother and father, by one's friends, and by the occasionally irritating strangers who are part of any trip to the cinema. These are the communities which matter to participants, communities of people with names and faces.

Leaving behind interpretive communities which are ascribed to participants' accounts by researchers attempting to access audiences' "subconscious" motivations will, going forward, be a way for audience studies to begin to talk in terms of audiences' experiences, rather than researchers' interests. Grounded audience studies, which this thesis offers as an alternative approach, prevents researchers applying untested, unverifiable concepts from other fields and relying on "common sense" assumptions. This is not to say that the object of study must always be the individual – far from it – but groups must be defined, they must have limits, and they must be groups in which participants place themselves. The simplest test would be to ask oneself, "Can I write out a list of the names of the people in this community?" If you can, that community is small enough that maybe

the concept is useful, as long as it is grounded in participants' definitions of themselves. If you cannot, or if the list would be so long that your hand would become tired, perhaps you are being proscriptive and tailoring your participants' identities to fit your own research interests. Radway's (1984) study of readers in a small town kept her community small in exactly this way. It is only through the need for audience studies as a field to have a unifying concept, one that can account for thousands of experiences, that Fish's (1980) logically deduced theory later became proscriptive. The aim of this thesis has always been to allow its findings to grow from and be guided in the development by participants' responses. Rather than to begin with theories and concepts which are then applied to participants from the "top down", this study sought to conduct audience studies from the "bottom up". One cannot do this while clinging onto one's own notions of who your participants are.

There emerged from data concerning the cinema and the drive-in in the 1970s tales of tinny speakers, rear-view mirrors obstructing one's view, the joy of falling asleep in one's own car, the room for picnics and blankets, and the pain of only getting to see what the boys wanted to watch because they were the only ones with a car. Audiences are concerned about their own lives, their own people, and their own towns. To go over their heads and start talking about their subconscious loyalties to different groups is to lose what really makes the cinema important for them. *The Exorcist* is an important film to many people, but it is the direct relationships between these people and their immediate environments that give memories of this film its meaning.

Chapter 5

Night terrors

Censorship and regulation

'Tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil
- Macbeth

The Exorcist came to almost every participant in this study accompanied by stories of censorship and folk tales of its power over audiences, regardless of when they first saw it. Upon its release, *The Exorcist* was considered possibly "blasphemous" and potentially "dangerous" (Gilchrist, 1974; Smalldon, 1974; Lewin, 1974). In 1974, articles ran in the UK with headlines such as 'Ban *The Exorcist* say churchmen' (Gilchrist, 1974), 'Horror film may make you crazy, warns Canon' (*Evening Standard* reporter, 1974), and 'London girl "victim of *The Exorcist*"' (Bilton, 1974). Coverage in the USA was less sensational overall – the film received much more positive reviews than in the UK – but, still, details of a "cursed" production and traumatised audiences crept through. The *San Francisco Examiner* stated that the 'filming of *The Exorcist* would make an eerie movie itself' (Reed, 1973) and an account of the success of the film in the *New York Times* came to define talk of *The Exorcist*'s original release:

> It's been reported that once inside the theatre, a number of
> moviegoers vomited at the very graphic goings-on on the
> screen. Others fainted, or left the theatre, nauseous and

> trembling, before the film was half over. Several people had heart attacks, a guard told me. One woman even had a miscarriage, he said. (Klemesrud, 1974.)

Such lurid details established the inescapable folklore surrounding what has become arguably the most controversial and sensationalised film in cinema history.

It became plain from responses to the survey that censorship and the status of *The Exorcist* as a censored text is an important if not defining part of audience's experiences with the film. It is what makes people decide to watch it; it is what makes people enjoy talking about it; and it is why many children over the years have not been allowed near it. Through analysis of participants' recollections, I here examine in detail the importance and meaning of censorship in its many forms for the audiences of *The Exorcist* and offer a new model for thinking about censorship, a theory of personal censorship. This deals primarily with those affected most by censorship, whether through parental censorship or through lacking the means to circumvent national censorship: child audiences.

The two organising principles around which the theory offered in this chapter are built are: 1) *systems of parental regulation;* and 2) *processes of self-censorship*. The parental regulation of the film for children and individuals censoring the film for themselves are both commonplace in the data set and carry with them significant ramifications for the overall experience. These accounts are defined by personal relationships and the model of censorship this chapter is to offer follows suit.

The Exorcist as video nasty

Although there are a few instances of participants forbidden to attend the cinema to see *The Exorcist*, perhaps due to the role of cinema workers in keeping at least the very young children out, the vast majority of instances of parental intervention in the matter occurred in the home. Those participants who were told to keep away from the film at the cinema by parents – all Americans as they could access the film with parental supervision – simply report that this was the case and have little more to say. They were not permitted to go and so they did not go. With one notable exception, which is discussed later, there was no system of approval or disapproval

and no way around this ban, except to read the book and use one's imagination (as participants #240 and #495 did). Due to this lack of a need for parental regulation during the first phase of *The Exorcist*'s distribution and reputation, this chapter focuses on the latter two phases as outlined in the introduction to this thesis, *The Exorcist* as a "video nasty" and *The Exorcist* as a "classic", with the majority of data referring to the former. The focus is on home viewing, which has been overlooked in historical audience studies due to a focus on pre-home video eras (e.g., Kuhn, 2002; Smith 2005; Stokes and Jones, 2017). While the reputation of *The Exorcist* as a classic in phase three does not hinge on issues of censorship, there are still instances of parental regulation in this later period.

During the late 1980s and the 1990s, the means of accessing *The Exorcist* on bootleg VHS cassettes came with its own associations. The illicit nature of the illegal cassettes played a part in presenting this idea of a film which was beyond the pale and part of the video nasties, which had become 'a recognisable film genre within Britain' (Egan, 2007: 3). Indeed, part of the appeal of such films was their illegality. Paul describes the artistry involved in one man's production of his own VHS of *The Exorcist* which evoked this reputation:

> Paul: Yeah. First time I watched it was on a battered old VHS that someone had dubbed off an original one, so it wasn't even like a proper *Exorcist* tape. It was, um… A kid I was in school with, his dad was big into the *Exorcist* films and you'd heard like, ah, these have got things that are banned and–
>
> Martin: Right.
>
> Paul: You know, "It's dead scary." This kid got the dubbed tapes because his dad used to keep them in the shed, so he robbed them out the shed.
>
> Martin: Right. (Laughs.)
>
> Paul: And he used to make his own covers for them.
>
> Martin: Brilliant.
>
> Paul: But he just put a banned thing (laughs) on *The Exorcist*. So, it was just like *The Exorcist* and then he'd done like a, you know, like a red stamp thing?

Martin: Yeah.

Paul: He'd just drawn as if it'd been red-stamped. "Banned!"
(Paul, interview, UK.)

Quite aside from the usual playground gossip around horrific films, many participants who were at school in the late 1980s and early 1990s describe how this shadow economy of pirated videos was often how they would encounter horror films, since they required no parental approval in the same way as did renting them from a shop. Films which blurred the line between fiction and documentary, such as *Faces of Death* (LeCilaire, 1978) and *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980), were for participants a big playground talking point. *The Exorcist* was released in 1973 as a big budget Warner Bros. production directed by an Oscar-winner and written by a bestselling novelist. It had none of these associations until the 1980s. The lure of the forbidden, for many children, was even stronger with the film's home video ban, and created for many a real sense of trepidation:

I watched horrors. I liked horrors. But the idea that one of the ones I'm watching is like so horrific that it's been banned was just like, because I'd seen some – what I thought at the time – was some pretty horrific films. (Paul, UK, interview.)

There were, of course, stated associations of *The Exorcist*'s reported "dangers" to audiences in the 1970s, but this was a blockbuster release from a traditional studio. The video nasties were largely cheap, international films for the most part, and the narrative, pushed by the *Daily Mail*, was of their threat to British children (Renowden, 1982). The illegality of selling videos of *The Exorcist* in the UK after 1986 associated the film with the video nasties. The scare-mongering of the 1980s about the dangers of horror films took on a new dimension and urgency after the tragic murder of James Bulger in 1993, then four years old, by two ten-year-old boys. This sparked a second British media panic about the "effects" of violent and horrific films on children (Kirby, 1993), adding further cause for potential parental concern.

Articles about the film from the late 1990s onwards are retrospectives, with few new incidents to report upon. The film took on a historical quality in the late 1990s. Its ban on home video in the UK was no longer an on-going concern after 1999. The

spectre of the video nasties still loomed over *The Exorcist*, with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974) and other previously censored films also permitted a release in 1999, but these were of historical interest rather than part of another censorship campaign. The coverage of *The Exorcist* was different given its status as an Oscar-winning studio picture and its widespread cultural influence. It is often this earlier generation who provide first-time viewers in the late 1990s onwards with information about the film. Indeed, many had already been doing so while the film was unavailable, relating stories of their own experiences to their children and recycling rumours about fainting, vomiting, and suicides. Such stories also featured in a documentary screened on the BBC in the UK, *The Fear of God* (Jones, 1998), which was much publicised and seen by many British participants. It recycled many of the sensational stories of the film's audiences upon its release, but treated the film as a historical artefact, presenting test footage and deleted scenes (some of which were inserted into the 2001 Director's Cut).

The reputation of *The Exorcist* affected viewing strategies for many participants in a number of ways during its time on home video. Despite the inevitable crossover between the phases of *The Exorcist*'s reputation, it holds true that in the 1970s audiences could see the film as a horror blockbuster, in the 1980s it was banned and associated with the video nasties, and post-1998 it was a historical artefact, a widely available "classic" film. Parents, when considering whether to allow their children to see *The Exorcist*, were doing so largely with this general knowledge of the film.

Parental regulation

In all, sixty-two participants were told they could not watch *The Exorcist* as children. While this does not account for a large percentage of the data set, it proved significant in as much as how this has affected how the film has been received and remembered by these participants. The potential for parental regulation, in terms of the impact on meaning and on the development of tastes in childhood film-viewing, is enormous and defines many participants' recollections. The importance of censorship is clear also from the pleasure evident in talk of regulation of

childhood viewing practices. Participants, as a rule, enjoyed discussing restrictions on their behaviour as children, marking it as an important part of their lived experience.

Fear of punishment drove many participants, as children, to extreme measures to see *The Exorcist* undetected. These fears were not unfounded, as Kirsty J (interview, UK) recalled: 'I remember once being busted and having my TV removed for a week (it felt way longer than a week at the time I'm sure)'. Another participant felt the wrath of a friend's parents:

> My parents allowed me to watch any horror movie. So they rented me *The Exorcist* and I brought it over to my friend's house. His parents kicked me out after twenty minutes... They were very Christian... (Participant #260, survey, USA.)

While individuals expected no punishment for defying the wishes of censor board, there were good reasons for them to avoid being caught in the act by their parents. Sarah Smith states, 'Crucially, parental authority was the only form of cinema regulation which might attract punishment if defied', making it the predominant mode of censorship on an everyday level (Smith, 2005: 123).

Parental regulation is here examined where it is most common: in the home. This is an important feature of many descriptions of seeking out *The Exorcist* for the first time in the years since its release. Such parental censorship shaped in a number of concrete ways the kinds of experiences participants in this study had with *The Exorcist* and how they remembered it. Only one participant (#487) discussed being unable to access the film due to official censorship. As stated in Chapter 4, British cinema-goers in this study abided by the law laid down by the BBFC and did not attend before they turned eighteen. (Others surely may have, of course, but are not represented here.) However, the overwhelming majority who could not see the film at first placed the blame at the feet of their parents. As David Buckingham found in the most thorough exploration of childhood film-viewing to date, with the popularity of VHS at its height and questions about the dangers of its accessibility to children dominating the press in 1993, 'As new technologies have steadily undermined the centralised control of moving images, the responsibility for

regulating children's viewing has increasingly fallen to parents and to children themselves' (1996: 253).

A key finding of this study is that the personal is much more important to audiences than is the national and this is true for matters of censorship. The only participants to discuss the BBFC directly were those who were unable to see the film after its ban on home video and official censorship was easily circumvented through piracy. Even the circumvention of censorship was often defined by personal relationships, with bootleg videos sourced from friends and older relatives. Many participants who were not forbidden from watching the film still operated on the assumption, as children, that the film was taboo and the act of watching it was a form of rebellion, whether against their parents, their teachers, their friends or imagined others.

The content of participants' recollections as well as the language used can reveal a great deal about the myriad meanings of the memory of parental regulation for them, with the specific case of *The Exorcist* providing solid ground upon which we can explore the issue. In this section, accounts of parental regulation and the actions of the children are examined for their impact upon the viewing strategies and experience of *The Exorcist*.

Concerns

Priorities for parents regulating children's viewings were consistent in participants' accounts. Buckingham found sex, violence and bad language were, of course, the main concerns for parents, but that the priorities were not consistent across his surveyed families (1996: 259-261). The most oft-cited reason ascribed to parents for their regulation, in this study, was that the participant was just "not old enough" (#378, survey, UK). In an interesting twist on this, one father-to-be forbade his pregnant wife to see the film, protecting participant #145 in the womb (survey, UK). The "not old enough" rationale covers most of these motivations as a catch all, but there are five main motivations, as judged by participants: 1) concerns about sexual material; 2) the child was too sensitive for horrific scenes; 3) religious objections; 4)

fear of the child sharing the film with more sensitive children, usually a sibling; and 5) a parent's own fear of the film and of having it in their home.

Kirsten's (interview, UK) mother did not want her child to go to her Catholic school the day after seeing *The Exorcist* telling teachers that she had been allowed to watch the film. This extended to household bans on the film which were targeted at one sibling but included all. Kristen discussed how she experienced a ban in order to protect her younger brother:

> Kristen: So she probably didn't really know that much about [most of the video nasties], whereas *The Exorcist*, obviously, she saw that when it first came out and she knew exactly what was in there. So, there probably was an element of her wanting to keep some of it away from us[…] And my brother was way more susceptible than I was. He was much younger. He's seven years younger than me. So, she probably didn't want me showing my brother *The Exorcist* (laughs).

In this way, siblings felt the force of parental censorship where such action was only thought necessary for one of the children, with them both treated as a unit. Anything that was too much for one child was outlawed for both, since the parents had an understanding, as here, of the sibling dynamic and the likelihood of one sharing the film with the other. Sharing between siblings was common, so perhaps this was a sound parenting strategy. Kirsty J (interview, UK) was kept away from all horror films for a time, including Hammer horror films and even older Universal monster pictures: 'I can't honestly say I know what they didn't want me seeing as the only reason I ever got given was, "That stuff will give you nightmares, it has an age rating for a reason"'. Natalie's (interview, UK) mother was concerned about her seeing sexual scenes. The mother of participant #87 (survey, USA) was Catholic and thus he was denied a chance to see the film due to concerns about his spiritual well-being. Another participant was forbidden from bringing the video into the house because his mother was afraid of the film herself (participant #334, survey, USA).

In rare instances, acts of parental regulation occur due to conflicting tastes between parents and children. Stu's (focus group 4) mother objected to *The*

Exorcist on principle based exclusively on it being an American film. Feelings of anti-fandom are enough to warrant a ban for parents in this way. Censorship has been discussed as an extreme instance of anti-fan activism, wherein matters of taste propel those who dislike a given text to take action against it (Jones 2015; Gray 2003; Alters, 2007). I explored this in depth with my own study of audiences' talk of the censorship of *A Serbian Film* (Smith, 2018 and 2019). I found that discourses of taste and distaste were a key factor when participants expressed either pro- or anti-censorship views (2018: 130). Many of those participants who described themselves as having general anti-censorship, liberal views used quality judgements against *A Serbian Film* to support its censorship (2019: 201). This also echoed the findings of my earlier study into censorship discourses in the British press (Smith, 2015). The link between anti-fandom and pro-censorship sentiment has been established and is a mitigating factor in parental regulation, though it is rare in this data set. In fact, those parents who had seen the film were much less likely to impose restrictions on their children watching it.

Where parents were critical of the idea of their children watching *The Exorcist*, this takes the form of a warning about the effect the film may have on them, rather than a warning about any parental punishment. Kirsty C (interview, UK), who heeded her mother's warnings and did not watch *The Exorcist* until much later, describes why she thought her mother tried to turn her away from the film:

> As I got older, I don't understand myself why I didn't just watch it, I mean I had watched probably worse films, such as *The Ring* and *The Grudge*. I think it was mainly because she found it terrifying rather than it being too sexual or religious, she was obviously genuinely terrified after watching it, and didn't want me to have the same experience. (Kirsty C, interview, UK.)

Parental regulation by parents who had their own prior experiences with the film were, across the board, of this nature. Whereas there is little which speaks to anti-fandom as a motivating factor in parental regulation of *The Exorcist*, the few examples do speak to its possibility, though this precludes any notion that censorship is *always* related to anti-fandom.

In no recollections of parental activity or discussions regulating children's activities were there concerns about children being inspired by or copying violent scenes. Buckingham, whose study was entirely concerned with this notion, made a similar discovery: 'Although some parents are concerned that younger children will copy "play fighting" from television, their primary concerns in relation to violence are that their children will become frightened or upset' (1996: 305). Jan (interview, UK), a grandmother now, expressed no fears of the children learning any untoward language or behaviours, or of their learning of any sexual details, stating, 'Certainly I wouldn't have let a child of mine watch it. I have four grandchildren now and I don't think any of them would cope with it.' Jan feared the film would overwhelm children emotionally, prompting this desire to protect with the emphasis on the notion of her children and grandchildren "coping" with the film. This echoes most (real and potential) parents' concerns about nightmares.

Buckingham found that parents participating in his study found it hard to predict what might upset their children, with some upset by more innocuous materials (1996: 305). Recurring themes Buckingham (1996: 306) finds which upset children in his study included 'bodily violation, the supernatural […], threats to family harmony and to children', which explains the wariness of parents regarding *The Exorcist*, given that this functions as a check list of the film's contents. Courtney was told to hide her eyes for gorier scenes and describes how, 'I have fond memories of my family sitting round to watch films like *Final Destination* […] and I'd constantly have to miss all the 'good' bits in case I'd get nightmares!' (interview, UK). This is a common consideration where parents censor films for their children. When Courtney's parents relented as she got older and allowed her to indulge in her curiosity about *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and other horror mainstays, Courtney states her mother 'changed her stand point to "I won't stop you, but if you get nightmares that's on you!"' (Courtney, interview, UK). The protection of children from emotional or (mild) psychological trauma (i.e., nightmares) is far and away the most frequently offered justification for parental regulation and once a child is old enough the responsibility for avoiding traumatic experiences is handed over to the child him or herself, as it was for Courtney.

The sentiments of participants in this study was that their censorial parents were in the business of protecting them and not simply passing on their own tastes. When asked about what age he would allow his hypothetical children to watch horror films, Kieran (focus group 1) relates it to his own experiences as a child. He describes his first encounter with horror in full at eleven or twelve years old, how it was affecting even though he felt himself "ready", and contrasts this with an instance where his parents saved him from potential nightmares earlier:

> Kieran: Even like sneaking horror films as a kid, I went out and watched it round a friend's house, and thought it was great. *Halloween 4* was the first one I watched. And it was great. And I come back to my house and I'm in bed that night and I was terrified. So, I'm definitely glad they didn't show me any horror until I was like eleven or twelve.

> Martin: You're glad they weren't just sitting you down in front of *Silence of the Lambs* as a kid?

> Kieran: Well, that's actually one of the ones. When I was like ten, we were at a Christmas fair and I bought it, and my mum was like, "Here, you can watch that one." I put it on for ten minutes and it was the first-person Buffalo Bill kills and my dad's went over and hit the eject button and said, "Ah, we'll put that one away for a while."

Kieran's parents' actions are remembered as protectionist, which he recognises now as necessary. His father's actions are not remembered as a judgement of the film, but a judgement of Kieran's readiness.

Participants, when discussing how they might regulate their own children's viewing, limited their talk to protecting a child from distress. Using the conception of censorial urges as manifestations of anti-fandom does not work for *The Exorcist* for the most part, despite its conceptual usefulness for other potential scenarios. A total censorship-as-anti-fandom conceptualisation ascribes motive to parental regulation and other forms of censorship where it does not belong, such as the campaign of the Nationwide Festival of Light. While their motives are outside the remit of this study, writing that organisation off as merely campaigning against films they did not like does a disservice to the complexity of history. Their

organisation was founded around its members' Christian values and their stated agenda was protectionist.

Protectionist censorship is the overriding theme of parental concerns regarding *The Exorcist*, and its impact upon meanings, of the film and of memories of the experience, are changeable based on strategies of regulation and strategies of circumventing it. Echoing Buckingham's (1996: 262) findings, there were no patterns in who was deemed in need of protecting; it was more individual and tailored to each child. The concerns of parents were tied to the character of their children.

Strategies

There are a number of distinctive strategies for parental regulation found in participants' accounts. The approaches to censorship and classifications found in this study, told predominantly by the then-children involved in these scenarios, are as follows:

> a) The parent(s) allow the child free reign to watch anything.
>
> b) The parent(s) restrict viewing based on their own experience with a film or from recommendations from the censors.
>
> c) The parent(s) view the film and decide whether it is suitable for the child.
>
> d) The parent(s) view the film with the child, prepared to censor the film by fast-forwarding or telling the child to look away should any unsuitable material appear.

These fit well with Sarah Smith's (2005) findings. Also, there is what Smith calls "occasional misjudgements" in parental regulation. This is not of the same quality as the approaches listed above, being less a strategy and more an outcome. In her study, Smith finds these same systems (Smith, 2005: 121). Each of these variations is a common feature in the data set concerning *The Exorcist* and will here be examined in turn, along with the ramifications for meaning for the children, after first examining the systems of approval implemented in the asking for and the granting or denial or parental consent.

The free-reign approach would often be coupled with warnings about nightmares or advice, such as that which Kristen received from her own mother who was non-plussed at finding her child watching *Driller Killer* (Ferrara, 1979) and *Straw Dogs* (Peckinpah, 1971): "Turn it off if it gets too scary" (Kristen, Interview). Buckingham found that most parents felt that around the age of thirteen, children were mature enough to make their own decisions regarding the media they watched (1996: 315). With the average of participants here watching *The Exorcist* at the age of thirteen, that tallies with this study. Even though a significant proportion of children watched the film without parental consent, that so many children chose to watch the film at around this age would suggest they were indeed coming into their own. Depending upon the reason for the film's official BBFC or MPAA rating (i.e., whether it was for sexual or violent scenes), there were a number of strategies parents took when deciding, when there was a decision made, whether to allow their child to watch a particular film. In this way, the work of censor boards can be seen as the starting step in the process of parental regulation.

There was a variation from the four strategies where in a number of households there was an *anything-but-The-Exorcist* rule as an addition to the usual procedure. A special exception was made for *The Exorcist*. Six participants describe how this was the case for them. For some, this approach manifested even in a complete refusal to have a copy of the film present in the house. For other parents who did allow the film in the house for themselves, the VHS was treated like a firearm, being locked away in a cupboard out of reach of the children. This happened to Kirsten, whose mother permitted anything – she ran a mobile video rental service and had a house filled with VHS tapes – but locked *The Exorcist* away. The parent is the authority on whether the child is ready to see the film within these systems. The children, themselves, have no say, and the rules are subject to change and special exceptions by the parent without notice or reason.

The popularity and notoriety of *The Exorcist* meant many parents were already aware of what the film contained and therefore their mind was quickly made up. Many did not rely on newspaper stories about *The Exorcist* or the certificates granted by the censor boards. Where parents had not seen the film, censors'

certificates were used merely as an indicator that a decision might be needed. Parents would screen *The Exorcist* for themselves before arriving at a decision regarding their child's viewing of the film, making their own judgement. Such measures were by no means limited to *The Exorcist*, and many participants discussed general rules for more adult-targeted films in their accounts of childhood film-viewing habits. Paul outlined the process by which his mother would have let him watch an "18"-rated film as a child in the 1990s:

> Paul: We used to have this guy that came round in a van with all the latest [video] releases strapped to his boot[…] We used to get horrors from him, but my mum used to have to– Because she'd let us choose what we wanted, but she'd watch the film beforehand, so we could generally watch it if it was violent or if there was drug use or anything like that (laughs). Or swearing. She'd let us get away with that.

> Martin: (Laughs.) Right.

> Paul: But she wouldn't let us see any proper sex scenes or anything. So, she was a bit funny about that. Normally she'd screen it the night before and we'd get to watch it the day after. So, we could usually pick. But, by that point, she wasn't too bad […]

> Martin: Did your mum have to screen [*The Exorcist*] for you?

> Paul: No, no. My mum didn't know we had that. I mean I don't think she would've minded too much, but obviously there's a couple of scenes in it that might not have got past her.

This kind of informed decision-making is important in stories of parental censorship, where systems were in place. Where clear systems were not in place, it is important to remember that there are a variety of different motives for censorship and myriad objections parents may have to their children seeing the film. As in Kuhn's model where no two instances of censorship are alike, we must allow for the same potential for complexity when making claims for parents' motives.

In an interesting example of a system of approval, the parents of Jeff (interview, USA) deferred their authority and told Jeff he could see the film only if he obtained permission from Father Valentine, the priest at the family's church. Jeff's parents

did not trust the ratings board had a person's spiritual well-being as their foremost concern and felt their deferring to a religious authority would best safeguard his religious development. This is an example of why parents may not follow the guidelines of censors, other than suspicions that censors are too conservative and underestimate a child's ability to cope with violent imagery: parents can have different priorities. While the authority figure was in Jeff's case unusual, the system of approval evidenced here was not unusual at all.

Where parents insisted on being present for the screening in order to regulate their child's access to the film as they watch there was no expressed resistance to this from participants. It was largely accepted, since the request to see the film was prompted by an enthusiasm to see the film that could hardly be overcome. Indeed, many participants who were refused permission to see the film went to great lengths to undermine their parents' wishes. The presence of a parent during a film-viewing, a routine way of watching films for most, was no real barrier to their enthusiasms.

Where parental censorship occurs, there are considerably more mentions of mothers restricting activities. From the sixty-two mentions of parental censorship, twenty-seven state it was both parents or name no names and three state their father forbade it, but twenty-eight describe how their mother did not allow them to watch *The Exorcist*. Sarah Smith made this same discovery regarding parents of the 1930s: 'Where parental authority is mentioned [in oral history interviews], it is nearly always maternal authority; indeed, many respondents recall their mother's authority as a very powerful influence in the regulation of their behaviour' (Smith, 2005: 121). As here and as in Smith's historical work, few participants discuss their father with regards to censorship. Buckingham came to a similar conclusion: 'in the vast majority of cases, it was the mother who was identified as the parent most likely to take responsibility for regulating children's viewing. Insofar as fathers made an appearance in these discussions at all, they were almost exclusively seen to be simply imposing their own tastes' (1993: 118). Although mothers are more censorious of *The Exorcist* according to quantitative trends found in the 746 survey responses, they are also much more likely to sit down with their child and share *The*

Exorcist with them, encouraging them to watch, as discussed in the next chapter on more positive parent-child scenarios.

The higher likelihood of a mother's involvement in a child's film-viewing activities compared to a father's may be the result of more traditional gender roles in the home. Allowances must be made for the possibility that mothers may censor more simply because they are the parent children ask first. This study includes accounts of the home from as far back as the 1970s, but there is no scope in this study to seek answers to pursue this. The directive of this study is to investigate the potential for meanings alone and the processes involved. In examining the processes, this study bears in mind the potential for differences between when a mother and when a father regulates viewing, insofar as this can be done based on participants' recollections. Parenting trends are, of course, the domain of quantative studies.

Regardless of which parent regulated more, some children whose viewing practices were not regulated, or who were granted permission to watch *The Exorcist*, recall with regret that they were allowed to watch the film at a young age:

> I first watched it with my mum and dad probably around 1982. To be honest, I reckon they should've shown more caution as I was already a nervous type after they let me stay late up and watch the Saturday night horror double bills on BBC2. So, yes, *The Exorcist* did as I thought it would do and scared the living Hell out of me and I didn't sleep properly at night for the following six months. But I loved the film…. although I did show caution and didn't re-watch it straight away even though it was there on the shelf. (Participant #615, survey, UK.)

Systems of approval, in this way, are not always oppressive processes but protective and sometimes desired ones. There are many examples of participants watching the film as children and experiencing negative effects, such as nightmares, which explains this desire for protection where it is found. Occasionally, the parents are blamed:

> My dad took my sisters and me to see it in a movie theatre in the San Fernando Valley. I was eight (thanks, dad), didn't know anything about it beforehand. It was unbelievably

> scary. I had nightmares about it for weeks. My mom had
> the book and I hid it in the bookshelf because even the
> cover scared me. (Participant #236. USA.)

Whereas in these instances, however, parental presence seems ineffective to keep the child free from distress, other parents were more active in real-time regulation. In the instances quoted above, parents choose for the children and there is no stage of the child requesting access. They are in this way a separate proposition from such instances where approval has been asked for and granted on the condition of an adult being present, but the process is the same as parents of course try to mitigate the damage after the misjudgement. Parents' desires and tastes trump the child's tastes or preparedness in these examples and, as with regulation, the choice is taken out of their hands.

An important consideration concerning regulation, whether based on tastes or protectionism, is that this is not always a source of enmity. This can lead to game playing, as with pranking one's parents or children, as in the following accounts:

> To this day, my mother freaks out if any of us do "the voice",
> she really cries and runs out of the room. We all think it's
> hilarious, but I suppose she's been deeply traumatised by
> the film! (Participant #69, survey, UK.)

> Scaring each other in my family happened often. Everyone
> knew how terrified I was of Regan, so they'd purposefully
> leave a full screen picture of her on the computer, or play a
> sound clip of her voice. My mom and I would be laying
> together in the dark, and she would put a flashlight
> underneath her chin to spotlight her face and she'd let out a
> maniacal laugh as I begged her to stop. She once chased me
> around the house with a full raw chicken while I sobbed.
> Hahaha. (Hope, interview, USA.)

There can even be the creation of support structures where the distaste towards horror for the parent or child is managed by the other. The best example of the latter is Caitlyn's (interview, UK) screening of horror films for her mother, Gill (interview, UK), who enjoys horror but can be sensitive concerning scenes of violence. This is discussed shortly in more detail.

Acts of parental regulation are not wholly oppressive and non-negotiable. They are not taken as a simple, "bad" limitation of a child's freedom. Buckingham found that parent-child dynamics where media regulation is concerned are complex processes, that 'to regard parental responsibility[…] as merely a matter of restricting your children's viewing – or indeed of imposing a fixed set of rules – is to ignore the complex ways in which children make sense of what they watch, and to neglect the possibilities of a more positive approach' (1996: 253-254). This study also found such complexity, with participants' acknowledging parents' protectionist, caring role.

There are enough variations on parental censorship which, with it being bound in pre-existing relationships, ensure it cannot be a single, predictable event with the same outcome every time. The focus on the *process* of parental regulation – and, later, self-censorship – rather than the outcomes, is to account for the sheer variety of possible outcomes based on a predictable number of scenarios, as listed above. Buckingham found there were factors which affect the extent and nature of parental regulation of children's viewing habits, including the number of televisions in the house, siblings, their ages, and other factors (1993 :118). No experiences with a film can be categorised and coded with definite fixed outcomes for every combination of events, of course. Efforts to categorise and therefore summarise experiences in such simplistic terms, including Jonathan Gray's (2003) concepts of the fan, the anti-fan and the non-fan, can only ever provide tentative starting points for further analysis. Many such starting points have come to the forefront in the analysis of the responses in this study, however, suggesting a fruitful way for exploring encounters with films in the home and within the family dynamic.

Outcomes of regulation

The following outcomes of parental regulation were the most common or significant in this study:

> 1) Both parents are said to have banned the participant as a child from watching *The Exorcist* and he/she obeyed.

> 2) Both parents banned the film and the child disobeyed.

> 3) One parent banned the child from seeing the film and this was obeyed.

> 4) One parent banned the child from seeing the film and this was disobeyed. In a number of instances this act of defiance was facilitated by the other parent who swore the child to secrecy.

> 5) Another party (another relative, a friend's parents or another figure with authority) banned the film and this was obeyed frequently due to the rule being tied to the place where the viewing was taking place (e.g., a friend's house, grandma's house, a classroom).

> 6) The child was banned from watching *The Exorcist* and obeyed until leaving the family home as an adult.

Of course, the first category is not covered in this study as having seen the film was a prerequisite for taking part in this research.

Censorship led to the alteration of the experience both on an interpretive level and in more practical ways which disrupted the viewing or changed the text itself (such as watching a poor-quality bootleg VHS to circumvent parents' wishes). The biggest change, however, was how the experience changed for participants in definitive, measurable ways by their having the process of viewing the film (and not the film text itself) interrupted or distorted. This ranged from having to watch the film piecemeal after bedtime over the course of a few days to avoid detection (participant #587, UK) to being told by parents to look away for all of the "good bits" (Courtney, interview, UK). Akin to the discussion in Chapter 4 of how poor exhibition equipment in the cinema in the 1970s led to dialogue being difficult to hear for Mark (interview, UK), nothing affects the interpretation of a film more than the removal of certain elements or moments.

Viewings of the film discussed in this chapter were affected by parental intervention just as effectively, if not more so, than when the film was censored for television, an action which directly changed the material nature of the film. Edited television broadcasts were discussed by participants as their first viewing of the film, but they almost did not count, by participants' recollections, due to the extremity of the censorship (participants #166 and #314, survey, USA). The changes

were such that *The Exorcist* on cable television in the 1980s was hardly the same film as *The Exorcist* on VHS or at the cinema.

In much the same way, elements and moments of even the full version of *The Exorcist* were denied to participants (as children) in this study, changing the film's meaning. In a number of instances, the experience of watching the film was fragmented either due to parental intervention during the viewing or, more frequently, as a result of a secret attempt to skirt around a parental ban. For example, the following participants were denied the full experience in different ways. The first was just three years old when he encountered *The Exorcist*:

> My parents went to see it at a drive-in, certain I would be fast asleep in the rear of the family wagon. I faked it and only LISTENED to the film...and THAT VOICE. Scared the hell outta me. (Participant #183, survey, USA.)

> The cable company gave us a trial for Showtime/AMC, and I watched the film in the basement late at night with the volume low so my parents wouldn't hear. I remember being confused (because I couldn't hear the dialogue), but did enjoy the movie well enough. It wasn't particularly terrifying for me (again, the volume was too low), but I could still understand why it was so well-regarded in its genre. (Participant #457, survey, USA.)

> I peeked into my sister's room who was watching it and I caught glimpses and scenes, but she wouldn't allow me to watch. I recall not being allowed to watch it on multiple occasions and it being so taboo appealed to me even more. (Participant #36, survey, Japan.)

The first quoted participant was denied the visual element of the film as he pretended to his parents that he was asleep; the second was denied the aural element due to watching surreptitiously; and the third could only experience the film in brief snippets before being escorted or at least ordered out of the room. It is crucial when discussing censored films (institutionally censored or otherwise) to place these viewings in the real world, such as in the quoted examples, and to note the consequences of such censorship on the material experience. Studies which concentrate only on the effect upon viewing strategies and interpretations of acts of censorship and moments of controversy miss this crucial point. However, such

studies (e.g., Barker, 2005; Barker et al., 2001; Weir and Dunne, 2014) are almost always concerned with adult viewers, and this is largely a feature of childhood viewing habits.

The clearest change in meaning for children who were denied the entire experience comes as a result of the decontextualisation of much of the film's imagery. The sense of the story – which has a happy ending for Regan – is lost when the child is permitted only glimpses at the film. (For participant #457 above, the lack of understanding due to the unintelligible sound removed any sense of stakes from the film and had the opposite effect.) Caitlyn (interview, UK) describes her first encounter with a fragment of the film, and its impact, stating, 'I think what made it so scary was the lack of context because I'd just happened upon that scene, rather than watching the whole thing'. The lack of context is the defining factor in her memorable and haunting encounter with a film she later came to love and re-watch many times. Her confusion was part of what she found scary, which is consistent in such experiences when the participant was at a young age. Such out-of-context and out-of-control first encounters with moments from *The Exorcist* are not infrequent in the data set. Holly, too, had the same experience with a clip show:

> Holly: The first time I came into contact with it, it was like a snippet. I think I was about 11.
>
> Henna: Oh my God.
>
> Holly: It was one of those countdown shows. It was like the best films, and my mum had told me to watch it because I was film obsessed my whole life. And it started with like *Chicken Run*, so I was like, "Right, OK. We'll watch this countdown show." And *The Exorcist* was the number after that. And I was very young and I was just shocked. But, then, I tried to like– that imagery actually quite frightened me at that age. But as I grew up, I started to develop an interest for horror films and stuff. (Focus group 2.)

Holly, like Caitlyn, eventually worked this experience into a narrative of fandom. Katharina (participant #606), similarly saw a clip of *The Exorcist* on *Jeapordy* and still has a fear of the film. Another participant was an unwitting and unwilling first-time viewer of *The Exorcist* in much the same way as Holly and Katharina, but with

important differences which produced a different reaction. For participant #680, who was 'a young 12/13-year-old skater' at the time, he was introduced to the film piecemeal:

> One of them must've got a pirated copy of the movie & basically played me all the scary parts one after the other (fast forwarding between them – presumably to see my reaction). So, I saw a grainy film showing these crazy images with no context apart from the guys told me "this film increased the suicide rate in America". I didn't even know what I watched until many years later. I was freaked out for around a week, badly. I might add I'd been an avid horror movie watcher for many years prior to this from the age of around 8, so I'd already "seen some stuff", but nothing like this. My experience was not of the movie, as it wasn't explained what I'd just seen, it was literally the imagery within. (Participant #680, survey, USA, living in the UK upon first viewing.)

The contextual information apart how these images "increased the suicide rate in America" made for a terrifying experience. Some recent first-time viewers of the film, those too young even for the 1990s revival and 2001 Director's Cut, encountered the film not through any film-related means but, instead, through viral videos:

> My only knowledge of the film came from a review from *Cinemassacre*'s James Rolfe, as well as some of the various 'jump scare' pranks on the internet which would use Reagan McNeil's face as the method of frightening unsuspecting viewers. I thought that watching the film and appreciating it as a piece of cinema would ease my comfort with my fear of the character. (Participant #356, survey, UK.)

This participant's fear of the film had less to do with its reputation and was more linked to this decontextualised frightening imagery. Many of the most extreme and phobic responses to *The Exorcist* were initially the most fragmentary. Acts of parental regulation which forced children into fragmentary viewings had the potential to greatly affect the experience in this way, leading to, for some, a long battle to overcome its effects.

Self-censorship

The necessity to explore self-censorship is evident from participants' recollections which include accounts of hiding one's eyes, stopping or fast-forwarding a VHS when scared, and, of course, the oft-repeated stories of people fleeing the cinema. Many participants watched *The Exorcist* in their home, as children, before they felt truly ready to do so and made preparations to watch the film which were designed to help lessen its anticipated impact. Buckingham found 'children learn to regulate their own emotional responses' (1996: 254). Sarah Smith, too, talks of how children can effectively "ban" or "cut" a film for themselves, either by not attending the cinema or by hiding their eyes (2005: 106). We can add to Smith's list of self-censorship activities found in this study. These include activities which occur in the home, which was by necessity not a part of Smith's study of 1930s cinema-going, such as adjusting one's environment and manipulating the film itself through fast-forwarding, changing the television channel, or simply turning the television off all together.

Some participants discussed how they had developed an almost irrational fear of the film, objectified in their minds as a force unto itself, based on talk surrounding it and, especially, based on elements of the film which had been separated out for marketing purposes. This included clips on game shows (as with participant #606), the cover of William Peter Blatty's source novel, Mike Oldfield's music, stills and illustrations in magazines, and the poster image of Father Merrin in the fog. Promotional materials such as these, including the *Fear of God* documentary, served an important role, as "prefigurative materials" (Barker, 2004), in preparing participants for their experiences with *The Exorcist* and allowing them to pre-judge the film as something of which to be afraid. Sometimes, however, particularly for younger children, these materials were so powerful as to create a near-phobic response to the film before a person had even seen it. This was as true of the 1980s as it was for the 1990s. Marco (interview, UK) discussed a fear of the novel's cover and his experience with a 1974 issue of *Famous Monsters of Filmland* he encountered in the lead up to his watching the film years later, which took several attempts on VHS. His experience is typical of those participants who exhibited near-

phobic behaviour before seeing the film which led to self-censorship in their first attempts to view *The Exorcist*:

> Marco: I was very much aware of the book, seeing the book in every single shop, it seemed. And the absolutely stunning cover, which frankly scared the shit out of me. I remember as a kid going into shops, looking at the other books, and picking them up and putting them over the cover of the *Exorcist* book, so that I could read the others […] One other thing. In one horror magazine my brother had – I'm still trying to hunt down to this day, it might have been H*ouse of Hammer* or something like that – there was some pictures from *The Exorcist* in, the first I'd seen actually of Regan's face, which just did me a terrible mischief. Just terrified me.
>
> Martin: (Laughs.) Yeah.
>
> Marco: I tell you, my brother took it to our primary school, prompting a rather prim girl to refer to him as the "son of Satan", which of course was about as cool a thing as you could possibly be. So, basically, I was kind of drip-fed bits of imagery from it. I think there was one other Hamlin sort of book of horror films. And I think there was the picture, the shot when you get, the outline of Pazuzu's statue and Regan's kind of kneeling on the bed.
>
> Martin: Oh, when she's reaching up?
>
> Marco: Yeah. So, of course that just thoroughly messed with my head. I mean– What an image […] So, these sorts of images were incredibly, extraordinarily potent for me. But, still, of course, I hadn't read the book. I certainly hadn't seen the film. (Marco, interview, UK.)

Marco's fear led him to take actions to censor, for himself, images of the film and the book. It led to the film being unbearable, almost, and contributed to his needing several sittings to get through the film in its entirety.

The motives behind then-young participants watching the film despite not feeling ready, where they had a choice and were not simply forced to watch the film by another, were straight-forward. There were those who felt they needed to master a fear of the film that had already developed and there were those who wanted to achieve bragging rights at school. Jeff (interview, USA) was fascinated by *The Exorcist* because of shared interest in horror with his brother and because of his

own keen interest in special make-up and animation effects, which he had experimented with himself on Super 8. He had read a great deal about the film and was about as prepared as one could be to watch it. Yet, even despite knowing how the effects were done, thanks to articles in *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, he said, 'Honestly, I was an anxious mess walking into the theatre'. Participant #356 (survey, UK) had developed a fear of *The Exorcist* through viral prank videos featuring Linda Blair's face and watched to tame that fear: 'I was on my own in the room. It had to be daylight and the screen had to be small.' Paul (interview, UK) and many others first heard about the film in school. These rumblings about the film's power set it apart, even for seasoned horror fans, as needing to be subdued somehow.

Each of the motives for watching the film despite strong reservations about its power – to overcome a fear of it, for bragging rights – were strong enough to allow children – and it was almost exclusively children who self-censored – to adjust their viewing strategies to overcome the risk. The most effective and obvious form of self-censorship, one not covered by data here, occurs where there existed no motive strong enough to overcome that fear: the strategy of never watching *The Exorcist*. Buckingham (1996: 307) states that children are good at the partial or total avoidance of materials they feel may upset them. While not covered in this thesis, a great many people will have refused to engage with the film and this is itself an integral part of the overall picture of self-censorship.

There were popular strategies in participants' accounts of self-censorship, and the vast majority of these experiences occurred in the 1980s and 1990s with *The Exorcist* on VHS. The general obedience of British participants to the "18" certificate meant few British children were seeing *The Exorcist* in the cinema; *The Exorcist* was to be battled at home. This was largely the case in other countries, with the USA as a notable exception due to its "R" rating. The malleability of the home as a viewing environment is a key factor which differentiates it from the cinema experience. The cinema, with its fixed projection times, uniformity of darkness and social norms which prohibit the use of major distractions from the film, provided little place to hide for its audiences. Hence, in the cinema, there are tales of audience members leaving the auditorium. Jeff (survey, USA) readied himself to do just that:

> We saw it at the Town and Country six, and I remained seated until "Help Me" appeared across Regan's stomach. Then I bailed to the back of the theatre so I could leave if I had to... I stayed and I was scarred for life and don't regret a thing. (Jeff, participant #48, survey, USA.)

Viewers at home had to take no such precautions as VHS and television provides the opportunity to stop the film while remaining in the space.

Setting up distractions or manipulating the viewing environment to dampen the expected effect of the film are a form of personal, individual censorship. The two most common strategies are to manipulate either the film or the environment. Attempts to subdue *The Exorcist* when alone included watching the film on a bright day with the curtains open. When speaking with Marco, for whom it took several attempts to watch the film all the way through on VHS in the 1980s, he described the difference between how he watched *The Exorcist* and his ideal horror film viewing habits at the time:

> Martin: When you watched it for the first time at home and that kind of thing, did you just… did you do any preparations and that kind of thing? Did you have to watch it in the day time or…?
>
> Marco: Oh, yeah, yeah. Daytime. Definitely.
>
> Martin: (Laughs.)
>
> Marco: First attempts were daytime.
>
> Martin: Is that how you would normally watch horror films?
>
> Marco: Certainly not, no. That's not the ideal. Of course, the ideal for watching a horror film is with the lights low, if possible. So, yeah. And that's the thing, isn't it? It's interesting. Because I'd watched other horror films with my little mates. I'm trying think, like films that scared us but that were fun scary, like *The Howling*. The first time we saw that, lights down low, group of fourteen-year-olds. Brilliant. Really excellent, fun, popcorn, drive-in, all of that. But none of that really sort of fits with *The Exorcist*. (Marco, interview, UK.)

The description of *The Howling* as 'fun, popcorn, drive-in, all of that' sets it apart from *The Exorcist* and establishes the kinds of experiences associated with group

viewings for Marco. Importantly, it establishes Marco's viewing strategies for *The Exorcist*, one which was common for children at home. Where the manipulation of the viewing environment was not enough for Marco, he manipulated the film: he turned it off.

Natalie similarly described how she watched *The Exorcist* in the daytime, but she also created a deliberate distraction. These actions were out of the ordinary for Natalie on both counts:

> Martin: You said you made sure to watch *The Exorcist* in the daytime and played a game at the same time? Had you done that before? Was that standard practice? Did you have to watch and make sure your sister wasn't upset? Did you watch movies together a lot?
>
> Natalie: That wasn't something we usually did. Although I would often have films playing in the background while I did something else, that wasn't usually during a horror movie that I had been wanting to see. I think we played the game because of the notoriety *The Exorcist* had what with being banned for so long. It felt like I was about to watch something dangerous and that it must be much scarier than anything available to view legally. (Natalie, interview, UK.)

The status of *The Exorcist* as "illegal" added a great deal to Natalie's sense of the film as dangerous. Downgrading the film, treating it as one of many films which she often ran in the background, helped to soothe Natalie's fears.

The notoriety of the film led to Marco, Natalie and others deliberately downgrading their experience with the film in a way that would normally be unthinkable. Participant #356 described how 'it had to be daylight and the screen had to be small', similarly downgrading the experience. Ensuring the television screen was small, in effect, meant the character of Regan, who had already been built up as an object of fear through prefigurative materials online, could not jump out at the participant to quite the same degree. This has the same effect as the daylight for Marco and Natalie. The experience is deliberately worsened, the technology lesser, the atmosphere less conducive to being scared, so that the film can be bearable.

The way participant #356 talks about the film, as a film to conquer rather than as an entertainment, lends itself well to this idea of the film as a test, which is a viewing

strategy related to the reputation of the film itself, which for participant #365 was in the third phase of its reputation: the classic, "the scariest movie of all time". This attitude was prevalent in British accounts, evidently shaped by how the reputation of the film was built on shared stories from parents who saw it as teenagers and could not share the VHS in the 1980s and 1990s due to its ban.

Mitigation

In a number of cases, the power of the film could not be supressed during the viewing. It was not uncommon for children to ask for parents or other relatives to be present to help mitigate the impact of *The Exorcist* during that first viewing at home. This was a strategy which allowed a young child to watch *The Exorcist* with a feeling of safety, a strategy Buckingham also found in his study of children and their media habits (1996: 307). These guardians could warn the child and hide them when required. The same strategy is a mainstay of children's film-viewing habits, having been noted in Smith's study of 1930s cinema-going, quoting one participant thus: 'I got a dreadful shock and looked away from the picture instantly. Mother told me she would tell me when to look again . . . From then on, if it looked as though there would be anything frightening in the film I would tell whoever was with me to "tell me when to look again"' (Smith, 2005: 134). If the child became too distressed, this was the cue for the parent to turn the film off: 'Watched it with my mom, who made me stop watching it because I was getting freaked out' (participant #299, survey, USA). A further example of this comes from a participant whose mother attempted to mitigate the film's power by undermining the child's sense of it being real:

> I was little and all I remember was hearing that it was a bad, bad movie. My mother told us to not be scared, that they used peas to create the vomit, and that it was all fake, there were people behind cameras. She showed us pictures of Linda Blair in a magazine too. I don't think that we were scared. We all watched horror movies all the time and my parents were very cynical about the practical effects, plot holes and implausibility of the events in movies. My mom helped by telling us things like "When have you seen on the news of someone killed by a demon or a ghost?" (#496, survey USA.)

Some children did this for themselves without parental help, reading as much as possible about the film's production before seeing it to undermine its sense of reality. For parents, monitoring their child's responses as the film progresses and providing an understanding of the film's production processes and unreality is an effective strategy for managing potential distress. This tallies with Buckingham's findings on children's coping strategies for disturbing media, their 'challenging the text's reality status' (1996: 307). The desire for parental supervision on the child's part in such instances is an effective form of self-censorship.

The use of guardians to assist happened as much at the cinema in America as it did in the home, thanks to the low age-rating the film was given by the MPAA. For example, participant #515's parents had to manage her physically after an error of judgement:

> I was three – YES, THREE – when my parents took me to see
> *The Exorcist* in the theatre. I remember it being super loud
> and terrifying. My parents sat me between them and held
> my eyes and ears while i was screaming my head off. (Nope,
> I don't know what they were thinking!) (Participant #515,
> survey, USA.)

When asked how his mother responded to the film, Jim described how he was aware of being protected by her at the cinema, in a much less physical way than was participant #515:

> My mother's reaction would be hard for me to gauge. The
> first time we went I know she spent an inordinate amount of
> time making sure I was doing okay, so I think she probably
> watched me more than she did the movie. The second time
> around was a true chance for her to enjoy the movie, but I
> think she was still seeing it more through my eyes, again
> making sure I wasn't freaking out. (Jim, interview, USA.)

Children took comfort from the fact that their parents or other relatives had watched the film before and could be trusted to tell them to look away when it was about to become too frightening. However, for one participant, this was complicated by the inclusion of previously unseen footage in the version he watched with his aunt, who was not expecting new scenes:

Eventually I had got my older aunt to watch it with me, her being much older and having seen the original film prior gave me the much-needed reassurance as a child. I'll always remember this very first viewing of the film, for it would give me the most terrifying moment of any horror movie to this very day. See, my aunt having seen the film before, she would warn me in advance of any scene that might be too much for me to take in, during which I'd then go about covering my eyes if I had to. I'd come to trust this entirely. Unfortunately, this was the version that had the never-before-seen footage. As I'm watching the film, it's obvious that I can sort of relax a bit, for you could feel that the film's constant tension has let up almost entirely here. It's right then that we're shown the "Spider Walk" scene. This scene was absolutely horrific to witness at the time. It's so unexpected and abrupt that it's disorienting. It was as if I couldn't properly comprehend exactly what I was witnessing at that exact moment. This was practically traumatizing for me as a child – scared at night-time type of stuff. Of course, It had shocked my aunt as well, but in a way far less severe. It wouldn't be until a decade later, now as an adult, that could force myself to sit through and watch the scene again. (Participant #292, survey, USA.)

Despite the misjudgement here, leading to participant #292's inevitable nightmares, the strategy was a sound one, and a popular one. Usually, participants engaging in other kinds of precautions were watching the film in secret, against the expressed wishes of their parents, so the protection offered by other participants' parents during supervised viewings was not an option.

An interesting example of the desire of mitigation comes from Gill (interview, UK) who was interviewed separately from her daughter, Caitlyn (interview, UK). Caitlyn, as a child, had her viewing regulated by her mother. As an adult, Caitlyn has a fascination for horror and is an authority on the genre. This occurred alongside what Gill perceives as an increase in graphic violence in the genre. With this being the case, the parent-child roles concerning the regulation of horror films have switched. Caitlyn now routinely warns her mother away from films she feels may be unsuitable for her. This demonstrates that such relationships need not be parent-to-child and that the boundaries and tastes of individuals are the important factor, rather than the relationship status always defining film regulation practices.

Conclusion: a personal model of censorship

This model outlines for the first time how censorship works from the bottom up, for audiences. Annette Kuhn stated in 1988 that 'there is more to censorship than cuts, bans and boards of censors' (1988: 2). Well, there is more to censorship than industry, artistry and the law; censorship in all its forms affects audiences and audiences are themselves agents of censorship. Strategies of parental regulation and self-censorship are generalisable in their motives and impact upon experiences but cannot define the entire experience; there are too many variables. Buckingham states, 'In the end, it was argued [by parents], using television successfully came down to a matter of "knowing your children": it was not something that could easily be reduced to a set of abstract rules and prescriptions' (1996: 262). However, it is worth investigating what effects parental regulation and self-censorship may have upon a film experience, especially for children, and how they come about. As censorship greatly affects the experiences of child audiences more than adult audiences, this model revolves, at its core, around the former.

An instance of censorship on the personal level includes two actors, the person or institution doing the censoring and the person who is denied the text, the *regulator* and the *regulatee*. We can initially divide this model into these two categories to better understand the actions of each and what they mean for themselves and for one another.

A regulator may be direct, potential, or indirect:

> *Direct regulators* are those people who enforce regulation, such as parents, siblings, teachers, and workers at video stores and cinemas. Parents have, by some way, the most power and desire to regulate.

> *Potential regulators* include anyone in the above list who is circumvented by a regulatee's actions. Children watching *The Exorcist* in secret, knowing their parents would not allow it, were acting within the domain of the potential regulator. Potential regulators have the potential to enforce regulation, given the chance.

> *Indirect regulators* have no direct contact with the regulatee and the regulatee's actions have no bearing on these

individuals or groups. The BBFC and MPAA are indirect regulators. Their certifications, in data here, were taken as a guide for parents, suggesting they may need to regulate it for their children. Official censors have only as much power as they are given by direct regulators, but their work is an important first step in the process in informing parents of potential problem scenes in a film. Where audiences wish to circumvent official censorship, they do so with little trouble. However, for those who do not actively seek to circumvent censorship, such as those who watch a censor-edited film in the cinema, these indirect regulators can still have an effect. Other indirect regulators include organisations or people who have either expressed disapproval of the film or who the regulatee imagines would disapprove of their act of watching the film. They largely have no impact upon everyday film experiences, but allowances must be made for exceptional circumstances when indirect regulators influence distribution, as with the video nasties.

The directness of the relationship between the regulator and the regulatee determines the extent to which the act of regulation effects meaning. Regulation from family members, friends, schoolteachers, and others central to one's life means more to audiences than does regulation from the MPAA, the BBFC, the government, and other national organisations. It is important to note that one does not have to be emotionally close to one's parents or family members to have a direct relationship; directness is determined through how much *in-person* contact the person has had with their regulator.

The more direct the relationship between the regulator and the regulatee, the more action needs to be taken for the latter to access the film. The MPAA or BBFC are easily circumvented. Parental regulation is trickier. There is a possibility of discovery, disapproval and punishment that does not come from disobeying a national censor board. The more actions required to circumvent the regulation, the more meaningful the impact upon interpretation. As a child living with one's parents, the regulatee must go to greater lengths to watch *The Exorcist* than must an adult watching a banned film in their own home. Actions taken, such as recording the film in secret off television or watching with the sound low so as to not be heard, add to the film experience for child audiences. The adult viewer may only have the spectre of their parents' potential disapproval hanging over their

head, which affects the experience in a less meaningful way. The amount of initial resistance from the regulator is what prompts action and creates meaning for the regulatee.

The "creation of meaning", in these hypothetical situations, refers to added interpretations of *the film itself* and *the act of watching the film* that would otherwise not exist. For example, a child threatened with punishment for watching *The Exorcist* has an added element of danger, adding meanings related to risk and rebellion. Watching *The Exorcist* against the wishes of one's parents, for the regulatee, says something about one's character. It adds a meaning of, "I am a person who goes against my parents' wishes." The adult watching *The Exorcist* in their own home against their parents' preferences may have the added meaning of "I like different films to my parents" or, more broadly, "I am not like my parents."

Meanings created in the act of watching the film and in the film itself and whether one enjoys or appreciates it are linked to notions of one's identity. It is not always to the same extent, but 'all taste is first and foremost distaste', as Bourdieu states (1984: 56). This is true of *The Exorcist* and the distaste can relate to a great many things. One may be expressing distaste of one's family, of popular culture, of other films, or of anything one can think of when expressing one's pleasure at watching *The Exorcist*. However, it does not have to be distaste per se. It does not have to be "I dislike this film/person", but can simply be the result of a desire to be *different from* someone.

Watching a censored film has implications for one's identity, particularly if the reason one watches it in the first place is *because* it is censored. Participants in this study position themselves – they position their identities – by locating themselves *in opposition to* or *in accordance with* other identities, e.g., "I am *not* like my parents", "I *am* like my brother", or the popular "I am *not* like religious people." There is an element of performance in participant accounts in this way, where there is an attraction towards certain people and a revulsion from others as they naturally place themselves, both for their own benefit and for the benefit of myself as the researcher and near-stranger. It is important to remember that interactions between myself and interviewers are, in essence, *introductions*, and participants'

recollections are to be treated as such. Participants are presenting a version of themselves for the purposes of the interview. This is not to say this is a false version; it is merely the most relevant version for the situation.

Where parental or other direct relationships do not produce resistance, it is sometimes in the interest of the regulatee to construct resistance using a hypothetical group. This resistance is based in experiences with pre-figurative materials such as newspaper coverage. The condemnation of *The Exorcist* by the religious groups serves well here as fuel for the fire. Resistance does not require such materials, of course, as it can be based in lived experience or prejudice. Negative experiences growing up in a religious household, irreligious beliefs, or unfavourable views of organised religion underpin some participants' statements in which they use imagined religious others to provide resistance.

The Exorcist, and any controversial film, produces this desire to create a "figure of the censor" in this way. Martin Barker describes how censorship is justified by censors and commentators by the creation of a hypothetical worst-case-scenario spectator who may be influenced or damaged by violent media, a "figure of the audience" (2016b: 123). This study finds that the reverse is also true: audiences of controversial media create a "figure of the censor", a hypothetical person or group who disapproves of the film and their viewing of it. This turns an everyday film experience into raw materials for identity construction or maintenance, fostering a feeling of rebellion against imagined oppressors, or it can do the same simply to add to the enjoyment. Whereas "figures of the audience" are based on their presumed responses to violent media, "figures of the censors" are based on hypothetical disapproval of the person's act of viewing (and enjoying) the film in question.

An instance of censorship provides a platform for those who are denied access to construct for themselves certain identities. In childhood, instances of censorship or direct parental regulation provide a space for children to set themselves apart from their parents and develop identities of their own. The fact that the average age of participants watching *The Exorcist* for the first time through all time periods and in all countries settles at thirteen is no coincidence; this is the age at which children

begin to want to determine themselves as separate from their parents. In Erik Erikson's (1965) psychosocial model of identity development, it is between twelve and eighteen when a child begins to seek independence from parents and form an identity of their own. Resisting acts of parental regulation fuels this journey, as does railing against imagined others to better construct one's own identity.

Circumvention of indirect regulation from imagined others is a poor substitute for circumventing regulation from more direct relationships, however. Where a regulatee can position him or herself as going against the wishes of a parent or other more personal authority figure, this takes precedence in the telling over the circumvention of any laws. Marco (interview, UK) talks of how his brother took horror magazines to school, for example, and a girl called him "the son of Satan". This is worth more to Marco in identity construction – he is demonstrating an affinity with his brother and therefore any identity work for his brother reflects back on himself – than is simply watching a film the BBFC had banned, because it elicited a direct response. Circumventing censorship functions as a way of constructing or maintaining facets of an identity in this way. Circumventing censorship when assisted by another person can produce an ally and build relationships. This may explain moments when one parent goes against the wishes of the other to enable the child to watch the censored text.

Participants here, through stories of being regulated in their childhood viewing, construct a version of themselves and a version of their past that is pleasurable and often presented as a formative experience. It is either formative through its extreme nature, as in stories of self-censorship, or through its being part of an ongoing routine, such as parental regulation of viewing, that presents an image of their childhood.

The act of parental regulation is also meaningful for the regulator in much the same way as it is for the regulatee. This is particularly true of cases where participants were stopped from seeing *The Exorcist* due to a parent's bad experience with the film in their own childhood. Kate Egan (2020) discusses how, for Monty Python fans, sharing their love of comedy with their children allows them to discuss their past, to situate themselves when the shows and films were originally produced.

There is more on this in the next chapter which concerns intergenerational gifting of *The Exorcist*, but stopping their children from seeing *The Exorcist* allowed some regulators to discuss their own childhood experiences, to recalibrate themselves for their children as someone who was once a child themselves.

Protectionist agendas are the defining driving factor behind the censorship of *The Exorcist*, and these, too, perform a function for identity construction and maintenance. Censoring, as well as circumventing censorship, builds relationships. These can be relationships based on power, as when regulation occurs, or based on protection, as when parents assist a child with self-censorship by supervising a film experience. Whether confrontational in nature or supportive, acts of regulation and censorship speak of the identity of the regulator and regulatee.

It is important to note that parent-child confrontations were not as confrontational as that word choice would have one believe. Parents were indeed angry at their children for going against their expressed wishes and watching *The Exorcist* anyway, but this was also sometimes met with indifference by the parent. In the case of participant #587, he went to great lengths to record the film off television onto VHS and spent an entire fortnight watching it in small chunks after bedtime with headphones, watching as much as he could get away with at a time without being caught. Triumphant, he eventually told his father he had seen the film and the convoluted means by which he had been able to achieve this end. His father offered no punishment, despite having banned the film from their home: 'my dad didn't even want me to talk about *The Exorcist*, let al.one see it […] He just said he didn't want it in the house and that was it' (participant #587, survey, UK). He was simply perplexed by the great lengths to which his son had gone to watch the film.

Parents do not always take censorship entirely seriously. They do not take it as seriously, for the most part, as children take the business of subverting it. What could appear as a draconian act of banishing a film from the house is part and parcel of everyday parental duties which include a hundred other things. Different parents have different takes, of course, different levels of investment in regulating their children's viewing habits. For many, it is important insofar as they feel it is their duty to protect children from nightmares and other disturbances of the

imagination. Some, of course, have a strong reaction to their children's film-viewing being perceived as inappropriate. For example, Gill (interview, UK) stated she was annoyed her babysitter had shown her daughter, Caitlyn, a portion of *The Exorcist.* However, save a stern reprimand here and there, the consequences for children breaking these rules were mild. The anger was never long-lasting and is recalled now with resignation that it made little difference in the end, anyway. Rules which at the time seemed important, with the passage of time and with no disasters befouling those who broke said rules, are a source of amusement in the present day, or at least a source of exasperation, provoking the thought, "Why did I bother?". For regulatees who were caught red-handed watching the film and were punished, there is a similar feeling of amusement in the retelling. The most important part of the story, when told by participants who overcome such parental regulation, is the inventiveness with which they skirted the rules, or their own fiercely independent attitude towards such material at a young age. Marco (UK, interview), for example, stated with some amusement that his parents had resigned themselves to the fact that they had raised a "little horror geek". Parental regulation is not always defined by tension and dominance. It is not always unwanted. Acts of self-censorship are remembered fondly as the actions of a child.

There is a drive towards maintaining a positive self-image in the recollection of these often-treasured memories, and it is the self-image which predominates rather than discussion of the film itself. For many participants in this study, *The Exorcist* was an important milestone in their development as film fans and often as independent people apart from their parents. It was sometimes used to describe a more innocent child, too, in cases where parents helped them to negotiate the troublesome terrain of the film's horrors.

Parent-child relationships cannot be described to their full extent by audience research, but we can learn about the types of actions and the possible outcomes through examining what is remembered and how it is discussed. Descriptions of interactions relating to *The Exorcist* cannot be presented as gateways into understanding the relationship between a particular parent and a particular child. Systems of approval and strategies and outcomes of regulation produce a vast array

of meanings because they are so closely entwined with the meanings of the relationships of the people involved, and that is the key to the personal model of censorship presented in this chapter: the word "personal". The model presented here of how participants discuss censorship is not done so in the spirit of psychoanalysing the group of people who generously donated their time to this study. These are universal drives – the drive to tell stories about oneself that are pleasing either as nostalgic snapshots or because of the contrast with how one is now – and are by no means restricted to the subject at hand.

One must tread carefully with the linking of censorship and taste. Censorship is not always a form of anti-fandom, unless one is to employ even broader, somewhat ridiculous definitions of anti-fandom such as "They are anti-fans of their children being scared." Taste and anti-fandom can be a factor - it happens in a few instances here – but one cannot lay the blame of censorious urges at the feet of anti-fandom (which I have done myself in a previous study of *A Serbian Film* (Smith, 2018 and 2019)). To simplify motivations for censorship in this way is to circumvent any possibility of discussing the possibility of real upset that horrific and violent imagery can have on children.

The spectre of "harm" and the "effects tradition" defines audience studies of genre films and is the agreed upon starting point for many research projects into audiences of horror. The benefit of this grounded audience study is that the concerns come from the participants and as such the research is not designed and its agenda set, as so many are, by decades-old folk theory. The *Daily Mail* and the censorious British press have set the terrain of debate in academic studies of horror audiences so effectively that there is a reluctance to discuss the possibility of children being disturbed by horrific images. One does not have to claim, as does the *Daily Mail*, that children will be damaged to the point of going out and becoming murderers to be able to discuss trauma. A benefit of the diachronic aspect of this study is that such traumatic experiences are contextualised by participants within the scope of their entire lives. No diachronic studies of the reception of controversial have been conducted to date, so it is for the first time here there is a demonstration of how talk of such experiences for audiences should be tempered

by such contextualisations. The majority of participants who were badly frightened by *The Exorcist* as children found ways to cope, frequently by simply re-visiting the film as adults.

Writing here, I am drawn to the word "trauma", for its explanatory power and my own tendency towards the dramatic. However, the word trauma is undoubtedly too much. While these moments have upset children and are at the extreme end of responses to this study, to pretend "trauma" from a film can be as tough on a child as can things which can be described as "trauma" in other academic disciplines – such as abuse or the loss of a loved one – is to go above the participants' heads and make claims for the seriousness of film-viewing situations participants themselves would surely reject. Part of the grounding of a grounded audience study should be – as I have tried to do here – to always remind oneself that even the most important aspect of one's study is but a fraction of a participants' life. Audience studies, as a field, would do well in a project of discarding grand theories and moral panics if its practitioners would bear in mind the complexity of the lives of their participants. *The Exorcist* does not define the relationships between parent and child; no film can. Instead, the experience of watching *The Exorcist* is defined by these relationships.

Chapter 6

To the Devil a daughter

Friends and family

Media use is not a placeless activity, states Shaun Moores in a common criticism of audience studies (2016: 132), and studies of cinema-going seeking to address this criticism still miss so much of everyday film experiences. Chapter 4 of this thesis theorised the importance of the direct environment and direct relationships in cinema-going, but in studies concerning both film and television it would seem that films on television are just something that happens between shows; films are studied in the cinema and shows are studied on television. Barbara Klinger (2006) has identified this shortfall and studied how the nature of film texts changes in the home, but this is still an enormous blind spot for audience studies and film history. Here, 84.78% of survey respondents watched *The Exorcist* for the first time on television. Memories of Fathers Karras and Merrin and their battle for Regan's soul are framed, for the majority, as experiences in living rooms and bedrooms, not in the cinema, yet the memory is very much one of a *film* and not of *television*. This chapter presents analysis of *The Exorcist* in the home, looking at more positive parent-child dynamics and *Exorcist* experiences as part of a social routine.

In talk of the cinema, many participants are very descriptive, establishing the scene of a much-loved place their youth, but such details are absent from descriptions of home viewing. However, memories of the home in survey responses and interviews still relate to all three of Vanessa May's (2016:13) types of nostalgia: nostalgia for a

place, for an era, and for feeling included in social and cultural trends. Unlike in cinema memories, nostalgia for place is here nostalgia for the social dynamics of a place. Moores, in studying media use in the home, found that conceptualisations of place need to go beyond just location: a place 'is something that is constituted through habitual practice' (2016: 136). Participants' nostalgia is for their parents, siblings, and childhood friends, and particularly the habitual practices of film-watching they enjoyed together.

Nowhere is the family more important when watching a film than when watching at home as a child. Due to the age of *The Exorcist*, with adult audiences from the 1970s out of reach, this research became, somewhat accidentally but in no small part, a study of childhood viewing. Watching *The Exorcist* at home as a child is a story of familial censorship and stern warnings, as discussed in the previous chapter, but it is also a story of parents sharing their favourite films with their children, of too many friends huddled around a television during sleepovers, and of sons and daughters unnerving their parents by doing "the voice". When discussing experiences with *The Exorcist* at home, even more so than in the cinema, they are stories of family rituals where the film is woven intrinsically into part of their lives. To compliment the previous theories of the cinema environment and parental regulation, this chapter offers a theory of the dynamics of the home, encapsulating inter-generational sharing of the film and social viewing environments.

"The scariest movie of all time"

This chapter does not line up exactly with the "classic" phase of *The Exorcist*'s reputation from the 1990s onwards. As in Chapter 5, there is some crossover between the 1980s and 1990s. However, whereas the previous chapter mostly concerned phase two, the "video nasty" phase, this chapter leans more towards a time when *The Exorcist* was a widely available, culturally familiar entity with a historical quality. It lost some of its association with the video nasties. This association never goes away fully, since its censorship has become part of the film's folklore and identity. There is, however, much more of a sense of the film's status as an elder statesman of the horror genre.

Part of the historical quality the film engenders in this phase comes from how it is talked about by family members who saw the film upon release. *The Exorcist* is an artefact of participants' relatives' childhoods, rather than a direct product of their own:

> It was a film I had heard so much about from my parents and older brother and sister that I had huge expectations […] My mother had told me numerous stories about when she had first seen it on its original release in London and how scary she had found it as well as all the rumours of people fainting and fleeing the cinema. My older brother also told me stories growing up about the head spinning scene and the sick. (Participant #20, survey, UK.)

Stories shared by relatives are incredibly common, with relatives telling children of a film that 'had scared my mother so much she thought the devil was coming one night to take my oldest brother' (participant #424, survey, UK), and that was 'the scariest thing [my dad had] ever seen' (participant #361, survey, USA). Participant #582 (survey, UK) states: 'I grew up always hearing about *The Exorcist* from my parents as their reason as to why they wouldn't watch another horror film.'

Gifting

A quarter of all survey respondents were told about or introduced to *The Exorcist* by someone in their family. The process of a parent sitting down with their child to share a film is a feature of data generated by Barker et al. (2016) for *Alien.* This is a deliberate act with a distinction drawn between a film being just *put on*, where a child has little choice, and the act of purposefully *showing* someone the film to share the experience, which strengthens familial bonds by introducing new shared interests (Barker et al., 2016: 44). This kind of sharing, which Barker et al. (2016) term "gifting", also occurs for *The Exorcist*:

> My mother told me about the film, and that she'd been banned from watching it as a kid, since they were Catholics. I loved horror films, so she decided to introduce me to her favourites from when she grew up. I was probably eleven or so, just starting to feel myself as a person away from her, so she wanted to bridge that gap. We went to Family Video,

> rented a copy, and had a movie night in the basement
> together. (Participant #25, survey, USA.)

Information given about the film establishes the context in which the film should be watched, so it is the experience as well as the film that is being gifted. In most cases, gifting was accompanied with the above establishing of the gifter's experience with it in their younger years. The act of gifting, in this way, is itself a memory text (after Kuhn, 2002); it is an act of remembering performed for the giftee.

Work on the intergenerational gifting of Monty Python shows and films by Kate Egan (2020) describes how fathers pass on their love of comedy to their daughters, and in doing so Egan conceptualises gifting as identity work by the person doing the gifting. Egan states, 'introducing Monty Python to their daughters seems to allow fathers to reveal more about themselves as a socially and culturally situated person (rather than as just these respondents' fathers) thus providing honest insight into their preferences, values and interpretations in order to strengthen the father-daughter bond' (2020). In participant #25's account above, her mother does just that in contextualising her identity as a mother with her childhood as a Catholic, her own mother's banning of the film for her, and by introducing her favourite films. The same can be seen in the following accounts:

> I grew up loving horror films, and they never seemed to negatively affect me afterwards, so my parents allowed me to watch them from early on. I remember my parents both saying that *The Exorcist* was one of the scariest films they had ever watched. My mom told me her friend got so scared at one point, she threw her popcorn in the air and it spilled all over the movie theatre when they first saw it. This story made me want to see it. So, I was about twelve years old and watched it at home with my mom. (Participant #72, survey, USA.)

> Watched as a child – maybe aged eleven or twelve - as my mother had a habit of allowing me to watch every unsuitable horror film that was screened on TV (such as the Hammer double bills, recorded and played back the next day). She thought *The Exorcist* was brilliant – she'd seen it at the cinema when it came out – and I watched it on our tiny TV screen in the middle of the living room, reminded by my

> mother not to tell my father she'd let me watch it!
> (Participant #77, survey, UK.)

> Throughout my childhood I'd heard about it from my mum
> who was a horror fan. She'd seen it on its original release in
> '73 when she was fifteen. The lurid tales she told of people's
> reactions and how terrified her and her friends were
> fascinated me. (Participant #106, survey, UK.)

Barker et al. (2016: 54) emphasise the taste-making role of the gifter specifically, stating that 'having it recommended by an established familial tastemaker is enough to make *Alien* a desired text […] [and so] as a result, when *Alien* was recommended, the recommendation was taken seriously'. What is clear from data in this study is that the giftees are active in their pursuit of *The Exorcist*. Rather than having the film shown to them, simply handed down by someone with more knowledge of films, the film often becomes a desired text due to stories of how it affected one's parents. As discussed in the previous chapter concerning parental regulation, gifting is often accompanied by a system of approval. The process is not a linear parent-to-child one based on a parent's independent decision to show the child a film. This happens, but gifting may also be requested by a child, who is then shown the film with the context offered by the parent. The child's role in the gifting process is not an insignificant one.

Egan (2020) describes a situation where it is predominantly fathers sharing a love of Monty Python with their daughters and Barker et al. (2016: 54) discuss how it was the fathers largely sharing *Alien* with their children, but this is not the case for *The Exorcist*. As you can see from quoted accounts of gifting above, *The Exorcist* differs insomuch as each account is of a mother sharing her love of *The Exorcist.* The quantitative findings of this study are to be taken with a pinch of salt as data here is by no means representative of all who saw *The Exorcist*, but analysis reveals this trend which contradicts the findings for Monty Python and *Alien*. As discussed in the previous chapter, it was predominantly the mothers who were regulating children's viewing, in line with Buckingham's findings that mothers often took up such responsibilities (1993: 18). This is true of *The Exorcist*, but, surprisingly, this trend reveals that the reverse may also be true. Of ninety-four instances of gifting, sixty accounts were of mothers. There was also a trend concerning who was being

gifted the film. Of those ninety-four instances, there was evidence of mothers sharing the film more with their daughters. There were thirty instances of mothers sharing with daughters and thirty instances of mothers sharing with sons; because more men than women responded to the survey (459 to 271), 6.53% of men were gifted the film by their mother while mothers shared the film with almost double the number of women, 11.07%. These are small numbers, admittedly, and may not have registered as noteworthy had they not contradicted the trends found by Barker et al. (2016) and Egan (2020).

The trend here of mothers sharing *The Exorcist* more and choosing to share it more often with daughters is fascinating given the nature and content of the film, being an horrific depiction of how a mother-daughter relationship is torn apart and then healed. Sarah Ralph, in a study of mother-daughter dynamics and shared film interests, noted that 'middle class mothers and daughters repeatedly demonstrated in their responses a shared interest in the performing arts that had been introduced and encouraged by the mother during the daughter's childhood' (2015: 93). Ralph found that mother-daughter talk about film stars 'performs an important function in mother-daughter relations and young women's development as an individualised female identity' (2015: 110). That mothers in this study were both more willing to forbid their children to watch *The Exorcist* and to share the film with them, particularly with their daughters, suggests there may be something about the film, perhaps its depiction of motherly fears or the breakdown of a mother-daughter relationship (via supernatural means), that singles it out as different from films such as *Alien*. This speaks to the necessity in historical audience studies to not exclude individual films from discussion and to avoid a complete focus on the social event of film-watching. Different films inspire different processes in different people.

Another pattern, perhaps a more easily explained one, is that British participants were more often told about the controversy and extreme audience reactions growing up than were their American counterparts, who were more often simply told of how the film gave their mother or father nightmares. Not only were first-hand accounts of people fainting, vomiting and running out exclusive to the UK, so were second-hand accounts of stories involving people's parents. This follows from

the discussion in Chapter 4 of how American participants, who were younger when they saw *The Exorcist*, remembered *surviving* the film in the 1970s, whereas British participants were *witnesses* to the spectacle of the event, due to their being older at the time and thus better able to process the horrific imagery. It follows that since this is how the film is remembered differently by American and British 1970s cinema-goers, those are the terms in which they have described the film to their children.

An important factor in the British experience is the lack of wide availability of the film from 1986 to 1999 due to the home video ban and there being no television broadcasts. All gifting of *The Exorcist* is done in the home. For thirteen years in the UK, there was quite often no film to gift. Many of the original cinema audience members of the first release of *The Exorcist* who had young children in the 1980s and 1990s would not have been able to pass on the film as an experience. While censorship was easily circumvented by many who knew where to look, such opportunities were not available to all. In the stead of an actual film to show their children, participants' parents shared with them their stories of seeing the film:

> My mother had told me numerous stories about when she had first seen it on its original release in London and how scary she had found it as well as all the rumours of people fainting and fleeing the cinema. (Participant #20, survey, UK.)

> My parents had seen it in the cinema on its release and had hyped it up to me as the scariest film ever. I can't remember who I watched it with but remember being a bit disappointed by it. To this day, my mother freaks out if any of us do "the voice", she really cries and runs out of the room. We all think it's hilarious, but I suppose she's been deeply traumatised by the film! (Participant #69, survey, UK.)

They were told not details of the film itself, but of people's reactions to it. Even when the film was not accessible, parents performed the same identity work as in instances of gifting the film. As Egan (2020) found for Monty Python, they situate themselves in the past, as people outside of their role as mother or father. That the same processes occur when there is no film to share suggests that it is a common

process of parental identity work that applies as well to other media and parent-child interactions. When the film became available, of course, older fans shared *The Exorcist* itself with their children.

Gifting is not limited to parent-child relationships and is not always intergenerational. Gifting occurs between parents and children, but it also goes from friend to friend, sibling to sibling, and even from child to parent:

> I watched it in the mid-nineties as a kid (I would have been seven or eight) with my sister. We had a VHS rental store down the street from us and rented horror movies all the time. My sister had already seen it and decided to share it with me one day, so we rented it. I knew it would be good, otherwise she wouldn't have watched it again, but I didn't know how good it was. (Participant #649, survey, USA.)

> I saw it alone, but I loved it so much that I watched it again with my parents. I lent it to my friends because I really wanted to know what they thought of it. (Participant #542, survey, UK.)

> The film is scary as a horror film, but I always feel like… I watched it with my mum. It was late at night, we'd all just watched, and I was like, "Oh, *The Exorcist* is on. We'll watch *The Exorcist*." My dad and my sister sort of ran out of the room, like, "I'm not watching that." And my mum, she'd had a few glasses of wine, she was like, "I'll watch it." And I tried to explain to my dad and sister what a lovely film it is. The first hour, or even a bit before that, the relationship between the mother and the daughter is so nice. And I think the film ends nicely as well. It's such a nice, lovely film. It's got horrible things in it. Horrible things happen, but I don't think it's like a disgustingly awful film. I think it has a lot of nice things about it and it's a really nice film to watch. (Robbie, focus group 1.)

Robbie's attempt to share what he felt was a "lovely" experience with his family shows that, when taken alongside participant #542 who sought discussion about the film and others who hoped to frighten their friends and family, there are many motivations for sharing. While there is the tie to identity work being done, by being the one sharing this particular film, there can be a selfless aspect to the act as well as a selfish one.

The act of sharing films is discussed by many participants with relation to their friends. Steve (interview, UK) and Holly C (interview, UK) both stated that entertaining a friend who has not seen *The Exorcist* is the main reason they would watch the film again, to show it to them. Even those not especially enamoured with the film will share it with friends for a particular atmosphere: 'It's more of a campy experience to share with friends' (participant #298, survey, New Zealand). Barker et al. (2016: 54) state, concerning inter-family gifting, that 'seeing *Alien* experienced by someone else, or having it recommended by an established familial tastemaker, is enough to make *Alien* a desired text', and that 'influence is held by trusted individuals who can act as guides in the kind of content that should be sought out and consumed'. These are both true of *The Exorcist* and they are true of more than familial relationships. Friends, too, wish to become the tastemakers of a particular friendship and enjoy watching someone else experience the film for the first time.

Sharing with friends is as commonplace in this data set as is sharing with family members, though the motives may vary to be less about identity work in terms of resituating oneself for the giftee (as mothers do in discussing their own childhood) and more about creating shared experiences that further cement bonds of friendship and establish the giftee as the "tastemaker" of the relationship. Relationships with friends, as with family (Ralph, 2015: 107), should not be considered in a vacuum, and neither should dynamics within these relationships. The gifting of films is but one of many processes that work to maintain and strengthen social dynamics.

Sleepovers

Children in the 1980s and 1990s, as represented in this study, had a clear film culture of their own. For even the least fannish among them, it was a culture of schoolyard boasting, video-swapping, and sleepovers. Sarah Smith came to a similar conclusion about children of the 1930s (2005: 16). This is certainly not exclusive to that decade and the later invention of home video technology only widened that gap between children's and adults' film cultures.

The film-viewing habits of children in the 1930s are near-incomparable to the viewing habits of children post-1973. There was no home viewing to speak of in the 1930s and one would certainly struggle to gain admission to the cinema in more recent times using jam jars, tea bags, or rabbit skins (Smith, 2005: 143). As for older children, it was not until the 1940s when the word "teen-ager" even came into popular usage (Cosgrove, 2013). But there are still some points which are relevant to more modern children. While it is certainly true that in the 1980s and 1990s children sometimes required adult intervention to see certain films, the shadow economy of bootleg VHS tapes exchanged between children allowed them much more agency in accessing film content, as discussed in the previous chapter. Between these secretive informal distribution networks (often with videos "borrowed" from parents without their knowledge), the pleasure in competition with not only obtaining films but sitting through them, and the unique mode of viewing particular to sleepovers and viewings at home with friends in general, children's film culture of the 1980s and 1990s was a rich backdrop for encounters with *The Exorcist.*

Sleepovers provide space for children away from their own home and their own parental rule to watch films often not permitted in their own homes:

> My friend's dad had a number of bootleg tapes including *Cannibal Holocaust*, *Cannibal Ferox*, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. We weren't allowed to watch them, but we would put them on during sleepovers when everyone else was in bed. (Participant #613, survey, UK.)

> I watched it around age nine-to-ten with my friend at his house when his parents were gone. (Participant #173, survey, USA.)

Many children watched *The Exorcist* in this way out of necessity when the film was banned in their own home. The sleepover can be viewed, in this sense, as an act of gifting by the host.

Sleepovers were conducted largely without direct parental supervision and, as such, normal rules did not apply:

> It was at a sleepover at my house when I was twelve. The usual thing with sleepovers was to watch horror films. My three best friends stayed over and we all slept on duvets and sleeping bags in the living room. My parents had to go to bed early because we had taken over. It went on til about 11pm. (Participant #603, survey, UK.)

The parent-child dynamic, being the power resting with the parent, is dissipated by the event nature of a sleepover, where parents deliberately leave children to their own devices. This did not always go as planned, however, and parental intervention was still required where the children overstepped the boundaries of their permitted freedoms.

Sleepovers were not arranged with the sole intention of watching *The Exorcist*. Watching a film was often only one of many activities, including video games and television: 'So, like, you know, just duvets in the lounge, bit of computer, talking nonsense, and then put a film on' (Paul, interview, UK). Almost always, sleepovers were described as a multi-film affair. Participants describing sleepover programmes frequently described routines of horror film marathons with friends. Participant #311 (survey, Canada) watched *The Exorcist* with *Return of the Living Dead* (O' Bannon, 1985) with his eleven-to-twelve-year-old friends; participant #305 (survey, Australia), at twelve years old, watched it in a double-bill with *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975). This relates to the importance of bearing in mind the cinematic surround of the cinema and drive-in, including the overall film programme. The cinematic surround of a sleepover, it must be said, has considerably more moving parts, with a variety of possible activities and as many surroundings as there are homes. It was not the direct environment that was the most important variable for sleepovers, however. In no accounts of sleepovers were the surroundings described. The most important aspect of a sleepover, as remembered by participants decades later, was the atmosphere and the behaviour of those present.

Important to sleepovers, as much as to drive-in theatres, was that the social contract of behavioural norms was negotiable as it was only enforced by the friendship group (unless they became rowdy enough to wake the adults). The primary viewing strategy for watching a film with friends, in this scenario, was to be entertained by the film but also to try to entertain the rest of the group yourself. It

was a collective entertainment, consumed and performed by those present. Children reacted to moments in the film they found funny, or moments they thought other people might have found funny, in an exaggerated fashion. This laughter functioned as a distancing strategy where *The Exorcist* was concerned. Sleepovers, for teenage boys, were accompanied by an atmosphere of false bravado. Paul (interview, UK) described his first time viewing the film at a sleepover at his house, and he emphasised that he did not appreciate the film in that environment, even though the experience of watching it was enjoyable. His account provides much to think about in terms of how the false bravado greatly changed the experience of the film, which was very different when later watched alone:

> Martin: So how did you feel when you actually saw what was in it? Did it match up to how bad you expected it to be?
>
> Paul: No. The first time I watched it, no, to be perfectly honest. Subsequent viewings, definitely, but that first time was a bit of a different one, because, as I say, I'm watching it with a group of mates […] So, you've got this kind of bravado in place. You're kind of trying to show, "Ah, this ain't no thing." It's a group of, probably, age range, sixteen to thirteen, twelve. I feel like my little brother was there as well, so, yeah, about twelve. I'm watching it, and, it's like, you're enjoying it, but the thing with that film is there's large parts where, actually, it's really nicely paced because it doesn't rush anything, you know. It slow builds […] Those slower moments that are showing things like that, the subtleties of it, the nuances of the actual film to kind of take you on that journey, you're not paying as much attention. Because, you know…
>
> Martin: Right. You're looking for–
>
> Paul: You're talking to each other.
>
> Martin: Oh, ok. Yeah.
>
> Paul: You know, it's not the same as if I watched it on my own, where I'm focused on every detail and you're kind of being drawn into the world. You're very conscious of the fact that you're watching that film and you're watching it with your mates. So, you're putting on a front with it, to make sure that you don't embarrass yourself. But you're watching it with your mates, so, you know, like, when she comes down stairs and says to the dude… [the astronaut…]

and she's like, "You're gonna die up there," and then she pisses herself on the rug.

Martin: Yeah.

Paul: That's, like, "Whoa, what the hell?" She just told him he's gonna die up there and then she's doing that. Like, she's clearly got no control. "What?" That's crazy. You look at that scene now and you're like, "Wha–? That's crazy, man. What would you do there, like?" But back then, it's like, "Aaaaah! She's pissing herself!" Like, it's hilarious. It's hilarious. Because you're thirteen and there's a little girl peeing herself on a rug.

Martin: (Laughs.) Right.

Paul: That's… You know. We're teenage boys. That's hilarious. And, then, some of the even more horrific scenes, like the cross, the scene with the crucifix…

Martin: The masturbation?

Paul: Yeah. That's, like, thirteen-year-old boys watching that, it's hilarious. Like, it's not. It's obviously not. But, to a thirteen-, fourteen-year-old boy, it's, like, you gotta laugh, because you don't fully understand everything that's going on. You don't realise the severity of what you're seeing. But you can see that there's a woman jabbing herself with a crucifix. And you're like, "Ha." It's funny. It is funny.

Martin: Yeah.

Paul: That's the kind of idiot I was as a teenage lad, and there's that level of discomfort, because it is unsettling. So, that plays into it as well. So, you ramp up the things like getting the giggles at it, because, you know, you're trying to show you're not actually scared by it, you're not feeling a little uneasy with it so. Little bit of giggling, and once one starts laughing, that's the thing. (Paul, interview, UK.)

The laughter at scenes Paul found disturbing on a second viewing is, by his own account, entirely the product of the sleepover as a viewing environment. The social contract at a sleepover with a group of friends, specifically a group of young boys, was very different from that of the cinema, whose rules are based on avoiding interfering with or disturbing other audience members' experiences. For example, in a cinema, the social contract revolved around rules such as no talking and having

respect for the film. Paul's account displayed neither of these as concerns during a sleepover. He also discussed how he and his friends would talk over the film frequently. Others also described the sleepover environment and how it was not suited to *The Exorcist*:

> I have seen the film at least fifteen times since then (I'm thirty-three), but probably more. It's not a slumber-party movie; it's a moody and deeply moving character-focused horror drama. It is probably my favourite film. (Participant #536, survey, Australia.)

There was, at sleepovers which almost always featured a number of activities as well as watching films, much less of the respect for the text.

Girls' sleepovers, from participants accounts here, had much less of the bravado involved:

> I was ten the first time I saw the film. I was at a birthday party/sleepover and there were probably about a dozen little girls there, and we all voted on *The Exorcist* to watch since all of the adults were asleep. I remember having heard it was the scariest movie ever made, and I was terrified the entire time but didn't want to miss any of it. I remember the scene when Regan crawled backwards down the stairs – we were all screaming and a few girls started crying, and the host's mother woke up to turn off the movie. I couldn't sleep the rest of that night. I've loved horror movies my whole life but I didn't pick that movie up to finish it until I was in my twenties. (Participant #227, survey, USA.)

In this account, the girls feel like they are able to take the film seriously and, as a result, they are not afraid to show their fear. However, there was no suggestion that girl groups enjoyed a cinema-style social contract. The screaming and crying is as disruptive as the boys' laughter, but it is a result of being free to respond as enthusiastically as they want, rather than, as for the boys, their being free to be disruptive in any way they like. In some instances, girls' behaviour was no different from the boys in terms of respecting the film where they found it uninspiring:

> I was about sixteen at a slumber party with my best friend and three or four other girls I wasn't very close to. We got bored and started to fast forward to just the scary parts. I was raised in a kind of fundamentalist home and remember

being deeply bothered by the scene where Reagan stab-masturbates with a crucifix. (Participant #245, survey, USA.)

Instances of scaring one another were also present, which occurred much less in boys' accounts:

> I wasn't really scared after watching it, my friend however had to be taken to the toilet after watching it and the other two girls came too. I hid in the spare room and when she came out (in the dark) I did the *Exorcist* voice to call her name from behind the door and she screamed and nearly fell down the stairs. Obviously hilarious at the time! (Participant #603, survey, UK.)

There were no mentions of mixed gender friendship groups for sleepovers. This may have been down to parental control, of course. The only mixed gender groups mentioned were for cousins. There are clear-but-small differences between groups of boys and girls at sleepovers in data here. False bravado drove much of the entertainment for the boys and girls were much more likely to show their fear. For both, it is the lack of the restrictive cinema-going social contract of silence and attention that defines their experiences. Accounts of horror-marathon sleepovers are common for girls and boys, indicating that this was a popular mode of viewing. *The Exorcist* is presented by many participants as an exceptionally powerful example of a relatively everyday event.

Routine viewing

In contrast to sleepovers, which were permitted by parents and offered an adult-free, self-governing nature preserve of sorts for children for an evening, routine viewing in the home is defined by pre-existing family dynamics. There are as many variations of routine viewing practices as there are families, but they each operate along similar parent-child dynamics:

> We used to go into Blockbuster and pick a film each for two nights then watch all three together over the two days! We have quite different tastes in general, my mum would like "story films" as she called them but usually with a crime tale, so films like *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Goodfellas*, *The Green Mile,* etc., then my step-dad liked all sorts from thriller films like *Face/Off* or *Identity* through to James Bond

> and *Die Hard*... There aren't many films I have sat through
> luckily which I didn't enjoy as I like most genres of film, I
> highly doubt my parents would say the same as yes most of
> my choices would be horror films which weren't always their
> cup of tea. (Kirsty J, interview, UK.)

Kirsty's account itself contains smaller individual processes with potential variables: the access to and choice of films; the timing of viewings, including whether all at once or broken up; and how to deal with conflicts of tastes (which resolved peacefully enough here from Kirsty's side). One woman described how her family used to have "horror movie Fridays" once a week (participant #101, survey, USA), and many others describe less genre-specific weekly rituals.

Far from a totalitarian, parent-first regime, differences of taste between parents and children were largely accepted in both directions. Parents would sit through children's films they did not care for (or, in Kirsty's case, horror films) and children would sit through films that may have pushed the boundaries of what they were able to cope with, either emotionally or just in terms of boredom. Sarah Smith (2005: 119) found that even in the 1930s parents were often forced to put on a brave face and attend films chosen by their children, proving that parents' suffering at the hands of children's films is universal and timeless. Indeed, the idea of making their parents suffer through horror films was appealing for some: 'I think both my parents weren't into horror films at all and were somewhat disturbed by my brother and mine's sort of ghoulish leanings, so, of course, this adds to the taboo, and to the attraction' (Marco, interview, UK). Of such differences are individual identities made as children come of an age to want to separate themselves out from their parents. Added to this, of course, was the simple pleasure of watching someone else, who may not be as well versed in horror, suffer through a film they are not enjoying: 'My brother was properly scared which was lovely' (participant #189, survey, UK); 'The movie scares the bejesus out of my wife, and it's fun to watch her watch the movie' (participant #166, survey, USA). There are no accounts of differences in tastes being more than mild annoyances to either parents or children, of course, as, being part of a ritual, those disappointed by one night's entertainment knew it would soon be their turn to choose the film.

Hope's family had a very similar routine to Kirsty's, where the trip to Blockbuster was a key part of the experience. Whereas Kirsty's family made concessions by watching more films and allowing everyone a choice, for Hope it is presented as a process of negotiation:

> My family has always been big movie watchers. We would have a movie night at least twice a week where we would go to the local movie rental, pick something out together, sit down in the dark after dinner together, and watch together, going back as long as I can remember. We love movie trivia and most of our inside jokes and phrases come from movies. Unfortunately, I don't remember my first movie or anything along those lines. (Hope, interview, USA.)

Hope's inability to recall her first movie experience speaks to either one of two things: either this routine began so early that Hope was too young to be able to remember now, or it was not the film which was important but the activity of watching one together. Such routines did not have to involve parents, of course, as many participants regularly watched films with siblings:

> I first saw it in 2000 at the age of seven, in my living room. My older brother rented horror movies often and I was always determined to watch them with him, even if I couldn't sleep for a week afterward. (Participant #367, survey, USA.)

The participant above was willing to forgo her peaceful nights of sleep just to watch horror films with her older brother, which testifies to the importance of this routine for her. These routines are also not exclusive to families:

> I was with a good friend of mine at his apartment. I hadn't ever seen the movie, but everyone kept recommending it to me, and we were both in the mood for a classic horror film. We usually have dinner and watch a horror movie on Thursday nights, so it just made sense to check out *The Exorcist*. (Participant #249, survey, USA.)

Regardless of the relation, and regardless of some disappointing films along the way, the shared experience is highly valued by participants who discussed it here.

Films watched as part of a routine, in a family, became the basis for shared references and in-jokes for Hope, above, which is echoed by other participants, such as Marco (interview, UK):

> Marco: Real favourite bit. Merrin arrives at the door and then you get the sort of cry of "Merrin!" really loud. You know that bit? Just as he arrives.
>
> Martin: Oh, when you can hear her voice?
>
> Marco: Chris McNeill opens the door and just from upstairs she goes "Merrin!" really loud. And I must admit, when me and my partner ever see a man in a fedora, you have to shout Merrin.
>
> Martin: (Laughs.)
>
> Marco: Not necessarily in his face.

Such routines serve to bring family members closer together through these shared experiences and are valued as sources for future in-jokes. They were not always appreciated, of course: 'I do remember the day after watching that I repeatedly told my grandmother "the power of Christ compels you" which she didn't find funny' (participant #167, survey, USA). These moments are recalled with fondness and laughter and can be a crucial part of the family-viewing experience. They are presented as snapshots of childhood which rarely say as much about the film as they do about participants' relationships with their loved ones.

Barker et al. (2016: 52) found that specific viewings of *Alien* were part of family viewing rituals and that the film became important in this way, within the family unit, and became wrapped up in memories of family:

> There is a sense that the ritualised viewing of *Alien* helped to inform family dynamics and relations. We can see this particularly in #795's evocative account, where she notes that *Alien* has become a sustained point of reference in her relationship with her parents, to the point where viewing *Prometheus* in 2012 – thirty-three years on from their original viewing of *Alien* – became an act to memorialise her late father.

This can be found among the responses to *The Exorcist*. One participant stated that the film would always be associated for him with trauma because of the timing of his first viewing, being around the time his brother attempted to commit suicide. For good or ill, associations build around certain films, despite their place in an on-going routine, because of the timing of specific viewings. The routine stays the same, but the context, the family unit and its dynamics, does not.

Conclusion: a theory of the "home" in home viewing

In this study of audiences' relationships with *The Exorcist*, the importance of the home as a venue for film-watching and the family dynamic as a viewing context shines through. Arguments for the specificity of place as having an impact upon meaning cannot apply only to the cinema, but also have enormous ramifications for the home. It is simply of a different nature. For example, there are issues of children gaining access to their desired films. As with censorship, there is a process of approval, being either a negotiation or simply a ritual of whose turn it is to pick a film.

Testament to the importance of family viewing rituals is how parents relay stories of their own childhood to their children when gifting a film. It is an important part of people's everyday lives, to the point where parents are keen to share film experiences with their children. In line with Egan's (2020) findings, gifting is a form of identity work. The gifter is constructing or maintaining a particular image of themselves in the gifting of a film and in the sharing of stories of their experience with it. The gifter's stories about their experience with the film set the stage for the giftee's experience in an instructional nature; in offering an account of their own experience, the gifter suggests a viewing strategy for the giftee. Where a mother tells her daughter that a film gave her nightmares for weeks, she prepares her to expect it to be scary. Where a mother tells her son that a film is a classic that must be watched, she prepares him to look closely at the technical mastery evident in the film's construction. Most of all, however, the gifter is, in gifting a film, revealing something about him or herself. That the same processes of storytelling occur for *The Exorcist* when the film was unavailable on VHS is a strong indicator of the

universality of this process of parents essentially humanising themselves for their children, trying to be more than simply mum or dad.

Gifting does not only occur between parents and children, and hosting a sleepover, providing a space where one's friends can watch a film in a special atmosphere free of the cinema's social contracts and parental supervision, is also an act of gifting. Important to the social contract of the majority of sleepovers is a set level of investment in a given film. For *The Exorcist*, this often resulted in boys being expected to have very low levels of investment – they entertained each other by laughing at the film and demonstrations of bravado – and girls being expected to have high levels of investment. With any film at a sleepover generally being only a small part of an evening's entertainment, film experiences in such circumstances are marked by their casual nature, heightened by a lack of parental supervision.

When talking of their home, participants describe their families, viewing routines, and upbringing. The cinematic surround of the home is a world apart from that of the cinema or the drive-in. While it is defined by people in the same way, it is not defined by architecture or technology. There were only descriptions of the home via descriptions of the people and practices within it. Routines of family-viewing are important to participants and are afforded much more description than is *The Exorcist* itself in this study. This applies to participants who were children in the 1980s and 1990s and supports assertions in the field of cinema memory studies (Kuhn, 2002; Kuhn et al., 2017; Anderson, 2013) that individual films are less important than the habit of cinema-going. Childhood routines provided space for relaxing with one's friends and family, enabling in-joking, pranking, and bonding through enjoying (or suffering through) one another's tastes.

On the other hand, the higher likelihood that mothers would share *The Exorcist*, particularly with their daughters and especially when one compares this trend to the father-led *Alien* and Monty Python gifting (Barker et al., 2016; Egan, 2020), demonstrates there are factors related to individual films that affect whether, how, by whom, and to whom it is gifted. The reasons for *The Exorcist* being shared more by mothers and more to daughters are beyond the scope of this study, but there is a central mother-daughter relationship in *The Exorcist* not present in the

aforementioned films. Such a trend at least underscores that one cannot conduct film history without accounting for individual films, even if routines are often more important for participants. Routines and rituals may stay the same, but it is the exceptional cases that provide telling details which can highlight the everyday.

The gifting of films and of the space to watch films, in sleepovers, presents a picture of how family dynamics can affect much of how one receives a film. As with parental censorship, claims cannot be made for individuals, only for the processes which impact upon the meanings given to films and their viewing. Looking into accounts of viewing in the home – in one's own or someone else's – brings into relief the importance of routines and the idiosyncrasies of home viewing experiences. Barbara Klinger (2006: 16) argues for, and demonstrates the value of, studies of the home as a site of exhibition. This study has focused on the individual within the home, rather than the home as merely a second-run cinema, to theorise how film experiences are impacted by one's relationships, as well as the environments within which these experiences take place.

That the majority of film-viewing experiences take place within the home is inarguable. That the family context is important in how films are watched is indisputable. At no time does this apply more than when one watches as a child. The home is a vital aspect of audiences' stories with any given film, not only due to the prevalence of home viewing but due to the huge varieties in experience afforded by the relationships around which routines form.

Chapter 7

"The power of Christ compels you!"

Remembering and Christianity

Factors of environment, relationships, and routine were important to participants at the time of viewing and can have an enormous impact upon meaning-making processes, as evidenced in previous chapters, but the experience does not end when the film is over. As Barker et al. argue with regards to viewing strategies, the final phase, sedimentation, where audiences make sense of the film, can take some time (2008: 16). Interpretations change over time, particularly when prompted by repeat viewings and through experiences with other films, or, as this chapter argues, through everyday experiences in one's life. The various features of encounters with *The Exorcist* are marked as important by participants in their remembering and in the manner in which these memories are described. When their old routines, and potentially their friends and family, are no longer present, memories of *The Exorcist* mean something much more than they did upon the day in question. The loss of childhood and all that comes with it – particular their families and their religious beliefs – changes the person viewing the film, and, thus, the film itself changes, too.

Historian Callum Brown, in his wide-ranging empirical study of people who have lost their religious faith, argues that the 1960s were the beginning of the end of Christianity: 'quite suddenly in 1963, something very profound ruptured the character of the nation and its people, sending organised Christianity on a

downward spiral to the margins of social significance' (2009: 1). The majority of participants, regardless of when they first saw the film, watched it for the first time as a child. Many were raised in religious households and have since drifted away from the Church. This is a very common experience by Brown's account; he states that while the UK Christian Handbook stated that sixty-five per cent of British people were Christian, more recent calculations place the number of people who actually attend church at as few as three per cent in some English counties (2009: 3). Brown states, 'Christianity is becoming Britain's past, not its present' (2009: 3). In the course of his book-length study, Brown (2009) examines oral testimonies using discourse analysis to draw out the nuances in people's stories of losing their religion, emphasising its importance for his participants throughout despite their dismissal of it, and the same is true of participants here. This study provides a fascinating insight into how people have lived with *The Exorcist* all these years with participants' religious beliefs often acting as a point of reference, for them, in discussing their childhood in contrast to their present selves.

The offer of a (slightly) different version of *The Exorcist* aside with 2000's "The Version You've Never Seen", the film has remained the same while its audiences have aged. Whether their first viewing of *The Exorcist* was five or forty-five years ago, participants speak almost of a different person when they describe their younger selves sitting down to watch the film. This provides an opportunity to explore the workings of diachronic reception for individuals. How does the film seem to a person when he or she watches it again at a later age? How does it affect one differently as a child compared to when one has a child of one's own? Is the impact of the film lessened when one watches it again after leaving one's childhood religious beliefs behind? These are questions that this study answers by focusing on accounts of that first experience and the differences felt through remembering or repeat encounters with the film, which bring into relief much of what participants' feel has changed in their lives.

This exploration of the form and function of memory begins in the 1970s, before moving on to look at memories of viewing in the home as they relate to those raised in religious households. Audiences' religious beliefs, as yet, have not been

incorporated into a study of their viewing habits and meaning-making processes. Given the transformative power of religious beliefs on a person's worldview, this is an area with great potential for aiding our understanding of audience processes.

As the majority of historical audience studies focus on the activity of cinema-going rather than any individual film (Kuhn et al., 2017), theories generated in this chapter are short of company. Only Helen Taylor's (1989) study of fandom has addressed how the nature of a specific film may change over time in the course of a fan's life. Barker et al. (2016) and Klinger (2006), in their empirical studies, both seek answers to what it is audiences are doing when they repeatedly watch the same film, but do not investigate diachronic reception in the context of a person's life. They describe the pleasures inherent in repeat viewings, debunking the idea that a film is less engaging when the plot is familiar (Barker et al., 2016: 81) and examining modes of repeat viewing and motivations (Klinger, 2006: 137). Klinger ultimately describes motivations for repeat viewing as 'mastery and solace: mastery of the narrative and one's own world; solace in the sense of control that predictability brings' (2006: 155). Klinger theorises briefly in her concluding remarks that 'the capacity for favourite films to accompany individuals through their lifetimes gives repetition contrasting potentials', stating that repeat viewings 'may inspire nostalgia or elicit revisionist constructions of meaning' (2006: 188). It is this potential for nostalgia and revisionist constructions – here of the film and of participants themselves – that this chapter also explores. The potential for contrasting one's past self with one's present self, when re-watching or simply remembering *The Exorcist*, is enormous, thanks in no small part to the nature of people's changing religious beliefs. A single film can appear, to the same person years later, as something other than what was experienced that first time. Films are not experienced and then forgotten. Films enter and re-enter people's lives. Their meanings are constructed on the foundations of dynamic personal relationships that evolve or fade away. The meanings of memories of films are in the ever-changing eye of the beholder.

Remembering the 1970s

The space of the cinema was important to participants in shaping the experience, as discussed in Chapter 4, but the clarity of their memories of place demonstrate its importance beyond the context of their *Exorcist* viewing. Some offering a guided tour of the environment from memory. Annette Kuhn (2002: 19) found that the laying out of the terrain in this way was an important part of how people relayed their memories of cinema-going, as it was for Gill (interview, UK):

> Gill: I mean, generally, what would happen is you'd get to the cinema, there'd usually be a queue a couple of yards outside and people add to it closer to the time. And, then, you go into the cinema. It was quite an old cinema. Actually, I should tell you something about the cinema because I think that probably (laughs) added to the experience.

> Martin: Oh, that would be great.

> Gill: You'd go up the steps – it was the old Scala cinema in Merthyr – and you'd go up some steps into the cinema – it's a very old building – and on the right-hand side there was the ticket office. Next to that there was the thing that sold snacks. And there were stairs then in the right-hand corner. They were quite dark stairs. You'd go up them into a very narrow corridor, and you'd go along there and it was… As I remember it, it was kind of… I know the carpet was red. I think the walls… It was kind of very claustrophobic to go up there. […] And really you could only go up one at a time. And you'd go into the cinema itself. And it did sort of strangely add to the atmosphere. If you had to, you know, go to the bathroom when you were watching the film, it was quite creepy […] They'd have this long narrow corridor and you'd go through the door and the door would be really heavy and creaky. Oddly, it added to the experience.

The tour aspect of this recollection is indicated by the second-person ("you") perspective in which it is told, and in the ordering of details which takes one from the outside, past the ticket office, and up the stairs into the auditorium. Gill is retracing steps she has taken many times before but will, due to the cinema's closure, never take again.

There is a sense of loss common in talk of 1970s experiences. This sense of loss can relate to a number of things, such as Carol's (interview, UK) regret that whereas once 'you could sit and watch a horror movie, now, you know, it's computer graphics, so (sigh), to me, it takes it away'. This regret at the development of horror films speaks of a genre that has left her behind. Many of the cinemas in recollections of the 1970s are long-since closed – this is also true of drive-in theatres – and technologies and publications discussed, such as VHS and film magazines, are now obsolete. Glen McIver's (2009) study of memories of a Liverpool cinema finds that its eventual closure and destruction enhanced former patron's memories of it, making it stand taller in their minds. Gill's loss of the Scala in Merthyr helps explain its vividness in her recollections.

More than just buildings and technologies, the routines of which these people were a part are also obsolete. Many participants rarely attend the cinema any more, including Gill, Steve, and Marco (interview, UK), who said, 'a part of me has fallen out of love with going to the cinema'. The routines which informed first experiences with *The Exorcist* – going to the drive-in, renting a video from a shop, staying up late to record the film on VHS, having sleepovers with friends – are no longer part of people's lives. Memories of *The Exorcist* as a film cannot be separated out from memories of who one was at the time of that first encounter, of the routines, places, and relationships of which watching the film was a part.

The people involved in these recollections, particularly parents and friends, are often spoken about with a sense of loss, too, similar to the nostalgia for technology, places, and old routines. In some instances, this is because of actual loss where loved ones have passed away. Vanessa May's (2016) work on nostalgia describes it as seeking a sense of "belonging from afar": 'Nostalgia almost invariably relates to a sense of unhappiness with the present, against which the past, or rather, an idealised version of the past, is favourably compared, and thus involves an awareness of the distance between now and then' (2016: 4). There is in many accounts a sense of if not unhappiness now then at least a happier time in one's childhood. Nostalgia can also be simply a missing of those old styles of relationships, of nostalgia for being a child to one's parent. They do not need to

have passed away. This may explain the seeming fondness for parental discipline which is remembered with amusement and affection in discussions of parental regulation in Chapter 5.

May identifies in her study three forms of nostalgia, related to place, era, and a sense of reluctant nostalgia where one is almost exiled to irrelevance with the march of time by younger generations (2016: 13). This study echoes May's findings, with accounts from the 1970s particularly invoking these three types of nostalgic longing. Lost friends and lost family, or those lost dynamics, are intertwined with participants' memories of *The Exorcist*:

> Martin: Would you say *The Exorcist* is a special film for you?
>
> Jim: I definitely would say *The Exorcist* is special to me. I revisit it often, in some ways, to retain a connection with my mother (who passed away some years ago). I realize that that is a really odd movie to cherish in that particular way but that's where I'm at. (Jim, interview, USA.)

One of Helen Taylor's participants in her study of *Gone with the Wind* fandom speaks of how the film always reminds her of a friend to whom she borrowed the book shortly before she was killed in an air raid during World War 2 (1989: 34). *The Exorcist*, as horrific as it is, also comes with such associations.

Memory construction

Memories of *The Exorcist* in the cinema in the 1970s vary greatly in their level of detail. Studies by Jackie Stacey (1994: 63) and Annette Kuhn (2002: 9) reveal how memories are not simply a direct line to the past; they function as memory texts which construct a speaker's identity and preserve an idealised past or past self. There are clear patterns worth exploring here regarding detail levels. Notably, those who remember the film most clearly appear, at first glance, to be those who enjoyed it most and, as a consequence, have re-watched the film repeatedly. Those who did not enjoy the film struggle to remember much about it. Carol (interviewee, UK) watched the film 1974 and never again, stating, 'I didn't rate it enough to go and see it again'. Much of her interview centred on her personal circumstances in the 1970s and in emphasising inaccuracies in *The Exorcist*'s treatment of the subject

of possession. Carol remembers her mindset approaching the film – that of a student of evil in literature with scepticism about the hype surrounding *The Exorcist* – but of the film itself she remembers little:

> Carol: As I said, it's not a film that stayed with me. I hadn't thought of it until I got that survey in the email […] But some films have stayed with me. To actually remember what happened in *The Exorcist*, I would have to watch it again. It didn't stick with me apart from her head rotating.

While Carol's interest in the film was more academic, her low opinion of the film ensured it became unimportant as a memory. All that she can remember clearly is her circumstances and interests at the time.

Where participants had good recall of the film, they had a clear memory of the event of watching it. Marco, Jan, Owl, and others describe the experience in great detail. There are some interesting exceptions, however, including Mark, who disliked the film the first time but can recall well the experience. He has since re-watched it multiple times, which suggests that the act of re-watching presents an opportunity to re-structure old memories. In a study of the workings of children's memory, Carole Peterson describes how 'memories are jointly constructed, elaborated, and shaped in conversation between mother and child […] and children recall experiences better when their mothers have helped to provide a narrative format' (2002: 53). Along with further encounters obviously helping to cement the details of the film in participants' minds, watching the film again may serve, as it did for Mark, as a structure upon which to hang the earlier memory. Re-watching the film allows a person to contrast this further experience with their first, of which they cannot help but be reminded. As a child commits to memory an experience the more it is relived through the telling by their mother, so is that first memory of *The Exorcist* further committed to memory with each reminder. This ability to recall more clearly the first experience when one has re-watched the film is evident from participants' accounts and may explain the particularly memorable nature of *The Exorcist*, being that so many of its fans re-watch it religiously.

Gill's (interview, UK) account supports this idea while highlighting that enjoyment of a film is not enough to support its recall. Like Carol, Gill had not seen the film

since 1974, but she remembers enjoying it greatly. Gill had not avoided the film deliberately since and may have watched it again had she chanced upon it, but she states it just never happened, largely as a result of the film's unavailability for years in the UK. When asked which parts of the film had really stuck with her, Gill was in no doubt:

> Gillian: For me, one of the creepiest things about *The Exorcist*, one of the things that really made me shudder… Regan comes out of the room and she's on the stairs and she does that weird sort of spider walk […] And that's really, really unsettling.

There is in Gill's recollection little of the insecurity about memory expressed by others who struggle to remember that first time. She is able to describe the scariest scene for her and remembers well the emotional impact of the film's ending.

Interestingly, Gill's memory regarding the scariest moment cannot be accurate. The "spider walk" scene was not present in the film released in cinemas in 1973; it was edited into the 2000 Director's Cut. It also featured heavily in the *Fear of God* (Jones, 1998) documentary aired on the BBC. This inaccuracy may be a case of Gill seeing the "spider walk" footage later, perhaps in the BBC documentary, and misremembering her original viewing. She may also have viewed the Director's Cut and subsequently forgot that experience; even if she saw the Director's Cut in 2000, that is eighteen years prior to her interview. The inaccuracy of Gill's memory also extends to a description of the film's opening, though this was not uncommon in participants' accounts:

> Martin: Did you say in your survey response that somebody fainted?
>
> Gillian: Oh, gosh, yes. We got into the cinema. We were sort of settling down there. There was kind of a buzz, you know. There was general sort of talking. It wasn't as loud as during the film. But there was this sort of air of expectation really. And the opening scenes come on, you know, the scene in the fog, the figure in the fog.
>
> Martin: Yeah.
>
> Gillian: And all of a sudden there was a disruption, and a woman had fainted, in one of the seats closer to the screen.

> So, I'm trying to remember if the film was stopped while they took her out. I– I can't quite recall that.
>
> Martin: Ah, right.
>
> Gillian: But, yeah. I think there'd been just so much hype and everything. But, I mean, there was nothing then. It was simply the titles […] I suppose I can understand if someone had fainted later, further into the film.

The famous shot of Father Merrin in the fog occurs an hour and a half into the film. However, it does serve as the introductory image to *The Exorcist*, of sorts. The shot served as the main poster and home video cover image and is often used in newspaper coverage of the film. In this sense, the famous image Gill discusses *is* the introductory image, if not the first shot.

Much of Gill's recollection concerns the cinema itself, the details of which are the amalgamation of years of going to the Scala. Details about its layout and decorations are not unique to her memories of *The Exorcist* and could be recalled when talking about another film. The *Exorcist*-specific details are of the protestors, a woman fainting, and of her tears at the film's finale. These elements are atypical compared to her usual cinema trips. This suggests that unique experiences need less help to retain detail in one's memory. Gill saw the *Exorcist* sequels once each on television later as part of ordinary film-viewing routines and struggled to remember anything at all about them, including which one was which, despite expressing admiration for *Exorcist III*. Details of these films and viewing experiences did not stick because there was nothing unusual about the watching of them, and she has not re-watched them to reinforce her memories of those initial reactions to individual moments in the films. Similarly, Marco (interview, UK) struggled to watch *The Exorcist* to the end as a child in his first encounter, his fear forcing him to quit, yet he tried and tried again until, after several attempts, he saw the whole film. The memory of *The Exorcist* for Marco is a combination of these several viewing attempts made in short succession, and while he remembers two moments in the film which may have made him quit he cannot place them in specific viewings. The film is important to Marco, as are his first experiences with it, but the uniformity of those first several attempts – all in daylight with the curtains open – means there is

no feature unique to any individual attempt. After many re-watches, Marco has encyclopaedic knowledge of *The Exorcist*, but having several experiences with the film that first time in the same conditions ensures that he cannot tell them apart from one another in his memory. Memories of multiple similar viewings become an aggregate because, unlike Gill's cinema experience with *The Exorcist*, there are no defining features that set them apart. Paul's (interview, UK) account on his inability to distinguish between his repeat-viewings of *The Exorcist* also supports this idea:

> Paul: Cause you kind of… You remember the situation of the first time you watched it, maybe the second time, maybe the most recent time. But I've probably seen that film upwards of twenty times total, I reckon.
>
> Martin: Right.
>
> Paul: But, yeah. Somewhere round there. So, you pick up different parts of the film as you're going. And I couldn't tell you about the seventeen times I've watched it in between.
>
> Martin: Yeah, of course.
>
> Paul: Because, you know, the vast majority of them are gonna be the same. It's gonna by me, sat in my bedroom, on my own watching it.

This suggests that the film experiences that are likely to stick are those which either have unique variations in the viewing.

Gill's memory of *The Exorcist* itself is defined by the emotional response she felt while watching it, the intensity of her feeling for Father Karras's plight and her admiration for his sacrifice. The inaccuracies in her memory of the film do not contradict her general feeling about it. Inaccuracies in memories occur frequently for participants of all ages and for different films. Inaccuracies are difficult to discuss regarding memories of cinema-going, since the details of what research participants did as children are unverifiable and memories of the colour of the curtains, say, are just as hard to confirm, but memories of individual films are checkable and highlight well such inconsistencies. Kieran (focus group 1) described how, when watching *The Silence of the Lambs* on home video, his father intervened, stating, 'I put it on for ten minutes and it was the first person Buffalo

Bill kills and my dad went over and hit the eject button'. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Buffalo Bill is never seen to kill any of his victims on screen. Only the results of Bill's actions are seen during an autopsy scene. Kieran's story conveys the emotional truth of his story – his father was afraid for him – even if it does not convey the truth of what was in the film. Gill's (interview, UK) feelings about the "spider walk" scene, that it made her 'shudder' and that it was 'really, really unsettling', may not be true of the film at that time, but they are true of her experience; that is what she was feeling.

The same is true of recollections from participants who were very young, who remember only fleeting images and a feeling of being overwhelmed. These stories, as presented in their misremembered form, exaggerate the truth of the film experience and convey more strongly the effect than they otherwise would with the correct details of the films. When Gill describes how the opening scene of *The Exorcist* with Father Merrin in the fog had many people anxious and worked up already, this is lending a concrete image to her recollection where she cannot remember how the film actually starts. Lending a visual to this memory makes it stronger in the remembering and in the telling. Likewise, the memory of seeing a murder committed on screen in *Silence of the Lambs* sounds more disturbing than simply seeing a naked corpse, hence this memory has been revised to the point where it can more easily retain the memory of that feeling. The details may become fuzzy over the years, but the truth remains. These altered memories are more easily remembered in these strengthened revisions, and they are also more easily communicated. The context of the interview must always be held in mind. These are not private, personal recollections, but communications with an interviewer (Kuhn, 2002: 9). When performing memories and trying to communicate the meaning of an experience, the old adage (frequently attributed to Mark Twain) applies, 'Never let the truth get in the way of a good story.'

Christian belief

When contextualising experiences with *The Exorcist* within a person's past, there are inevitably factors not present now which once contributed to a person's

outlook and personality. Examining these factors opens discussions on long-term reception. Foremost among these factors, a common topic of recollections especially in reference to its absence, is religious belief. Where participants expressed a lack of religious belief, they did so often to justify a lack of investment in *The Exorcist*, defining themselves in opposition to a hypothetical religious spectator. Discussed in Chapter 5 in participants' constructions of a "figure of the censor", here this relates to identity performance of a different sort. While this study would surely have benefited from more Christian participants – people from other religions may have proved similarly enlightening – the final data set included few who professed religious belief. There were, however, a great many participants who openly discussed their loss of belief since childhood. For the purposes of studying diachronic reception, this was ideal. It was not the aim of this study to define what Christian audiences thought of *The Exorcist*, but to investigate how the film changed with changes in one's life.

Narratives of religious belief here took four forms: 1) they were not raised in a religious household and are not now religious, so there is no loss of belief; 2) they were raised in a religious household (the extent varies), but have left their belief behind; 3) they were raised with religious belief and hold onto it; and 4) they were not raised to be religious, but have since come to believe in God. Religious belief is not a binary "yes" or "no" and varies in character between individuals:

> I was raised Catholic, and attended Catholic school growing up, but we were always in the "focused on charitable deeds" camp, rather than seeing the world as filled with demons and evil forces. (Dan, interview, USA.)

> My mother was lapsed catholic, but she sort of projected this idea of a very nice Jesus, if you like, a gentle Jesus. So, the blasphemy that was in it felt extremely shocking. To be honest, I was such a little kid that even the language was shocking. (Marco, interview, UK.)

The distinctions are important to participants and could either temper or magnify the effect of the portrayal of evil in *The Exorcist*. These four narratives of religious belief are grounded in accounts of childhood, discussed using a past-present register to draw comparisons between themselves at different times. Framing

himself as 'such a little kid' and emphasising the shocking nature of something as everyday as swearing helps Marco distance himself from his past self.

Where religious belief is discussed by participants – it was unprompted in the survey – it is predominantly the first two narratives that appear, framed within the context of the participant's childhood. Declarations of atheism, offered by many, were given as a reason for a lack of investment in *The Exorcist* or its surrounding controversy. This manifested in different ways:

> I'm not in any way religious, and actually quite the opposite – I hate religion. I just think it's pointless, but it makes for good stories […] But the fact that I'm not into it means that I'm not susceptible to any outrage or anything about it, because it doesn't bother me. (Paul, interview, UK.)

> I've seen it maybe four or five times, and it hasn't really changed. It's not that it's a bad movie, but I was never religious and didn't believe in things like God or the Devil and demonic possession. Things like zombies-from-chemicals-or-radiation, aliens, or other actual, physical threats always seemed much more plausible to me. Even ghosts were something I held more in the "possibly real" pile, with nothing religious ever making it past "the crap people tell each other to scare someone into acting the way they want them to act". (Participant #311, survey, Canada.)

> By this point in my life, I was already an atheist, so the thought of the Devil and possession didn't really scare me too badly. (Participant #111, survey, Canada.)

There is a lack of emotional involvement with the blasphemy debates surrounding the film and the story's threat is too incredible to cause any sense of unease. Participant #111's phrase, 'By this point in my life', creates a loss-of-belief narrative. Participant #311 and Paul do not express having had a religious upbringing and are more fervent in their rejection of the religious aspect of the film, presented in sweeping criticisms of organised religion. A different kind of atheism narrative is offered by Jan (interview, UK), who states, 'At that time, it was not, to want of a better word, de rigueur to be religious. It was seen as absolute and utter nonsense and based on absolutely no truth at all'. Jan expressed that she is not religious now, yet it was something she was thinking through at the time in a 1970s setting which

effectively ruled it out as "uncool". Rather than a narrative of loss, Jan's is one of finding her identity in a more positive way, in terms of thinking about and looking for something, rather than leaving something behind. Experiences with *The Exorcist* were often placed in a narrative arc of a loss of religious belief with what participants' believed at the time being just as important to them as what they believed in the present.

Critical to some responses from irreligious participants is a hypothetical religious spectator, a discursive construct used to communicate their own lack of outrage or fear by imagining another who *would be* outraged or afraid. This is often implied, as in Paul's account above where he cites his atheism as a reason for not being susceptible to becoming angry about blasphemy; implied in this statement is the opposite subject position, being the person who is outraged *because* he or she is religious. Other uses of this construct are more obvious, some based more in empathetic responses to the more extreme elements of the film:

> Watching it, I could see why people were upset about it. I could see why if that was your religion you would find it upsetting. I suppose (laughs) I learned a lot about James Ferman watching the film, and Mary Whitehouse for example. I was like, "OK, now I get it." Because if that was your belief system, it seemed to be like sticking fingers up at them for the sake of it in some ways. But no, it didn't affect me in that way because I don't have that kind of religious background. (Steve, interview, UK.)

> I think it scares religious people more, because it is an actual depiction of how the devil would get to someone in the comfort of their own home […] So that's a worst-case scenario for the religious. (Mark, interview, UK.)

> For me, *The Exorcist* never had any scare factor, though that's partly due to not being able to relate to the characters personally. I'm not a religious person so the fears presented didn't quite reach me. Whereas with *A Clockwork Orange*, the themes of home invasion and violence are prominent to anyone. (Courtney, interview, UK.)

These constructs, religious "figures of the audience" (after Barker, 2016: 123), are in line with the processes of creating "figures of the censor" discussed in Chapter 5. These can be one and the same, with hypothetical religious others also

disapproving of the film's release. For the most part, however, these were created in the spirit of understanding how someone else could be upset by the film. Though, they are still in the service of identity work. There are few positive mentions of religion. While a handful criticised religious organisations, most simply expressed a lack or a loss of belief, a belief that had been instilled in them by religious parents and grandparents, usually. Presenting oneself as atheist and as untroubled by something *because* of this atheism positions oneself as immune to the film's power, as stronger in this regard. Though perhaps "stronger" is unfair to participants. While there were some responses which exhibited disdain for Christians, most, as above, were in the spirit of understanding. They are establishing themselves as logical atheists in their identities during the interview, but not as superior; rather, different. Unlike talk of censorship or matters of taste (see Smith, 2019), talk of religious differences need not be presented as hierarchies with the speaker at the top. Identity work need not always be so combative. As with the cases of establishing a loss of religion, participants present themselves in contrast to religious parents and grandparents, establishing a generational difference, an aspect of their identity based on their separateness from their family. A religious upbringing was often remembered, as was parental regulation, rather fondly, with nostalgia for a simpler life and more defined relationships with their families.

The last two of the religious upbringing narratives, those of having religious belief, are less common. There was only one example of the fourth (Laura, interview, UK), for whom *The Exorcist* was inspiring:

> Martin: Did [*The Exorcist*] make you feel anything else besides scared?
>
> Laura: Um. Do you know what, it sounds ridiculous saying it, but I actually think I came out a slightly different person than the person who went in to see that film.
>
> Martin: Yeah?
>
> Laura: I am religious. I come from a family that isn't. And I think at quite a young age it shaped how I felt about those sorts of things and religion itself.

Martin: Oh, yeah?

Laura: It was quite a big impact. Maybe because I was quite young when I saw it. I wouldn't quite have the same reaction now. But, as a young girl, I thought "Oh, my God." It made me think about bigger things than what I was thinking at the time […] It was really quite a massive impact on me where for the next person it could just be another horror film. I suppose it's how you take it.

The feelings voiced by Jan, that religion was socially unacceptable, are not exclusive to the 1970s. Such sentiments, if anything, have only become more pronounced over time. Brown states, 'Christian decay in Britain has been perceived as a decline without an imagined end' (2009: 3). While this varies nationally, there is an unmistakable trend towards the rejection of organised religion. This may have affected participants' willingness to admit to religious belief. This is evidenced in Laura's hesitation in discussing her experience and her offering of caveats such as 'it sounds ridiculous saying it' and 'I suppose it's how you take it'. There is still the past-present register found in stories of leaving religion behind and the projection of opposite experiences onto others ('the next person'), demonstrating that the processes described of remembering and discussing the loss of religious belief are just that: processes. The process of remembering and talking about the taking up of religious belief is the same, with the same discursive strategies, but these processes can produce different outcomes. Both paths are walked in the same manner, but they lead to different places.

The process of telling stories about oneself which span one's life invokes "autobiographical memory", 'that uniquely human form of memory that moves beyond recall of experienced events to integrate perspective, interpretation, and evaluation across self, other, and time to create a personal history' (Fivush, 2011: 560). As with childhood memory formation, which requires a stable framework to build on – for example, re-watching the film – autobiographical memory provides a framework by crafting a narrative of one's life. "I used to be religious, until I grew out of it" is a story participants tell themselves and others which reinforces their identity. Autobiographical memory 'define[s] our being and our purpose in the world' (Fivush, 2011: 562). This can be achieved through telling stories about

ourselves as much as through telling stories about others, as in the case of the hypothetical Christians.

Clear from some cases, despite the nature of said hypothetical Christians as a discursive construct, is that religious belief *did* heighten the experience and make *The Exorcist* scarier for some with religious beliefs:

> I was confused at first... but by the end I feared for my
> SOUL. I do not remember immediately afterwards, other
> than praying every night for two weeks. (Participant #131,
> survey, USA.)

This varied over time with changing beliefs, for those at first terrified on religious grounds:

> It has changed with my beliefs of how it could affect me.
> Upon the first watch I was scared and thought I could be
> possessed at any moment, especially knowing it was based
> on a true story. I now believe that it was a case of mental
> illness played up for Hollywood sales. I still have a very close
> relationship with my religion but do not believe that a
> demon could possess me. (Participant #213, survey, USA.)

In some cases, it made participants question their fairly firm identities as atheists: 'I'll be frank, it did contribute to, probably when I was about eleven, I started sleeping with a rosary under my pillow' (Marco, interview, UK). These fears were almost always outgrown, of course, especially where participants tend to mostly follow the narrative of either never having been religious or of leaving their religious upbringing behind. Instances where these fears are outgrown are where participants face their fears, watching the film again at a later age.

Buckingham (1996) talks about the different coping strategies children have with disturbing texts and how these vary between fiction and non-fiction, presenting an interesting question about the reality status of *The Exorcist*, which is a deeply Christian film by all accounts. Buckingham states that negative experiences with non-fiction texts, such as documentaries or news footage, vary in so much as children are driven to take concrete actions to conquer their fears, such as raising money for disasters which upset them on the nightly news (1996: 307). For

participants who were raised in a religious household, precautions taken to defuse *The Exorcist*'s power also took on a religious aspect.

One participant, Johnnie (interview, Canada), had lasting fears of the film which left him when he lost his religious faith, demonstrating the potential power of religious belief in shaping a film's reception. His experience with *The Exorcist* was the most extreme negative response encountered in the data set, involving 'night terrors about three to four times a week' for around forty years:

> Since becoming an atheist, I have had a few nightmares that
> tried in vain to attack my brain […] When I stopped believing
> in the gods and the devils, I finally took charge of my mind
> and put guilt and shit out to the trash. I have played the
> theme song to this movie many times and there has been no
> more triggers into the world of night terrors. None.

Describing himself as a "devout atheist", Johnnie's experience could be said to be in Sarah Smith's (2005) category of being "an occasional misjudgement", akin to a parent allowing children to watch a movie when they were not mature enough to cope. However, Johnnie, as a 16-year-old boy, was beyond the need for parental consent. He does attribute blame to his parents in much the same way as those victims of occasional misjudgements, however. Clear from Johnnie's extreme reaction is a very strictly anti-religion theme, and that appears to be where he attributes the blame for his trauma at the hands of *The Exorcist* (which he describes as having 'an element of PTSD'):

> My mind was "raped" with the insertion of the Christian
> religion via mandatory classes that my sister and I had taken
> when we were about thirteen-ish. We had to go to classes
> so that we could be "Confirmed" at the Anglican church. I
> fought like crazy with my mom about going, but she insisted
> and I lost in the end. I remember who taught the class and I
> remember where I sat in the class and I remember how
> frightening this Bible book was at the time.

The language and construction of the account are presented in very strong terms as a sexual assault. Johnnie described later how, for him, 'Watching the movie was no different than being a childhood rape victim really'. *The Exorcist* was inseparable then from the trauma of his religious upbringing, and it remains inseparable in his

memory today. Though his fear of the film has diminished, the experience is coloured by his religious upbrining in the strongest terms. While this was an extremely intense experience compared to others, Johnnie's experience at least highlights how one's upbringing may distort memories of film experiences, as well as the experiences themselves. Johnnie's account testifies to how a person's relationship with any given film may be more complex than simply enjoying it or interpreting it in a given way, and it is a relationship that changes over time.

Old fears

Where participants, as children, experienced prolonged fears and anxieties which troubled them for some time after seeing *The Exorcist*, there were often attempts to master that childhood fear, sometimes years later, through re-watching. This was especially common for those for whom *The Exorcist* remained incomplete, either through parental regulation or abandoning the film themselves. The series of terrifying sounds or flashes of disturbing images taken out of context remained with some participants in this state for many years. It is only later – much later for some – that the whole picture of *The Exorcist* was available, and the isolated images from the earlier experiences could be re-confronted and contextualised within the story and potentially, though not always, de-fanged.

Katharina (participant #606, survey, female, Germany), unlike Caitlyn (interview, UK) who watched *The Exorcist* at a later age and became an avid fan of the film, could not overcome her fear of it, but she tried the same confrontation strategy:

> I remember that nineteen years ago, when I was eleven, I was watching *Jeopardy* with my parents and they showed a scene from the movie, related to a question. It was the scene where Regan twists her head 360 degrees. I am pausing even typing this. Back then, I was interested in horror movies, so I didn't look away, but that night, when it got dark, i was so scared of even the brief excerpt that I had seen. From then on, which was the late 1990s, I was scared of the movie. It used to be shown on TV a few times a year so I had my parents check the TV guide beforehand to make sure there was no picture of it in it. When the Director's Cut came into the cinema, and I can't even check when that was, because I can't google the movie because images will come

> up and I won't be able to sleep, I used to avoid any kind of commercial breaks, when I was watching TV, fearing the trailer for it would come on. […] When I was eighteen I decided I would finally face my fear, since I was an adult and it would be fine, so I decided to rent the Director's Cut and watch it together with my then-boyfriend, in broad daylight. We watched it and I was very scared. […] I thought it would help to see the movie and maybe get rid of my fear, but I didn't get rid of my fear. I was quite scared for a while and then it just subsided into my regular level of fear of the movie which is I can't look at pictures of it or I might have trouble sleeping.

For Katharina (participant #606), the complete lack of context, with the horrific imagery appearing within the otherwise benign, routine programming of a comfortable evening with a game show with her parents, made the fear too much to overcome, even through a later viewing with safety precautions. She went to great lengths, enlisting help from her parents, to avoid any exposure to even a single still image from the film. Katharina describes unsuccessful efforts, before re-watching, to quash what at this point had become a phobia:

> So, between being eleven and scared of the movie and finally watching it at eighteen, I of course looked up some things about the movie. I went to the public library and had a look at the book, but I was too scared to actually check it out and read it. I also asked my parents about it and they told me what it was about […] I don't believe in demonic possession but since I was so scared of the movie, I did research it a bit. (Participant #606, Germany.)

Where the mastery of the film text itself would not suffice, Katharina turned to the real-life subject matter, as did those who took religious precautions, such as Marco (interview, UK) with his rosary.

Confrontation was not the only post-film coping mechanism, as evidence by Katharina's phases of avoidance. Johnnie (interview, Canada) avoided the film entirely. When asked if he had seen films like *The Exorcist* prior to his encounter with it in 1974 at a drive-in, Johnnie stated, 'I can assure you that I had never seen a movie like *The Exorcist*, I never want to see another movie like *The Exorcist* and I will never see another movie like *The Exorcist*!' He rejected outright the idea of trying to master the film:

> No one should see it. This movie is not a movie. It is a
> conduit to a very special hell that lives inside of all of us. I
> would believe, it is a movie like this one that can eventually
> tip the bucket with the sight of just one drop of blood and
> will turn on a benign gene within the double helix that turns
> a person into a psychopathic killer[...] Under no
> circumstances should this film be shown to children and
> maybe no one under the age of twenty-five for that matter.
> This is not a movie about exorcising a little girl. This is a snuff
> film of human intellect. I say this because I can still feel the
> effects of this film this very minute. (Johnnie, interview,
> Canada.)

Haunted by night terrors for years later, Johnnie has a protectionist attitude concerning others' viewing of the film. Despite taking no action to master the film, as discussed previously, Johnnie eventually freed himself of his night terrors with the loss of his religious beliefs. A confrontation, Johnnie emphasised, would not have helped him.

Accounts such as Johnnie's attest to the value of studying diachronic reception and particularly to the value of studying a single film. Studies of cinema-going in general which are focused on a single period in which the participants were children (as in Kuhn, 2002) risk eliminating influences from particular films which may prove illuminating for other factors, besides participants' aging. Marriete Clare and Richard Johnson, from their studies of memory and identity formation, state that accounts of the past reveal much about the present: 'they [...] reveal through their formal features and choice of instances much about the writer's current identities and trajectories' (2000: 199-200). When only one period is discussed, it is this trajectory which is lost. A focus on first experiences alone would lose sight of other encounters where people were able to overcome their fear of the film and developments in their lives which changed the film's meanings.

Conclusion: a theory of memory

Memories of the cinema and the drive-in have at their core a sense of nostalgia, which, May (2016) found, can take the form of a nostalgia for a place, for an era, or a kind of nostalgia which hinges on one being left behind by upcoming generations. These three variations of nostalgia are present in data here, which features

accounts with a clear sense of loss, speaking to participants' 'longing to belong' (May, 2016). They long to belong once again to their family, some of whom have passed on. They long to belong to their parents in the same way they once did, as part of a parent-child relationship which they have long-since left behind. They long to belong to the same town in which they grew up, with the same technologies and trends that shaped their childhood. Many are left behind, particularly as the horror genre has undergone enormous change in tone and register and as cinema-going culture has changed, making many participants happier now to watch a film at home. From these factors, the palpable sense of nostalgia emerges.

Distant memories of cinema-going are reinforced through being provided a framework upon which to hang the memory, and an important framework is the film itself. Through repeat viewings, one experiences many of the same highs and lows as in that first encounter, or is forced to reconsider them; in either scenario, that first encounter is brought to mind. Rehearsal and repetition of memories, as evidenced in studies of childhood memory development (Peterson, 2002), aid their longevity. Repeat viewings offer a chance at reviewing one's memories. Another factor aiding a memory's longevity is where a cinema-going experience has more features away from the normal routine. For *The Exorcist*, these included protests and extreme audience reactions. When a cinema-going experience is largely run of the mill – or where repeat viewings are simply part of a normal television-watching routine – these memories become harder to place and lose detail.

Inaccuracies in memories are common, but the emotional truth of the memory remains. Details may be lost, added, or obfuscated in the remembering and the telling, but these serve to spotlight the most important elements of the experience for participants. The nature of an oral history interview as an act of communication permits such liberties and, as Kuhn (2002: 24) discusses, memories are, in this way, performances. Such performances are aided greatly by further rehearsal and repetition as stories of these experiences are shared, something which was common with *The Exorcist*, evident from how many participants recalled their parents' accounts of seeing the film. Each repeat encounter with a film, either through watching again or recalling the experience, presents an opportunity to re-

evaluate that first encounter. This can lead to nostalgia, where one re-evaluates one's current life against that of one's younger self. Re-evaluations and nostalgia go hand in hand; memories are always recalled within the context of one's present life. Comparisons cannot help but be drawn. The framework provided for remembering by individual films is a vital part of cinema-going memories and film-watching memories more generally. When one eliminates individual films from discussion of cinema-going, one loses insight into how such memories are perpetuated by individual people.

Tying films to individuals in one's life can also help to preserve the memory of a viewing experience. Films remind participants of loved ones who have passed away or become distant. They remind participants of being in family dynamics, being a smaller cog in the family machine. Taylor's (1989) describes how even when the film is not experienced with another person there can be strong associations made. One fan stated that she always associated *Gone with the Wind* with her friend, to whom she lent her copy of the novel. Her friend was later killed in a World War 2 air raid and the association, even half a century later, was still strong (Taylor, 1989: 34). Barker et al. (2016: 52) describe how a mother-son trip to see the latest film in the *Alien* franchise, *Prometheus* (Scott, 2012), was turned into an act of memorialising their lost loved one. These associations are present in recollections of seeing *The Exorcist*, accompanied by the context of the home and participants' place within it.

The exceptional case of Johnnie and his religious upbringing shows how a film can be a pervasive force in someone's life, even in a non-fannish way, and how one's relationship with a film can change over time due to factors outside the film itself or any related prefigurative materials. The loss of religious belief, becoming a parent, changes in film culture, or simply aging are phenomena which have greatly affected participants' feelings about *The Exorcist*. The religious aspect of *The Exorcist* again speaks to the necessity of including details relevant to specific films. Stories of the changing reception of *The Exorcist* for individuals based on their changing religious beliefs attest to the importance of individuals' identities when discussing memories of film. These identities are being communicated in an interview context to a

stranger and the selection of memories and the discourses used to relay them in the present day are as important as the events described in the past. Importantly, these identities, particular religious ones, are wrapped up in participants' relationships with their families. Even in the case of Laura (interview, UK), it was important for her to mention that her family was not religious when discussing her own religious belief. Identities can be defined by positive or negative comparisons with others. Often this is done using hypothetical religious others, particularly when participants' do not have religious families to draw upon for comparisons. This study finds that organising people based on the historical period concerned may work as a starting point into investigations, but researchers must account for the character of individuals in the audiences as much as for the character of a given time.

In discussing the factor of religious beliefs, the traps of Stanley Fish's (1980) interpretive communities, which are disguised as "common sense" and deceptively simple extrapolations, must be avoided. We must in the first instance bear in mind that there are many versions of religious belief and "a religious upbringing". To label a group as "Christians" or "atheists" is to lose the differences that participants are keen to express. A person's feelings about religion, as are other factors, are based in their personal relationships, particularly with their parents. While the processes of how these and other factors can impact meaning are definable, the exact meanings are not. It is the process of discussing religious belief and unbelief which are the same, not the outcomes of having religious belief or not having religious belief. Grouping a great many people and declaring them an interpretive community is tempting in its explanatory power – the concept is often used where no other explanations for commonalities can be found – but it would be an illusion, explaining something that does not exist, doing a disservice to participants. It is the *process*, not the outcome, that is important.

Whereas individual films may not be important in previous studies of cinema memories (Kuhn et al., 2017: 10), this is not the case with a film like *The Exorcist*, which has many defining features which make it memorable. Films like *The Exorcist* do not come along once a week. When one flattens the cinema-going experience by

making all films the same – i.e., unmemorable and unimportant – the nuance of the cinema-going experience, which can be different for different films, is lost. The use of oral histories to move the focus away from the films themselves and onto the cinema-going experience has at its heart, quite rightly, a project of ensuring one is not left with histories of the cinema without audiences. However, one still only accounts for half of the picture when one produces histories of the cinema without films.

In respect of the issue of studying a single film, much of the insistence in research on memories of cinema-going about how participants care little about individual films (Kuhn, 2002; Anderson, 2013) has less to do with the participants' preferences and more to do with the fact that they are being interviewed for a project about "cinema-going" and thus are more likely to give interviewers what they believe they want to hear. Kuhn has asked this of her own work in later writings (with Biltereyst and Meers, 2017: 10).

The same flattening of the cinema experience, the removal of individual films, is equally troublesome when applied to audiences. As evidenced in earlier discussions (Chapter 4), participants' ages greatly affects their memories. Ages during the first experience and the number of particular losses a participant may have had impact upon the manner of remembering. The majority of historical audience studies (Kuhn, 2002; Smith, 2005; Anderson, 2013; Lacey, 1999; Trevari Gennari et al., 2017; Stokes and Jones, 2017) take a specific time period as their organising principle, rather than a film or an area, for example, and this leads to data sets which are only applicable to one specific demographic. Findings relating only to those over sixty years old cannot in good conscience be applied across the board to all age groups.

The Exorcist was a uniquely controversial, terrifying, and religious film for participants. It became entangled in many personal relationships, with parents banning or sharing it with their children, with it serving as a reminder of lost loved ones, and with it functioning as a marker, upon repeat viewings, of how much had changed for them over the years. The film and its related prefigurative materials, such as marketing or reviews, is not the only source of meaning for audiences.

There is a deep well of personal history and important relationships which shape the experience and mould it into different forms in their memories as time goes by.

Chapter 7

Conclusions

This thesis offers four intrinsically linked theories of audience processes as they
relate to *The Exorcist*:

> 1) A theory of the role of the cinematic surround, an
> extension of Anderson's (2013) concerns about cinema
> programming that accounts for architectural, technological,
> and social factors;

> 2) A theoretical model of personal censorship as it is
> actioned by and upon individuals, providing understanding
> of the meaning of censorship in everyday film-viewing
> habits;

> 3) A theory of the further role of the family and children's
> separate film culture, including the environment of the
> sleepover, in shaping film experiences;

> 4) A theory of diachronic reception and "cinema memory"
> which goes beyond existing studies of isolated eras and
> demographics, and beyond the cinema, to account for the
> persistence and character of such memories as rooted in
> present identities;

These theories all emphasise the importance of audience's immediate physical and
social environment in their meaning-making processes. These understandings are
the result of examining participants' lived experiences and personal relationships
and are grounded in their own words.

The findings of this study, importantly, relate only to *processes*, rather than
outcomes. The model of personal censorship offered in Chapter 5, for example,
presents the systems, stages, and potential consequences for meaning. It does not

presume to present a majority view of how censorship of *The Exorcist* changed the experience for its audiences. There are no claims made in this thesis that participants are representative of anyone other than themselves. To take such action would be to render pointless the qualitative nature of this study, which is not suited for making claims about representativeness. All this study can do, and I would argue has done, is identify and explain universal processes and their variables which respect individuals' identities, circumstances, motivations, and relationships.

Mother-daughter case study

To further illustrate the importance of direct personal relationships and individual character and participants' words over analysis based on demographics in developing the above theories, I here present analysis of two interviews. Having interviewed a mother and daughter separately – Gill is Caitlyn's mother (both UK) – we are afforded a look at both sides of the working model of parental and self-censorship. A unique aspect of their relationship is that when Caitlyn was old enough to watch horror films by herself her interest in the genre began to outstrip that of her mother and she began to regulate her mother's viewing. Their censorship roles switched. Sarah Ralph has examined mother-daughter relationships in the context of sharing their love of film stars, finding that shared film-viewing rituals and enthusiasms in these relationships bring opportunities to become more involved in one another's lives and potentially "re-orientate" their relationship over time (2015: 35). Such a re-orientation is a key feature of Gill and Caitlyn's dynamic.

There was no free-reign film-viewing policy in place for Caitlyn as a child. Though she recalls few moments when her actions were directly restricted, her viewing as a child was still monitored with care. Gill had a clear approval process for Caitlyn when she asked to watch a potentially unsuitable film as a child, which Caitlyn describes as a thoughtful one:

> Martin: Did your mum stop you watching certain films when you were younger? She mentioned that maybe she would've waited a little bit before letting you see *The Exorcist*.

> Caitlyn: I don't remember anything that was off-limits really. We've always had a certain amount of compromise in how we deal with things. So, I'd go to her and say, "I want to do this," or "I want to watch this" and she'd think about it, read about it perhaps and then come back to me and say if she'd rather I didn't. But there would always be a reason, rather than just a blanket "no". (Caitlyn, interview, UK.)

Caitlyn's memory is of a fair-minded process. There always being a reason for a refusal meant a great deal to Caitlyn. A key point of curiosity and indeed frustration for many participants, sometimes aimed at the BBFC, was that they could not understand why *The Exorcist* had been banned. Laura (interview, UK) expressed frustration with her inability to pin down why the film was banned on home video in the UK. There was a sense for Steve (UK, interview) that *The Exorcist* did not fit the pattern in terms of what had been banned, since it seemed, upon his viewing, to be a "quiet" film. Caitlyn's being provided with an explanation for reasons why certain films were off limits for her helped to sate her curiosity and to understand that her mother's actions were protective in nature.

Gill's decision of when to allow Caitlyn to view *The Exorcist* – she stated she would have shown it to her eventually – was actually taken out of her hands, as described below in her recollection of Caitlyn's first viewing of the film:

> Gill: I don't know whether you'd like to know this, but, um, when my daughter was twelve years old, my husband and I had to go somewhere. And we had difficulty getting a babysitter. And my friend volunteered her daughter. She seemed like a sensible girl. We got home to find that she'd actually watched *The Exorcist* in my house with my twelve-year-old daughter.
>
> Martin: (Laughs.) Oh, dear.
>
> Gill: (Laughs.) I don't know if that has anything to do with why she likes horror films now. I was absolutely, well… I was annoyed. And, I mean, my daughter was, I think she was somewhat traumatised, as you would be at twelve. But it's one of her favourite films now, so I dunno.
>
> Martin: So, would you have maybe waited a few years before…
>
> Gill: Yes. Yes. (Gill, interview, UK.)

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The annoyance Gill describes at learning her daughter had seen *The Exorcist* was based on Caitlyn's young age. Parental censorship, for Gill, especially with *The Exorcist*, was intended as an act of protection. Caitlyn's own memory of this first experience of the film confirms that, as Gill feared, she found it traumatising:

> I can't remember how old I was, but I'm pretty sure I should have been in bed by the time it went on, so it was probably something the babysitter and her friends decided to watch to pass the time without watching me, as such. As far as I can remember I just came back downstairs as they were watching it and so all I saw was Linda Blair in full green makeup with all the scars, etc. Looking back on it now, I think that what made it so scary was the lack of context because I'd just happened upon that scene, rather than watching the whole thing. It was just totally uncanny and unexplainable. I can't remember too much if I stayed to watch very much of it, but the face on the screen stuck with me for some time. (Caitlyn, interview, UK.)

The immediate outcome of Caitlyn's seeing *The Exorcist*, her trauma, was as her mother predicted. This suggests Gill knew well her daughter's tolerance levels for frightening imagery. This is evidenced later in Gill's interview when she discusses a previous film that had upset a younger Caitlyn, stating, 'I remember her being quite traumatised by Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*. And when I watched it, I was quite surprised by the intensity' (Gill, interview, UK). Knowledge of Caitlyn's boundaries, for Gill, seems to have grown out of these kinds of "occasional misjudgements" (afterr Smith, 2005: 122). Through these moments of misjudgement, the likes of which are seen in other participants' experiences of a lack of preparedness for horrific imagery, Gill came to understand her daughter's tolerances. Through seeing how these kinds of materials upset her daughter, Gill acted, through acts of parental regulation, to avoid further occurrences. Where Gill allowed Caitlyn to watch films as a child that were potentially upsetting, Caitlyn (interview) describes how 'I think there's a difference between seeing something devoid of context (as in the case with the babysitter), vs seeing an entire film, knowing that it isn't real, grasping the themes, etc. Having a chat about it sets everything up properly really.' The openness between Gill and Caitlyn, with Caitlyn rarely if ever going behind her

mother's back to watch a film, allowed for potentially upsetting films to be if not defused then at least placed in a proper context with a chat.

The fragmented viewing of *The Exorcist* along with the removal of Gill's opportunity to discuss the film with Caitlyn beforehand are defining factors in Caitlyn's eventual fear response. Upon her second viewing, where the scariest scenes were permitted their proper story context and after Gill had been able to discuss the film with her, Caitlyn was able to overcome her fear. The direct environment of that first viewing did not permit Caitlyn a full understanding of the film.

The eventual outcome of seeing *The Exorcist*, for Caitlyn, was that the film fed into her developing love of horror, leading to a change in the dynamic between her and her mother regarding violent films. *The Exorcist* became a firm favourite for Caitlyn that has been re-watched over and over. The incident, while evidently traumatising for her at the time, has now been subsumed into the narrative of her horror fandom. Caitlyn later re-confronted the film in its entirety and tamed it in her mind. Caitlyn's experience serves as a foundational building block in her experience of her fandom. Caitlyn's growing fandom led to the shift in the regulation of film viewing between Caitlyn and her mother. For their relationship as it pertains to film viewing, censorship and sharing as mother and daughter is not authoritative and one-directional. In fact, as she has grown up and followed a passion for horror cinema, Caitlyn has become the censor. Gill stated, when asked if they watch horror films together, that Caitlyn 'will generally watch them first to make sure that they're not too gory for me' (Gill, interview, UK). Caitlyn expanded on this in her own interview:

> Martin: Your mum mentioned that you act as a bit of a safety net for her when it comes to horror, steering her away from films that might be a bit too much for her. She mentioned *Martyrs* as an example. What kinds of things are usually off limits? Is it usually graphic violence like that, or is it scariness too? I think my mum would have a very bad time with *The Orphanage*, for example, even though it's not really violent.

> Caitlyn: Yes, definitely. I rave about *Martyrs* to anyone who will listen, but I know she would hate it. Same with stuff like *The Woman*. If it's an "18" certificate, I'm definitely

> watching it first because it's more likely to dwell on violence or the results of violence a bit more. I don't have to watch out for jump scares particularly. It's mostly violence. She's been watching the *Westworld* TV show though, which I've not seen, and I've heard that can be kind of graphic, so I guess she's getting better with it. I think she'll always prefer books over films and I'll always prefer films, so part of me watching something first is usually because I'm interested in it and then I think about whether she'll like it or not. I've been raving about *Hereditary* for ages and I'm still not sure how she'll feel about it, but whenever we see something which really clicks with one of us, we'll usually show it to the other one and chat about it.

Caitlyn describes how she and her mother have a practice of sharing films and television shows, but there are firm criteria which determine if Caitlyn will share a film or not. The first of these is whether she believes her mother will enjoy it or find it interesting. The level of violent content is another factor Caitlyn considers. This criterion has at its core the same intent as Gill's criteria for when Caitlyn was a girl: the avoidance of trauma. As Caitlyn has become more of an authority on films, particularly horror films, their dynamic has shifted in this respect, echoing the findings of Ralph (2015) which demonstrate the usefulness of shared rituals and enthusiasms for mothers and daughters in allowing the child to mature into a new role.

The language used by Caitlyn when she expresses concerns about her mother's potential reactions to violent scenes has, at times, almost a parental quality of its own, for example where she describes that her mother is 'getting better with [violence]' in media (interview). BBFC ratings are used by Caitlyn as a guide to let her know which films require pre-screening. Violent scenes, specifically in films rated "18" by the BBFC, ensure that viewing horror films together often require Caitlyn to screen them for herself first. This is a parental strategy which occurs frequently where the regulation of children's viewing habits is discussed in this study. As times have moved on, Gill appears to find herself left behind by a clear trend towards increasingly graphic violence in more recent horror movies, describing *Saw* and its ilk as uninteresting and discussing her own squeamishness. Discussing the violence in Fox's *Exorcist* television show, Gill states:

> Gill: I know it was a follow-on from *The Exorcist*, but it was interesting to see what filmmakers would make of the subject these days.
>
> Martin: Like which parts they would emphasise and that kinda thing.
>
> Gill: Yes. Yeah. Oddly enough I could watch that. I don't know what my limit is. I think if there's a story I can put aside a little bit of that sort of squeamishness. And I think that was the thing with the film, with *The Exorcist*. There was a story there, there were people, there were personalities, and each person had their own little story.

Of course, *The Exorcist* was for Gill a bit of a departure, even at the time of its release. The inarguable escalation in the graphic nature of violent scenes in recent years – thanks as much to advances in special effects as to the relaxation of institutional censorship – has left Gill open to unwanted emotional responses where scenes may cross her personal boundaries, in much the same way Caitlyn was open to the same upset upon first seeing *The Exorcist*. These boundaries for Gill, in terms of her wanting to self-regulate her viewing, are vague and can only be defined by occasional misjudgements.

The much-appreciated regulation of horror films Caitlyn performs for Gill is not quite of the same nature as her own childhood regulation, however. It is not a system wherein Gill will approach Caitlyn to ask permission to watch a film, as Caitlyn did. It is instead part of Caitlyn's routine of watching films. Part of her interpretation of her film experiences is to assess the film's suitability for viewing with her mother. Though this is only for films she wishes to share, films she thinks her mother might find interesting. She also talks about how if her mother watches a film Caitlyn might find interesting she will share, demonstrating how this is still not entirely in one direction. Caitlyn's regulation of Gill's viewing is not a formal process and is simply a factor in her assessment of films she would often watch for herself anyway, should she decide the film is worth sharing afterwards. In much the same way in which Buckingham (1996: 262) describes parental regulation in his study of childhood viewing, Caitlyn's criteria for Gill are based on knowing her mother's tastes and tolerance levels for violent scenes.

Caitlyn's regulation of films is almost a mirror image of her mother's regulation of her viewing practices as a child, demonstrating that censorship practices can be passed down. Through Gill's practices of regulation of Caitlyn's childhood viewing along with her policy of openness about why she was restricting access to certain films, Caitlyn appears to have developed an appreciation for the protection she enjoyed, even if it may have been frustrating at the time. This open and frank discussion of censorship when she was younger has led to Caitlyn returning the favour. Caitlyn's love of horror has grown into expertise and Gill has taken to drawing upon Caitlyn to help steer her away from potentially upsetting scenes. In this way, Caitlyn's regulation of Gill's viewing can be considered part of a self-regulation strategy by Gill. Whereas parental regulation of viewing is often presented and can easily be thought of as a combative element of a parent-child relationship, for Gill and Caitlyn it was never a source of enmity and has become a natural part of their relationship as they share films with one another, free of the risk of upset from scenes of graphic violence.

These interviews demonstrate the importance of acknowledging the context of film-viewing, including an audience member's age, and outline how experiences are defined by processes – Gill's opportunity to regulate properly was taken out of her hands and thus Caitlyn's experience was dramatically different – and the important of individual relationships. Also clear, from Caitlyn's shift into the role of regulator, is that it is not only audiences' experiences of the film which are subject to change; their experiences of the processes also change.

Limitations of this research

Researching audience memories of older films will always present problems with recruitment and the clarity of recollections, but choosing one of the most popular and most controversial films of all time as its subject certainly gave this study an advantage. However, there are limitations to this data set. Alongside the self-selection process for participants of any audience research, this study suffers from what oral historian Paul Thompson (2000: 51) calls "retrospective representativeness". Older people who saw *The Exorcist* upon its release in 1973

and 1974 have since passed away – participants here who saw it in the 1970s were all in their late teens and early twenties – making the pool of potential participants much smaller for that period. Due to generational differences, for example in religiosity, these older generations may have had unique views on the film. From news articles and film of protests, it is clear that members of the Nationwide Festival of Light (NFOL) and the clergy who spoke out against the film in 1973 and 1974 were older, ensuring that this study could not hope to capture protestors' sides of the story and the most negative opinions of the film.

Having complicated the reception of film in the cinema and responses to protests in Chapter 4, it would be remiss of this study not to allow the possibility for the same complexity for those protesting the film. Just as cinema-going can have a variety of motivations and social contexts which inform it, so too, it follows, can protesting. Motivations for protesting may have included everything from being concerned about the film's power to simply participating in a church activity out of a sense of duty or kinship. Opinions of the film formed by protesters, like anyone else's, were also not fixed and may have changed over time. It is thus important not to oversimplify protestors' actions using broad assumptions. Alison Parker's (1997) history and study of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) from 1873 to 1933, discusses how this kind of bottom-up, community censorship should not be thoughtlessly equated with the actions of national censor boards, governments, and those in power. Parker states this is a trap into which many avowedly anti-censorship researchers and historians fall (1997: 4). The WCTU, which is comparable in its aims to the NFOL, battled against practices and popular culture its members considered "impure" in a society they saw as being in decline. The WCTU consisted of women who had little authority of their own, particularly in a turn-of-the-century America which often denied women a say in the kind of culture in which they wished to live. When trying to humanise a history of cinema-going through analysis of individual experiences, it would be dishonest to dismiss another group as being one-note and without their own complexities just because they are not the subject of one's study. The memories of protestors are outside the scope of this study and, sadly, may not now be recoverable at all. Such an oversight leaves

this thesis as a rather limited and one-sided history of the reception of *The Exorcist*. However, this thesis is not a work of history. As this is first and foremost a study of audience processes, the lack of such accounts are not a major limiting factor. They are, however, sorely missed for their potential to complicate simplistic narratives about protests.

Recommendations for future studies

Absent from discussions of censorship in this study, which became a de facto study of childhood-viewing, are present-day child audiences. Sarah Smith's study of child audiences of the 1930s has little relevance to childhood viewing of the 1970s onwards, such has been the impact of home viewing technologies. A strong case can be made that Buckingham's 1990s studies (1993, 1996) are now similarly outdated with the advent of the internet and smartphones and their prevalent accessibility for children. More than ever, thinking of children's viewing habits in terms of systems of approval may be considered now outdated, given the unfettered access many have to media content. Buckingham in 2000's *After the Death of Childhood* took a closer look at more recent technological change and, even in 2000, was to report that 'the attempt to *protect* children by restricting their access to media is doomed to fail' (2000: 16). Buckingham instead argues for parents and educators to *prepare* children for media, rather than cutting them off from media deemed unsuitable (2000: 16). While the ubiquitousness of media content in the present day might suggest that parental regulation is now so impossible as to be irrelevant, participants in this study still expressed a desire to stop their own children and grandchildren (real, future and hypothetical) from accessing unsuitable materials. As this study has showed, even where parents try and fail to regulate their children's viewing habits this still has an enormous effect on children's viewing strategies and eventual memory of the event. Parental regulation may be near-impossible now, but attempts will still be made in earnest and these attempts *mean* something, as they did in this study, both *to* the parent and the child and *for* their relationship with one another. Technological changes, and changes in the type of media being consumed, demand more up-to-date studies of childhood viewing habits.

Religious belief in audiences, used in this study simply as a marker in helping to understand diachronic reception, is worthy of study in and of itself. This is one of the first audience studies to consider religiosity as a factor for audiences. Especially fascinating would be an investigation of how religious audiences experience religious films. A study by William Brown, John Keeler, and Terrence Lindvall (2007) of audiences of *The Passion of the Christ* (Gibson, 2004) presents audiences' opinions of the film, but it is a purely quantitative study. They conclude, 'more qualitative studies are needed to further explore how people acquire religious values, beliefs, and practices through the medium of film' (2007: 105). This study has shown the potential for such qualitative studies.

It would be of great interest to study the processes discussed in this thesis for a different kind of film. Religious films, as stated, would be a productive avenue, given the lack of representation of religious audiences in audience studies. However, it would also be fascinating to conduct further investigations into the family dynamic as it involves films. This study has highlighted the importance of the family in acts of regulation and sharing for one of the most controversial films of all time. How families watch films together is a hugely important factor in film experiences, particularly for children and parents. Processes of regulation and sharing do not apply only to horror films and diachronic reception would be just as interesting a topic for children's films or family-oriented classics such as *An American Tail* (Bluth, 1986), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981), or *Dirty Dancing* (Ardolino, 1986). It is hoped this study, particularly with a grounded audience studies approach which allows small studies where audiences define the research interests, provides a prompt for explorations of different kinds of media, old and new, popular and obscure.

Grounded audience studies

Grounded audience studies, the new approach to audience research offered by this thesis, is not without limitations. Not least among these is that is does not allow for the targeted asking of a specific research question, due to its avowed rejection of using pre-existing concepts and theories as the basis for one's research design.

However, its potential for investigations of historical audiences, cinema memory, and even contemporary research is enormous. This thesis is the first study of audiences to fully employ grounded theory methodology and as such offers an original approach for those wishing to conduct qualitative audience studies. The methodological description of Chapter 2 is written so as to function as a guide for researchers wishing to conduct a grounded audience study.

Grounded audience studies is a practical, flexible and, most importantly, participant-led methodology. Its use in this study led to the disregarding of proscriptive theories which have come to dominate audience studies, such as interpretive communities (Fish, 1980). This study privileged participants' experiences over logically deduced, "common sense" concepts that were not derived from or supported by data. Research questions were arrived at through the analysis of audience accounts to two broad, open-ended questions in the survey and subsequent interviews. The specific concerns of this study were thus co-authored with participants and not decided before the study began. In the emphasis on producing insights only from one's own data, grounded audience studies offers more than a new way to conduct audience research. It offers a challenge to the current model. Grounded audience studies is audience studies "from the bottom up". It allows participants to *actually* participate, rather than treating them as raw materials, and holds researchers personally accountable for the concepts and theories they use.

The constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2016) adopted in this study offers a way to account for the role of the researcher in generating data. Researchers have often tried to remove themselves from the project to lay claim to objectivity. The Glasserian and Straussian approaches to grounded theory are guilty of this, before Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory brought a much-needed aspect of reflexivity. Objectivity in audience research is not feasible. It is certainly not possible in the traditional model when the researcher is the person who sets the terms of the research and the frameworks within which the studied process is analysed. Qualitative research involves interpretation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011: 3). Too many researchers, particularly in audience studies, carry with them their own

biases and interests and merely use their participants to fill out the researcher's own arguments. The concept of objectivity, since it cannot be realistically obtained, needs to be discarded. The subjectivity of qualitative research should be embraced as a key strength. In embracing this, in accounting for it rather than making excuses for it, a researcher can employ grounded audience studies methods to co-construct the specific research questions of a project with its participants.

The possibility for audience studies of controversial, censored and violent texts and media to finally break free of the chains of the "effects tradition" is one too good to ignore. For too long, studies have been shackled to this idea of defending against the "effects tradition". Such studies are bound by the terms of investigation and discussion set, largely, by censorious British newspapers. As a result, the research is designed to fit researchers' pre-existing counter-argument and participants' data is used merely to furnish that argument. As admirable and useful as the studies are in numerous ways – many have been drawn up as a point of comparison for this study – this counter-argument has shaped entirely the research design of studies of childhood viewing (Buckingham, 1996) and of controversial films (Barker et al., 2001; Weir and Dunne, 2014). The best way to break free from this discursive prison is to set a new terrain of debate (after Barker et al., 2001: 12), to draw a new map of audiences' relationships with such films. This can only be achieved once researchers cast aside these issues which have been largely irrelevant for around twenty years (except for in tabloid journalism). Enough evidence now exists to disprove the link between media violence and its real-life counterpart. Journalists will always seek to attribute blame to a popular media when tragedy strikes. They do this not because there is proof, but because it is "common sense", it offers an easily understandable solution ("Ban it!"), and, crucially, because it is a story that will draw debate and eyeballs to their publication. This is their job. The BBFC have had enough proof at this point, even from their own commissioned research (see Cumberbatch, 2011; Barker et al., 2007). It is not in their interest to admit that there is no link, and neither is it safe for them to do so given the unpopularity of such an opinion with much of the public, including journalists and politicians. With this in mind, there is little need for aiming for "proof" that no link exists, nor indeed

for "proof" that public opinion sways the other way (as do Weir and Dunne, 2014). Such research simply continues a tired conversation when the other party is not invested enough to ever be swayed. In the meantime, this approach produces only research that speaks to the interests of researchers, journalists, and censors, not to audiences. Grounded audience studies presents a way forward by forcing researchers to leave the past behind. It offers a way to create a new framework for talking about violent and controversial media by involving its participants in driving the direction of the study through theoretical sampling and collaboration.

Grounded audience studies frees researchers from the shackles of "the effects tradition" and the unverifiable assumptions of "interpretive communities", among other such inheritances which speak to the past of audience studies rather than the lives of audiences. The analysis involves only their words. The findings are based only in their experiences. The grounded audience studies methodology, if adopted, has the potential to produce research which like never before actually speaks to audiences' experiences. When trying to free oneself of decades of proscriptive theory and assumptions about audiences, the best help for which one can hope is the input of participants who have not taken part in such studies, have never read such studies, and who, indeed, may fail to see the point in such studies.

In the process of conducting this project, I endeavoured to communicate with participants as much as possible to keep them involved even after their accounts had been taken. I designed and created a website, theexorcistproject.com, to share the project's progress and historical findings. This follows from the spirit of grounded theory methodology, which places the participants' concerns at the forefront of a researchers' mind and values their input as collaborators. Alan Brown (2017: 58) voiced strong concerns about the direction of the field of audience studies, that so many people are asked to submit thoughtfully drafted survey answers into the online void only for the project never to be heard of again. If the field continues in this fashion, treating participants as mere data, recruitment will soon become impossible and the field will face certain doom. The participant-led approach of grounded audience studies can produce findings which speak to everyday experiences and halt the field's slide into public apathy.

Findings

Research concerns emerged from participants' survey responses and early interviews as data was analysed concurrently with its generation. These concerns defined the direction of the project and were refined as further survey responses came in and more interviews were conducted. Research questions, arrived at through an inductive, exploratory, grounded theory methodology, were:

1) How are places recalled in memories of film experiences and to what extent can it be said that they contribute to the meaning of the film experience?

2) What effect do different processes of personal and parental censorship have on meaning and how does the memory of these serve a function for identity work?

3) What is the relationship between memories of film experiences and memories of the family and the family home? Do these factors also change over time to produce meaningful differences in how a film is remembered?

4) How might aspects of a person's identities influence the process of meaning-making for the film, the experience of watching it and the remembering of it, and what is communicated of these identities in the remembering?

5) How is the meaning of a film maintained or changed over time for participants, and what may be factors in such changes or in the absence of changes?

Chapter 4 examined the role of places; Chapter 5 dealt with censorship and parental regulation; Chapter 6 concerned itself with family-viewing and other social routines; and Chapter 7 addressed issues of long-term reception and memory. These chapters contribute to understandings of film-viewing processes in audience studies, censorship studies, memory studies (particularly the burgeoning interest in "cinema memory"), and, in a broader, methodological way, the field of film and cinema history. Theories created from data in this study present expansions to and challenges of previous thinking, along with the creation of theory where none previously existed, as in the case of censorship studies.

A theory of place and film

Chapter 4 analysed memories of cinema-going and the drive-in and theorised the impact of the viewing environment. Its key findings were as follows:

1) The cinematic surround, adapting Louise Anderson's (2013) term, encompasses more than the trappings related to the architecture and exhibition practices of a viewing environment. Equally important is the social context, which includes the dynamics of relationships with friends and family. This is especially important to the cinema, whose "loving darkness" (Kuhn, 2002: 122) is often over-romanticised and whose unfamiliarity is often exaggerated. The cinema and the drive-in were familiar places and, especially in rural areas, filled with familiar people. Accounts of the drive-in, particularly, demonstrate that the family dynamics of the home are not left there, and may still define film experiences outside of the home.

2) Physical and technological factors matter a great deal more than previously discussed elsewhere (for example in Kuhn, 2002; Stokes and Jones, 2017; and Smith, 2005), with sound systems particularly important. Viewing *The Exorcist* as fragmented visual or aural moments had an enormous effect on its potency for young children, sometimes so much so that it led to a near-phobia of the film, and technology was a factor in fragmenting the experience.

3) The age at which one watches a film has an enormous impact on how one remembers the experience. Participants who saw the film at a very young age are left with only "flashbulb memories" (Pillemer, 1998: 8), snapshots of emotions. Those who saw it when they were older talked less of their own emotional responses and were better placed to remember the context and compare their own responses with those of other audience members. Definable biological factors, such as age, serve considerably better when seeking explanations in differences in accounts, as interpretive communities, as a concept which focuses on undefinable cultural differences, is not fit for purpose.

Ultimately, direct relationships and concrete environmental and technological factors have great power when influencing the meaning of film experiences. Audiences are well aware of this and viewing strategies often take this into account,

for example where participants preferred to sit with friends at the cinema rather than the family with whom they arrived.

A personal model of censorship

The analysis of responses concerning parental regulation and self-censorship in Chapter 5 led to the theorising of a personal model of censorship, particularly for child audiences who are those most affected by censorship. The implications of a controversial film's reputation on meaning was studied closely by Barker et al. (2001), however, their study was of adult viewers of an arthouse thriller which was ultimately not censored. The study was also firmly entrenched in the battle against "the effects tradition", being a direct response to tabloid-generated controversy, and was restrained by this in the ways previously discussed. The findings of this grounded audience study concerning censorship were wide-ranging and a model for thinking about the effects of censorship on a personal level was offered:

1) Acts of censorship involve a regulator and a regulatee, and the regulator may be direct, potential, or indirect. Direct regulators are people who directly action censorship, including parents and cinema attendants. Potential regulators are those who would regulate viewing, but who have been circumvented. Indirect regulators are not individuals but groups who do not directly stop the viewing of a film. This includes film censors, who only have the power accorded to them by individuals upholding their wishes, though they do have limited powers of audience members less inclined to circumvent censorship and act to prompt processes of censorship for direct regulators, especially parents.

2) Audiences of controversial films may create hypothetical censors, a "figure of the censor". This is the opposite of Barker's (2016b: 123) "figure of the audience", in which censors and would-be censors create a hypothetical spectator who must be stopped from viewing the film. A "figure of the censor" is created by a spectator and represents those who he or she thinks may wish to stop their viewing of the film. Functionally, this is identity work, wherein the spectator differentiates him or herself from censorious groups.

3) The more direct the relationship between the regulator and the regulatee, the more action is required to circumvent regulation and the more meaningful this act of circumvention becomes for the regulatee. Due to the relative ease of circumventing the wishes of the BBFC and the MPAA even in the 1980s and 1990s – and the fact that official film censorship serves to simply inform parents' decisions – the most effective form of regulation is parental. Therefore, censorship has the most impact on meaning for children.

4) Circumventing regulation and watching a censored film has implications for meaning and the potential for identity work, for example in thinking of oneself as a rebel or outside of mainstream taste cultures. In childhood, this potential for identity work is very appealing and the watching of censored and parentally regulated films allows children a space to develop an identity separate from that of their family. To a lesser extent, the act of parental regulation is meaningful for the regulator and can serve in identity work, particularly where regulation is motivated by their own bad experiences with the film.

5) In almost every account, parental regulation was protectionist in nature. This undercuts the notion that censorship is an expression of anti-fandom and is a clash of tastes (as argued by me in Smith, 2018). Protection from parents was not always unwelcome. Sometimes, it was requested, with parents serving to mitigate the horrors of the film.

6) Film censors' recommendations are used only as a guide by parents, at most a suggestion that they may want to pre-screen the film before showing it to their children. This is worked into pre-existing systems of parental approval. There were no accounts of parents following censors' advice blindly. Echoing Buckingham's (1996: 262) findings, parents believe they know their children's thresholds for screen violence from seeing their reactions to films previously, including occasional misjudgements which led to upset.

7) Parents did not take the regulation of their children's viewing particularly seriously. Certainly, they did not take it as seriously as did the children in their efforts to circumvent it. Strict rules were often set in place, but punishments were rarely administered where children were found to have broken them.

8) Practices of parental regulation one is subjected to as a child may become models for one's own regulation practices later in life, as best demonstrated in Caitlyn and Gill's role reversal where a daughter became a censor figure, of sorts, for a mother often troubled by increasing violence in films. Caitlyn's protectionist motivations and openness about the process reflected the strategy used on her by her mother.

There is more to censorship than the industrial and the artistic. Its impact upon meaning, which is strongest for children, can greatly affect film experiences and the remembering of them.

A theory of the "home" in home viewing

Analysis of memories of viewing habits in the home with friends and family, particularly involved "gifting" and sleepovers, revealed a great deal about what the "home" in home viewing can mean:

1) Cinema-going is only a small part of film-viewing habits, the majority of which occur in the home and are thus inseparable from family dynamics in childhood. Films seen in the cinema live on through home viewing and in the study of an individual film through multiple periods it has become clear that a single film can occupy a special place in people's lives. As stated previously, this can be the case for any number of films which meet innumerable criteria, such as quality, being very sharable, and being a source for in-jokes and games.

2) Gifting a film, showing it to someone else, is a form of identity work, in line with Egan's (2020) findings about fathers sharing their love of Monty Python with their daughters. For parents, it allows them a moment to present themselves as a person with a situated past, as something more than the current mother or father role which they occupy. In friendship groups, it is highly desirable to be a taste-maker. Gifting also has a selfless quality, with enjoyment being taken from seeing another person responding to the film.

3) Contrary to findings concerning *Alien* (Barker et al., 2016) and Monty Python (Egan, 2020), which found that fathers were more likely to gift a film, *The Exorcist* was most often shared by mothers. While it is beyond the scope of this study to

establish the reasons for this difference, it is notable that such a difference does indeed exist, that gifting is not exclusive to fathers and that it varies from film to film.

4) Children have their own film culture. Over time, this has consisted of video-swapping, schoolyard gossip and posturing, sharing magazines, and film viewings at sleepovers. The space of the sleepover, the providing of which is an act of gifting in itself by the host, is a unique viewing environment often defined by a low investment in a film, which is usually just one of a number of planned entertainments.

The viewing environment of the home, judging from the above findings, is strongly defined by the people and the dynamics that drive behaviours within it.

A theory of memory and diachronic reception

The remembered detail and character of film experiences varies based on the important of relationships and places, as theorised in Chapter 7:

1) The diachronic reception of a film, being how its meanings are maintained or change over time, is greatly affected by changes in people's identities. Chief among these for *The Exorcist* was religious identity, including the loss of the religious beliefs of one's childhood. Not only was the film a different experience for those who believed in possession, it allowed those who did not a space to consider their beliefs, and even, for some who were driven to prayer by their experiences, to experiment with belief. Changes in personal identity, separate from the film and without re-watching it, can lead to a change in one's relationship with a film, as evidenced in Johnnie (interview, Canada) overcoming his phobia of *The Exorcist* after rejecting Christianity years later. This is the first time changes in people's personal identities has been seen to affect long-term reception – questions of diachronic reception are often based on changing societal standards (e.g., *Gone with the Wind* and race issues in Taylor, 1989) – and this study has presented the very first exploration of the importance of audiences' religious identities.

2) Inaccuracies in memories of film experiences and a film's content are common. This is increasingly likely where there has been a long time since the experience and

where there were no novel features of the viewing which set it apart from a normal film-viewing routine. At the cinema, protests and extreme audience responses from other people made seeing *The Exorcist* a memorable experience. Where there are no novel features of the viewing, the film is less likely to be remembered accurately.

3) There is a link between the re-watching of a film and the clarity of memories of first encounters with it, suggesting that experiencing the film again acts to reinforce those first memories. Memories of childhood events are reinforced by parents as they talk to their children about said events over the years (Peterson, 2002: 53), providing a foundation for them. Re-watching *The Exorcist* acts to prompt memories of that first encounter, creating a foundation for those memories with each subsequent viewing in the same way. The act prompts almost a rehearsal of the participants' stories of that first time as they either experience the same emotions again or are able to contrast their emotions against those at that first encounter. Where *The Exorcist* was not watched for a second time, the details of the film became fuzzy, even where first impressions were favourable.

4) The age at which participants are asked to recall their film experiences is a factor in the detail, content, and character of their recollections. This is particularly clear where older participants express various forms of nostalgia, in line with Vanessa May's (2016: 13) findings. Studies of cinema-going in a specified period (e.g., Kuhn, 2002; Smith, 2005), are bound to a set of participants all of the same age and in the same general stages of their lives. A study of a single film over its forty-six-year lifespan reveals different kinds of memories and different ways of talking about them.

5) When an encounter with *The Exorcist* as a child led to a near-phobia of the film, re-watching at a later age often worked, and was at least always intended to work, to conquer participants' fears. Its opposite strategy is one of avoidance. In both strategies, there are factors outside of the film itself – particularly maturing with age – which dampen the impact of a film on a second attempt.

6) Individual films matter a great deal in cinema-going and film-viewing memories. This is by no means the consensus in historical audience studies, which states that

individual films fade into insignificance and it is only the routine and social experience that is remembered (Kuhn, 2002; Anderson, 2013). Such findings, of course, came from *studies of cinema-going*. When asked about a specific film experience, rather than the routine of cinema-going, participants were keen to discuss *The Exorcist* and a number of other films that stood out, which were memorable for a whole host of reasons. Memorable experiences were with films as diverse as *Bullitt* (Yates, 1968), *The Little Mermaid* (Clements and Musker, 1989), and *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night 2* (Pittman, 1987). *The Exorcist* and these other films, as memorable experiences, were used to colour descriptions of routines. Memories of the person with whom they watched *The Exorcist* and the specific time in their life are recalled which may otherwise be missed. There is great value in exploring memories of individual films, in painting a broader picture by investigating the finer details.

In all, the widely accepted adage of cinema memory studies that individual films do not matter is rather a narrow conception of the role of films in the sociality and dynamics of audiences. Memories of cinema-going are presented often as being the aggregate of a routine. When one concentrates on the aggregate, it does not preclude the existence of the individual experiences. The aggregate is indeed *defined* by its difference to the outliers, to the more extreme experiences, to an *Exorcist*, to a *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) or a *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977). When one speaks of aggregates, one loses the colour and the texture of what a film-viewing experience can be. Each next experience has the potential to be exceptional in some way. To speak only in aggregates about "cinema-going" is to flatten this potential of film experiences. Audiences do not go to the cinema hoping to have exactly the same experience as last time. There is always a hope that it could be more.

The home is defined by relationships and these relationships, whether they involve gifting or regulation or religious upbringings, can define not only the initial encounter with the film but the place of the film in one's memory. Much of this study has been a study of childhood viewing, yet even when one leaves the childhood home behind its spectre remains. The self of the present cannot help but

compare and contrast with the self of the past. *The Exorcist*'s nature as a uniquely horrifying yet deeply religious film, released during "the death of Christian Britain" (Brown, 2009), allowed for insights into long-term reception, into how a film changes for people as they themselves change over the course of their lives. What was scary for a child fell away in adulthood. What was true for a child changed greatly as the beliefs of previous generations were left behind.

Going forward

Film audiences have been much explored in terms of their demographic particulars, such as their class, race, gender and nationality. What this study has found, and what I emphatically argue, is that none of these variables matter to participants nearly as much as do their relationships to those around them when making sense of a film or of their memories of films. Demographics are something into which people are placed by those in power, be it the government, be it marketeers, or be it researchers conducting a study. Of course, a person can commit themselves to a demographic as part of their identity construction, and these things must play a part in how a person perceives the world. From this study, however, it is clear that the act of viewing and remembering films is an incredibly personal one. The imposition of a researcher's politics upon the audiences they are researching is exactly that, an imposition. Not one participant discussed race or sexuality or gender or nationhood when recalling their experiences with *The Exorcist*. And they certainly discussed nothing that would relate to the psychoanalytic readings which have until now dominated academic discussion of the film (Clover, 1987; Creed 1993; Scahill, 2015).

Martin Barker cited interpretive communities in his list of 'almost unarguable certain truths about audiences' (2006: 125). In the same article, when listing his ambitions for the field of audience studies, Barker stated that it was essential for this "vital" concept to be made measurable and testable by researchers (2006: 129). That it remains neither measurable nor testable twelve years after this call to action is a testament to the concept's unreliability. The continued use of the concept results in participants' experiences being "explained" by researcher-

imposed categories, such as nationality, gender, sexuality or race, which may not align with how participants see themselves. In practice, the use of unmeasurable, untestable interpretive communities is in this way as intellectually dishonest as is using a hypothetical spectator's unmeasurable, untestable "subconscious" to explain the "effect" of a film on audiences with psychoanalytic jargon. Researchers have taken a logically deduced hypothesis from another field and applied it wholesale to their own because of its explanatory power, despite its investigative impotency and flattening of audiences' experiences.

As a metaphor for how different people make sense of the same texts, Fish's (1980) concept of interpretive communities is useful; as a concept which forms the basis for audience research, it is misleading and robs participants of their individuality and their agency. In a grounded audience study, participants define themselves in their own words. No claims are made of participants that they have not made for themselves. They are not subjected to psychoanalysis by a film scholar with no background in psychology and with no reference to recent literature on psychology. Their experiences are not widely categorised by demographic information. Put simply, participants, in a grounded audience study, remain people.

Participants here did not care all that much about the meaning of the film text itself, apart from in the sense of how it made them feel and how it brought them closer to another person, or to an understanding of themselves. The latter occurred through the questioning of their own responses to and feelings about the film and how these changed over time. It sometimes occurred through the prompting of religious questions, such as, "Why did I believe in this as a child?" A grounded audience study is the bridge with which it is possible to cross this canyon between academic discourses and the everyday experiences of audiences. The flexible, iterative and, most vitally, participant-driven approach of grounded theory is an absolute gift to audience studies. Rather than developing a carefully composed question to put to audiences, a grounded audience study allows said audiences to participate in the asking as well as the answering, based on their own priorities. Grounded audience studies is audience studies from the bottom up. I offer the findings of this thesis as an expansion of and challenge to the accepted wisdom of

contemporary and historical audience studies and present a viable alternative methodology which has as its foremost concern the experiences of everyday audiences.

This thesis urges audience studies to move away from the overused generalisations and groupings of other studies. I do not argue for completely individual experiences where no two experiences are the same and the entire project of audience research is invalidated; instead, I argue only for the tightening of groupings used. In order to be truly reflective of everyday processes, groups under discussion must be clearly defined with concrete characteristics, the opposite of how interpretive communities are used. The only groupings which reflect everyday processes are those which are present in participants' responses, rather than categories imposed by researchers. Taking such liberties with participants and their data leads to work in which they cannot recognise their own experience, to generalisations so broad that participants' voices are lost. Many studies, especially early fan studies and work on horror audiences, are thinly veiled attempts to "rescue" the reputations of particular films, genres, or fan bases. Horror audiences are rescued from stereotypes about being depraved perverts and *Star Trek* fans are shown to be proactive and creative enthusiasts, rather than simple trainspotters. Such rescue efforts, which at the time revolutionised the course of audience research, are no longer necessary. Such rescue projects which once served to redirect the flow of film studies away from textual analyses and industrial histories now serve only to further the interests of the researcher at the expense of those who give up their time, energy, and privacy to recount their experiences. Groupings must come from the data themselves, rather than being determined ahead of time. Researchers must operate *alongside* participants, not above them.

What the experience of *The Exorcist* meant to people the first time they saw it, and what it means to them now, is a matter of relations. It is bound up with their thoughts of those who watched it with them or those who refused to, with those who told them about it or those who warned them away, and with memories of the rituals and routines which make up a person's life, of which *The Exorcist* became a part.

Appendix I

Survey template

1) Can you remember when you first saw *The Exorcist*?

    On first release in 1973/4

    The 1970s/80s

    The 1990s

    The 2000s

    Since 2010

2) What can you remember about that first viewing? How much did you know about the film beforehand? Has your view of the film changed over the years at all? Tell us as much as you can! Please use the back of this survey if needed.

3) On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being great, how good would you have rated the film at the time? Please circle.

4) On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being incredibly scary, how scary would you say you found the film on this first viewing? Please circle.

5) What kind of film viewer would you class yourself as? Please pick one that comes closest to describing yourself.

    Casual fan/occasional film viewer

    Film fan

    Film student/scholar

I follow particular kinds/genres of film

I like to keep up with interesting new releases

I think of myself as a film expert/professional

6) How old are you?

7) Where do you live?

8) What gender do you identify as?

9) Please specify your ethnicity.

10) If you would be willing to be contacted to take a more involved role in this research, potentially being interviewed, please write your contact information below. An email address or phone number is fine.

Appendix II

Early interview template

This interview template was used in early interviews. Interviewees were sourced primarily from their survey responses, so this template was tailored to reflect information already given. As the project progressed, questions were dropped and added based on avenues being explored, as detailed in discussions of theoretical sampling in the methodology chapter.

1) Introduction. Briefly describe the project's aims, progress, and funding. Ask permission to record the conversation. If there is anything you do not remember, that is to be expected. If there is anything you want to talk about as it comes up, please do not feel like you have to stick to my questions.

2) Open with a question about something they have already said in their survey related to their first experience watching *The Exorcist*.

3) First experience. (If they don't remember any answers to these questions, ask them about the last time they saw it. They may talk about the first as a comparison.)

      a) Was it at the cinema? Did you watch it at home?

           i) What was the cinema like? Can you describe it?

           ii) Was it your usual one?

4) How old were you at the time?

5) Who was there?

6) How did you feel about watching the film? Excited? Nervous? Not bothered?

7) How much did you know about the film before you saw it?

8) What drew you to the film?

9) Had you watched similar films to *The Exorcist* before? Is this the kind of film you would normally watch now/as a child?

10) How did it make you feel while watching it?

11) Did the film make you feel anything besides scared?

12) Could you get a sense of how other people felt about the film?

13) What about after the film was over? Did these feelings stay with you long?

14) What do you normally look for in a film?

15) How do you normally watch films?

16) Are there any moments in the film that stood out for you that first time?

    a) Why did that stand out?

    b) How does this scene play out now for you, watching the film back? Does it have the same impact?

    c) Are there other scenes which you find more interesting now?

17) Have your views of the film changed at all over the years?

18) What makes you want to re-watch the film?

19) What kind of themes or characters normally scare you in films? Can you describe any moments from other films that have scared you? In the same/a different way? Is there a reason for that do you think?

20) How do you feel about the religious aspects of the film? Did they have an effect on you? Are they interesting or important to you? Do they have any bearing on how you feel about the film?

    a) Would you consider yourself a religious or a spiritual person?

b) Did you have a religious upbringing?

21) If you could watch the film again, completely fresh for the first time, what would be the ideal way to watch it? (Place, people, time, snacks, what would you do before and after.)

22) Can you talk about your experiences with any films or stories you've watched or read that relate to *The Exorcist*? Maybe the book or any other films in the franchise or similar films over the years?

a) How does the film compare?

23) Is there anything else you think might be relevant in your background to how you feel about the film? Maybe your family background or any experiences you have had?

a) Where do you live?

b) Where were you living when you saw *The Exorcist* the first time?

c) What do you do for a living?

d) What is your involvement with films usually? Are you a fan, a more casual viewer, or are you not too bothered about them?

24) Can I ask what made you want to take part in this research?

25) Is there anything else you would like to mention that maybe links with anything we have spoken about today? Anything I may have missed or just something you want to talk about?

26) If you decide later that you would rather not have something in print – if you have said something and you're not sure you want to share that after all – you can always send me an email and we can look at editing it out. I do not want to publish anything you're not comfortable about.

27) Thanks and goodbye, providing contact details if necessary.

Appendix III

Focus group template

1) What did everyone think? Can we just go round everyone quickly one at a time and just hear what you thought of the film? Did you like it? Did you think it was good? Was it scary?

2) Was this the first time anyone had seen it? Was it different to what you were expecting?

3) For those who'd seen it before, how was this screening different from the first time you saw the film? Did you notice anything new? Did it make you feel anything different? Had you forgotten any of it?

4) How do you feel about the religious aspects of the film? Is *The Exorcist* a religious film in your mind? Do you find these elements interesting? Do they make it more or less scary?

5) How would you describe how you watch films generally now versus how you watched them as a kid? Is there much difference? Is there anything different about how you watch a horror film? Did you do anything different as a kid when you watched a horror film vs anything else? Did you have to get permission to watch them? Did you watch them in groups more, in sleepovers or anything like that?

6) What makes a film scary? Does the setting help make something scarier (i.e., home vs cinema vs screening room)? What's the scariest film you've ever seen, and what made it scary? How does *The Exorcist* compare?

7) How does the age of the film affect how you look at it? How do you think people would've been reacting to it in the 1970s? What would your parents make of the film?

8) If you had to describe the film to someone who had never heard of it before, just in a couple of sentences, how would you describe it?

Appendix IV

Project data

Please consult the enclosed CD which features all anonymised survey responses in an .xlsx file and a document containing full interview transcripts, focus group indexes, and an NVivo codebook of all codes generated from these sources.

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