



MOVIEGOERS IN MANHATTAN REACT TO *THE EXORCIST'S* DEADLY MIXTURE OF SEX, VIOLENCE AND EVIL

## BEHAVIOR

### Exorcist Fever

In a quiet Beverly Hills, Calif., neighborhood, residents have been awakened at dawn as thousands of people gather for an 8 a.m. showing at a theater seating 1,450. Every day 5,000 moviegoers stand in the long queue wrapped around the Sack 57 Cinema in Boston. Four Manhattan theaters have lines extending for blocks from noon to midnight. In its first five weeks, *The Exorcist* (TIME, Jan. 14-21) has rung up more than \$10 million at box office cash registers in 20 cities. Glowing—and gloating—Warner Bros. executives predict that it will easily top the alltime moneymaker *The Godfather*, which grossed more than \$155 million for Paramount.\*

Daily the lines grow longer—raising the suspicion that the film's popularity may be less a show-business phenomenon than a lesson in crowd psychology. "I'm the first on our street to see it," chirped one suburban matron. All kinds of people, it seems, have been infected by *Exorcist* fever. Teenage girls on triple-tier wedgies teeter down the aisle behind pin-striped businessmen carrying briefcases. A silver-haired woman clutching a sandwich wrapped in waxed paper slides uneasily into a seat next to a middle-aged naval officer. Most audiences, however, tend to be young and to contain a far higher than average proportion of blacks and, in some cities, people of Spanish origin. "Voodoo, you know," a black file clerk said matter-of-factly.

**Flying Furniture.** "I want to see it before it's banned," explained one proper Bostonian. Many people say that they go simply because everyone warned them not to; others are fascinated by the special effects, like the bedroom scene

with the flying furniture, or are curious to see the girl vomiting pea soup or mutilating herself with a crucifix. Still other viewers yearn to be scared. "To be strictly honest, I'm morbid," admitted one college student. "It's a cult; you have to see this movie," said another. "It's the beat 'em and bleed 'em creeping-crawlies cult," grinned a third.

The Archbishop of Canterbury had another explanation. "I think it's part of the religious trend that's going on, the craving for the supernatural, the interest in the nonmaterial," said the Most Rev. Arthur Michael Ramsey, who arrived in Manhattan for a lecture tour. "Genuine cases of demonic possession are a minority," he added. "If there's an immense craze on the subject, it is a sign of spiritual immaturity."

Dr. Ari Kiev, a psychiatrist at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, thinks that *The Exorcist* somehow unveils the innermost unexpressed concerns of many people. "It acknowledges the presence of evil; if people are attracted to this film, then that is what is in their subconscious. Then again, many patients see themselves as the devil."

Others see themselves as his victim. A prominent Midwest Catholic theologian received dozens of calls from confused people fearful that they were losing their grip on reality. A number of priests reported receiving inquiries from people who believed themselves possessed. After seeing the film, two young Chicagoans required hospitalization. "They're way out in leftfield," said Dr. Louis Schlan, psychiatrist and medical director of Riveredge Hospital in Forest Park, Ill. "They see themselves possessed by Satan."

Many others who have seen the film experience nightmares, hysteria and an undefined, but nevertheless profound apprehension. "It is dangerous for people with weak ego control," explains Dr. Vladimir Piskacek, a Manhattan sociologist and psychiatrist, "but it would not cause psychosis." Small children may suffer from hallucinations after see-

ing *The Exorcist*, but Dr. Piskacek doubts that the film would permanently impair even an immature mind.

Predictably, there are widespread objections to the film's R rating, which permits youths under 17 to see it if accompanied by a parent. Manhattan Child Psychiatrist Hilde Mosse warns that the film provides a "deadly mixture of sex, violence and evil. The idea that we can solve our problems by magic instead of by rational solutions is destructive. I lived through this before Hitler came to power. He said, 'Listen to the language of your pure Germanic blood, your unconscious.' The Jews in Germany then became the devil to be exorcised. The only thing *The Exorcist* can do," Dr. Mosse concludes emphatically, "is to pull young people down to a primitive level."

**Badge of Honor.** For some, sitting through the film has become a badge of honor, like riding the steepest roller coaster in the amusement park. "I've been in this business 47 years, and I've never seen anything like it," asserted Los Angeles Theater Manager Harry Francis. He estimates that each performance exacts an audience toll of four blackouts, half-a-dozen bouts of vomiting and multiple spontaneous exits.

Meantime, from Aspen, Colo., where he is at work on "another theological thriller," *The Exorcist's* author, William Peter Blatty, grumbled: "I'm sick of hearing that the movie is a success because of a rediscovery of the occult. A thousand or more books have been written on the occult in the last ten years—they've each sold about ten copies." Blatty acknowledges that *The Exorcist* was plagued by a "series of disasters": halfway through the filming, fire destroyed the set, and the man who was playing the director died. But he notes: "There has been a devil theory that sinister forces were annoyed by the film. I don't attach any significance to it. Still," he adds with a sly smile, "I would like to think that somebody down there doesn't like me."

\*Even more horrifying movies may now be under consideration. *Exorcist* Director William Friedkin commented before his film opened: "I think *The Exorcist* will be a bellwether. If it wins a wide audience, that may give the studios courage to handle more ambitious themes with more graphic scenes."