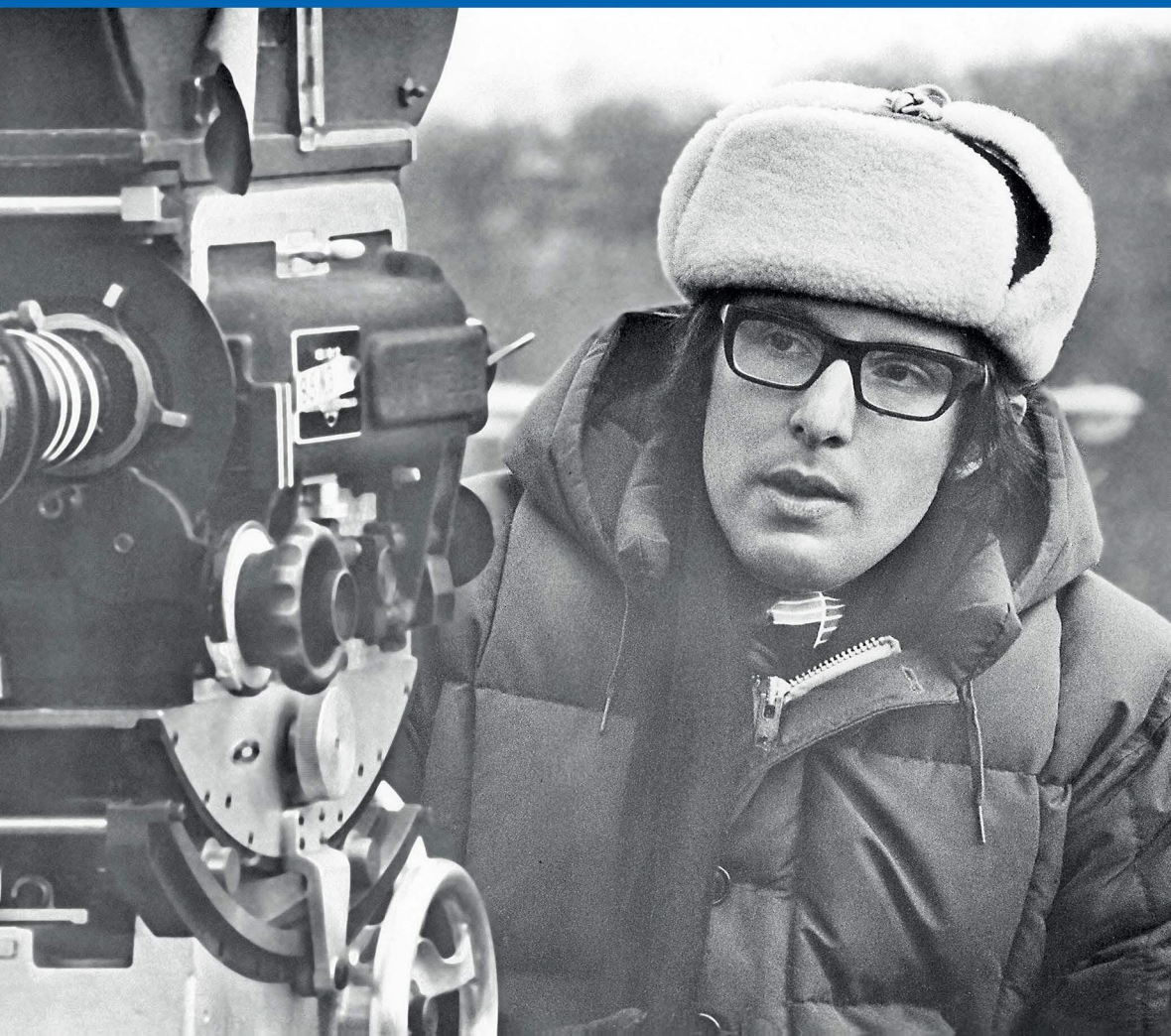




ReFocus

# The Films of William Friedkin

STEVE CHOE



## ReFocus: The Films of William Friedkin



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Steve Choe

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Cover image: *The French Connection* (1971) directed by William Friedkin.

Shown on the set: director William Friedkin © Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation/Photofest

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# Acknowledgments

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I am grateful to the editors of the ReFocus series for providing me with the opportunity to research and write this book. This project came at a fortuitous time in the course of my thinking about the moving image, after my book on contemporary Korean cinema was published in 2016, which allowed me to continue to think about the issues around politics, emotions, and ethics I raised there. I knew *The Exorcist* since I was a teenager and saw *The French Connection* while in college but I became engrossed with *Sorcerer* a bit later. The audacious aims of the film and its hallucinatory ending were particularly striking for me. Before I knew much about the rest of Friedkin's oeuvre, I was fascinated that these films, each different from the other in genre and scope, were made one after another and by the same director. *Sorcerer* has typically been understood as exemplary of the outsized pretensions of New Hollywood filmmaking in the late '70s, along with Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate*, Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York*, and Francis Ford Coppola's *One From the Heart*. I don't dispute this historicization, as it helps periodize this era of Hollywood filmmaking, but the more I learned about Friedkin, the more I realized that *Sorcerer* was also about a series of ideas that span much of his work, despite their variety and diverse range. I began to think about *Sorcerer* as a film about the lived experience of time, allegorized through the timespan of the cinema. The project has allowed me to pursue deeper research into other films by this auteur, many of which were forgotten or received negatively by critics at the time, and to consider ideas that critics, scholars, and Friedkin himself may have missed. Coincidentally, some of these problems were those I had been analyzing in my previous work and so I was thrilled to develop them further within a new historical context.

I am especially grateful to colleagues, friends, and students who have entertained dialogue with me about Friedkin and his cinema. These individuals



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Finally, I would like to acknowledge Jeffrey Winter. My hope is that the final results of this project have realized some of its initial aspirations.

*December 2020*

# Introduction

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On February 25, 2016, William Friedkin, the Hollywood director of *The French Connection* in 1971 and *The Exorcist* in 1973, was interviewed by Marc Maron on his podcast, *WTF with Marc Maron*. In his two-hour conversation with the comedian, the 81-year-old filmmaker speaks about the films, music, and art that inspired him and the television programs, operas, and films he directed. Friedkin has an excellent capacity for recall, particularly for names and dates, and is an engrossing storyteller. On the podcast he eloquently recounts stories about meetings for lunch with Billy Wilder and dinner parties at the house of Francis Ford Coppola (with the food prepared by George Lucas), and reveals thoughtful insights about working with Gene Hackman, Tommy Lee Jones, and others on his most well-known as well as his lesser-known productions. Although Friedkin was bar mitzvahed, the director, perhaps inexplicably, tells Maron of his long admiration for the “teachings of Jesus.” In fact, while he was in Turin to direct Verdi’s *Aida* at the Teatro Regio, he was invited to see the Shroud of Turin by the last surviving relative of the Savoia kings, Serge of Yugoslavia. While he was aware of the issues surrounding the authenticity of the Shroud, it proved to be an especially dramatic experience:

Serge arranged this private showing for eight people to which Sherry and I were invited. After the noon mass had completely let out, a big black limousine came around the corner with the Bishop of Piedmonte and two or three priests accompanying him. And Serge said to us, “You will have to kiss his ring.” We kissed the ring, both of us. Then we went inside to the empty basilica. As you walk toward the rather ornate altar, on the left-hand side is a long room, covered from outside with leaded glass and from inside with velvet drapes that remained shut for a hundred years.

Serge handed the keys to this room to the bishop who opened the doors. They rolled back the drapes and now we are in a room that was probably twice as big as this room, fifteen by ten, probably thirty by twenty. And the only thing you see in the room is just to the left of the altar. The only thing you see in the room is a painting of Jesus, and I don't know who it was by, it does not seem to be a well-known or famous portrait, and you see a rug. The priests—there were eight of us—and the priests rolled back the rug, and there's a foot pedal. The bishop placed his foot on the pedal, at Serge's invitation, and up from the floor rises this table that's about fifteen feet long. After the rug is rolled back, it's covered by a red velvet cloth with an embroidered gold crucifix. They roll that back, and beneath leaded glass on the table is the outline of a crucified man in blood. The most current DNA has shown, and they're pretty good with the DNA now, that that image of the crucified man is not paint, certainly not photography, because its existence has been known since the third century, photography goes back to the nineteenth century. It is in fact type AB blood. It's the outline of a crucified man including the outline of a crown of thorns and there's an outline of blood in the chest where the Centurian Spear was supposed to have gone. You're looking at the image of a crucified man whose palms are crossed but they have been nailed through. His ankles are crossed with one nail through both ankles. You see the outlines in blood of this image. And my wife and I and everyone else in the room burst into tears. As I think of it now my eyes tear up. And we see what is the image of a crucified man. In other words, we see, before us, man's inhumanity to man. Bang. I don't know if it's Jesus . . . My wife and I, who are both Jewish, burst into uncontrollable tears because of the power of this image.

The drama of “man's inhumanity to man” compelled Friedkin and his partner, Sherry Lansing, who was CEO of Paramount from 1992 to 2004, to break down and weep before the sight of the Shroud. The traces of blood indicate that the man wrapped in it was subjected to violence and suffered in pain. Friedkin's reaction, as he recalls it, was induced by the “power of this image,” even as its authenticity remains in question. Nevertheless it was an image that solicited a dramatic, emotional, bodily response. One is reminded here of André Bazin's essay on photography and a footnote making the connection between the Shroud and visual media explicit: “Let us merely note in passing that the Holy Shroud of Turin combines the features alike of relic and photograph.” The Shroud has inscribed on it traces of the past, allowing the viewer to take in the image of a man who once lived and is no longer, while functioning as an *aide-mémoire* for the story of how he died. This story is not only significant within the theological context—Friedkin performed a great deal of research on Jesus

and his historical milieu—but in the context of universal, secular humanity as well. It attests to the capacity for humans to sympathize with the suffering of others and, perhaps, the melodramatic character of this image of suffering.

In an interview that I conducted with the director in 2017, I brought up this experience he related to Maron and asked about his relationship to Christianity and with Catholicism more specifically. To be sure, Friedkin recognizes that his interest in Catholic faith is as an outsider, of someone who was not raised within this tradition. He nevertheless believes in its wisdom and, as it turns out, some of its basic tenets will find their way into his films as well.

All I can tell you in answer to that is I strongly believe inherently in the teachings of Jesus Christ. But I'm not a Catholic, I'm not a Christian. I was raised in the Jewish faith. I never felt particularly close to it because I never understood the language. The religion that interests me the most is Catholicism, but not the practice of it . . . So the value of religion: people need something to hold onto that's greater than themselves. I do. To the extent that you rely on that, that's an individual thing, but it's the mystery of faith.

The “mystery of faith” will be a key phrase for interpreting a number of Friedkin's films. For this mystery is relevant not only for understanding the role Catholicism plays in the filmmaker's life but also for how it raises questions around belief in the image, cinematic and otherwise. The filmmaker's experience of the Shroud is exemplary, then, for the power of the image, even when it may be suspected of being inauthentic or fake, can still move viewers to tears. It can raise problems around violence, around its ethics and justification, the relationship between morality and law, the spectacle of suffering and its solicitation of sympathy, and around the possibility of redemption. These are issues that for Friedkin have become like obsessions and are articulated within the mode of popular cinema.

\* \* \*

This book is an attempt to refocus our understanding of the films of William Friedkin, particularly those that have not been celebrated or recognized, and to try to bring the issues that concern them as a whole into greater relief. *The Exorcist* and the Academy Award-winning *The French Connection*, two paramount films of the New Hollywood generation of filmmaking, are his most successful and well-known works. These films set new standards for the scope of the genres in which they are typically categorized and now occupy a kind of mythic status in our culture. They are the ones that have received the

lion's share of attention by scholars and critics, and Friedkin himself discusses *The Exorcist* and *The French Connection* most often in public. On the other hand, many filmgoers will have at least heard of or be familiar with *To Live and Die in L.A.* from 1985. Others will perhaps know that in 1970 Friedkin made a film adaptation of Mart Crowley's off-Broadway play, *The Boys in the Band*, that he directed the ambitious *Sorcerer*, which was met with crushing failure at the box office, and perhaps be aware that he made the highly controversial *Cruising* in 1980, which incited protests during its filming and release. Most will likely not know that he adapted Harold Pinter's play, *The Birthday Party*, that he filmed an interview with the octogenarian German director Fritz Lang in 1975, that he remade *12 Angry Men* as a television movie in 1997, or that he took on smaller film projects, working on a scale more typical of independent filmmaking, in more recent adaptations of two intense plays by Tracy Letts. The director of a horror film that is often called the scariest movie of all time made almost twenty feature films and over a dozen fictional and documentary productions for television. And while only a few of these could be counted as belonging to the horror genre, which is typically how *The Exorcist* is categorized, his oeuvre encompasses a wide range of popular genres, from crime thrillers and dramas to action and adventure films, including even a couple of comedies. The director is aware that *The Exorcist* is often understood by critics and historians as a pivotal text in horror film history but he will typically reiterate that he became interested in William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* after he first read it in 1971 because he understood it as a story about the "mystery of faith."<sup>2</sup> His filmic adaptation was intended not only to be horrifying but also "transcendent, as Blatty has intended."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is this experience of transcendence, realized by a largely secular individual who has a particular admiration for the discourse of the Catholic church, that can be linked to his response to the Shroud. Reconsidering and rethinking most of his feature-length productions, this book will attempt to renew our estimation of them, and in doing so, allow us to consider his well-regarded films in conjunction with those that are less known and even disliked.

The failure of Friedkin's *Sorcerer* in 1977 is typically understood, by critics and the filmmaker himself, as being a watershed moment in his career. As he was filming and editing it, he thought that this remake of Henri-Georges Clouzot's *The Wages of Fear* would constitute his magnum opus, the work that would sum up his ideas surrounding the relationship between human agency and fate. "Here was a film," he remarked in 1990, "that I set out to do, that was more than I realized at the time expressing my own cynicism, my own dark side, and I felt that it was pretty good."<sup>4</sup> Friedkin also believed, with some hubris, that it would be as successful as *The Exorcist* at the box office and predicted that it would gross at least \$90 million, about the same amount the 1973 film garnered at the time *Sorcerer* was in production in 1976. "Was this bluster and bravado?

Hardly. I believed it,” the director recalls.<sup>5</sup> It opened to terrible reviews and also had the unfortunate fate of being released one month after *Star Wars*. George Lucas’s film opened to a limited number of cinemas but it quickly became a runaway blockbuster hit as well as originating a franchise that has since attained mythic pop culture status. Friedkin’s film played for only a week at the Chinese Theater in Los Angeles before it was overtaken by *Star Wars*. Critics at the time wondered why anyone would want to remake Clouzot’s masterpiece and charged the director for “sinfully” creating an inferior copy of the original.<sup>6</sup> Following a complicated production process that involved two major studios, Paramount and Universal, and a final cost that went way over budget, Friedkin was devastated when the film earned less than one-tenth of what he expected. Indeed, other New Hollywood directors such as Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich, and Michael Cimino experienced failure by the end of the 1970s, due at least to the changing conditions of production, distribution, and exhibition in Hollywood. As David A. Cook writes, many well-known auteurs of the 1970s “experienced a reversal of fortune from the beginning to the end of the decade because so much changed so rapidly. Friedkin’s was simply more dramatic than most, because he had been briefly at the pinnacle of the blockbuster pyramid in the process of its formation.”<sup>7</sup>

*Sorcerer* was followed by a string of films that received either lukewarm or intensely adverse responses from critics and audiences. *The Brink’s Job*, *Cruising*, *Deal of the Century*, *Rampage*, *The Guardian*, *Jade*: with one underperforming release after another, the 1980s and much of the 90s were particularly unkind to the director. In a *Sight and Sound* article called “Whatever Happened to William Friedkin?,” the author explains that the filmmaker, “as a ‘man of the 70s’, went on making genre films with an uncompromisingly dark view of man and society, at a time when that darkness grew increasingly unfashionable, first with audiences, and then with the (always craven) critics.”<sup>8</sup> In his personal life, Friedkin suffered a heart attack in 1981 while driving on the freeway. He fortunately recovered but had to undergo physical therapy for months in order to relearn how to walk. When the director returned to full health, he vowed to learn from his past mistakes and produce better films. But his new releases would invariably be compared to *The Exorcist* and *The French Connection*, and critics typically echoed uninformed or even unfair comparisons to these unique works. In 2012, a reviewer recounts a list of “nonsense” that has “riddled” Friedkin’s résumé since 1973 and then writes that the director’s newest production at the time, *Killer Joe*, “continues that downward trend, and with any luck it will be the last we hear of William Friedkin.”<sup>9</sup> Despite the craven wishes of critics that he somehow go away, and though his films never enjoyed the incredible success of his earlier ones, the man of the ’70s continued to produce and never compromised on his thematic preoccupations. Each film is driven by a set of questions that enable us to think of all the films of Friedkin as a body of work.

Meanwhile, *The Boys in the Band* was remade in 2020, directed by Joe Mantello and distributed on Netflix, and a feature-length film of *The Exorcist* is reportedly in the works for theatrical release in 2021. This time around, film critics seem to be more forgiving of the ostensible sin of remaking original films of the past. A documentary directed by Francesco Zippel called *Friedkin Uncut* was shown at festivals and cinemas in 2019, featuring interviews with collaborators and actors with whom he worked. In 2020, another documentary, called *Leap of Faith: William Friedkin on The Exorcist*, was released, this one directed by Alexandre O. Philippe and which delves into the ideas that informed Friedkin during the production of his 1973 blockbuster. In an ironic turn of fate, a number of the director's works, including *Sorcerer* and *Cruising*, have more recently enjoyed a reassessment within the popular and scholarly discourse. The writer Stephen King, in an article for the BFI, remarks that, "My favourite film of all time—this may surprise you—is *Sorcerer*, William Friedkin's remake of the great Henri-Georges Clouzot's *The Wages of Fear*. Some may argue that the Clouzot film is better; I beg to disagree."<sup>10</sup> When the Blu-ray disc of *Cruising* was released in 2019, critics did not denounce it as a homophobic screed that linked homosexuality with violence, as they did when the film was first released in theaters. One contemporary reviewer has called it a "gloriously messy BDSM thriller" while others acknowledge its daring and unabashed portrayal of gay desire, before the AIDS crisis would make such depictions increasingly rare in Hollywood. Film scholars have devoted essays, book chapters, and even an entire monograph to *Cruising*.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, an excellent anthology of essays devoted to *The Boys in the Band* was published in 2016. And more recently, a selection of interviews featuring the director was published in the "Conversations with Filmmakers Series" through the University of Mississippi Press.<sup>12</sup>

These studies are preceded by Friedkin's own memoirs, *The Friedkin Connection*, which is the arguably the most significant of the more recent books that have been written about the director. Published in 2013 when he was seventy-eight years old, it is striking for its honesty and general lack of sentimentality about his failures. *The Friedkin Connection* recounts the director's upbringing in the North Side neighborhood of Chicago, the beginnings of his cinema career, his experience of phenomenal success in the early 1970s, struggles with producers, censors, and actors, his professional disappointments, the gradual diversification of his creative activity in film, television, and opera, and then a kind of resigned acceptance of his career trajectory. And while one would be well-advised to maintain some degree of hesitation about the anecdotes reported in it, and to remember that they are to be taken as an article of faith, fascinating flashes of humility and self-reflection repeatedly appear about his own life and career. These flashes of insight were apparently inspired by Elia Kazan's 1988 autobiography. "It's the greatest book about

film ever written,” Friedkin remarked to me, “[a]bout a life in film, and the book is called *A Life*. It was a tremendous influence on my autobiography. Especially the candor with which he described everything equally that he did, good and bad. And he doesn’t boast or brag, he’s self-critical, and completely honest about all of his shortcomings.” The reception of Friedkin’s films, both good and bad, has had a great deal to do with what he calls the “mystery of fate,” a mystery that may be related to the mystery of faith, and which he invokes to explain unforeseen events and surprising developments in his life. The director repeatedly claims ignorance about how his films would be received by critics and audiences and throughout *The Friedkin Connection* his tendency is to chalk up unanticipated setbacks to the hand of fate. It is in this way that he is able to bring the narrative of his life and career together, to reconsider his work retrospectively, and refocus the thematic and aesthetic obsessions that reappear in most of his films.

It is in the spirit of these more recent writings on the films of William Friedkin—by critics, scholars, and the director himself—that this book proceeds and continues the critical reassessment of this American auteur. I argue that his work raises the nature of moral character in the cinema and the problem of faith in the modern era in order to seek more capacious, humane ways of relating to others. In provocative narrative moments and explosive scenes that violate how spectators typically think and feel in the cinema, Friedkin lays bare the logic of extra-judicial violence by critically interrogating the nature of moral judgment and its relationship to legal justice. Not only in *The Exorcist* and *The French Connection* but also in *Sorcerer*, *Cruising*, *To Live and Die in L.A.*, *Rules of Engagement*, *Killer Joe* and other films, key characters knowingly transgress moral norms; yet in doing so, the images of these characters provide viewers with the opportunity to critically think the logic of violence that underpins their actions. Indeed, it is precisely the depiction of transgression that defines much of Friedkin’s work. In their pursuit of transgressive experience, which takes root in the everyday yet strives to overcome it, his films test the limits of what it means to be a moral human being in postwar American life. Policemen who brutalize civilians with impunity, soldiers who lash out in anger, lawmen who become vigilantes and take the law into their own hands, but also murderers who are put to death: these characters and situations from Friedkin’s films raise the question of justice and interrogate the moral lines that separate victims from victimizers. We shall see that his work habitually gravitates toward the delineation of moral contradictions and ethical ambiguities. In doing so, Friedkin asks difficult questions around who is worthy of sympathy and grief, who must be held accountable for wrongdoing, and in what measure.

Narration will be a key area of analysis throughout this book, and we will look closely at its aesthetic form and solicitation of viewer sympathy within popular cinema. But these are areas of critical analysis that will be



opened up in order to bring them into crisis. In Friedkin's cinema, denouements are deliberately obscured and plots are knowingly fractured, as if to defy classic Hollywood narration. In tension with the dramatic spectacle that so moved the director when he and his wife encountered the Shroud of Turin, his films have generally eschewed attempts to evoke powerful sentiment. Friedkin explicitly described his own work as "unsentimental" in my interview with him. But it is precisely within this tension between moral sentiment and the lack of it that the mystery of faith in secular life can be brought into relief. To be moved by the image of suffering, an image that attests to universal humanity, even when the authenticity of the image remains in doubt, equates to a kind of belief in the cinema for Friedkin, in what the cinema can do and the discursive effects that it can mobilize in the world. And to maintain a critical stance toward this sentimentality is to pose the problem not only of whether what viewers see and hear in the cinema counts as true but also of whether it can still provide us with the experience of redemption.

Friedkin's career came of age in the wake of the counterculture of the late 1960s, when public sentiment had already turned decisively against the Vietnam War, and confidence in public institutions had soured in the midst of the Watergate scandal and in the subsequent handling of the legacy of Richard Nixon's presidency. Films like *The French Connection* (1971), Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), Sidney Lumet's *Serpico* (1973), Alan Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974), Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) spoke to younger, radicalized audiences who sought out films that reflected the social and political turmoil that raged outside the theater. The generation of directors that comprised the New Hollywood of the late 1960s to the early 1980s produced work after the collapse of the studios and the Production Code, while contending with the challenges of television and broad changes in the American economy after the dismantling of the Bretton Woods agreement in 1971. Friedkin's films challenge viewers to think critically about the melodrama that is seemingly inextricably linked with politics in America. Compromised individuals in his cinema are asked to render justice in a fair and impartial manner, but this responsibility is repeatedly disrupted and subverted in his films, often by figures of law enforcement. While the American populace was losing faith in the legitimacy of its institutions, Friedkin's work considered the extent to which these institutions were already compromised and impoverished, motivated by moralizing gestures and performative politics. His cynical films show how moral righteousness, fueled by fear and rage, often serves as justification to commit amoral and illegal acts. They resonate with politics in the 1970s in this regard and particularly with the public discourse throughout this decade surrounding the Watergate scan-

dal. In 1973, Nixon famously declared that “I am not a crook.” Beleaguered and hounded by the press, he quickly lost legitimacy as commander-in-chief in the eyes of the public.

These are questions that would continue to be addressed in Friedkin’s work into the 1980s and beyond, questions that critically reflect on what legitimates the exercise of moral judgment and how others may be deemed guilty or innocent. At a time when traditional morality and structures of authority were being questioned, a number of films inspired viewers to overcome the values of the previous generation through an appeal to a kind of critical pointlessness or to what Todd Berliner, in his book on American film in the 1970s, calls “narrative incoherence.”<sup>13</sup> The late Thomas Elsaesser has noted that the heroes in New Hollywood demonstrate a sense of

inconsequential action, of pointlessness and uselessness: stances which are not only interpretable psychologically, but speak of a radical scepticism about American virtues of ambition, vision, drive; themselves the unacknowledged, because firmly underpinning, architecture of the classical Hollywood action genres.<sup>14</sup>

As Friedkin’s career continued into the 1980s and after, some key themes would continue to reappear, despite the changing conditions of production for his films and the changing historical circumstances. We will see how his cinema critiques the ethical thinking of popular narration while striving to discover and delineate one of its own.

This book is organized into five chapters, each introducing concepts and lines of ethical thinking that are key to understanding Friedkin’s oeuvre as a whole. Each chapter places two, three, or four films within historical and theoretical contexts. This work is meant to be read straight through, ideally in conjunction with screenings of the work under discussion, as one chapter builds upon ideas developed in the previous ones. Within each chapter, the films are analyzed in chronological order. The reader may notice that I have chosen only sixteen of Friedkin’s films to analyze in detail. Although I make at least passing reference to almost all of the director’s films and television productions, the works I have chosen for this study I believe are the most effective at articulating thematic obsessions that are distinctive to the director’s sensibility and style.

Chapter One, “Spaces of Melodrama,” introduces a small cluster of concepts that will be key to understanding the approach I will be taking throughout this book. It begins by focusing on *The Night They Raided Minsky’s*, *The Birthday Party*, and *The Boys in the Band*, three of Friedkin’s earliest films. On the one hand, I will discuss the analytical virtues of thinking New Hollywood cinema against the backdrop of what Linda Williams calls the “melodramatic mode.”<sup>15</sup>

Following the dismantling of the Production Code and the industry's shift toward younger audiences, movies in the late 1960s became more explicit and risqué, transgressing the moral boundaries that would have run counter to the Code's aim of "moral uplift." On the other hand, Friedkin's early films take place in enclosed interior spaces, implicitly delineating inside from outside, and bring us quickly into the experience of these spaces as claustrophobic. Claustrophobic spaces affect characters by both heightening the sense of desperation for the individuals within the diegesis and by inducing anxiety for the spectator sitting in the enclosed space of the cinema theater. *The French Connection*, as we know, is set in outdoor locations in Marseille and New York. Here, for the first time in Friedkin's films, we see the character of the policeman who crosses the thin blue line to pursue criminals by having recourse to morally and legally questionable methods. Those who enforce the law become violators of the law, emboldened by their own outrage at the transgressions of others and their growing frustration at the inability to capture the French drug traffickers.

Chapter Two, "Policing the Police," further considers this crossing from policeman to criminal. In *To Live and Die in L.A.*, law and lawlessness are made exchangeable with each other, like real and counterfeit money, or cops who impersonate crooks. Friedkin boasts that the fake currency used in the film was successfully exchanged by a crew member's son for candy at a supermarket, allowing us to ponder the difference between truth and fiction in the cinema. Moreover, *To Live and Die in L.A.*, with its "dirty" cops and car chase set piece, is read here as a reiteration of themes and problems taken over from *The French Connection*. The later film seems to "impersonate" the earlier. Where the heroin in the earlier film was real, the money in the later one is fake, bought by real money procured from the federal government. At stake in these exchanges is the question of legitimacy—of what legitimizes paper as legal tender—but also of identities based on gender, sexuality, and criminality. These issues are also raised in *Rules of Engagement* and *The Hunted*, both films that feature military soldiers who act out with impunity under conditions of emergency. Male camaraderie and loyalty are invoked in them to justify the transgression of law. Procedure and protocol in fact merely stand in the way of their moral righteousness, and are seen to be frustrating impediments toward the heroic recognition of virtue, however perverse, within the melodramatic mode. *The Hunted* is explicitly structured as a chase film and it is precisely the chase that sanctions the chaos it typically produces as well as the suspension of legal and moral norms.

The next chapter, "Criminal Desires," looks at *Cruising*, *Jade*, and *Killer Joe*, three films that have raised controversy for their explicit representations of and linkage between violence and sexuality. While the characters in these films exhibit signs of criminal desire that are sexual in nature, I am less interested in performing psychoanalytic analyses that will reveal their interiority. Rather, we

shall see that for Friedkin, working with the formulation attributed to T. S. Eliot that states that “action is character,” characterization is a consequence of legible actions and not the other way around.<sup>16</sup> Sexuality and criminality are manifest through legible performatives and not simply the expressions of a psychic condition. In this way, dissimulation and impersonation become key themes in *Cruising* and *Jade*, as identity is constituted in both films through the display of surfaces that are available for scrutiny within the melodramatic mode. *Killer Joe*, adapted from the play by Tracy Letts, also works with the thin line between policeman and criminal, taking the justification of violence that Friedkin has interrogated in previous films to its limits. We shall see that the transactional relations that comprise the ethics of the characters in this claustrophobic community of poor individuals, who have been trapped in desperate situations, seem to implode from within, culminating with the film’s explosive conclusion.

Chapter Four, “Justice at the Limits of Popular Cinema,” takes a look at four films in order to consider the impulse toward transgression within the context of melodrama. Taken together, they span almost the entirety of Friedkin’s filmmaking career: *The People v. Paul Crump*, *Rampage*, *12 Angry Men*, and *Bug*. The first three films of the chapter raise the question of how justice may be realized through the form of popular narrative. *The People v. Paul Crump* and *Rampage* both deal with the morality of capital punishment but differ in their approach toward its ethics. While the earlier film offers a clear critique of the death penalty, by 1987 Friedkin seems to have shifted in his position and makes the case that state-sanctioned death for the victimizer can achieve some measure of justice for the victimized. The 1997 film *12 Angry Men* is a remake of the well-known 1957 Sidney Lumet film of the same name. In his remake Friedkin makes subtle changes to the script that places the film into dialogue with issues of race and justice that were raised during the O. J. Simpson trial, the so-called “Trial of the Century,” that unfolded on American televisions in 1995. Finally, *Bug* is another adaptation of a play by Letts that takes the dichotomy between interiority and exteriority to its limits, showing what happens to the spaces of melodrama when they are plunged into crisis. The protagonists of the film become obsessed with bugs that are simultaneously inside and outside their bodies, inducing an experience of paranoia for the characters in the diegesis, but perhaps for spectators sitting inside the cinema theater as well.

The last chapter, “The Power of Cinema Compels You,” culminates with Friedkin’s most ambitious films, bringing the mysteries of faith and fate to the fore most explicitly. *The Exorcist* and *Sorcerer* were made relatively early in the director’s career, one a major success with most critics and audiences and the other a failure with viewers at the time. But these films introduce broad themes to which his later ones will repeatedly return. They bring us back to questions that refer to the power of the cinema image. *The Exorcist* and *Sorcerer* ask viewers to have faith in what it reveals, on the one hand, and also lead us to reflect upon the unfolding

of one's life through film's own temporal unfolding. When Friedkin speaks about fate, he is referring to the arrival of that which cannot be anticipated, yet an event that is nevertheless certain to occur. *The Exorcist* take the limits of what can be seen and heard in the cinema to its breaking point, raising the problem of faith in the cinema through the allegory of religious faith. *Sorcerer* plays out a narrative of human individuals who are placed in extreme conditions and, because they have nothing more to lose, risk their lives by choosing to pursue a goal in a state of constant precariousness. The four main protagonists deliver highly combustible explosives on rickety trucks through dilapidated roads, over hundreds of miles of treacherous terrain.

After the disappointment of this film's poor reception with audiences, Friedkin continued to direct, perhaps with a similar sense of precariousness that reminded him of his own status as a filmmaker in Hollywood. At the Cannes festival in 2016, Friedkin reflects upon this constant reminder that followed him throughout his long career, according to his interviewer:

"Inside of every one of us who has ever created anything there is an almost constant record of failure," he told the festival audience. "That's what we think about. That's what involves our thought process. I know some of the most successful filmmakers and songwriters, and inside these giant talents is a little mouse."<sup>17</sup>

Refocusing our understanding of the films of Friedkin must be undertaken with an appreciation of the way in which this auteur has dealt with a long period of disappointment following an experience of stunning, but short-lived, success. The *Spectator* journalist who interviewed him reports that Friedkin arrived at the festival "basking in sort of adoration he hadn't known for half a lifetime."<sup>18</sup> When I spoke to the director at his Bel-Air home, he had just returned from one of the many retrospectives of his work that were taking place in New York, France, Italy, and other locations where international festivals celebrated his career. I asked him what he thought about the recent recognition of his work and he replied, with characteristic brute honesty, that he "doesn't give a damn." I laughed at this somewhat flippant response and then, with the same lack of sentimentality, we moved on to discuss his rich life and career.

## NOTES

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18. Lane, *William Friedkin: Interviews*, 140.

## Spaces of Melodrama

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### *THE NIGHT THEY RAIDED MINSKY'S (1968)*

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The premise of *The Night They Raided Minsky's* (hereafter *Minsky's*), Friedkin's second fictional feature, embodies a number of contradictions that will be reiterated throughout his work. The film begins with a series of intertitles written in the second person and read by a vaudeville announcer (spoken by Rudy Vallée). While the text states that the story is based on "really true incidents that actually happened," Vallée's hyperbolic and flamboyant voice indicates that the ensuing film will have a campy tone. The intertitles acknowledge its "real sophisticated audience," addressing them with a wink and smile. They then entice the viewer with the premise of the scandalous story that will follow: "In 1925 there was this real religious girl and by accident she invented the striptease. This real religious girl. In 1925." The repetition of the "real religious girl" and the year, 1925, seems intended to saucily emphasize the tension produced by the juxtaposition of the virtues of faith and the questionable scruples of striptease. Further tensions are also indicated in the text's reference to religious naivety and the excesses of the Roaring Twenties as well as to the perceived incongruity between the sexual mores of 1925 and those of 1968, the time of the viewer. The presence of the intertitles harks back to the silent period of film history and Vallée's radio voice to the youth culture of the 1930s.

The credit sequence further plays out these contradictions through montage. *Minsky's* cuts to black-and-white footage of smiling flappers dancing with their partners and robust men performing stunts in front of clapping audiences. This sequence then settles into depictions of New York's bustling Lower East Side, featuring working-class women shopping in its outdoor markets and men pushing heavy carts through its busy streets. In the midst