



RE-RELEASES

Serpico

Serpico

Directed by: Sidney Lumet
©: Produzioni De Laurentiis
Produced by: Artists Entertainment Complex Productions, Martin Bregman
Associate Producer: Roger M. Rothstein
Unit Manager: Martin Danzig
Production Secretary: Shari Leibowitz *
Assistant Directors: Burt Harris, Alan Hopkins
Script Supervisor: B.J. Bachman
Casting by: Shirley Rich
Extra Casting by: Talent Services Associates Inc
Screenplay by: Waldo Salt, Norman Wexler
Based on the book by: Peter Maas
Director of Photography: Arthur J. Ornitz
Camera Operator: Louis Barlia
Assistant Camera: James Hovey *
Gaffer: Willy Meyerhoff
Key Grip: Charles Kolb
Film Editor: Dede Allen
Co-editor: Richard Marks
Assistant Editor: Ronald Roose
Production Designer: Charles Bailey
Art Director: Douglas Higgins
Set Decorator: Thomas H. Wright
Set Dresser: Les Bloom
Scenic Artist: Jack Hughes
Prop Master: Joe Caracciola
Costume Designer: Anna Hill Johnstone
Wardrobe: Clifford C. Capone
Make-up Artist: Redge Tackley
Hair Stylist: Phillip Leto
Music by: Mikis Theodorakis
Music Arranged and Conducted by: Bob James
Sound Mixer: James J. Sabat
Boom Operator: Robert Rogow
Re-recording: Richard Vorisek
Sound Editors: John J. Fitzstephens, Edward Beyer, Robert Reitano, Richard P. Cirincione
Locations by: Cinemobile Systems
Transportation Gaffer: Raymond Hartwick
Production Publicity: Solters/Sabinson/ Roskin
Cast:
Al Pacino (*Frank Serpico*)
John Randolph (*Sidney Green*)
Jack Kehoe (*Tom Keough*)
Biff McGuire (*Captain McClain*)
Barbara Eda-Young (*Laurie*)
Cornelia Sharpe (*Leslie Lane*)
Tony Roberts (*Bob Blair*)
John Medici (*Pasquale*)
Allan Rich (*District Attorney Tauber*)
Norman Omellas (*Rubello*)
Ed Grover (*Lombardo*)
Al Henderson (*Peluce*)
Hank Garrett (*Malone*)
Damien Leake (*Joey*)
Joe Bova (*Potts*)
Gene Gross (*Captain Tolkin*)
John Stewart (*Waterman*)
Woodie King (*Larry*)
James Tolkin (*Steiger*)
Ed Crowley (*Barto*)
Bernard Barrow (*Palmer*)
Sal Carollo (*Mr Serpico*)
Mildred Clinton (*Mrs Serpico*)
Nathan George (*Smith*)

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

For decades, American cinema sought a populist genre to replace the western as a form in which good and evil could be embodied in white hats and black hats, and issues of national identity, absolute morality and masculine self-image could be assessed in the context of audience-pleasing action and excitement. In 1977 *Star Wars* provided the answer; the western proper faded away and all the cowboys climbed into spaceships and swapped their guns for lightsabers. To the present day, the dominant box-office form of mainstream cinema is the science-fiction-and-fantasy-tinged comic-book spectacular. But, in a brief window, it seemed that cops would trump cowboys.

When actor-director Jack Webb's *Dragnet* – a show that dramatised authentic LAPD cases, with 'names changed to protect the innocent' – migrated from radio to television in 1951, a brand of badge-wielding urban law and order became familiar and unquestioned in the media. For more than 20 years, cop heroes dominated small and big screens, in all varieties of toughness, intellect and rigidity; often, the handover from western to policier was made explicit, as in *Coogan's Bluff* and *Fort Apache, the Bronx*. In the movies, Don Siegel offered Richard Widmark as Madigan and Clint Eastwood as Coogan and Dirty Harry; Gene Hackman's Popeye Doyle propelled *The French Connection* to Oscar success; and cop-turned-author Joseph Wambaugh's novels gave rise to *The New Centurions*, *The Choirboys* and *The Onion Field*. On television, procedurals such as *The Streets of San Francisco* and *Police Story* ran alongside personality-led gimmick shows including *Columbo*, *McCloud* (a riff on *Coogan's Bluff*) and *McMillan & Wife*, before evolving into ensemble dramas like *Hill Street Blues* and *Homicide Life on the Street*. The mismatched cop partnership (in which teams of mixed sexes, races and legal approaches bond to become buddies) became a thing with *Freebie and the Bean* in the movies and *Starsky & Hutch* on TV, then mutated into freakier efforts like *Partners* (gay and straight), *Lethal Weapon* (sane and crazy), *Dead Heat* (dead and alive) and *The Breed* (vampire and human). Cops even crossed over into science fiction via *RoboCop* and *Alien Nation*.

Throughout, the ideal was Webb's Sergeant Joe Friday: upright, deadpan, inflexible, efficient, remote, a stickler for the law. Mr Spock with a badge and gun, Friday is entirely free from the warmth that marked his UK counterpart Sergeant George Dixon of Dock Green (Jack Warner) or the sitcom sheriff of *The Andy Griffith Show*. An early idol of James Ellroy, who has mutated the cop form in his entire output (which includes the films *Cop*, *LA Confidential* and *Rampart*), Webb's Friday is interesting only insofar as the actor-auteur's contempt for law-breakers and their associates seems to take in the entire world and render the hero some sort of avenging monster who looks at every perp and witness and suspect with gunsight eyes and should quite rightly terrify everyone who might cross his path.

Then came Frank Serpico. An Italian-American who joined the NYPD as a patrolman in 1959, Serpico raised the issue of endemic corruption in various departments, inspiring Mayor John V. Lindsay to convene the Knapp Commission into police malfeasance. In 1971, the whistleblower was shot in the face by a drug dealer – it was alleged that other officers had failed to support him during a raid and, in effect, set him up for execution. He survived, and Peter Maas's biography *Serpico* became a bestseller, eventually winding up with producer Martin Bregman and mogul Dino De Laurentiis. The property was briefly considered as a Robert Redford-Paul Newman vehicle (Newman would have played Serpico's politically connected lawyer friend David Durk, who is fictionalised as cop Bob Blair, played by Tony Roberts, in the film) before Bregman signed Al Pacino, fresh from *The Godfather*, to star, and John G. Avildsen, fresh from *Joe*, to direct. In the event Avildsen – later to make *Rocky* – left the project and Sidney Lumet took over.

Ironically, Pacino's Serpico – for all his shaggy, hippie looks – could stand beside Joe Friday or Harry Callahan in superhuman rectitude. An eager beaver who hares off on his own to crack cases, even if it makes colleagues look bad, Serpico is uncomfortable with free lunches and won't take a penny of the graft that his

Gus Fleming (*Dr Metz*)
Richard Foronjy (*Corsaro*)
Alan North (*Brown*)
Lewis J. Stadlen (*Berman*)
John McQuade (*Kellogg*)
Ted Beniades (*Sarno*)
John Lehne (*Gilbert*)
M. Emmet Walsh (*Gallagher*)
George Ede (*Daley*)
Charles White (*Commissioner Delaney*)
Kenneth McMillan (*desk sergeant*) *
Judd Hirsch (*cop*) *
Italy/USA 1973©
130 mins

* Uncredited

A Park Circus release

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colleagues expect as a regular perk of the job. Friday would approve. It's just that the movie depicts every other cop as crooked, so the overall portrait of the police is antithetical to the vision of *Dragnet*. By 1973, after the divisions of the late 1960s, plenty of average Americans were disillusioned by the behaviour of uniformed officers during civil-rights marches or Vietnam protests. A 1967 revival of *Dragnet*, in which Friday busts hippies, protesters and long-haired troublemakers, was taken as camp even by viewers who had grown up with the earlier incarnation of the show. Later, in *The Big Easy* or *The Shield*, there would be nuanced depictions of corrupt cops who were nevertheless good police, but in *Serpico* the official villains are unredeemable. Lumet casts great faces – the pockmarked detective who holds back while *Serpico* has his arm trapped in a door is a young, unbilled F. Murray Abraham – and the film offers an array of shifty, glad-handing, bullying, sinister or threatening officers.

Though *Serpico* is drawn from Maas's non-fiction book, the film, scripted by Waldo Salt and Norman Wexler, plays loose with the timing. Events take place over a decade, as shown by the transformation of the clean-shaven, short-haired rookie patrolman in neat uniform into a bearded, long-haired, countercultural shambler, but there's no sense of the great shifts in greater society in the 1960s. Frankly, all of *Serpico* seems to take place in an endless 1973, and the fashions, slang, drugs, music (an unusual score from Mikis Theodorakis) and street vibe are all definitely 70s rather than 60s; when the film gave rise to a short-lived spinoff TV series (anything about a cop could get a season in the 70s) with David Birney, *Serpico*'s anti-corruption campaign was downplayed and stories focused on his undercover drop-out cop cases. Aside from an amusing 'happening' scene in which *Serpico* freaks out a succession of with-it caricatures when they find out what he does for a living, the drama is all inside the police department rather than in the relationship between cops and civilians. As the *MAD* magazine parody of the film ('*Serpicool*') pointed out, the hero seemed to be the only person in New York who didn't know cops were on the take.

It's startling to revisit *Serpico*, with the electric and yet unmannered lead performance of Pacino and the mosaic narrative approach of Lumet, and realise how tough the movie is on its lead character. Even in 1973, the temptation of 'liberal Hollywood' was to make cardboard heroes out of those struggling against endemic evil – this would, presumably, have been what a Robert Redford *Serpico* might have looked like. But Pacino and Lumet show that one of the sacrifices *Serpico* makes in his crusade is his own likeability. Unable to partake in the camaraderie of cop partnerships because of his refusal to accept graft, *Serpico* is also removed from his ethnic family support group by his decision to live where he works rather than in his old neighbourhood. In the course of the film he has one trivial affair, with model-gorgeous Leslie Lane (Cornelia Sharpe), who calmly leaves him to marry someone else. A more serious relationship, with next-door neighbour Laurie (Barbara Eda-Young), collapses as he takes out on her the frustrations of yet another failed attempt to tell the truth. Even his steadfast friend Blair, who bonds with him in a funny moment as a roomful of cops have to sample marijuana, is abused and rejected after his connection to the mayor fails to come through.

There's an *Enemy of the People* aspect to *Serpico*'s story. Pacino digs deep to hint that his persistence has as much to do with bloody-mindedness and hurt pride as altruism and integrity. In the era of Nixon and Watergate, paranoia was a dominant mode of American cinema, and *Serpico* throbs with the dangers of every situation: undercover in plain clothes that make him look like the enemy, *Serpico* has to dodge bullets fired by a fellow officer while he's making an arrest; called to an informal meeting of his colleagues in the park, he finds himself in the middle of a circle of menacing, accusing officers who feel that a cop who isn't corrupt paradoxically can't be trusted. Attempts to take his story to superiors, internal affairs, the mayor's office or the media are all thwarted, and even his ultimate victory just puts a target on his back. At the end, *Serpico* is seen alone but for his sole companion, an enormous and equally shaggy sheepdog, slumped on the docks as a caption reveals that the real-life *Serpico* now lives quietly in Switzerland, perhaps to avoid yet another 'accidental shooting'.

Kim Newman, *Sight and Sound*, March 2014