

Good Cop—Bad Cop

What real life cops think of Hollywood Portrayals

By Bill Gallagher

December, 2002

“Most police movies make me want to puke. Make that your lead.”

Detective Sergeant Scott Johnson

In real life there are more good cops than there are bad cops. But in Hollywood, most of the good movies are about bad cops. If all you know about police work is what you see on the big screen, you might think being a cop is either about breaking the rules to get the bad guys or going all the way over to the dark side and becoming one of the bad guys.

Think again.

Here to straighten you out are eleven members of the Portland Police Bureau. BrainstormNW asked them to play film critic when it comes to cop movies. They were asked to critique the way their careers in law enforcement are portrayed on the big screen. This is just about cop movies, not cop television shows. Cops get a much better shake on the small screen. And no Feds. We're talking strictly local cops, from the big cities to the suburbs, from the boondocks to the backwoods, as rendered for the box office.

The critical consensus is that there are really only a few good cop movies and a lot of really bad cop movies along with some stupid and some dangerous cop movies. But there are no really GREAT cop movies. There are some great scenes and great performances in various cop movies but never a beginning-to-end film classic about a cop or cops. The officer/critics also agreed that only a few cop movies bear even a passing resemblance to the reality of their jobs. And they raise the issue of dealing with what I'll call the “Training Day/Bad Lieutenant thing.” Bad cop movies like these give those who don't know better the idea that the cops are criminals too, nothing more than crooks and killers with badges. Try telling the 17-year old gang banger who's seen Denzel as Detective Alonzo Harris about twenty times that the cops AREN'T brutal and corrupt. But the studios know that what sells tickets is the extreme. More than one officer acknowledges that because so much of what he does is write reports, reality can't touch fantasy when it comes to audience appeal.

What follows are cop movie lists based on what these ten cooperative Portland Police Bureau officers told BrainstormNW. They were recruited for critic duties by a Bureau-wide email. Their opinions are only their own and not the Bureau's.

THE TEN BEST COP MOVIES OF ALL TIME

Officer Jim Lawrence came up with half of this list. His top five cop movies all came up in interviews with the other ten officer/critics.

1. THE FRENCH CONNECTION. This is as close as you'll come to a GREAT cop movie. It won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1971. Gene Hackman as Popeye Doyle, the dogged New York narcotics detective, captures the reality of

surveillance work when he's seen eating cold pizza outside the fancy restaurant where the suspect is dining. The chase scene is shown in training classes at police academies. It's directed by the same guy, William Friedkin, who spent a lot of time in Portland recently directing "The Hunted," with Tommy Lee Jones and Benicio Del Toro.

2. **THE NEW CENTURIONS.** One of the few cop movies that features officers in uniforms working the streets. Based on a Joseph Wambaugh book and starring George C. Scott and Stacey Keach, this underrated cop movie gives us two smart cops consumed by the job.
3. **COLORS.** Who would think that a movie starring Sean Penn and directed by Dennis Hopper (Remember "Easy Rider?" He directed that too.) would make this list. But it kept coming up in conversations with the officers. It's based in L.A. in 1987 when gang wars were at their peak (387 gang-related killings the year before). Penn plays the adrenalized rookie teamed with the savvy veteran street officer played by Robert Duvall. "Colors" gets it. "That movie had a huge impact on how kids looked at us," according to Officer Rafe Cancio of Portland's Gang Enforcement Team.
4. **THE BORDER.** This almost violates the "no Feds" condition since it tells the story of a uniformed Border Patrol officer, but Jack Nicholson does such a great job playing the conflicted cop that I'll make an exception. He's dealing with what a lot of street cops deal with every day: the futility of the work. You bust them; they're back on the streets. You deport them; they're back wading across the Rio Grande. Pretty harsh treatment of Jack's fellow border patrol officers (especially Harvey Keitel as the smuggler's accomplice) betrays a bit of an anti-cop bias.
5. **HEAT.** Back in the mid-90s I interviewed then—Portland Police Chief Charles Moose and asked him about his favorite cop movie. The man who has become the best-known police chief in America said there was only one: "Heat." It stars Al Pacino as the edgy LAPD Robbery-Homicide detective who's up against Robert De Niro as the brains behind a crack team of armed robbers. Written and directed by Michael Mann of "Miami Vice" fame, it appeals to lots of cops for the way it shows the cost of being consumed by your career fighting crime. Now the rest of the best. The other five cop movies that belong on the list.
6. **DIRTY HARRY.** Most of the officers chuckled when I mentioned Clint Eastwood's best-known role. "Escapist...almost cartoonish," is the way Officer Bob Gorgone describes the movie that New Yorker critic Pauline Kael once called "a remarkably single-minded attack on liberal values." Released in 1971, it had an eerie resonance recently as the snipers near Washington DC demanded \$10 million to stop the killing just as the psycho killer in "Harry" had.
7. **FARGO.** There's not enough of Marge Gunderson of the Brainerd, Minnesota police force—as played by Frances McDormand in this film from the Coen Brothers—but what there is of her appeals to all the officers who mentioned this movie. She's a decent cop playing by the rules, maintaining a home life and not losing her humanity on the job. She even shoots a fleeing low-life sociopath in the lower leg to wound rather than kill him.
8. **L.A. CONFIDENTIAL.** James Ellroy, who wrote the book on which this movie is based, won't cop to how much of this story is based on the truth. In fact, he brags

- about making it all up. But for a probing look at the personalities that make up a big city police force, you can't beat this one from director Curtis Hanson. It's got corrupt cops, honest cops and conflicted cops played by Kevin Spacey, Russell Crowe, Guy Pearce and James Cromwell. This is arguably the best ensemble cast ever in a cop movie.
9. SERPICO. Is there better dramatic material for a cop movie than the agony of the officer who decides to expose the venality of his colleagues? Al Pacino plays Frank Serpico of the NYPD as neither saint nor crusader but as a man who believes that doing his job as a cop means calling out cops who can't be trusted. Pacino has played lots of cops, but never as well as he plays this role.

 10. A tie between THE PLEDGE and HOMICIDE. Sean Penn directs Jack Nicholson in "The Pledge," which deals with a detective in a mid-sized city who can't let go of his last case. Jack goes around the bend but the obsession with (or commitment to) that one case can be typical, according to our panel of police officer critics. "Homicide" is here because I had to find a place for at least one David Mamet movie. Joe Mantegna plays a detective who happens to be Jewish and finds himself caught between his religion and his allegiance to the police force. Mamet dialog crackles with cop-speak.

THE THREE "BEST" WORST COP MOVIES

When I asked Sergeant Brian Schmautz of the Portland Police Bureau for help contacting officers who might have something to say about cop movies I mentioned "Training Day." There was a long pause on the other end of the phone line. Then he said, slowly, "That...movie...was...unnerving."

1. TRAINING DAY. Denzel Washington finally gets his Academy Award for Best Actor and it's in a movie that a few of the officers I spoke with couldn't even watch. Unfortunately, lots of kids and criminals have watched it. "They see that movie and they see us as ugly, evil and corrupt," according to Officer Gorgone. "'Training Day' is as harmful as any movie I've ever seen when it comes to police work," says Officer Jerry Cioeta. "I've had kids say to me, 'Hey, don't think I don't know what's going on. I've seen the movie. I know you beat people up.'"
2. BAD LIEUTENANT. When I told non-cops I was working on a piece about cop movies, a typical response was, "Oh, like 'Bad Lieutenant?'" Harvey Keitel plays the Lieutenant who even other bad cops can't believe when it comes to how low he has sunk. As with "Training Day," some officers can't stand to watch this one all the way through.
3. INTERNAL AFFAIRS. The rare corrupt cop movie that features a uniformed officer. In this case Richard Gere plays an LAPD Sergeant who crosses way over the line and will kill his partner to protect his criminal enterprise. The crusading Internal Affairs officer (Andy Garcia) who goes after him is only marginally better. He's supposed to be the good guy but he belts his wife at one point and violates about a dozen department rules along the way.

BEST SPEECH ABOUT COP MOVIES IN A COP MOVIE

1. From SHOWTIME starring Rober DeNiro and Eddie Murphy.
“Being a police officer is not what you see on television. I’ve never had to choose between the red wire and the blue wire. Never seen a police car flip over causing a chain reaction with other cars that burst into flames. Never had to jump from one rooftop to another. I spend my time investigating crimes, tracking down leads, typing up reports and sitting in court. It’s difficult, tedious work and you’re not going to get rich doing it. But I’ve been on the job for 28 years and I wouldn’t have it any other way. I’m a detective, that’s what I do. If you break the law in my city I will do everything in my power to hunt you down and put you behind bars.”

Delivered to a classroom of elementary school kids. Good speech. Lousy movie.

Or, as Captain Mike Bell, Commander of the Transit Police Division with the Portland Police Bureau, says, “My wife tells me, ‘Wouldn’t it be neat to be a movie Captain?’ She means wouldn’t it be neat not to have to go to endless meetings, deal with mountains of paper and get to be out on the streets sometimes?”

And this, from Sergeant Johnson, who finds that most cop movies make him want to puke. “They’re all about this man of action. Man of action? I’m a man of writing reports.”

OUR PANEL OF COP MOVIE CRITICS

Officer Jim Lawrence, Officer Rafe Cancio, Officer Bob Gorgone, Officer Garth Edwards, Officer Jerry Cioeta, Officer Jeff Helfrich, Detective John Brooks, Sergeant Detective Scott Johnson, Sergeant Brian Schmautz and Captain Mike Bell.

Bill Gallagher is Program Director and Movie Critic for Newstalk 860 KPAM.