

The French Connection Film Summary

The French Connection by William Friedkin

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Context

For viewers watching twenty or thirty years after the making of *The French Connection*, the true significance of the film may be lost due to the increased technology of filmmaking. However, Friedkin's police thriller was fast-paced and intricate for its time. All detective stories since 1971 owe many of their elements and techniques to *The French Connection*.

In 1971, *The French Connection* was quite a novelty. Most films until this time had a positive and happy air about them. Even sad films tried to put a positive spin on things, and no films portrayed real life with the gritty realism seen in Friedkin's *The French Connection*. The film shows the good and bad sides of both the underworld and the police force. Shot so that it almost seems like a documentary, *The French Connection* takes a gutsy look at the truth of the police force in this action-packed movie. When Doyle shoots Nicoli in the back, audiences were shocked that a cop would do such a thing, but they began to see the world as it truly is: the bad deals, the routine busts for information, and the desire to win at all costs.

The French Connection gives a fictionalized report of the largest narcotics bust of the time that occurred in 1962. The film is taken from Robin Moore's book *The French Connection* that was based on the true story. The narcotics officers, Eddie Egan and Sonny Grosso's names were changed to Doyle and Russo in the film version, however. The two busted a huge heroin deal that had connections to the French underworld.

In the film version of the story, Doyle and Russo are two narcotics cops who get a lead that a major heroin deal is going to occur. As they follow the clues, they begin to realize that the deal is not just taking place between Americans but members of the French underworld as well. Eventually, they find the heroin and discover the players behind the deal. However, their lives are in even more danger when the bad guys find out they're being followed. A thrilling chase scene and a dramatic end to the film follow. At the very end of the movie, each character is shown, and their fates are told. The only one who gets away is Alain Charnier, a powerful Frenchman who leads the deal.

Gene Hackman plays the main character, Detective Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle. Hackman steals the show with a powerful performance, highlighting Doyle's tough character. Doyle makes all the major decisions and has all the heart-stopping emotional and action scenes. Hackman had already become a popular actor with his previous tough roles, having been nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor for his roles as Buck Barrow in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Gene Garrison in *I Never Sang for My Father* (1970). Hackman finally won the Academy Award for Best Actor for his role in this film.

Next to Hackman, none of the other actors had much of a chance to display their abilities. Not only was Doyle the main character for the film, but also Hackman played him so well that he effectively stole the show. Roy Scheider does an admirable job playing Hackman's sidekick, Cloudy, but he is not given the chance to show off his skills with major emotions or action.

The French Connection was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won five. The film won Best Actor in a Leading Role for Gene Hackman; Best Director for William Friedkin; Best Film Editing for Gerald B. Greenberg; Best Writing for Ernest Tidyman, and Best Picture. *The French Connection* also won the three awards for which it was nominated at the Golden Globes: Best Director of a Motion Picture for William Friedkin; Best Actor in a Motion Picture for Gene Hackman, and Best Picture.



Summary and Analysis

The French Connection opens in Marseilles near a bridge. A man is eating a sandwich and watching two other men walk out of a building, get into a car, and drive away. Later the same man sits at a restaurant watching the crowds. The man walks home, but as he checks his mail he is shot by another man.

In Brooklyn, several boys talk to a Santa Claus collecting money for the Salvation Army. While others are distracted, another man enters a busy bar populated by African-Americans. He locks one man into a telephone booth and when the others run out, the Santa Claus and the man chase them. As they run, we see that "Santa Claus" is Detective Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle. When they catch the man, they wrestle him to the ground and beat him. They corner the man, Willie, and try to find out who his connection is. They ask about the barber and where he lives.

In Paris, two men talk about a boat and a needed expansion. The man in charge returns to his beautiful house by the ocean and is greeted by his wife. He gives her a gift for his trip: it is a camera. She shows him the coat she bought for him today since America is cold. He tells her he saw his daughter today who asked if they were happy.

Detective Buddy "Cloudy" Russo meets his friend in the courthouse, and they go out for a drink. Popeye meets them there. As they get a drink, they see a man meeting with a large group of people. The detectives stake out the bar until he leaves, and then, they follow him. They remain at another restaurant until early morning waiting for the man to leave. They follow him and a woman to another street where he gets out with his briefcase; however, he does not go in the building. They follow him further and see him take out stacks of newspapers from the trunk of his car and leave them on the side of the street. Inside the store, he and a girl sort through the papers.

Back in France, a man visits a large fortress on an island. There he meets another Pierre Nicoli. Pierre believes that the first man is making a mistake by involving someone else, but he reassures him that the man needs money and can travel freely because of his fame. Henri Deveraux arrives and accepts the job.

As the men watch Salvatore Boca from a nearby window, we learn his history of armed robbery and other possible contracts. Although he tried to hold up Tiffany's, they refused to prosecute. Sal is married to Angie, and she is a thief as well. He has a brother that is involved in crime as well. Cloudy goes into the restaurant owned by Sal and talks to his wife. Sal, the actor Dominichi, and Joel Weinstock all live in the same building. They follow Sal later, but they have to be careful not to be spotted. Popeye and Cloudy go into a bar and move everyone to the sides of the room. They clean out the bar, taking the drugs hidden beneath the bar.

When Popeye gets the bar owner to the back, he begins asking about Sal. He finds out that a major shipment is coming in this week. Then, Popeye asks where he wants it, Popeye just points at his cheek. He is a source, but he can't let his clients know. When



they return to the station, the chief tries to convince them not to follow this hunch. Finally, he agrees to let them wire Sal's home and office.

On the boat, Henri is meeting with the press on his ship outside New York City. When they reach the dock, they unload a black sedan from the ship. As Pierre and the other guy watch, Henri drives off. The chief convinces the rest of the force to give the detectives another chance, and they agree. Cloudy meets Popeye at his apartment and lets himself in. Popeye tells him that a woman locked him up with his own cuffs. When the woman sees Cloudy, she runs back into the bathroom. Cloudy then sits down to look through the files on their case.

As the French visit one of the five auto graveyards in New York, they tell the girl that the cars are involved in crimes or abandoned. Then, they are made into scrap metal or auctioned if they are not claimed. Charnier tells him that the man in the black cap is their buyer. In their office, the guys listen to the wires on Sal and Angie's phones while they play cars. Sal receives a call from a French man to meet at a hotel. Cloudy and Popeye rejoice at their find.

The detectives follow Sal along with Bill. They are cut off and lose Sal, but they contact some other cops who follow him. As he waits at a light, Sal realizes he is being watched and tries to loose the cops. He enters the Roosevelt Hotel followed by Cloudy who runs into Sal, Pierre, and Alain on his way inside. Outside the hotel, the cops decide to follow the men. Popeye and Cloudy stand outside in the cold waiting for the men to finish their dinner before following them hotels. Popeye asks the attendant, Alain's name as if he had forgotten it, then he waits outside for Cloudy.

Inside a hotel room, a chemist checks the purity of the load of drugs. Sal tries to convince Joel that everything is legitimate as he tries to finish making the deal. As Alain leaves the hotel, Popeye follows him through New York City and the subway. Popeye calls Bill and asks what is going on up there. Everyone else is in the wrong place, and he's on his own. However, he finally misses him as Alain stays on the subway at the last moment.

Cloudy follows Sal to Washington, D.C. where Alain and Sal meet. Sal explains that his people want to wait a little longer to make the switch. Pierre and Alain discuss the problems involved with making the switch, and Pierre tells him that he'll take care of Popeye.

Popeye wants to keep sitting on Sal and tries to convince the force to back him up while they cover a car accident. The chief becomes angry and tells them that they are off special assignment. However, as Popeye walks home that afternoon, Pierre tries to shoot him. Popeye runs to the roof to try to catch him, and he discovers a gun and sees a man running away on the road nearby. Popeye chases him, but the man gets away on the line.

Popeye finally takes a vehicle and hurries to the next stop on the line. The guard is suspicious of Pierre and attempts to arrest him; however, Pierre shoots him and holds



the driver to gunpoint, forcing him to keep going at the next station. Travelers on the train try to find out what is going on, but Pierre holds them at gunpoint as well. Popeye is involved in a chase sequence as he follows the train on the ground, hitting anything that gets in his way. Pierre shoots another man who tries to tell him that he cannot get away with this plan. The driver has had a heart attack and is no longer driving the train. Eventually it runs into another train, and Pierre loses his gun after hitting the wall. After finally escaping the train, Pierre climbs to the ground, and Popeye kills him.

Sal enters a car garage and is followed by Cloudy. However, Sal is there waiting for his car and drives off in it. Cloudy and Popeye follow him while someone else has followed Angie to a spot nearby. Cloudy and Popeye spend the night watching the brown car as they suspect it is "dirty." Another car arrives around 4:00 a.m. circling the block three times before getting out and loading packages into the other car. The people are surrounded by the cops, and they tell him that they were going to break down the car for parts. When Popeye finds out that there's nothing in the car but a map, he is very angry, but he takes the car in and tears it apart, but the mechanics find nothing.

In the police station, Henri Devereaux and his companion complaining that their car has been lost and demanding that the police find it. As they sit around, the men find out that the car was overweight when it was brought into the shop. Under the side panels, they finally find the drugs. Cloudy comes in to tell Devereaux that his car has been found and returns a car to him.

When Henri returns to the hotel, Alain meets him. Alain explains that he needs another favor and Henri must comply, because the police know that the car exists so he is now an accomplice. Henri doesn't know what he is an accomplice to, but he says "goodbye." Alain takes the car and has a Sal's brother, a mechanic, open it up. The chemist opens the bags to check the drugs and approves the deal. They then take the drugs and pack them into another container and make the switch. Then, Sal replaces the drugs with the money in the car.

As Alain and Sal try to leave, they are stopped by Popeye and other cops. They drive back to the warehouses where they met and hide. Popeye goes inside to find them. A shootout ensues, and Sal is killed and the rest are captured except Alain. Cloudy joins Popeye inside, and Popeye accidentally shoots Bill. They try to find Alain, but he escapes.

The fates of all the people involved then roll across the screen over their pictures"

"JOEL WEINSTOCK was indicted by a Grand Jury. Case dismissed for 'lack of proper evidence.'"

"ANGIE BOCA, guilty of a misdemeanor. Sentence suspended."

"LOU BOCA, guilty of conspiracy and possession of narcotics. Sentence reduced."

"HENRI DEVEREAUX, guilty of conspiracy. Served four years in a Federal Penitentiary."

"ALAIN CHARNIER was never caught. He is believed to be living in France."

"Detectives DOYLE and RUSSO were transferred out of Narcotics Bureau and reassigned."



Characters

Detective Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle, played by Gene Hackman

Description

Detective Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle is the premier detective on the New York narcotics team. Doyle works with his partner Cloudy for the Narcotics Bureau. Doyle is considered a tough cop who will do whatever it takes to make a bust; he regularly busts several bars so that he can get information from their owners about other potential leads.

When Doyle gets wind of the large heroin deal going down, he gets on the case immediately. Even when his supervisors are not convinced that he can find the culprits, Doyle keeps on chasing them and following clues. Eventually, Doyle finds the guilty parties and the drugs, bringing most of the bad guys to justice.

Analysis

Doyle is a strong, committed man. He is willing to do anything in order to uphold the law and make the biggest drug bust of his life. Doyle keeps calm in all situations, using his wits to keep himself alive. He is also extremely smart and able to follow clues that bring him to members of the French underworld and dealers in Brooklyn.

Although Doyle is committed to his job, he can also be extremely stubborn. When people want him to give up on the case, he refuses. Whether he is busting a bar or chasing a hit man through the city, Doyle is always the epitome of the tough cop.

Detective Buddy "Cloudy" Russo, played by Roy Scheider

Description

Detective Buddy "Cloudy" Russo is Doyle's sidekick. Although Cloudy does a lot of work to solve the case, he always seems to be second to Doyle. Cloudy is a tough guy, and without him, the case could not be solved. Cloudy is the one who realizes the differences in weight between the car when it entered the country and when it arrived in the shop. Cloudy is also the one who discovers some of the most important clues in the case.

Although Cloudy is not targeted by the hit man and thus, doesn't participate in the great chase scene, Cloudy is tough and helps Doyle to make busts and get information.



Cloudy also helps Doyle convince the rest of the force that the major heroin deal is going to happen and that they can stop it.

Analysis

Cloudy provides a good contrast to Doyle. Whereas Doyle is rough and sometimes cruel, Cloudy is even-tempered. Cloudy is a smart guy who picks up on a lot of clues that might otherwise be overlooked. Although Cloudy does get some recognition for the bust, Doyle seems to claim most of the attention since he was involved in the major chase scene.

Unlike Doyle, Cloudy is pretty laidback and could never be considered the womanizer that Doyle seems to be. Cloudy is the ultimate sidekick, giving information and pitching in, but being willing not to get a lot of attention for his work.

Alain Charnier, played by Fernando Rey

Description

Alain Charnier is a major player in the French underworld. Charnier is the instigator of the heroin deal, and he gets everyone else involved. Charnier is a smart man who knows how to work his connections. Charnier commits a major crime, but he is the only one to escape.

Charnier convinces the actor, Devereaux, to get involved in the scheme by offering him large amounts of money that he knows he needs. Charnier also chooses the heartless Nicoli to join him and take care of anyone who gets in their way.

Analysis

Charnier is a brilliant and powerful man. He is able to convince anyone to do as he wishes including Devereaux, a clueless actor. Charnier is smart enough to realize that Doyle is following him and brilliant enough to get away.

Charnier is the only person who goes free in the film, but his connections in France and his power help him to escape the United States unscathed. Charnier's power probably comes from his money and his powers of persuasion which are great. Charnier is never seen again but is suspected to live in France.



Salvatore "Sal" Boca, played by Tony Lo Bianco

Description

Sal Boca is the guy on the United States side of the deal. Sal is Joel Weinstock's guy who is supposed to run the deal and pick up the drugs. Sal is married to Angie, a thief, and he is well-known for being a drug dealer.

Analysis

Sal tries to outwit Doyle and Russo, but they have seen him around before so they know that he is a suspect. Sal is a smart guy, and he tries to have his cousin take care of the mechanical side of the deal, asking him to tear the car apart to get the drugs.

Pierre Nicoli, Hit Man, played by Marcel Bozzuffi

Description

Pierre Nicoli is the hit man hired by Charnier to take care of anyone who tries to cause trouble. After seeing Doyle around several times, Nicoli is sent to put an end to Doyle's snooping.

Analysis

Nicoli is a paid hit man and as such he only cares about the money he receives. However, Nicoli does seem to get a certain amount of satisfaction from killing people. He has a smirk on his face each time he kills someone, and he becomes rather excited when the prospect is mentioned.

Henri Devereaux, played by Frederic de Pasquale

Description

Henri Devereaux is a popular French actor who agrees to be a part of the heist because he needs the extra money and would enjoy a trip to America.

Analysis

Devereaux is completely clueless as to the real reason why he is getting paid to sail to the United States. He knows nothing about the drugs until his car goes missing, and Charnier forces him to retrieve it so that they can get the drugs.

Themes

No Total Triumph

In most cops and robbers stories, the good guys come out on top. In this story, however, no one really seems to win. Although some of the bad guys are caught, Alain Charnier- the guiltiest of them all- is not captured and thus receives no punishment. Additionally, the good guys suffer as well from wounds received during the fight.

Rather than having good totally triumph, this film shows a harsher, but truer, reality: there is no total triumph. Neither the good guys nor the bad guys truly win in this film. The bad guys don't get their money or their drugs, but the good guys don't capture all the bad guys either. No one truly wins in this situation.

Many Sides of Man

In this film, we see the many sides of man. Detective Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle is on the team for the good guys, but he is willing to do whatever it takes to win. Popeye often beats up innocent people or demands information from people at gunpoint. Popeye is cruel when it comes to facing the bad guys, but he truly has a kind heart and wants the bad guys to go to jail.

The bad guys also show the many sides of man. For example, Devereaux, a famous movie star, gets involved with the drug scandal so that he can make a little extra money. Alain Charnier is considered a wealthy, well-bred man, but he is the head of the scheme to sell the drugs in America. We learn that appearances can be misleading and that every man has more than one side.

Nothing Is What It Seems

The French Connection also shows that nothing is what it seems. Popeye and Cloudy seem to be normal cops, but when they are pushed, they become rough, violent, and unforgiving. Devereaux, Charnier, and Weinstock all seem to be wealthy, honest men, but each of these people are deeply involved in the plan to sell the drugs. The only person who seems completely honest in the film is Pierre Nicoli, the hit man, who tells everyone that his only desire is to kill.

Not only are people not what they seem, but the events in the film are not always what they seem. Popeye and Cloudy bust into a bar where they drag the manager to the back, but we find that this is all a show so that they can get information. The owner of the bar gives them tips, but he can't let his customer know. Also, they find the drugs in the car because of its weight not its look. The drugs are well-hidden in the running boards, and the car is anything but an innocent possession of Devereaux. Things are

not always what they seem, and *The French Connection* reminds us of that at every turn.

Style and Cinematography

Although many people watching *The French Connection* since the 1970s may not understand its importance, this film helped to build the basis for cops and robbers films everywhere. *The French Connection* has all the basic elements of a good cops and robbers film, but at the time it was filmed these were relatively new and were not cliché. Additionally, *The French Connection* used a documentary style to make the events seem more real since the film was actually loosely based on a true story. The elements of the film are brought together to form a seamless story.

One of the greatest successes of *The French Connection* is Gene Hackman's chase scene. After Nicoli tries to kill Doyle at his home, Doyle begins to chase Nicoli through the streets and subways of New York City. Swerving between cars, barely avoiding pedestrians, and always keeping his on the subway above him, Doyle chases Nicoli down for revenge. Although the chase scene is nothing when compared with major action films of today, the chase scene in this film was considered a triumph at the time. If you are a fan of action movies with great chase scenes, you can thank *The French Connection* for the genre.

The French Connection is an extremely realistic film for the time. Until the 1970s, most films were comfortable, fluffy films, but in the 1970s America entered a Golden Age of film when things began to change. *The French Connection* and movies like it were a big part of this change. By portraying a dirty New York City with tough, challenging police officers, America saw real life being played out on the screen. The film has a documentary feel because of the way it was filmed making the story even more realistic. Every detective and action movie since has been somewhat based on the way *The French Connection* won the hearts of the world with its tough, honest realism.

Motifs

Follow the Clues

As with all mystery stories, Doyle and Russo have to follow some clues in order to catch the bad guys. First, they have to figure out that a huge deal will be going down which they do with some help from their friends on the street. Then, they have to find out who is behind the scheme.

The biggest tip for the pair is that three of the suspects all live in the same building. The situation is too unusual to be coincidence, so Doyle and Russo have found their bad guys. Finally, they find the drugs as well after looking at the car's specs and discovering that it weighs more when they have it than it did when it was taken off the boat.

Like animals, these two follow the clues until they find out the truth of the matter. Then, they attack. By following the clues and tracking the bad guys, Doyle and Russo introduce use not only to the other characters but also to their world. We find out what being a cop is like and how the system works through the use of this motif.

Cops and Robbers

For hundreds of years, there have been stories based on the age old tale of good guys versus bad guys. In this film, the good guys are the cops and the bad guys are the robbers, more specifically drug dealers. Everyone knows that the good guys are supposed to win and the bad guys are supposed to either get killed or seriously punished. However, this film does take a bit of an odd turn since Alain Charnier, who is behind the deal, gets away completely free with his last known residence being somewhere in France.

The Chase

The chase is a basic part of any action film especially if it's about cops and robbers. In this film, Friedkin has created a master chase scene. Although compared to today's chase scenes, this scene may seem tame; the chase scene in *The French Connection* was the best of its genre at the time.

During the chase, we learn more about all the characters, including Doyle. We learn the lengths that they will go to in order to avoid being caught, and the lengths they will go to in order to catch someone. Doyle almost kills several people in his hunt for Nicoli, and Nicoli actually kills people to get away from Doyle.

Symbols

Darkness

Parts of the film are shot in complete or partial darkness. Since one of the movie's themes is the many sides of man this is an appropriate touch. The darkness symbolizes how little we really know about others. Trying to understand someone else can be like looking through the darkness and seeing only a dim shadow of the truth.

Additionally, the darkness serves to add to the mystery of the film. Darkness creates curiosity, and the viewer wants to know what is happening in the darkness. In the final scene, Doyle chases Charnier through an abandoned warehouse only to lose him in the end because of the darkness. The darkness hides intentions and motivations as well as people.

Guns

Guns are used constantly in the story. The guns represent the desire for power that each man in the film has. Charnier, Devereaux, and Weinstock are all in the scheme for money and power. Their henchmen are also looking for power. Nicoli, the hit man, finds power in taking the lives of others, and he would find particular joy in taking the life of Doyle, their greatest enemy during this deal.

Doyle and Russo also desire power and use guns to gain it. Everywhere they go, Doyle and Russo pull out their guns so that people can see that they are powerful. Whether interviewing people or just trying to watch the suspects, their guns represent their need for power.

The Car

The car that Devereaux brings over symbolizes the journey of the drugs from France to America. The drugs are hidden in the car, and the journey begins. From Devereaux's first agreement to help with the plan to his final desperate attempts to get his car back, the car symbolizes the deal made between the French and the Americans.



Essay Questions

Why is *The French Connection* an important film?

How is the actor Devereaux involved in the scheme? Why does he participate?

Why is much of the film shot so that everything is dark and difficult to see?

What is Joel Weinstock's role in the plot?

Why is it important that Sal, the actor Dominichi, and Joel Weinstock all live in the same building?

How does Popeye get information about the drug deal?

Where did the thieves hide the drugs and how do Popeye and Cloudy find it?

How is the chase scene an important addition to the genre?

Who is the one person who escapes capture at the end of the film?

What are the fates of the people involved in the plot?

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