



THE STAINED SHIELD

CORRUPT COPS OF NOIR

By Sharon Knolle

By the bitter end of John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), a gang of jewel thieves is mostly dead or in jail. As reporters question Police Commissioner Hardy (John McIntire) about one officer's involvement with the thieves, Hardy replies, "There are corrupt officers in police departments. The dirt they're trying to clean up is bound to rub off on some of 'em, but not all of 'em. Maybe one out of a hundred. The other ninety-nine are honest men trying to do an honest job."

He then flips on the police radios behind him, flooding his office with overlapping crime reports. "We send police assistance to every one of those calls 'cause they're not just code numbers on a radio beam, they're cries for help. People are being cheated, robbed, murdered, raped. It's the same in every city of the modern world. But suppose we had no police force, good or bad. Suppose we had . . ." he pauses for dramatic effect, then switches off all the radios, "just silence. Nobody to listen, nobody to answer. The battle's finished. The jungle wins. The predatory beasts take over."

The Asphalt Jungle is one of noir's bleakest entries, but its view of the police is relatively rosy: the cops are here to save us from the real criminals. Without them, civilization would collapse into chaos. That's true in many police procedurals on television, which tend to valorize cops. But historic protests against police brutality this year—which resulted in even more police brutality—demonstrate how deep the divide between civilians and cops often runs in real life.



Left: In *I Wake Up Screaming*, Laird Cregar is a crooked detective determined to railroad Victor Mature. Right: On-the-take Lieutenant Ditrich (Barry Kelley) slaps bookie Cobby (Marc Lawrence) around in *The Asphalt Jungle*

Film noir has always taken a clear-eyed, cynical look at the corruption that can come with carrying a badge. The genre’s cops range from the merely clueless, inevitably beaten to the solution of a crime by a dogged PI, to the breathtakingly brutal reveling in their power, to those like the police captains in *Witness* (1985) and *L.A. Confidential* (1997), who are running criminal syndicates within the force.

At the lowest rung of corruption, there’s Lieutenant Ditrich (Barry Kelley), *The Asphalt Jungle*’s cop on the take, who finally has no choice but to run in the bookie whose payroll he’s been on for so long. Then there are cops like Ed Cornell (Laird Cregar) in *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941), who relentlessly pursues sports promoter Frankie Christopher (Victor Mature), a man he knows to be innocent. Frankie looks guilty as hell after discovering the body of his protégé, the beautiful Vicky Lynn (Carole Landis), and Cornell seems to really have it in for him. When Frankie won’t break after being sweated by the cops, Cornell grabs him by the shirt and shouts, “I’ve got a good mind to kill you right now!” Another cop restrains him, saying, “Take it easy. What’s the idea of riding him so hard?” Cornell responds, “If that isn’t the guilty man, I’ll take the rap myself.” Convicting Frankie becomes his personal mission. In a line straight out of Steve Fisher’s original novel—Fisher also cowrote the screenplay—Cornell tells his suspect, “I’ll nick a guy on my own time and send him up to the chair . . . and then I get back pay.” Frankie learns that Cornell knew the real murderer was perpetual noir fall guy Elisha Cook Jr., but continued his frame-up because Frankie “took Vicky away

from me.” Like Cook’s obsessed switchboard operator, Cornell had also been in love with Vicky.

Dana Andrews’s Detective Mark McPherson may cross a few lines in *Laura* (1944), but his hoodlum-hating, frequently written-up character in 1950’s *Where the Sidewalk Ends* goes completely over the edge. Detective Sergeant Mark Dixon is already one complaint away from walking a beat when he slugs a suspect with a steel plate in his head, accidentally killing him. He covers up his crime and unwittingly leaves innocent taxi driver Jiggs Taylor to take the rap. Dixon thinks he can fix everything if he can pin the death on





Coming to the aid of an isolated blind woman (Ida Lupino) reawakens burned-out city cop Robert Ryan's sense of decency in *On Dangerous Ground*

Tommy Scalisi (Gary Merrill), the gangster he's been trying to nab for years. When that fails, he's willing to get himself killed if that's what it takes for Scalisi to hang. After a shootout with Scalisi's men, Jiggs is exonerated and Dixon is free and clear. But there's hope for this cop after all. Whether for love—he's fallen for Jiggs's daughter (Gene Tierney)—or a belated sense of justice, he does the right thing and admits his guilt to his commanding officer.

Another hate-filled cop who seems beyond redemption gets a second chance in Nicholas Ray's *On Dangerous Ground* (1951). Robert Ryan plays Jim Wilson, an embittered NYPD cop who thumbs through mugshots while eating a solitary dinner in his dingy apartment. In one of noir's most searing scenes, Wilson grimly beats a suspect, yelling, "Why do you make me do it? You know you're gonna talk! I'm gonna make you talk! I always make you punks talk! Why do you do it? Why?"

On the verge of suspension following his latest offense, Wilson is sent upstate to aid in a manhunt. A young girl has been killed and the suspect is a teenager with mental issues. The girl's father (Ward Bond) is hellbent on getting to the boy before Wilson does. Once outside the city, the hatred seems to leach out of Wilson. Or maybe it's that he sees in the suspect's blind sister (Ida Lupino) a sympathetic figure he must defend from the kind of violence he customarily dishes out. It may be too hopeful an ending that Wilson leaves the city and his loathing for his fellow men behind for a new beginning. It's one of the most optimistic of noirs, a genre rarely known for its happy endings.

Wilson may have been redeemed by love. But love (or lust) often spurs cops to aim for that big payday. Ten years after *Double Indem-*



Fred MacMurray goes rogue for a bank robber's alluring girlfriend (Kim Novak) – and the loot from a heist – in *Pushover*. Will partner Phil Carey catch on?

nity, Fred MacMurray once again commits murder for money and for a woman—and ends up with neither—in *Pushover* (1954). His character, Paul Sheridan, begins the film as the straightest arrow among a trio of cops on a stakeout for a bank-robbing murderer. Sheridan has been told to keep an eye on his less-than-trustworthy partner. But once he picks up the suspect's gorgeous girlfriend, Lona (Kim Novak), while undercover as part of the stakeout, he can't stop thinking about her. When Lona suggests they keep the money from the robbery, and that her boyfriend's "going to die no matter what we do," he's resistant at

“ In *On Dangerous Ground*, embittered cop Robert Ryan beats a suspect, yelling, “Why do you make me do it? You know you're gonna talk! I always make you punks talk!”



Opportunistic patrolman Webb Garwood (Van Heflin) stalks and seduces lonely housewife Susan (Evelyn Keyes) in Joseph Losey's *The Prowler*

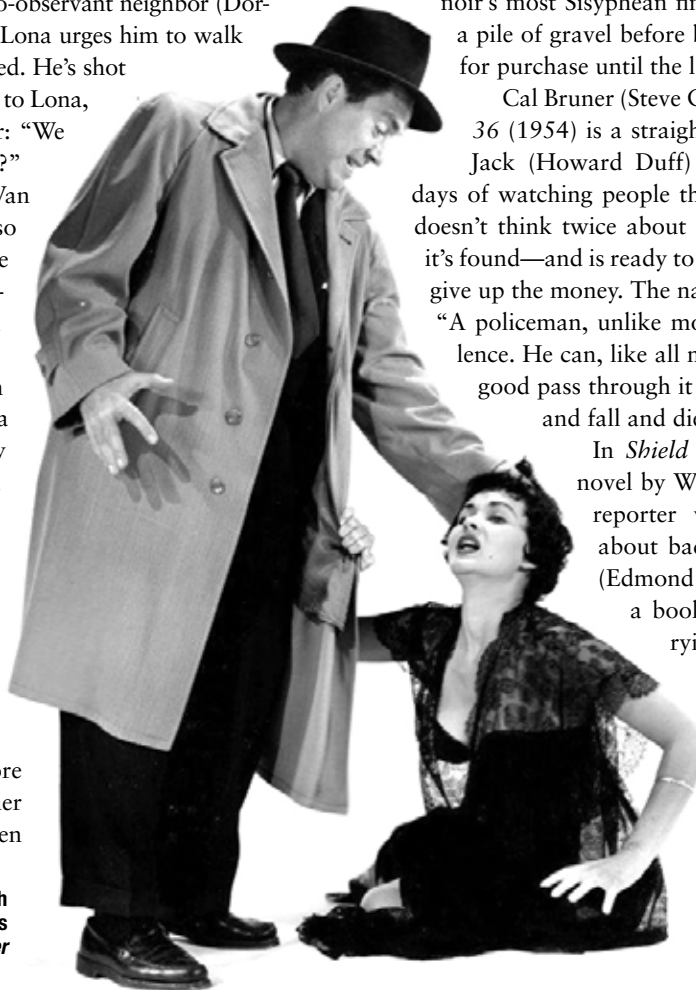
first. "Be a perfect setup for a cop, wouldn't it?" he sneers. "I could knock him off, hide the money, and call the meat wagon. No questions asked." But, just as in *Double Indemnity*, his initial aversion gives way to greed. Soon, Sheridan's not only killed the bank robber, but a fellow cop who's tumbled to his scheme. He graduates to kidnapping and potentially a third murder when a too-observant neighbor (Dorothy Malone) complicates his plans. Lona urges him to walk away, but Sheridan won't be dissuaded. He's shot by his own colleagues. His last words to Lona, before she's led away in a patrol car: "We really didn't need that money, did we?"

Patrolman Webb Garwood (Van Heflin) of *The Prowler* (1951) is also happy to bump off as many people as necessary for love and money—except the object of his affection isn't in on his scheme. He sets his sights on lonely housewife Susan (Evelyn Keyes) after she reports a peeping tom. He makes it his duty to keep doing welfare checks on Susan and finagles his way into a romance with her. After finding her husband's insurance policy, Webb decides to break off the affair, then "accidentally" kill his competition. Susan's skeptical about the circumstances of her husband's death, but at the inquest she testifies that she'd never seen Webb before the shooting. After he convinces her of his innocence, the two marry. Then

Susan reveals she's four months pregnant, a fact that will surely expose their affair. Webb forces her to hole up in an abandoned mining town until the baby is born. After he lets slip that he killed her husband for the insurance money, Susan tips off the doctor who attends the baby's birth before Webb can kill him, too. In one of noir's most Sisyphean finales, Webb scrambles to the top of a pile of gravel before being gunned down, fingers clawing for purchase until the last second.

Cal Bruner (Steve Cochran) in Don Siegel's *Private Hell 36* (1954) is a straight-enough cop, until he and partner Jack (Howard Duff) track down a counterfeiter. After days of watching people throw cash around like confetti, Cal doesn't think twice about keeping the counterfeit stash when it's found—and is ready to kill his reluctant partner rather than give up the money. The narrator ends the film on a grim note: "A policeman, unlike most men, lives close to evil and violence. He can, like all men, make his own private hell. The good pass through it with minor burns. The evil stumble and fall and die in strange places."

In *Shield for Murder* (1954)—based on the novel by William P. McGivern, a former police reporter who carved out a niche writing about bad men with badges—Barney Nolan (Edmond O'Brien, who also codirected) pops a bookie, steals the \$25,000 he was carrying, and makes it look like the man was shot trying to escape. Now he's got to convince his colleagues the shooting was on the level while getting the gangster whose money he stole off his back. "When are you going to stop thinking with your trigger finger?" his captain asks before letting him skate again. Nolan has a spotty



Edmond O'Brien (with Marla English) is one of noir's dirtiest cops in *Shield for Murder*



Left: Border cop Hank Quinlan is as crooked as they come in Orson Welles's 1958 masterwork *Touch of Evil*. Right: By the 1970s, cops who bend the law like *The French Connection's* Popeye Doyle (Gene Hackman) were celebrated as antiheroes

record and a mean temper, telling his girlfriend, “After sixteen years of being a cop, you get to hate people, everyone you meet.” After the gangster’s thugs pay her a visit, a drunken Nolan pistol-whips one at a restaurant in full view of the clientele. The manager screams, “Somebody call the police!” Nolan’s answer: “You had the police.” Nolan is ultimately gunned down in front of the model home he planned to buy, his fistfuls of cash no help against a barrage of bullets. His fellow cops don’t even remove their hats upon his death. His best friend bends down, seemingly in a gesture of homage, but it’s simply to remove the badge from Nolan’s stolen police uniform.

The most iconic exit of any bent lawman in classic noir has to be that of Orson Welles’s seedy border police captain Hank Quinlan in *Touch of Evil* (1958). A giant of a man—Welles padded his character’s frame to appear even more bloated and dissolute—Quinlan’s the “local police celebrity,” as District Attorney Adair (Ray Collins) explains to Mike Vargas (Charlton Heston). Vargas, a Mexican drug enforcement official, happens to be spending his honeymoon near the border when a wealthy real estate agent dies in a car bombing. As a witness, Vargas takes a natural interest in the case and realizes Quinlan’s unbroken chain of convictions is based entirely on planted evidence. In a finale nearly as virtuosic as the film’s storied opening, Vargas convinces Quinlan’s faithful partner Pete (Joseph Calleia) to wear a wire, then tails him and Quinlan through the dark streets with a radio receiver. An echo betrays Pete’s wire and Quinlan doesn’t hesitate to shoot him. Pete lives long enough to deliver a fatal shot to his onetime hero. As Quinlan lays dying in a pool of dirty water, his own sordid confessions from Vargas’s radio echo around him: “How many did you frame?” “No one who wasn’t guilty.”

The summation from Assistant District Attorney Al Schwartz

(Mort Mills), upon learning that the bombing suspect Quinlan framed was guilty after all: “Hank was a great detective, all right.” Madam Tanya (Marlene Dietrich) adds one of the greatest last lines ever written, “And a lousy cop. He was some kind of man. What does it matter what you say about people?”

By the 1970s, antiheroes like Dirty Harry were celebrated, not condemned. The trailer for *The French Connection* (1971) introduces Detective Popeye Doyle (Gene Hackman) thusly: “If he doesn’t like you, he’ll take you apart and it’s all perfectly legal. Because Doyle fights dirty and plays rough. Doyle is bad news, but he’s a good cop.” How over the line is Doyle? His partner, Buddy Russo

“ Too often, in movies as in real life, the thin blue line protects even the most criminal police conduct and punishes anyone who dares to cross it.



In the *High Noon*-inspired *Cop Land*, Sylvester Stallone's small-town sheriff rains down shotgun justice on a corrupt NYPD syndicate

(Roy Scheider), has to stop him while beating a suspect, yelling, "That's enough, don't kill him!" Even Hank Quinlan drew the line at roughing up suspects—at least in places where the marks would be visible. (The character of Russo was inspired by famed real-life narcotics-officer-turned-screenwriter/producer Sonny Grosso. He also provided the inspiration for 1973's *The Seven-Ups*, in which

Scheider plays a cop who's part of "the dirty tricks squad that even the regular police are afraid of.")

Undercover cop Frank Serpico blew the whistle on rampant corruption in the NYPD and was nearly killed for it. Al Pacino portrayed him in Sidney Lumet's 1973 biopic *Serpico*. After refusing to take the usual payoffs, Serpico tries to alert his higher-ups to this blatant bribery. He's praised for his "integrity," but the investigation goes nowhere. Same with the mayor's office, which doesn't want to alienate the department. After declaring, "The whole fucking system is corrupt," he goes to the *New York Times*. Serpico's reward for his honesty? He's shot in the face during a drug bust and his partners refuse to call for an ambulance.



Frank Serpico (Al Pacino) is a marked man when he tries to blow the whistle on police corruption in Sidney Lumet's biopic based on the real-life NYPD officer

Too often, in movies as in real life, the thin blue line protects even the most criminal conduct and punishes anyone who dares to cross it. In James Mangold's *Cop Land* (1997), the cover-up of a police shooting escalates into a bloody day of reckoning. NYPD officer Murray Babitch (Michael Rapaport) kills two suspects he believed were firing at him on the George Washington Bridge. When a search reveals no weapon in the suspects' car, his quick-thinking uncle, Ray (Harvey Keitel), also a cop, pretends Murray has leapt



Straight-arrow LAPD officer Ed Exley (Guy Pearce) learns he can't buck the system unless he plays dirty in *L.A. Confidential*

from the bridge. Murray lies low in Garrison, New Jersey, which has earned the title nickname because of the many NYPD officers who live there. The fact that Murray is alive is an open secret, but Ray soon realizes he's got to produce a body to make the case go away. When fellow Garrison cop Joey Randone (Peter Berg) stumbles upon Ray and his boys trying to off Murray, his life is also forfeit; Ray's a little too slow to come to Joey's aid on the next call, and Joey conveniently falls to his death. It's up to Garrison sheriff Freddy Heflin (Sylvester Stallone)—who usually looks the other way—to protect Murray and drag him in to One Police Plaza, after gunning down all the cops who stood in his way.

The worst thing a cop can be in other cops' eyes, as the movies tell us, is too straight. When we first meet Ed Exley (Guy Pearce) in *L.A. Confidential*, the 1997 adaptation of James Ellroy's 1990 novel, he's an ambitious go-getter hated by everyone else on the force. Exley tells Captain Dudley Smith (James Cromwell) he won't plant evidence, beat a confession out of a suspect he knows to be guilty, or "shoot a hardened criminal in the back," all things Smith unquestioningly expects from his officers.

And in Mike Figgis's underrated *Internal Affairs* (1990), an attempt by IAB agent Raymond Avilla (Andy Garcia) to take down a popular cop is sneered at by his superiors. Patrolman Dennis Peck (Richard Gere at his most slickly charming) exercises an unusual amount of influence over his entire division. Thanks to favors, bribes, and intimidation, he has most of the officers—and some of their wives—under his sway. The brass warn Avilla to back off: "You're talking about one of the most productive officers on the force. A great cop who at most bends [the law] a little bit." Which is better than "some straight-arrow pencil-ass who doesn't give you diddley."

Like Hank Quinlan, Peck's luck eventually runs out. Good triumphs. Evil fails. Except it's rarely that simple. In *L.A. Confidential*, a wisened-up Exley guns down the villainous Smith as the captain is trying to surrender, finally following through on Smith's own advice to shoot a hardened criminal in the back rather than run the risk

of him going free. But in the messy aftermath, Smith's crimes never come out. The police chief decides to honor both Exley and Smith as heroes. The headline reads "R.I.P. DUDLEY SMITH. Fabled L.A. Cop Dies Defending City From Organized Crime."

Training Day (2001) ends on a similar note, with the massive corruption of Denzel Washington's larger-than-life narcotics officer



Matt Damon may wear the uniform but he's working for the bad guys in *The Departed*

Alonzo Harris apparently dying with him. At the start of the day, Alonzo advises idealistic trainee Jake Hoyt (Ethan Hawke) to forget everything he learned in the academy if he wants to survive on the streets: “In this business, you gotta have a little dirt on you for anybody to trust you.” But Alonzo’s idea of “a little dirt” is more than just roughing up suspects and letting them go. After Alonzo incriminates Jake in the murder of a drug dealer, he threatens the rookie with the same fate, narrating the potential report on the evening news: “A Los Angeles Police Department narcotics officer was killed serving a high-risk warrant in Echo Park today . . . the young officer was survived by his wife and infant child.” Jake has no choice but to cooperate, especially since every cop on Alonzo’s squad will back up the senior officer’s version of events.

It’s poetic justice, then, when Alonzo is the one who doesn’t

survive the night. After his “King Kong ain’t got nothin’ on me” speech, Alonzo goes out in a hail of bullets to rival Bonnie and Clyde or Sonny Corleone. The film ends with this news report: “A narcotics officer was killed today serving a high-risk warrant near LAX . . .” Fittingly, Jake’s last act before leaving Alonzo to his fate is to yank Alonzo’s badge from around his neck.

Telling the cops from the crooks is almost impossible in Martin Scorsese’s *The Departed* (2006). Leonardo DiCaprio’s state trooper goes undercover in the crew of kingpin Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson), while Matt Damon is Colin Sullivan, one of Costello’s men who becomes a mole inside the Boston police department. As Costello memorably tells a young Colin, “When I was your age, they would say, ‘You can become cops or criminals.’ When you’re facing a loaded gun, what’s the difference?” In noir, very little separates one from the other. ■

WHAT MAKES A GOOD COP?

By Peter Stipe

You don’t hear much about good cops these days. Current events are shining a spotlight on the bad ones. Like the corrupt cops in film noir, they offer a warped fascination but pose a significant threat to the public. What motivates them? Noir certainly suggests some possibilities, but there’s no definite answer. Service should be its own reward. My partners and I had a simple objective: arrive first, save the victims, catch the crooks, preserve the evidence, always be the last to leave. It was a worthy goal. Sometimes you were out there all alone. Emerging from a hostile crowd with your man took some doing. I preferred having help.

Some officers were heavy-handed, some exercised bad judgement. When those guys were around, I always made sure to take control of suspects, prisoners, and crime scenes. If your name was attached to an incident, you wanted it done right. Our department weeded out those who couldn’t adapt to the job’s changing demands. With few exceptions, my assigned midnight shifts were completely in sync. Cars descended on every urgent call. Victims were attended to rapidly, bad guys rarely got away. Good cops are service- and performance-oriented. Bad cops dragged their feet responding or didn’t answer their radios at all. We did our best to compensate for them.

The good cop–bad cop dynamic is depicted clearly in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) by Lieutenant Dundy (Barton MacLane) and Detective Tom Polhaus (Ward Bond). Dundy roughs up suspects he can’t outwit, which appears to be most of them. That he outranks the even-handed and trustworthy Polhaus demonstrates one of many flaws in the civil service system. You can see the amusement on Polhaus’s face when Dundy is one-upped by Sam Spade. It’s like that in real life, too.

I entered law enforcement at the time old-school instincts converged with new-wave technology. We were issued service revolvers, wooden batons, and call box keys as rookies. Our agency sent me to the Detroit Metropolitan Police Academy in January 1986. The training was authentic. So were the casualties. Two weeks in, an officer just out of the academy and a veteran narcotics detective entered the same house in response to reports of a shooting. Both were in plain clothes and engaged one another in gunfire. Both died. A sobering incident for aspiring recruits. A few weeks later, an FBI shootout with bank robbery suspects in Florida left two agents dead and seven wounded. Both suspects were killed. A serious introduction to law enforcement. I’d rely heavily on my intuition, and enhanced tactics, for my entire career.

I was inspired by movie cops. Steve McQueen’s *Bullitt* (1968) was cool, calm, and extraordinarily restrained. Under fire several times, he doesn’t draw his sidearm until his final confrontation, a rarity in action films. Sam Levene’s Lieutenant Lubinsky helps track down *The Killers* (1946) of his boyhood friend, then engages them in an unintended reprisal. No more “big dinners” for them. Charles McGraw’s detective loses his partner but gets his man in *Armored Car Robbery* (1950). John McGuire’s Officer Rawlins is gunned down simply “doing his duty” by a demented Richard Basehart in *He Walked by Night* (1948). His ambush kept me hyper-vigilant. Like Rawlins, I commuted back and forth to work in uniform. I thought of him often while training. I tried to make myself a hard target.

What makes a good cop? He recognizes that his duty is to serve mankind. Every time an officer deals with a citizen, he is setting the stage for that person’s *next* encounter with the police. It doesn’t make much sense to unnecessarily humble someone in front of their friends or alienate them for no reason. A citizen shown respect is more likely to extend it in return. It’s a constant challenge to gain compliance in a quick, courteous way. Cops who understand that aspire to the higher standard we hear so much about.



The good cop/bad cop dynamic was laid out clearly in the days of *The Maltese Falcon*

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