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## Director Cuts: Sidney Lumet

### Rich Johnson

When we think of “Masters of Cinema,” there are few who carved their way and built such a reputation as Sidney Lumet. Spanning six decades, his immense body of work rarely missed a beat, Lumet’s method having evolved from Off-Broadway productions and anthology television dramas. Much like his contemporary John Frankenheimer, Lumet was at the forefront of innovative filmmaking that paved the way for New Hollywood, remaining in a unique position of bridging the gap between the old guard and a new generation of filmmakers. He may have been considered a journeyman to some, but the potency of his work remains essential viewing... and this latest course intends to provide the perfect starting point for any newcomer to such an intimidating filmography. Films covered will include his outstanding debut *12 Angry Men*, Sean Connery playing against type in *The Hill* and *The Offence*, Al Pacino’s crime classics *Serpico* and *Dog Day Afternoon*, along with the potent satire *Network* and overlooked *Equus*.

#### Resources:

Book:

*Making Movies* (1995)

**Author:** Sidney Lumet

**Publisher:** Vintage Books

Documentary:

*By Sidney Lumet* (2015)

**Director(s):** Nancy Buirski

**Available on:** Amazon Prime and Apple TV+.

#### Main films:

*12 Angry Men* (1957)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** Orion-Nova Productions

*Fail Safe* (1964)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** Columbia Pictures



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***The Hill*** (1965)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** Seven Arts Productions

***The Offence*** (1973)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** Tantallon

***Serpico*** (1973)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** Artists Entertainments Complex, Inc. / Produzion De Laurentiis International  
Manufacturing Company S.P.A.

***Dog Day Afternoon*** (1975)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** Artists Entertainment Complex

***Network*** (1976)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

***Equus*** (1977)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** Winkast Film Productions

**References to:**

***On the Waterfront*** (1954)

**Director(s):** Elia Kazan

**Studio(s):** Horizon Pictures

***Danger*** (1951-1953)

**Director(s):** Various

**Studio(s):** CBS Television

***Mama*** (1949–1957)

**Director(s):** Various

**Studio(s):** CBS Television

***You Are There*** (1953–1957)

**Director(s):** Various

**Studio(s):** CBS Television



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***Kraft Television Theatre*** (1947–1958)

**Director(s):** Various

**Studio(s):** CBS Television

***Studio One*** (1947–1958)

**Director(s):** Various

**Studio(s):** CBS Television

***Playhouse 90*** (1956–1960)

**Director(s):** Various

**Studio(s):** CBS Television

***Odd Man Out*** (1947)

**Director(s):** Carol Reed

**Studio(s):** Two Cities Films

**“Twelve Angry Men”** (1954)

**Director(s):** Franklin J. Schaffner

**Studio(s):** CBS Television

***Dr. Strangelove*** (1964)

**Director(s):** Stanley Kubrick

**Studio(s):** Showtime

***The Pawnbroker*** (1964)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** Landau Company

***Murder on the Orient Express*** (1974)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** G.W. Films Limited / EMI Films

***The Wiz*** (1978)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** Motown Productions

***Absolution*** (1978)

**Director(s):** Anthony Page

**Studio(s):** Bulldog Productions

***The Verdict*** (1982)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** 20th Century-Fox / The Zanuck/Brown Company



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### ***Running on Empty*** (1988)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** Lorimar Film Entertainment / Double Play

### ***Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*** (2007)

**Director(s):** Sidney Lumet

**Studio(s):** Unity Productions / Linsefilm / Funky Buddha Group / Capitol Films

### ***The Dark Knight*** (2008)

**Director(s):** Christopher Nolan

**Studio(s):** Warner Bros. Pictures / Legendary Pictures / Syncopy

### **Notes:**

*“For any director with a little lucidity, masterpieces are films that come to you by accident.” — Sidney Lumet*

## OVERVIEW

- Born: 1924, Philadelphia, USA. Died in 2011
- Career span: 1950s-2000s
- Debut film: *12 Angry Men* (1957), and went on to direct over 40 films
- Notable works: *Serpico* (1973), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *Network* (1976)
- Known for: Socially conscious, character-driven films that explore moral dilemmas
- Themes: Justice, morality, corruption, urban life, and ethics
- Style: Realistic storytelling, strong performances, fast shooting schedules
- Awards: Multiple Oscar nominations; received an Honorary Academy Award (2005)

Personal life: Two children. Married four times: Rita Gam (m. 1949; div. 1955), Gloria Vanderbilt (m. 1956; div. 1963), Gail Jones (m. 1963; div. 1978) and Mary Gimbel (m. 1980).

## INTRODUCTION: A CERTAIN CLASS

### **Immigration Story**

Common themes in immigrant filmmakers' stories include:

*Cultural identity:* Many immigrant filmmakers explore their dual identities and the tension between their roots and American culture. Interesting article via AOL: [“19 Phenomenal Photos Reveal What American Immigration in the 1900s Looked Like.”](#)

*Displacement and belonging:* Stories often focus on outsiders, adaptation, and resilience.



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*Reinvention:* Hollywood, in many ways, thrives on the energy and perspectives brought by immigrants reinventing themselves.

*Resistance and voice:* These filmmakers often push back against stereotypes and bring underrepresented voices to mainstream cinema.

### Contemporaries

Stanley Kramer (1913-2001). Known for: *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), *The Defiant Ones* (1958). As one of the first independent producers, he paved the way for independent cinema with his "message films" that tackled controversial social issues such as racism, nuclear war, and fascism.

Elia Kazan (1909-2003). Known for: *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *On the Waterfront* (1954). Focused on socially conscious dramas, intense performances, and psychological realism.

Nicholas Ray (1911-1979). Known for: *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *In a Lonely Place* (1950). Famous for portraying alienated youth and psychological tension.

Richard Brooks (1912-1992). Known for: *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *In Cold Blood* (1967). Focused on gritty realism and controversial subject matter.

Robert Wise (1914-2005). Known for: *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *West Side Story* (1961). Versatile director working across genres with a strong narrative style.

John Frankenheimer (1930-2002). Known for: *The Train* (1964), *Seconds* (1966). As well as a great dramatist, he was an innovator of action in cinema, from explosive train sequences to car chases.

Richard Fleischer (1916-2006). Known for: *Fantastic Voyage* (1966), *10 Rillington Place* (1971). An extremely versatile filmmaker who could adapt to any genre. He is the son of the famous, innovative animator Max Fleischer.

Stanley Kubrick (1928-1999). Known for: *Paths of Glory* (1957), *Spartacus* (1960), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964). Noted for meticulous craftsmanship and exploring complex themes in diverse genres.

### Post-War Cinema

During this time, the United States underwent significant changes reflecting social, cultural, and technological shifts. These included:

*Rise of film noir:* Although a term not coined in hindsight, postwar anxieties and disillusionment fuelled the popularity of film noir, a genre marked by dark, cynical tones, moral ambiguity, and complex characters. Classic examples include *The Big Sleep* (1946), *Double Indemnity* (1944), and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Thematically, film noir often reflected the psychological and social tensions of the era, including the trauma of war and the fears of the Cold War.

*The end of the studio system:* The war weakened the old Hollywood studio system that had dominated since the 1920s, but it was mainly down to the 1948 Paramount Decree that forced studios



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to give up their theatre chains, which led to less control over film distribution and exhibition. This was a major part of what led to the encouragement of independent productions.

*Shift in themes and storytelling:* Postwar films increasingly explored more complex and mature themes such as existential angst, psychological struggles, social issues, and critiques of American society. This led to a greater focus on realism and human psychology in films like *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *On the Waterfront* (1954) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955).

*Technological innovation:* The rise of Technicolor and widescreen formats (e.g., CinemaScope introduced in 1953) was a response to television's growing popularity. These innovations were used to lure audiences back to theatres with more immersive, spectacular visuals. 3D films also had a brief surge in the early 1950s.

*The "Red Scare" and censorship:* The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigations in the late 1940s and 1950s targeted Hollywood for alleged communist influences. The blacklist affected many writers, directors, and actors, leading to self-censorship and a chilling effect on political expression in films.

*The impact of television:* TV became the major competitor to cinema in the 1950s, prompting Hollywood to produce bigger-budget, more spectacular films. Studios also experimented with genres like musicals (*Singin' in the Rain*, 1952) and epic historical dramas (*The Ten Commandments*, 1956).

*Rise of independent and auteur filmmaking:* Some filmmakers began working outside the studio system, seeking greater creative control. Parallel to this was the rise of the Method style with the likes of Marlon Brando and James Dean.

## Defining the "American" Drama

A film genre focused on realistic, emotionally charged stories set in the United States, exploring complex characters and their struggles against personal, social, or moral challenges. These films often engage with quintessential American themes such as identity, ambition, family, and societal pressures.

*Key characteristics:*

- Realistic and believable storytelling
- Deep emotional and psychological exploration
- Focus on social, economic, and cultural issues
- Complex characters facing moral ambiguity
- Themes around the American Dream, success, failure, and human relationships

*Notable examples:*

The 1949 play *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller is one of the most archetypal examples of the American drama and tells the tragic story of Willy Loman, whose pursuit of success leads to disillusionment and family conflict, spotlighting the dark side of the American Dream. Other plays



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and films include: *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983 play, 1992 film), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947 play, 1951 film), *Revolutionary Road* (1961 novel, 2008 film), *Manchester by the Sea* (2016 film) and *Fences* (1985 play, 2016 film)

### Common themes:

*The American Dream:* Its promise, reality, and sometimes its failure or corruption.

*Family and relationships:* Conflicts, loyalty, betrayal, and reconciliation.

*Identity and self-discovery:* Characters wrestling with who they are versus societal expectations.

*Social issues:* Race, class, gender, economic hardship, and injustice.

*Moral ambiguity:* Characters facing difficult ethical decisions without clear answers.

*Psychological conflict:* Inner turmoil, mental health, and emotional struggles.

## PART ONE: EARLY LIFE & CAREER

Born June 25, 1924, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S. and grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. He studied theatre acting at the Professional Children's School of New York and Columbia University.

### Young Sidney

Born June 25, 1924, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S. and grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. He studied theatre acting at the Professional Children's School of New York and Columbia University.

Via the presentation, you will see Lumet as a child (left), photographed by Carl Van Vechten and (right) starring in a 1940 play *Journey to Jerusalem*.

Lumet's parents, Baruch and Eugenia Lumet, were Jewish and veterans of the Yiddish theatre, having immigrated to the United States from Poland. His father, who was born in Warsaw, was an actor, director, producer and writer. Sidney Lumet with his father, Baruch Lumet, in an unknown Yiddish stage production.

Lumet began his directorial career with Off-Broadway productions and evolved into a highly efficient television director. He began directing television in 1950 after working as an assistant to friend (and then-director) Yul Brynner.

Lumet's films address major social issues such as:

#### *Corruption and moral decay:*

This is seen particularly within institutions like the police, politics, and the justice system.

#### *Individual vs. The System:*

How moral individuals struggle against oppressive or corrupt bureaucracies.

*Justice and ethics:* He questions fairness, truth, and moral responsibility (*12 Angry Men*).



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*Power and authority:* Shows abuse of power and its impact on ordinary people (*Serpico*, *Prince of the City*).

*Media and manipulation:* How media shapes truth and public perception (*Network*).

*Urban alienation:* Raised in an urban environment, Lumet fully understands life's moral compromises and disillusionment in the modern city (*Dog Day Afternoon*).

*Human frailty and moral choice:* His characters are forced into ethical dilemmas that reveal their humanity.

### Theatre

As well as several summer theatre productions between 1947 and 1949, Sidney Lumet directed at least seven notable stage plays over his career, early efforts including *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1955), and Broadway productions of *Night of the Auk* (1956), *Caligula* (1960) and *Nowhere to Go But Up* (1962).

### Television

As one of the leading directors in the "Golden Age of Television," Lumet's television career made him one of the most skilled directors to emerge from the live TV era. Similarly to John Frankenheimer, it taught him discipline, speed, and a deep respect for actors — qualities that defined his prolific and acclaimed film career over the next five decades. Key series and anthologies included: CBS's *Danger* (1950–1955), in which he directed many episodes of this live dramatic anthology series, known for its tight, suspenseful storytelling.

Other series included: *Mama* (1949-1957) and *You Are There* (1953–1957) – an innovative series hosted by Walter Cronkite, which dramatised historical events as if covered by modern journalists. Lumet also directed numerous episodes of *The Best of Broadway*, *The Alcoa Hour*, *Studio One*, and *Kraft Television Theatre*. For these prestigious anthology series, he honed his skills with actors and complex live production.

He also directed original plays for *Playhouse 90*, *Kraft Television Theatre* and *Studio One*, directing approximately 200 episodes. Shows such as *Playhouse 90* launched a lot of Hollywood actors' careers – recognisable faces, including Paul Newman and William Shatner.

*"There are no minor decisions in movie making. Each decision will either contribute to a good piece of work or bring the whole movie crashing down."* — Sidney Lumet, *Making Movies* (1995)

Let's take a look at his personal taste in film:

Talking about some of the new talent that emerged during the height of New Hollywood in the '70s and the blockbuster era of the '80s, Lumet revealed he had two favourites when it came to American



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cinema: “I love Robert Zemeckis’ work. I think Steven Spielberg has become a great director. And I’m not using the word ‘great’ like Variety uses the word ‘great,’ I mean, of all-time.”

### Favourite films

*The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946)  
*Fanny and Alexander* (Ingmar Bergman, 1982)  
*The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972)  
*The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940)  
*Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith, 1916)  
*The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928)  
*Ran* (Akira Kurosawa, 1985)  
*Roma* (Federico Fellini, 1972)  
*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982)  
*Singin’ in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952)  
*2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)  
*Zero de Conduite* (Jean Vigo, 1933)  
*The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)  
*Odd Man Out* (Carol Reed, 1947)\*  
*The White Sheik* (Federico Fellini, 1952)  
*Winter Light* (Ingmar Bergman, 1963)  
*Dodsworth* (William Wyler, 1936)  
*Partie de Campagne* (Jean Renoir, 1946)  
*Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot* (Jacques Tati, 1953)  
*Schindler’s List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993)  
*Greed* (Erich von Stroheim, 1924)  
*The General* (Clyde Bruckman and Buster Keaton, 1926)  
*Amarcord* (Federico Fellini, 1973)  
*8½* (Federico Fellini, 1963)  
*Dumbo* (Various, 1941)  
*Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948)  
*Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959)  
*Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941)  
*Rome, Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945)  
*The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931)  
*Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942)  
*The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941)  
*Ugetsu Monogatari* (Kenji Mizoguchi, 1953)  
*Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950)  
*Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936)

The first film that had an impact on Lumet was Carol Reed’s *Odd Man Out*, which he often tried to replicate in terms of shots. Lumet [revealed](#): “That atmosphere seduced me, and then I thought of the acting, of the photography. And then I realised much later that there was something.”



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## PART TWO: AN IMPOSSIBLE SELECTION OF FEATURES

### *12 Angry Men (1957)*

*“It’s always difficult to keep personal prejudice out of a thing like this. And wherever you run into it, prejudice always obscures the truth.” — Juror #8*

#### Synopsis:

Sidney Lumet’s debut feature was *12 Angry Men* from 1957 and is often considered one of the greatest directorial debuts of all time. Following the closing arguments in a murder trial, the 12 members of the jury must deliberate, with a guilty verdict meaning death for the accused, an inner-city teen. As the dozen men try to reach a unanimous decision while sequestered in a room, one juror (Henry Fonda) casts considerable doubt on elements of the case. Personal issues soon rise to the surface, and conflict threatens to derail the delicate process that will decide one boy's fate.

The film is based on the 1954 teleplay “Twelve Angry Men”, which was a live broadcast for the *Studio One* anthology series. It was written by Reginald Rose and directed by Franklin J. Schaffner, who went on to direct the original *Planet of the Apes* (1968).

There is also a 1997 version made for television by William Friedkin (*The Exorcist*).

The three photos in the presentation show a key moment through the eyes of the different directors.

#### Themes:

The film consists of strong themes throughout, which would go on to become synonymous with Lumet’s work. These include:

*Justice and reasonable doubt:* The film explores the American justice system, emphasising the importance of reasonable doubt before convicting someone of a crime.

*Prejudice and personal bias:* It is a critique of how personal biases can impact decision-making in serious matters like a trial.

*Group dynamics and peer pressure:* The jury room becomes a microcosm of society, demonstrating how groupthink, intimidation, and social conformity influence people’s opinions.

*Moral responsibility:* The film highlights the ethical duty of jurors to ensure justice is served.

#### Cast of Characters:

Character dynamics form a crucial part of the drama. All the jurors represent various attitudes and social backgrounds, reflecting diversity in American society. Looking at a select few, we can see what each one represents:



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*Juror #8* (Henry Fonda): The main protagonist who challenges the initial verdict, representing rationality and justice. He is, appropriately, isolated from the rest of the group as he continues to press the case and the rest of the men.

*Juror #3* (Lee J. Cobb): The main antagonist is driven by personal anger and prejudice, highlighting an emotional bias.

*Juror #10* (Ed Begley): He exhibits overt prejudice, showing how racism can influence judgment.

*Juror #4* (E.G. Marshall): Logical and analytical, yet rigid. He demonstrates how cold logic alone may be insufficient.

### Cinematography and Direction:

“The visual language of *12 Angry Men*, crafted by Boris Kaufman, is defined by a sharp, realistic aesthetic that amplifies emotional depth within a single, confined space. Kaufman’s approach to this film is remarkably meticulous. Each shot is crafted to emphasise the psychological and narrative weight of the story. Given the single-room setting, Kaufman faced the challenge of making this environment feel engaging, despite its spatial limitations. His choices create a sense of dynamism that reflects the internal struggles and tensions among the jurors. This film’s visual design is a testament to Kaufman’s skill in transforming simplicity into layered storytelling.” Source: [Color Culture](#).

Lumet deliberately restrains the camera, which makes it all the more impactful. Lumet and Kaufman kept the camera movement subtle, using slight pans and tilts instead of dramatic shifts. The goal was to maintain the viewer’s focus on the rising tension among the jurors, without overtly drawing attention to the camera itself.

The entire film is mostly set in one jury room, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere that intensifies the drama. Even the temperature is established, where we are reminded of the unbearably hot weather with fans and the men fidgeting with their collars in the heat.

Breaking this down further:

*Camera work:* Lumet uses close-ups and varying camera angles to highlight tension, emotion, and the changing dynamics between jurors.

*Lighting:* The lighting becomes progressively brighter as the jurors reach consensus, symbolising enlightenment and clarity.

*Realism:* The film’s realistic approach and dialogue-driven narrative create a strong sense of immediacy and engagement.



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### Significance and Impact:

*Cultural impact:* *12 Angry Men* is considered a defining courtroom drama that remains relevant for its examination of justice, civic duty, and human nature.

*Social commentary:* The film critiques systemic issues such as prejudice and the fragility of justice.

*Influence:* It has inspired numerous adaptations and is often used in law and ethics education for its portrayal of deliberative democracy.

Further analysis on the film can be found via the [BFI](#) in their article “How *12 Angry Men* works – in 25 frames.”

### ***Fail Safe (1964)***

*“We’ve got no alternative! This minute the Russians are watching their boards, trying to figure out what we’re up to.”* — Brigadier General Warren A. Black

### Synopsis:

Lumet’s counterpoint to Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* is a Cold War thriller based on the novel by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler. The adaptation explores the terrifying possibility of accidental nuclear war triggered by technological errors and human fallibility. It follows a U.S. Air Force bomber crew mistakenly ordered to attack Moscow with nuclear weapons, and the desperate efforts to prevent a global catastrophe.

### Themes:

*Cold War paranoia and the threat of nuclear annihilation:* The film captures the pervasive fear of nuclear war during the Cold War era. It highlights how close humanity is to self-destruction due to misunderstandings, mechanical failures, or human errors. This anxiety is reflected in the characters’ reactions and the mounting tension.

*Fallibility of technology and systems:* The title “Fail Safe” ironically underscores the notion that even systems designed to be foolproof can fail. The movie explores how reliance on complex technology can lead to catastrophic errors with no easy reversal.

*Moral responsibility and the burden of command:* The film delves into the ethical dilemmas faced by leaders when decisions have life-or-death consequences on a massive scale. The President and military officers grapple with the impossibility of perfect decisions when the stakes involve millions of lives.

*Communication breakdown and escalation:* *Fail Safe* shows how miscommunication and the inability to quickly verify or countermand orders can escalate a crisis beyond control. It reflects real Cold War fears about the rapid escalation of conflicts.



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### Narrative Structure:

The story is told in a tightly controlled, real-time format, creating intense suspense. The use of intercutting scenes between the bomber crew, military command centres, and the White House plays into the tension throughout. The dialogue-heavy script and lack of elaborate action scenes also emphasise a psychological tension and the intellectual struggle of decision-making.

### Cast of Characters:

**The President (Henry Fonda):** Portrayed as calm, rational, and deeply burdened by his responsibility, Fonda's President embodies the ideal leader who must balance reason and emotion in an impossible situation.

**General Black (Walter Matthau):** A more hardline military figure who insists on following protocol, representing the military mindset of discipline and chain of command.

**The Bomber Crew:** The human faces of the crisis; they are disciplined but caught in a situation beyond their control, underscoring the tragic human cost.

### Cinematography and Direction:

Lumet employs a stark, black-and-white visual style that enhances the cold, clinical atmosphere. The camera work is restrained, focusing on faces and dialogue rather than spectacle. Lighting is often harsh, emphasising the bleakness and moral ambiguity, while the film's pace is deliberate, mirroring the slow, agonising decision-making process.

*Kubrick vs. Lumet:* Kubrick is centred in compositions – the *Strangelove* desk is a contrast to Lumet's throughlines and angles that are more triangular, pointing to characters.

### Historical Context:

Released in the same year as *Dr. Strangelove*, *Fail Safe* presents a more serious, sober take on nuclear war fears. It reflects the anxieties of the early 1960s and, based on when the original novel was being written, would have been an accurate reflection shortly before the Cuban Missile Crisis, capturing the precariousness of nuclear deterrence. With all of this in mind, the film is a powerful exploration of Cold War fears, the limits of technology, and the moral complexity of leadership in crisis. Its enduring relevance lies in its portrayal of how fragile peace can be and the heavy cost of human error on the global stage.



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## ***The Hill (1965)***

*“We’re all doing time. Even the screws.”* — Trooper Joe Roberts

### Synopsis:

Lumet’s British war drama *The Hill (1965)* is an often-buried little gem that deals with the harsh realities of the military, including racism and abuse. Set in a British Army military prison during World War II. The story follows a group of soldiers who are imprisoned for various offences and subjected to brutal disciplinary treatment under a harsh and sadistic Regimental Sergeant Major named Wilson. The central character, Staff Sergeant Williams, challenges the cruelty of Wilson and the harsh conditions, highlighting themes of authority, justice, and the human spirit under oppressive systems.

### Themes:

*Authority and abuse of power:* The film explores how authority, when unchecked, can become cruel and dehumanising. The prison staff uses harsh punishments (like making prisoners climb a man-made hill repeatedly) to maintain control, reflecting the dangers of authoritarian regimes or systems.

*Individual vs. the System:* The prisoners represent individuals struggling against a rigid, impersonal military system. The film critiques the lack of humanity in such institutions and the psychological and physical toll it takes on those subjected to it.

*Morality and resistance:* Some characters question the fairness and justice of the punishment, showing moral courage and resistance despite the oppressive environment. This theme highlights personal integrity in the face of systemic injustice.

*Psychological and physical suffering:* The hill itself symbolises the relentless punishment and the harsh conditions of war and imprisonment, serving as a metaphor for suffering and endurance.

*Style and impact:* Sidney Lumet’s direction emphasises realism, bolstered by intense performances and stark black-and-white cinematography that enhance the grim atmosphere.

*Racism and abuse:* The harsh realities of the military, specifically reflecting the time period.

Overall, Lumet’s film is a critique of military discipline and authority, questioning the balance between order and humanity.

### Cast of Characters:

Much like *12 Angry Men*, the characters clearly represent specific aspects of society and the human condition:

*Joe Roberts (Sean Connery):* A Former Sergeant Major, now a prisoner who represents a moral resistance and integrity. Roberts is the moral centre of the film — a man broken by the system but



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not corrupted by it. He refuses to submit to the sadism and hypocrisy of authority. His conflict with the officers and guards exposes the cruelty of blind obedience and the corruption of military discipline.

*Staff Sergeant Williams* (Ian Hendry): A sadistic prison guard and the main antagonist who represents abuse of power and institutional cruelty. Williams embodies the dehumanising effects of unchecked authority. He uses the military hierarchy to justify his sadism, showing how the system itself creates and protects tyrants.

*Regimental Sergeant Major Bert Wilson* (Harry Andrews): The senior officer overseeing the prison who represents the rigid system and blind adherence to rules. Wilson believes in discipline above all else, even when it becomes cruelty. He isn't personally evil like Williams, but his devotion to "the rules" makes him complicit in the system's corruption.

*Staff Sergeant Harris* (Ian Bannen): The only sympathetic guard who represents conscience within the system. Harris questions the morality of the prison's treatment of inmates and acts as a voice of decency. He illustrates how individual morality can survive even within a corrupt institution — though it's ultimately powerless against it.

*Jacko King* (Ossie Davis): A black prisoner from the West Indies who, for obvious reasons, represents racial and colonial oppression. King's treatment highlights not only class-based but also racial abuse within the British military system. His intelligence and dignity contrast with the racist attitudes of some guards and prisoners.

*Monty Bartlett* (Roy Kinnear): An overweight, cowardly prisoner who represents the everyman — weakness under oppression. Bartlett shows how ordinary people suffer and collapse under systemic cruelty. His eventual breakdown underscores the human cost of authoritarianism.

*Jock McGrath* (Jack Watson): Another prisoner, tough but weary, who represents endurance and futility. McGrath reflects the soldier's endurance — but also the futility of resistance in a system designed to break men physically and spiritually.

*The Hill* (the structure itself): Ultimately, it represents the system of oppression. The literal sand hill the prisoners are forced to climb repeatedly in the desert heat becomes a symbol of meaningless suffering and the crushing weight of military bureaucracy.

Connery went on to make four more films with Lumet, including *The Anderson Tapes* (1971), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974), and *Family Business* (1989), with 1973's *The Offence* being one of Lumet's best.



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## *The Offence* (1973)

*“Nothing I have done can be one half as bad as the thoughts in your head.”* — Kenneth Baxter

### Synopsis:

Another collaboration with Connery and, arguably, his best performance. The psychological drama tells the story of Detective Sergeant Johnson as it explores his mental state while he investigates a brutal assault on a young girl. Overwhelmed by the dark side of humanity he faces daily, Johnson’s suppressed anger and frustration erupt violently during an interrogation, leading to tragic consequences. The movie delves deeply into themes of violence, guilt, and the psychological toll of police work.

### Themes:

*Psychological breakdown:* The movie delves into the mental deterioration of Johnson, highlighting the emotional toll and moral ambiguities faced by police officers.

*Violence and trauma:* It portrays how exposure to violence can deeply affect individuals, blurring the lines between right and wrong.

*Authority and morality:* The film questions the integrity of those in power and critiques the justice system, revealing the flaws and hypocrisies within.

*Style:* Gritty and intense, with a focus on character psychology rather than action. Lumet’s direction emphasises close-ups and confined spaces to create a claustrophobic, tense atmosphere.

### Influence / Comparison:

Christopher Nolan has often cited his love for *The Offence* and how overlooked it is as a film. It is therefore no coincidence that the interrogation scene from *The Dark Knight* (2008) lifts heavily from *The Offence*’s infamous sequence.

### Symbolism:

Some of these key themes can be looked into in much more detail through the film’s use of symbolism.

*Detective Johnson’s breakdown as a symbol of repression:* Johnson’s psychological collapse represents the repressed anger and trauma not just of himself, but of society. His inability to process violence and moral corruption mirrors a wider societal failure to confront uncomfortable truths. His violent outburst can be seen as the eruption of suppressed emotions, symbolising how internalised pain and frustration can explode if left unaddressed.



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*The interrogation room:* The claustrophobic, bare interrogation room is symbolic of Johnson's mental state — confined, pressured, and isolated. It becomes a physical manifestation of his psychological imprisonment and descent. This setting strips away any facade, forcing raw truth and vulnerability to surface, symbolising the harsh and often brutal scrutiny within the justice system.

*Violence as a cyclical force:* Throughout the film, violence isn't just an external threat but something that feeds on itself. Johnson's actions reveal how violence can be internalised and reflected back in destructive ways. This cyclical violence symbolises the failure of authority figures to break free from their own trauma, perpetuating harm rather than resolving it.

*Use of Light and Shadows:* The film's lighting (cinematographer Gerry Fisher) often contrasts harsh lights and deep shadows, symbolising the duality of human nature — the good and evil, clarity and confusion. In contrast, shadows often engulf characters, emphasising moral ambiguity and the darkness lurking beneath the surface of society and the self.

In a 1973 interview\* by Susan Merrill promoting the film, Lumet was asked if he sees a development in his filmmaking, to which he responded: "I don't." The interview highlights how he focused on simplicity, so that his films became simpler over the years. "I'm terribly out of fashion now because I don't like directorial style. I think the theme should provide the style."

\*Available in the booklet in the [Eureka Blu-ray release](#).

## ***Serpico* (1973)**

*"The reality is that we do not wash our own laundry — it just gets dirtier."* — Frank Serpico

### Synopsis:

From the UK to the US and made the same year as *The Offence*, Lumet plunges into police corruption with the true-crime drama *Serpico*. A crime drama based on the true story of Frank Serpico, an honest New York City cop who fights against widespread corruption within the police force. Despite facing hostility and danger from his fellow officers, Serpico remains determined to expose the unethical practices and bring justice to the system. His struggle ultimately highlights the personal and professional costs of standing up for integrity in a corrupt environment.

### Themes:

*Corruption vs. integrity:* The film explores the pervasive corruption in the police department and Serpico's fight to remain honest despite the pressure to conform.

*Isolation and alienation:* Serpico's moral stance isolates him from his colleagues and puts his life in danger, emphasising the loneliness of whistleblowers.

*Systemic failure:* The story criticises the systemic issues that allow corruption to flourish and the challenges of reforming such entrenched systems.



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*Style and impact:* Lumet's realistic direction, combined with gritty cinematography, gives the film an authentic feel. The narrative is intense, often showing Serpico's inner conflict and the dangerous environment in which he operates.

### Historical context:

*Era of police corruption:* During the 1960s and early 1970s, many police departments in major U.S. cities, including New York, were plagued by systemic corruption. Officers often accepted bribes, protected illegal activities, and abused their power. The public was becoming more aware of these abuses through media reports and investigations.

*Civil Rights movement and social change:* The period was marked by growing demands for transparency, justice, and reform. The civil rights movement had exposed institutional racism and abuse of power, fuelling greater scrutiny of police behaviour.

*Watergate and distrust in authority:* *Serpico* came out just a year before the Watergate scandal exploded in 1974. There was already a growing cultural scepticism toward government and authority figures, making Serpico's story resonate deeply with audiences.

*Impact of Serpico's whistleblowing:* Frank Serpico's courageous stand helped prompt the Knapp Commission (established in 1970) to investigate NYPD corruption, leading to reforms. His story symbolised the possibility of change and personal sacrifice in fighting systemic wrongdoing.

### Scene Analysis — Opening:

*Context:* Frank Serpico (Al Pacino) has been shot in the face. He's bleeding, semi-conscious, and being rushed to the hospital by fellow officers. This intense opener perfectly sets the tone of paranoia, betrayal and corruption that defines the rest of the film.

### Shot Breakdown & Camera Design:

#### *Sequence Layout:*

1. [Police car interior]
  - Handheld camera (close-up on Serpico)
  - Low light; flashing red/blue reflections
  - Tight framing, claustrophobic composition

Lumet uses handheld, documentary-style cinematography to create immediacy as the flashing police lights strobe over Serpico's face, visualising moral chaos. The sound design, with its use of sirens and muffled dialogue, amplifies disorientation.

2. [Hospital Corridor]



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The long take follows the stretcher through narrow corridors. Lumet blocks extras (nurses, doctors) to create a *funnel effect*, emphasising urgency as naturalistic lighting and a muted colour palette (greys, greens) heighten the realism.

### 3. [Serpico's POV]

- Close-Up (Revelation)
- Blurred lights → Nurse faces → Close-up on Serpico's eyes → a necklace is cut (tension)
- We intercut between the past and present, witnessing Serpico becoming a police officer ("Dignity and worth of every individual")
- Blood glistens (ambient music begins to play)

The use of a POV shot connects the viewer to Serpico's vulnerability. Lumet cuts between subjective and objective angles to show both internal confusion and external hostility — the other officers' indifference hints at corruption.

The dramatic function of the opening scene is emphasised all the more by its bookend: The film circles back to this point, making it cyclical and tragic. It frames the story as a moral journey toward isolation, establishing Serpico as both *hero* and *victim* — a man punished for his integrity.

### Symbolism:

*Character isolation:* This is in nearly every shot (Serpico alone in frame, other characters clustered), visualising his moral and physical separation from the corrupt system.

### Legacy:

In essence, *Serpico* reflects a critical moment in American history when institutional corruption was increasingly exposed, and there was a push for accountability and reform. The film tapped into broader societal concerns about honesty, justice, and integrity during a turbulent era. It remains a landmark police drama, influencing later films and discussions about police ethics and reform. It's praised for its compelling character study and its unflinching look at institutional corruption.

### ***Dog Day Afternoon (1975)***

*"I'm robbing a bank because they got money here. That's why I'm robbing it."* — Sonny

### Synopsis:

Another outing with Pacino comes in the shape of *Dog Day Afternoon* from 1975. Based on the 1972 *Life* article "The Boys in the Bank" by P. F. Kluge and Thomas Moore, the crime drama follows Sonny Wortzik, a man who attempts to rob a bank to pay for his partner's gender confirmation



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surgery. The robbery quickly spirals into a tense hostage situation, drawing media attention and police negotiation. The film explores themes of desperation, identity, and societal pressure.

### Themes:

*Desperation and marginalisation:* The robbery is not for greed, but out of desperation — Sonny needs money for his partner’s gender confirmation surgery. This adds a human, emotional layer and explores themes of identity, love, and social alienation.

*Media and spectacle:* The media frenzy transforms the botched heist into a public spectacle, highlighting how real-life tragedy becomes entertainment. The film critiques the voyeurism of news coverage and public opinion.

*Authority vs. the individual:* The tension between Sonny and the police reflects broader distrust in authority. The police are not villains, but the power dynamics and negotiation tactics create a layered conflict.

### Key characters:

The main character is *Sonny*, played by Al Pacino): A complex anti-hero — nervous, passionate, and oddly charismatic. Al Pacino gives a legendary performance, portraying a man torn between chaos and conviction.

Other characters circle Sonny; a strong, supportive cast of hostages and negotiators. Keep an eye out for a very early performance from Lance Henriksen. Supportive cast includes:

*Sal* (John Cazale): Quiet and intense, Sal is unstable, adding to the unpredictability of the standoff. He serves as a foil to Sonny’s more expressive personality.

*Leon Shermer* (also referred to as “the wife” or “Sonny’s wife”, played by Chris Sarandon): A transgender character loosely based on Elizabeth Eden (born: Ernest Aron). The role earned Sarandon a nomination for the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor.

*Sergeant Eugene Moretti* (Charles Durning): Acts as a negotiator between the bank robbers and the authorities during the hostage crisis.

### Style and direction:

*Lumet’s realism:* The film uses natural lighting, minimal score, and handheld camera work to create an authentic, documentary-style atmosphere.

*Pacing and tension:* Set mostly in one location, the film sustains tension through character interactions, dialogue, and the evolving crowd dynamic.



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### LGBTQ+ representation:

*Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) was groundbreaking for its time in portraying an LGBTQ+ relationship — especially in a mainstream Hollywood crime film. At a time when these issues were often ignored or ridiculed in film, *Dog Day Afternoon* brought a complex, emotionally resonant portrayal to a wide audience.

*Humanising a transgender character:* Leon’s character is presented with empathy and depth. In a key phone conversation, Leon speaks about their mental health struggles and desire to live authentically. The film neither mocks nor fetishises Leon.

*Challenging masculinity and norms:* Sonny defies traditional masculinity in multiple ways: 1. His motivation is rooted in love and care, not dominance or greed. 2. His relationship with Leon and his bisexuality (implied by also having a wife and kids) adds complexity to his identity. Pacino’s performance gives Sonny vulnerability and passion without turning him into a caricature. In doing so, the film challenges the typical macho archetypes found in crime dramas.

*Limitations:* While progressive, the film reflects its time:

- Leon is played by a cis male actor (Chris Sarandon), which would likely be criticised today.
- Language around gender identity is dated or vague.
- Leon has limited screen time; we see her mostly through Sonny’s eyes.
- Yet, it’s important to weigh these limits against the context of the 1970s, when positive or even non-ridiculed LGBTQ+ representation was rare.

### Legacy:

*Dog Day Afternoon* remains a significant milestone in queer film history. Its portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters—especially Leon—was ahead of its time in terms of empathy and realism. It treats queer love and identity not as punchlines, but as central to the human story it tells. It is considered a classic of 1970s American cinema. It’s praised for its raw performances, social commentary, and exploration of unconventional themes like LGBTQ+ identity and anti-establishment sentiment.

### ***Network* (1976)**

*“I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore!”* — Howard Beale

### Synopsis:

Lumet’s sharp satirical drama critiques the television industry and its manipulation of news for ratings. Centring on news anchor Howard Beale, upon learning he will be fired, he delivers a famous on-air rant; an infamous outburst that turns him into a media sensation, prompting the network to exploit his breakdown for profit. The film explicitly explores themes of media ethics, corporate greed, and the blurring of entertainment and news and predicted the rise of sensationalism in media, where truth becomes secondary to ratings and spectacle. *Network* is a powerful work that remains



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relevant today, resonating with ongoing debates about media bias, fake news, and the commercialisation of information.

Peter Finch, who stars as the magnetically crazed Howard Beale, won a posthumous Oscar at the 1977 Academy Awards after he passed away at the beginning of that year.

### Themes (parallels to today):

*Sensationalism over substance:* Just like in *Network*, where the news becomes more about spectacle and emotional outbursts than facts, today's media often prioritises sensational stories, clickbait headlines, and viral moments to attract audiences, sometimes at the expense of accuracy and depth.

*Ratings and profit drive content:* The film shows a corporate network exploiting Howard Beale's breakdown for higher ratings. Similarly, many modern media outlets tailor content to maximise viewer engagement and advertising revenue, sometimes blurring the line between news and entertainment.

*Blurring news and entertainment:* The transformation of a serious news program into a form of entertainment mirrors today's "infotainment" culture, where news shows frequently mix opinion, spectacle, and celebrity appearances, making it harder to separate fact-based reporting from entertainment.

*Media as a tool for manipulation:* *Network* critiques how media can manipulate public perception. Today, with social media algorithms and curated news feeds, audiences are often fed content that reinforces their beliefs, contributing to polarisation and misinformation.

*Mental health and media pressure:* Howard Beale's on-air breakdown highlights the human cost of relentless media pressure. In today's high-stakes media environment, the stress on journalists and personalities, combined with 24/7 news cycles, can lead to similar strains. Would you like me to focus on a specific aspect, like social media's role or the impact of 24-hour news channels?

### Direction and symbolism:

*Time is running out:* The first time we see Howard Beale behind the news desk, a row of clocks hangs over his shoulder. Lumet used this common newsroom feature to carry deeper meaning, turning a familiar piece of set dressing into subtle foreshadowing. The clocks don't just mark different time zones—they serve as a quiet reminder that Beale's own time is slipping away.

*Magical realism:* Sidney Lumet and Paddy Chayefsky maintained that *Network* wasn't meant as satire — It was simply reporting the truth as they saw it. That perspective shaped how cinematographer Owen Roizman approached the film's visual language. Together, he and Lumet sought to express Howard Beale's transformation from an unhinged anchor into a kind of modern prophet.



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*One shot captures this perfectly:* As Beale delivers his sermon-like monologue before a live studio audience, Lumet positions the camera behind him. We see the crowd facing him, while the bright studio lights hanging overhead gleam like stars against a dark sky. Though Lumet rarely shot directly into light, Roizman convinced him that this visual would heighten the scene's sense of wonder and prophecy. The choice turns a simple television broadcast into a moment that feels almost divine.

### ***Equus* (1977)**

*“The normal is the good smile in a child’s eyes — all right.  
It is also the dead stare in a million adults.” — Dr. Dysart*

#### Synopsis:

Based on the 1973 play by Peter Shaffer\*, this overlooked psychological drama explores the complex relationship between a psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Dysart, and a troubled teenage boy, Alan Strang, who has blinded six horses in a violent, ritualistic act.

\*Peter Shaffer also wrote *Frenzy* (1972), *Sleuth* (1972) and *The Wicker Man* (1973).

The story became well known in 2008 when Daniel Radcliffe appeared nude in the role in a West End production. A delight for *Harry Potter* fans.

The year after, Richard Burton stars in *Absolution* (1978), directed by Anthony Page and written by Peter Shaffer's brother, Anthony Schaffer.

#### Themes:

*Religion and worship:* Alan's intense, almost religious fascination with horses represents a personal mythology that blends worship, passion, and pain. The horses symbolise primal, untamed forces that contrast with societal norms.

*Freedom vs. conformity:* The film questions the cost of “normality.” Dr. Dysart struggles with his role in “curing” Alan, fearing that removing the boy's fervent passions will render him mundane and emotionally deadened.

*Psychological conflict:* The narrative dives deeply into the psyche of Alan, revealing repressed desires, guilt, and the impact of his upbringing, particularly his conflicted relationship with his parents and their differing attitudes toward religion and sexuality.

*Repression:* This core theme drives much of the psychological conflict in Alan Strang and shapes the film's tension, often with unbearable moments acted out on screen. Alan's repressed desires are seen through his intense fascination with horses, which is deeply tied to his sexual awakening and religious experiences, both of which he cannot openly express. His upbringing — marked by strict, conflicting moral values from his parents — forces him to suppress these feelings. This repression



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builds up into a violent outburst, symbolised by the blinding of the horses. The horses become a physical manifestation of his repressed passion and confusion.

#### Visual and directorial style:

*Stark lighting and intimate close-ups:* Used to create a claustrophobic and intense atmosphere, mirroring the psychological tension. The theatrical origins of the story are preserved in some stylised sequences that heighten the symbolic nature of Alan's internal struggle. The iconography of the horse takes on god-like and mythic symbolism.

*Equus* is a provocative exploration of passion, faith, and the price of societal acceptance. It challenges viewers to consider what it means to be truly free and the sacrifices made in the name of mental health and conformity under a deep-seated sense of repression...

*Psychiatrist's role:* Dr. Dysart, tasked with "curing" Alan, recognises that treatment means breaking down these passionate but socially unacceptable urges. He fears that by repressing Alan's fervent inner life, he is stripping away something vital, leaving only a dull, conformist existence. This dilemma highlights the broader societal tendency to repress what is deemed abnormal or disruptive, often at the cost of individuality and emotional vitality.

#### Symbolism:

The act of blinding the horses can be seen as both an expression of repressed rage and a tragic attempt to silence the uncontrollable forces inside Alan. Repression in the film is not just a personal struggle but a critique of how society enforces emotional restraint and denies complex human desires.

## CONCLUSION: LUMET'S LEGACY

### Other notable films

*Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1962)

*The Pawnbroker* (1964)

*The Wiz* (1978)

*Deathtrap* (1982)

*The Verdict* (1982)

*Running on Empty* (1988).

### Final Years

His final film was *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, released in 2007, once again bringing an ensemble of actors including Albert Finney, Ethan Hawke, Philip Seymour Hoffman and Marisa Tomei.

Sidney Lumet will always remain a prolific filmmaker, renowned for his commitment to truth and realism. There was an almost unrivalled moral intensity on display in his work; a deep social



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awareness, exploring themes of justice, corruption, and personal integrity that made him a true “King of New York” — the city in which most of his films were set. Challenging audiences to confront ethical dilemmas and societal flaws, his naturalistic directing style is what most great filmmakers strive for. Ultimately, Lumet’s legacy *endures* because he was a storyteller who brought conscience and authenticity to American cinema. A rare commodity in 21st-century filmmaking.