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Film Analysis

Crisis

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines crisis as ‘an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending’ (“Crisis - Definition and More from the Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary”). During the early 1970’s, the nation was in exactly that; a crisis. As the scandals were unveiled, the country faced a defining moment within the political structure. The crisis wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, at least for the entertainment industry. The media devoured the details and played on the emotions of the American people.

In 1973, *Serpico*, which told the inspirational, true story of a dedicated New York police officer who opened the public’s eyes to the corruption within the department, was released within theaters (Hartill and Landers). *Serpico* fully embodied the controversial and powerful theme of the 1970’s. The American people had had enough of the corruption by powers of authority, and were now demanding change. The era reached its critical point with the Watergate Scandal and the first resignation of a United States President. The film *Serpico* presented a vivid representation of the feelings of the American people towards the corruption occurring within the United States during the 1970’s, fueling the political changes that would occur.

*Serpico* tells the story of a young, inexperienced cop in the early 1970’s. He quickly learns of the extortion and corruption within the New York City Police Department. Despite the dangers, Frank Serpico refuses to accept any money or participate in the criminal acts of his colleagues. Serpico finds that exposing the situation is extremely difficult as the corruption proves to travel high within the ranks of authority. After testifying for a grand jury, Serpico finds that his fellow officers miss no opportunity to put his life on the line. Against all odds, Frank Serpico continued to sacrifice for the desperately needed change (Hartill and Landers).

*Serpico* was successful upon its release in the United States. The film was directed by Sidney Lumet, who some consider to be a master of cinema during this time. Frank Serpico was played by Al Pacino, in one of his most memorable roles, with the assistance of the real Frank Serpico. The movie also features performances by John Randolph, Allan Rich, and Damien Leake. The film grossed over $27 million in the box office. *Serpico* was nominated for two Oscars and won numerous awards, including a Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture Actor by Al Pacino (Hartill and Landers).

The awards were impressive, but part of the reason *Serpico* was so successful was due to the feelings of the general public. The United States was finally reaching the end of the Vietnam War and the air was thick with mixed emotions. The Vietnam War lasted for over a decade, and cost the United States nearly 60,000 lives alone (Bantwal). The majority of the population was tired of the fighting, and began demanding world peace at rallies across the country. The events during the 1970’s only further supported the radical change that would occur.

During the first week of May in 1970, there were multiple anti-war rallies held on Kent State University’s campus to demonstrate the feelings of the students toward the Nixon Administration and the war in Vietnam. The protests began peacefully without incident, but the peace did not last. On May 4th, 1970 General Canterbury of the Ohio National Guard ordered the groups to disperse. The crowd became unruly and tried to retreat to a nearby practice field. The National Guard followed and at some point 60 to 70 shots were fired within a 13 second period. Many of the guardsmen fired their rifles in the air but a few did not. Four students were fatally wounded and another nine were injured. The incident was investigated and went to trial, but no one would take responsibility for the actions that occurred that day. In the film *Serpico,* there is a conversation that takes place between Frank Serpico and his Captain Mclain which illustrates the feeling of government officials towards the possibility of public scrutiny.

“I've been to outside agencies. I'll go to more if I have to,” Frank Serpico.

“What outside agencies? Holy Mother of God! Frank, we wash our own laundry around here! You could be brought up on charges,” Captain Mclain.

“We do not wash our own laundry. It just gets dirtier,” Frank Serpico.

Like Serpico’s story, Americans were standing up for what they felt was right, regardless of the risk imposed upon them (“*Serpico”*).

The shootings at Kent State University are often considered the beginning of the crisis within the Nixon Administration. The world that was watching saw a country that appeared to be impossible to govern. The Nixon Administration was responsible for several unethical acts including the most famous; the Watergate Scandal. The Watergate Scandal directly relates to the conflicts occurring within *Serpico*. The higher authorities were well aware of the corruption, and were often involved in it, for instance President Nixon himself was found guilty of several acts of misconduct. In the film Serpico is quoted as saying, “Today it is becoming harder to speak out, with the inception of the Patriot Act, the president has legislated free speech to be a crime (“*Serpico*”).” The very individuals that were elected to serve, and protect the United States people, choose instead to use the taxpayers’ resources for greed and corruption (Garay). As in the film, the administration did its best to quiet whistle blowers, and cover up any implications of wrong doing (“*Serpico*”).

The resignation of President Nixon carried a very powerful message. The American people were demanding the truth, not cover ups, much like Frank Serpico. They were honest hard working people, who were willing to do the right thing, regardless of the sacrifice. Perhaps the best example from the film is the true story it comes from. Even though the film had slight variations from the actual events, it was still a real story that someone had lived. The story was not created at the desk of a Hollywood writer. Frank Serpico lived every day with the uncertainty of if he was going to survive. Frank Serpico’s reasoning for his actions in the film were simple:

“The fight for justice against corruption is never easy. It never has been and never will be. It exacts a toll on our self, our families, our friends, and especially our children. In the end, I believe, as in my case, the price we pay is well worth holding on to our dignity (“*Serpico*”)”.

At times he was angry, and frustrated with the lack of responsibility of his superiors. Faced with the challenges presented to him, he never gave up, and continued to do the honorable thing. Frank Serpico became a hero to the American people (Maas).

The emotions that helped fuel the political changes during the 1970’s did not develop overnight. The film *Serpico* was so important to its era, because it was the visual example that people needed to see. *Serpico* showed that people were willing to stand up against powers of authority, with the risk of losing their life, like the students at Kent State University. For the first time Americans were confident enough to challenge a powerful administration, and essentially hold the ruler of our country responsible for his mistakes. Frank Serpico gave us a powerful story that accurately represented the emotions of the Americans during a time of political crisis.

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