

THE UNKNOWN MOVIES

The Offence

(1973)

Director: Sidney Lumet

Cast: Sean Connery, Trevor Howard, Vivien Merchant


From what I have gathered from watching and reading interviews for the past several years, Sean Connery today looks back on his years playing James Bond with some fondness. It's not hard to figure out why. Of course, the realization that he contributed to a series that is already considered an important part of film history must give him some pride. Though I am also confident that he can look at that experience with a positive eye also because of how audiences today look at him. Certainly, a lot of people cannot help but think of James Bond whenever Sean Connery enters their minds. But even those who instantly think of Bond will almost certainly think of other popular movies Connery has been in - like *The Hunt For Red October*, *Highlander*, and *The Untouchables*, the latter of which earned him an Oscar. But it wasn't always like this for Connery. Back during the days he was playing Bond, he was thoroughly tired of playing the part by the time he made *You Only Live Twice*. Part of this was because of the constant scrutiny by the world-wide press was taking a toll on his private life. But it was also because audiences didn't seem particularly willing to watch the non-Bond movies he was in at the time, including *The Hill* and *A Fine Madness*. "I'd like to kill James Bond," Connery once wearily told a reporter.

After leaving the Bond series after [completing](#) work on *You Only Live Twice*, Connery made a few unBond-like movies (such as *Shalako* and *The Red Tent*), but they were met with general indifference from critics and audiences alike.

Perhaps it was because of a need for some time to restructure his career plans that Connery subsequently agreed to make one more (official) Bond movie at that point. Perhaps it was also so he could regain some box office clout. (Though I am sure the hefty paycheck Connery was promised was a major deciding factor.) However, Connery did not agree to do *Diamonds Are Forever* simply for any or all of these reasons. United Artists also threw in an incentive to sweeten the pot for Connery, since they were desperate to have Connery temporarily reprise his role before finding a suitable replacement. UA told Connery that if he agreed to do *Diamonds*, they would afterwards cast him in another of their movies. Not just that, but Connery himself could choose the movie. The movie Connery picked was *The Offence*. UA managed to snag director Sidney



Lumet, who had already made an impression with movies like *Fail-Safe* and *The Pawnbroker*, and had actually worked with Connery several times before. Despite all this talent aboard, *The Offence* seems not to have made too much of an impression upon its initial release, which is a shame. While I couldn't call it a great movie, nor could I call it "entertaining" because of the serious subject matter it concerns, it does have a number of factors that make it an interesting watch.

One of these interesting things comes from the knowledge of how Connery was feeling about Bond at this time of his life, because the character he plays in this movie is one who has become frustrated and driven near the point of madness with what he has been doing as a career all of these years. Could Connery have chosen this project specifically because of this character trait in this part? I wouldn't be surprised if the answer turned out to be yes. Though the story and the other traits his character have are quite atypical, and I could see that doing something non-formula may have appealed to him as well. Connery plays Sergeant Johnson, a British policeman who has been in the force for a considerable amount of time when we first meet him. As the movie starts, we quickly learn that the area is in a panic because of a child molester on the [loose](#) . Three children have already fallen victim, and despite Johnson and others on the task force keeping an eye out, the molester soon claims another victim. That same night, a strange-acting man (Ian Bannen, *Waking Ned Devine*) is spotted and brought into the station. Though his colleagues aren't totally sure this is the man they are looking for, Johnson claims he is "100% sure", and starts putting the pressure on the suspect in the interrogation room. Though we don't see everything that happens during the interrogation, it's made clear something happened during it that touched a nerve in Johnson, making him suddenly lose it - he dishes out a beating that not only draws blood but leaves the suspect in a comatose state on the floor.

If *The Offence* was a typical police-oriented movie, the most likely thing that would happen at this point would be that Johnson would somehow try to cover up what he did, and the rest of the movie he would try to hide what really happened. However, things go differently almost



immediately after the suspect hits the floor - nearby policemen who heard the commotion burst into the room two seconds later and catch Johnson (bloody) red-handed over the collapsed suspect. Johnson doesn't even have time to entertain the notion of covering it up, and his fellow officers clearly refuse to do so. The other policemen promptly call for an ambulance, and Johnson's superiors force him to write and sign a statement, immediately placing him under suspension afterwards. The movie makes clear that this is one mess that cannot be cleaned up, and that Johnson is going to suffer some serious consequences. It

might seem that from this point on, the movie will take us step by step up to and through Johnson's dealings with the justice system. But once again, *The Offence* surprises us. Though we are taken to the first few painful steps Johnson goes through (having to break the news to his wife, being subsequently interrogated by investigators), the movie is not about the price Johnson pays for his act. In fact, we never find out what punishment he's given, or even if he *is* punished or not. Instead, the rest of the movie tackles a bigger question: After twenty years of distinguished service, what on earth suddenly made Johnson commit such a horrible criminal act?

Obviously, something happened in that interrogation room to drive Johnson to that act, but it's equally obvious that it has to be more than that, even before we get to see an unedited flashback of the interrogation near the end of the movie. There are signs something is seriously wrong with Johnson even before he gets the suspect alone in the interrogation room, such as the strange curt remarks he keeps blurting out while the leader of the search team lays out the plans to find the missing girl. The suggestion is that Johnson has had his sanity slowly eroded from years on the job, from seeing countless horrible sights that most of us are fortunate never to see even once. Several times in the movie we get a taste of what Johnson has gone through. Driving home after committing the deed, we are shown what is going on in Johnson's mind - an almost endless string of crime scenes and accidents he has seen in his career as a policeman, each more ghastly than the next. Lumet emphasizes the horror by showing these scenes in near silence, so our attention is held on the carnage that's displayed. In a way, we are seeing these sights just like Johnson - without any distractions, or hopeful signs. You then start to understand the deep psychological damage he has suffered, and any critical viewpoint you had of him starts to soften.

What Johnson did was indeed horrible. But the screenplay also argues that it was equally horrible that there apparently wasn't any lifeline for Johnson to grab onto along the way. While modern

law enforcement agencies around the world have psychological help available for its agents, there apparently wasn't anything like that around in the early '70s, at least in this English police station. None of the other policemen seem able to offer support or useful suggestions. During the inquiry, Johnson asks chief investigator Cartwright (Howard, *Mutiny On The Bounty*) how he manages to cope with what he sees day after day. Cartwright replies "Everyone finds a way," and adds that he simply doesn't take the memory of his work home to his private life... while facing away from Johnson with an anxious look on his



face. Johnson can't even find any comfort at home. Even before telling his wife (Merchant, *Frenzy*) what happened, it becomes clear that their marriage has been strained to near the breaking point for a long time - though we never learn this is partly or completely due to Johnson's mental strain. All the same, she desperately tries to be of help and support when she is told what happened - yet when her stony husband finally breaks down and describes his horrible thoughts in detail, she quickly finds herself having to run to the other room to throw up.

For a scene like this to truly work, the acting can't be any less than convincing. Merchant is only given several minutes of screen time to assist the screenplay to make a character we can believe has a troubled marriage, though still has some love left deep down that makes her try to reach out and help - unsuccessfully. She not only manages to do this, but does it while changing from one extreme emotion to another; her initial annoyance changes to disbelief, then we subsequently see hurt, anger, pleading, and confusion. She becomes a character, not simply a device for Johnson to inform the audience of what is going on in his head. It probably goes without saying that Connery gives out another excellent performance. He does get a little carried away a couple of times when his character is in an escalating rant that almost reaches hysteria, but otherwise he keeps things in check, seemingly knowing that someone like Johnson would likely be numbed in some ways by what he's been through for years. It's easy to overlook the other fine performances in the movie because of him, not just Merchant. Howard has pretty much just one big scene, an interrogation of Johnson that soon becomes something of a shouting match and a duel of two

stubborn wills - and Howard holds his own at every moment. And as the suspect, Bannen effortlessly goes back and forth from the two sides of his character; he's hesitant and mildly protesting when things seem against him, but when the tables turn he eagerly seizes and pummels what weaknesses he can find.

One unexpected thing concerning Bannen's character is that we never get concrete proof one way or another he is the molester the police are looking for. It's yet one more touch of the unconventional spirit behind the screenplay. The screenplay happens to be based on a stage play



(written by the same writer), and Lumet isn't able to shake of the stage origins, especially in the second half of the movie. But with the second half of the movie almost all entirely consisting of three long scenes each taking place in one room, you can't really blame Lumet for this. That's not to say Lumet isn't guilty of any wrong move on his part. Some of his direction is over-indulgent and excessively "arty" to the point of irritation. The opening of the movie, giving us a glimpse of an event that is to come, is not only long and unnecessary (it in fact spoils the impact of when the event actually happens), but is shown in very slow

motion along with annoying high-pitched tones on the soundtrack. And like other moments in the movie, what appears to be a close-up of a dentist's light is rudely imposed over the happenings. At least Lumet comes up with a few other personal touches that compensate. The atmosphere in any scene always feels dead-on; we feel the grey, bleak atmosphere of 1970s lower-class England while we're on the streets, and any scene involving crowds - a search party, policemen relaxing in the officer's lounge - somehow feels *exactly* as it would be in real life. But the real reason why *The Offence* succeeds is that Lumet most of the time simply keeps the focus on Johnson - a man not really likeable yet so believable with the pain he expresses that maybe we keep watching so we can assure ourselves we will never go over the edge like him.

[Check for availability on Amazon \(VHS\)](#)

[Check for availability on Amazon \(Download\)](#)

[Check for availability on Amazon \(DVD\)](#)

See also: [Busting](#), [Phoenix](#), [Route 9](#)

[HOME](#)

[INDEX](#)

[GENRE INDEX](#)

[EMAIL](#)