

Serpico Part II: A Documentary about an Icon

"Frank Serpico" will premiere April 23 at the Tribeca Film Festival in Manhattan

by *George De Stefano*



Antonino D'Ambrosio and Frank Serpico. Photo by Karim Lopez.

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Antonino D'Ambrosio's new documentary reveals the man behind the myth more than 40 years after the maverick cop exposed massive corruption in the NYPD. "Frank Serpico" explores the performative aspects of its protagonist's character, while highlighting the Italian-America side of the story.



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“People have been trying to make this movie for more than 40 years,” says filmmaker Antonino D’Ambrosio. The movie in question, and the one D’Ambrosio has made, is “Frank Serpico”, a new documentary about the maverick police officer who, in the early 1970s, exposed rampant corruption in the New York City Police Department. D’Ambrosio’s film not only reconstructs Serpico’s efforts to uncover the malfeasance that reached from the NYPD rank and file to the department’s upper echelons. “Frank Serpico” is an engrossing examination of courage, moral commitment, and the costs of such commitment in a society that too often marginalizes those who challenge abuses of power by institutions like the police.

And since Serpico is best-known to the public through Serpico, director Sidney Lumet’s 1973 film starring Al Pacino, D’Ambrosio’s documentary also is a meditation on celebrity, media myth-making, and how one man coped with the burden of being a mythic figure. Moreover, D’Ambrosio presents Serpico’s life as a specifically Italian American story, in which ethnicity, far from being incidental, is an essential component.

“Frank Serpico” will have its premiere April 23 at the **Tribeca Film Festival in Manhattan**. There will be additional screenings April 24, 26, and 29.

Francesco Vincent Serpico, born in Brooklyn in 1936 to working-class immigrant parents from Campania, was the first New York police officer to report pervasive corruption in the NYPD and to testify in public about it. He revealed that cops had been accepting millions of dollars in payoffs from drug dealers and other criminals, and that police officials knew of, overlooked, and participated in the misconduct. Cops like him who refused bribes were, as Serpico stated, “afraid to be honest.” He first told his superiors, but when they ignored him he enlisted the support of David Durk, a sergeant in the city’s Investigations Department who also was disturbed by police corruption and by the unwillingness of police and city officials to do anything about it. (D’Ambrosio’s film notes that the Italian-American Serpico and Durk, who was Jewish, were “outsiders” in the Irish-dominated NYPD.)

Serpico testified before a Brooklyn grand jury, and *The New York Times* gave the story front-page coverage. What lent particular force to his testimony was the fact that it came from someone within the department; previous exposures of police corruption all had come from outside the NYPD. Serpico, as writer Luc Sante says in the film, “knew where the bodies were buried.”

To say that his fellow officers and the NYPD brass were unhappy with



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Serpico would be a gross understatement. Other cops angrily confronted him, calling him a “rat”, and his life was threatened. Then, on February 3, 1971, he discovered just how despised he was. While attempting to make a drug arrest in a Brooklyn apartment, he was shot in the head by the suspect. The fact that the cops who had accompanied him to the scene didn’t follow him to the apartment suggested that Serpico had been set up to be killed. The other officers even refused to call in a dispatch to police headquarters that an officer had been shot. (An elderly man living in the apartment building called an ambulance for the critically wounded Serpico.) The bullet left Serpico partially deaf, and he has suffered from chronic pain from the fragments still lodged in his brain.



Documentary maker, Antonino D'Ambrosio. Photo by Karim Lopez.

D'Ambrosio's film reunites Serpico with one of his fellow officers, Arthur Cesare, and their encounter, more than forty years after the shooting, provides some of the film's most powerful, if disturbing moments. Cesare insists he has largely forgotten the events of 1971 since he retired from the police force, denies the extent of the corruption Serpico exposed, and even criticizes his former partner for harming the department. Serpico's frustration

with Cesare and his infuriating obstinacy and denial is painful to watch.

In late 1971, Serpico testified several times before the Knapp Commission, a panel created by Mayor John Lindsay to investigate police corruption. His shocking revelations, which became front-page news in New York and nationally, made him a household name. But he became mythic—or, to use today's parlance, “iconic”—when Al Pacino portrayed him in Sidney Lumet's “Serpico”. (The film was largely based on journalist Peter Maas' book, “Serpico: The Cop Who Defied the System”.) Since “iconic” has become nearly meaningless through overuse, it's worth noting that an icon is a religious image that is venerated as a symbol of divinity or sanctity; an icon's form suggests a larger meaning. Serpico indeed became iconic, not of holiness but of a kind of secular sainthood, through the image of Pacino-as-Serpico, shaggy-haired and bearded, with his soulful, world-weary gaze.

“Frank Serpico” explores the performative aspects of its protagonist's character, as well as his admitted eccentricity. Early on the film notes his penchant for disguises and role-playing as an undercover officer; later, it examines the impact of his celebrity, particularly after the great success



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of Lumet's film. D'Ambrosio deftly suggests the interplay of representation and reality by superimposing Pacino as Serpico in the gripping moments as he warily approaches the apartment where his would-be killer waits over new footage of Serpico returning for the first time to the scene of his near-death.

D'Ambrosio was reminded of the power of pop culture representations to shape popular consciousness while making his film. While driving to Serpico's upstate New York home with his crew, he was pulled over by a state police officer. "I was reluctant to tell the officer—who, by the way, was Italian— where I was going because you never know how someone is going to respond to Frank Serpico. But I told him, 'I'm going to see Frank Serpico.' He said, 'Oh you mean Pacino.' So that's what's happened – in popular culture Frank Serpico in some ways is secondary to Al Pacino's rendering of Frank Serpico in Lumet's film. That was something else I wanted to explore – what that does to someone. Some might say everything's fine for him, he had this book and this movie and he became famous. But the real issue is the real issue – the abuse of power and corruption. And that's continued to accelerate and ascend to levels that are quite mind-boggling even for Frank."

Serpico left, or rather fled, the United States in the late 1970s, moving to Switzerland and then the Netherlands. He took great pains to hide his identity, but in the Netherlands, he was recognized by local police (and the media) after he rescued a young girl who had fallen into a canal. As Frank Serpico relates, the local police commissioner told Serpico that he screened the Lumet film for police officials. (The Peter Maas biography was prominently displayed on his desk when the two met.) Serpico warned the commissioner that showing the film wasn't sufficient to prevent abuse, and that he and his department needed to be constantly vigilant. A year later, a major scandal involving that police department and narcotics came to light.

Serpico returned to the US in the 1980s to live a reclusive life in a cabin he built in rural upstate New York. He broke his silence, however, in 1997, when he testified before the New York City Council on abusive police practices. If the widespread graft Serpico exposed in the NYPD was a thing of the past, police abuse, especially of black males and other people of color, persisted, notwithstanding media exposure and mass protests. Serpico particularly criticized cops for excessive force and collusion to deny or cover up **police violence** (the "blue wall of silence"). He spoke out about the beating and torture of Abner Louima, a Haitian, in 1997 and the shooting death of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed African immigrant, in 1999. More recently, he censured the department for the 2014 death of **Eric Garner**, a black man from Staten Island who died when a police officer put him in a chokehold.

“Frank Serpico” is Antonino D’Ambrosio’s third feature-length documentary; it follows “We’re Still Here: Johnny Cash’s Bitter Tears Revisited” (based on his book, “A Heartbeat and a Guitar: Johnny Cash and the Making of Bitter Tears”) and “Let Fury Have the Hour” (based on his essay collection of the same name). His new film is especially personal for the forty-five-year-old filmmaker, as an Italian-American and as a politically-oriented artist. Like Serpico, the Philadelphia-born D’Ambrosio is the son of southern Italian immigrants. His parents emigrated to America in the 1960s from Colli al Volturno, a town in Molise near Campobasso. (The family returned there for a few years when Antonino was eight years old.) His parents, like Serpico’s, also were working-class; his father, a bricklayer, his mother a cafeteria worker.

“For me, there’s a particular resonance to any story of an Italian American that is not a ridiculous stereotype, especially for me growing up in Philly where ‘Rocky’ was so lionized and he’s not even a real person,” he says. “At fifteen years old I discovered Peter Maas’s book about Serpico and thought, wow, this is much more connected to my reality, the idea of honor and integrity, you work hard, and participate as a citizen. That same year my father died, so reading that story was not just inspirational but aspirational; I was going to follow my father’s legacy of carrying myself with honor and integrity, and doing that through telling stories.”

D’Ambrosio later moved to New York, where he studied public policy at New York University. In the 1990s, he started his own not-for-profit production company, La Lutta New Media Collective. (“La Lotta, but with a ‘u’ for ‘unity.’”) “I heard that Frank Serpico was coming to New York to speak to the city council against Rudy Giuliani’s policing policies. I managed to get into the gallery and I remember watching him and seeing people interact with him, some admiringly, some with scorn. And of course, Giuliani went on TV and lambasted him. That day I wrote in my journal that one day I’d make a Frank Serpico documentary. Fourteen years went by, I made a number of films and wrote a few books, and this is the kind of story I’m always interested in, stories of what I call creative response, this idea that we as human beings should turn obstacles into opportunities and make the world better for everyone. To strive to be greater than yourself. This is something that always stuck in my mind about Frank.”

D’Ambrosio sent Serpico a copy of “A Heartbeat and a Guitar”; he also sent him an essay he’d written for *The Nation*. Serpico liked both and invited D’Ambrosio to visit him at his home. They first considered writing a book together but “it turned into a film.” D’Ambrosio says Serpico approved his idea to make the film “a character study that looked at this American archetype and taking a deep, intimate dive into his story in a way that’s part Shakespearean and part Galileo.” (In “Frank Serpico”, the

actor John Turturro reads from Bertolt Brecht's play, "Life of Galileo".) "He's the guy yelling that the world is not flat and people are telling him it is flat, you must be quiet," says D'Ambrosio. "I wanted to tell that story and show that to the audience and say, would we do what he did? Why don't we do what he did? What he was fighting against has become embedded in higher systems, the abuse of power has been normalized and accepted."

"His Knapp Commission testimony was a prophecy of what can happen if we don't act, this is the way the system will run. The police are a good entry point for looking at that; they're the ones out there enforcing the law but they're the only people legally allowed to take human life. It was an interesting window into the idea of democracy and citizenship for me."

D'Ambrosio says Serpico didn't try to impose his ideas on the film. "He gave me leeway as a filmmaker, with my own vision. Some of the challenges he felt with [Sidney]Lumet he feels bitter about, and sometimes he could conflate them with our process. But I always tried my best to communicate and work with him, and ultimately, he was happy with the film."

Serpico was not entirely happy with Sidney Lumet's film; he clashed with the director over some of the script's nonfactual inventions and eventually was barred from the set. "He's been betrayed a lot in his life and I tried to be very sensitive to that," D'Ambrosio says. "Frank sometimes was very open, sometimes withdrawn. It's a hard process to have someone come into your life and put a spotlight on it. I think he was looking for as much peace as he could get from the project. I think he was able to get some. But to get it entirely through a film or book or other creative thing is not really achievable because the scars are long and deep. The best you can hope to do is to have an empathetic rendering of a person who tried to stand up and say no."

In D'Ambrosio's film, the author and academic **Stanislao Pugliese** remarks that Serpico's story illustrates the power of the committed individual who says no to wrongdoing, even at the risk of negative personal consequences. But moments later, Serpico offers a warning: don't look to heroes to fight injustice and make things right. "That's a big issue for me," says D'Ambrosio. "The idea of the hero is debilitating— 'I couldn't do what he did, he's exceptional, he's at another level as a human being.' But that's not the way history is made."

"Why aren't we supporting today's Serpicos?" D'Ambrosio wonders. Whistleblowers risk marginalization, imprisonment, and worse. Individuals, he adds, can effect change by their acts, but they need our support, in a "dialectical relationship with community." Frank Serpico's experience — isolated, threatened, and nearly killed, along with lingering physical and emotional trauma — makes that point inarguable.

