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Sequelitis

BY ANDREW SARRIS

FRENCH CONNECTION II: Sequelitis was considered a malignant disease in the Old Hollywood. Perhaps unfairly. Anyway, the New Hollywood is so self-conscious about sequels that it avoids tell-tale constructions like "the son of" and "the return of" like the plague. Hence, the portentous Roman numeral II, the most ridiculous of all rip-off titles. No matter. Pop theoreticians have argued in recent years that sequels in and of themselves are not necessarily deplorable. Recent evidence is mixed. "Godfather II" seemed more ambitious than "The Godfather" if only for its whiff of Havana Hegelianism. For the rest, "Godfather II" replaced action and characterization with nostalgic reverie to the Felliniesque tunes of Nino Rota. "The Planet of the Apes" seemed to go downhill in its sequels, where as the very brilliant Richard Lester's "Three Musketeers" and "Four Musketeers" were really one movie (albeit extra long) arbitrarily divided into two. "French Connection II," however, marks a complete, almost alelectical departure from "French Connection." It is not only the difference in the directorial temperaments of William Friedkin and John Frankenheimer, nor merely the difference between Brooklyn-Queens-Manhattan and Marseilles. It is the difference also between sadism and masochism, between Zap and Zen, between reflex and obsession. One might say that in the Friedkin original, the parts are better than the whole, and in the Frankenheimer retake, the whole is better than the parts. The ending of each film is crucial: confused and anti-climactic in the Friedkin, devastatingly final and cathartic in the Frankenheimer. The Phil D'Antoni connection with

the spectacular car chases is severed in the foot-weary Frankenheimer in which Gene Hackman's Popeye Doyle walks and runs much more than he rides and speeds. Some reviewers prefer the Friedkin because it is more kinetic, and thus presumably more cinematic. It is the old controversy once more between cinema as movement and cinema as life. In this context, "French Connection" is more mobile, "French Connection II" more moving. For once, Frankenheimer's penchant for pain and frustration has found an adequate correlative in Popeye's

from death by quick medical attention, and then forced to endure a cold-turkey cure for his addiction. From that point on, "French Connection II" takes on some of the vengeful intensity of "Moby Dick." It seems strange that the French police never seem to have enough men and firepower on hand whenever they corner the villains. One might suspect that some kind of fix was in. But we hardly notice. Gene Hackman's Popeye Doyle is a creature out of "Die Niebelungen" as he seeks out his indefatigable nemesis

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Pieta on the altar of heroin addiction. The screenplay (by Robert and Lauri Dillon and Alexander Jacobs) sets up Popeye Doyle in his porkpie hat as the ugliest American ever to be sent abroad. Instead of faking Francophilia for some easy laughs, Popeye comes on like Kilroy, intransigently insular to the core, and morally arrogant as well. He picked up where he left off in "French Connection" by managing to kill off more good guys than bad guys, and his questionable crusade against drug trafficking seems to be a classic case of the ends not being worth the means. But then he himself is captured by the bad guys, turned into a junkie, tossed back to the police with an OD in his veins, saved

in the person of Fernando Rey's Charnier, a monster whose grace clashes with Popeye's crudity on virtually a Tolstoyan scale of paradoxical morality. Except that it is Popeye the narc against Charnier the charming drug pusher, and at the end it is Charnier's heroin in Popeye's blood that transforms the ultimate chase from social policy to personal salvation. Thus, "French Connection II" glides less smoothly but cuts more deeply than the original.