Blu-Ray Review: ‘The French Connection’ Loses None of Its Power, But Video Disappoints

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Blu-Ray Rating: 3.0/5.0

CHICAGO – “The French Connection” is one of those rare movies that’s always better than I remember it to be. Not that I think poorly of William Friedkin’s masterful procedural, a multiple Oscar winner and game-changer in the world of detective cinema, but that it’s a film that blows me away every time I see it. So why did William Friedkin have to mess with the picture?

Maybe I’m too much of a purist, but I’m not alone in responding very negatively to the unusual video tampering done by William Friedkin on his amazing “The French Connection,” the winner for Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Screenplay, and Best Director. Both Jeffrey Wells and Glenn Kenny [12] have expressed similar disappointment in Friedkin’s remastering for arguably one of the best films of the ‘70s.

Essentially, what Friedkin has done was take a lot of the warmer colors out of his film, making a picture that looks cooler and more pastel. And also wrong. I have the same feeling watching the Blu-Ray of “The French Connection” as I do watching colorized movies.

The movie is still great enough to shine through the tampering and the special features on the Blu-Ray release of “The French Connection” are wonderful, but I’ve rarely been as disappointed in a video transfer as I am in this one.

Friedkin explains in-depth what he did on “Color Timing The French Connection” but here’s the brief version. He and his team first oversaturated the color, de-focusing it, and then reverted it back to black-and-white and combined the two images. John Huston did it in 1956’s “Moby Dick,” which apparently inspired Friedkin. The result is a film that just looks odd. Some scenes play too dark and with too much grain while others have colors that bleed like mad. Watch “Popeye” Doyle (Gene Hackman [4]) run down the street in the opening in his Santa suit and see a blur of red.
It’s interesting, but it’s wrong. The “faded monochrome” that Friedkin describes and shows as the way it could have looked on Blu-Ray is the way it should be seen or at least be available on a third disc in the Blu-Ray set.

My concern is when this kind of tampering stops. Are we going to make it 3D in a few years? A hologram version? When does it end? “The French Connection” is a masterpiece. Didn’t Friedkin have something better to do than re-work it? Maybe like make another good movie?

As for the audio, it’s not as frustrating as the video, but even this doesn’t sound right in 5.1 DTS-HD Master Audio. As with a lot of old mono tracks turned into surround ones, it sounds a little muffled and wrong. Stick with the mono track.

Of course, if you haven’t seen “The French Connection,” I can’t recommend the actual film enough. Hackman, in one of his first and still one of his best performances, plays Doyle, a New York City detective trying to take down the drug scene in New York.

Based on a true story, “The French Connection” is a gripping film with no sentimentality and no melodrama. It was one of the first films to give the audience a gritty, you-are-there feeling and influenced countless movies that came after it. The film also includes one of the best car chase scenes of all time. I adore the actual movie, which might make me more sensitive to the remastering than others.

The special features on the two-disc Blu-Ray version of “The French Connection” are wonderful. The first disc includes an introduction by Friedkin, a commentary by him, and a commentary by Hackman and co-star Roy Scheider. The disc also includes a trivia track and isolated score track. Even though the commentaries are old, they’re great enough that just the “Disc 1” special features would make this an excellent release, but they’re just the start.

New featurettes on “Disc 2” will be the big draw for “French Connection” fans. Hackman even makes an appearance for an interview featurette called “Hackman on Doyle”. Most of the featurettes are in HD and include “Anatomy of a Chase,” “Friedkin and Grosso Remember the Real French Connection,” “Scene of the Crime,” “Cop Jazz: The Music of Don Ellis,” and “Rogue Cop: The Noir Connection”. Already available and imported featurettes include the BBC documentary “The Poughkeepsie Shuffle” and “Making the Connection: The Untold Stories of The French Connection”.

Fox has also released “The French Connection II” on Blu-Ray this week. Largely ignored because, well, the first film was such a hard act to follow, the John Frankenheimer sequel actually is not half-bad. If you don’t compare it to the original, it’s a pretty good action film.

The Blu-Ray release for “French Connection II” includes “A Conversation with Gene Hackman,” commentary by Hackman and producer Robert Rosen, commentary by Frankenheimer, “Frankenheimer: In Focus,” and an isolate score track.

“The French Connection” is released by Twentieth Century Fox Home Video and stars Gene Hackman, Roy Scheider, Fernando Rey, Tony Lo Bianco, and Marcel Bozzuffi. It was written by Ernest Tidyman and directed by William Friedkin. It was released on February 24th, 2009. It is rated R.

“The French Connection II” is released by Twentieth Century Fox Home Video and stars Gene Hackman, Fernando Rey, Bernard Fresson, and Cathleen Nesbitt. It was written by Alexander Jacobs and Robert Dillon & Laurie Dillon and directed by John Frankenheimer. It was released on February 24th, 2009. It is rated R.
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