

Rebel in need of a cause

The Pledge, directed by Sean Penn

Joanne Laurier
10 March 2001

The Pledge, directed by Sean Penn, screenplay by Jerzy Kromolowski and Mary Olson-Kromolowski, based on the novel by Friedrich Dürrenmatt

The Pledge, the third film directed by actor Sean Penn (*The Indian Runner*, *The Crossing Guard*), is a police drama with psychological overtones. Based on the novel by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the movie focuses on Jerry Black, a Nevada homicide detective (Jack Nicholson). On the night of his surprise retirement party and with only a few hours left until he is officially off the police force, Jerry volunteers to go to a crime scene involving the brutal murder of an eight-year-old girl.

He takes it upon himself to deliver the devastating news of the girl's death to the parents and promises her mother that he will find the killer. The seriousness and personal nature of his pledge seems to stem from the heinousness of the crime, the unbearable grief of the parents and his own deep uncertainty about life after retirement. And perhaps a desire to go out, if not in a blaze of glory, at least with a decent dose of self-respect. Judging by appearances, life has recently been less than glorious for Jerry.

The murder case is abruptly and officially closed when Jerry's ambitious successor (Aaron Eckhart) torments an American Indian suspect (Benicio Del Toro), who is mentally disturbed but innocent, into confessing and then blowing his brains out. The police department is satisfied that the crime has been solved, but Jerry is not and the mission begins. He unearths evidence suggesting that the killer—a serial killer—is still at large, but his former cohorts, about whom an atmosphere of complacency and corruption hangs, send him packing.

Jerry apparently embarks on a new life and finds some real happiness, one suspects probably for the first

time, with a waitress, Lori (Robin Wright Penn), and her daughter Chrissy. The happiness is genuine, but are there other motives at work? Jerry's choice of location for his new life, determined after considerable deliberation, puts him in the best possible place to catch the killer. And Chrissy, the young girl, fits the profile of the killer's previous victims. To what extent is the relationship with his new family a part of a setup, a trap for the murderer?

When the killer makes contact with Chrissy, Jerry devises a plan (bringing in his old police colleagues) that requires using the child as bait. His *need* to catch the killer is a many-sided obsession that starts in the realm of the rational, but pushes hungrily into uncharted areas of his psyche. In the end, the murderer is removed from society, but without Jerry's being aware of the fact. Lori understandably leaves him, the other cops abandon him and his mind goes.

Penn's desire to invest a police drama with aesthetic qualities and autobiographical resonance speaks to some of the film's strengths, but also its weaknesses. First, haven't we had enough policemen-heroes? To add to the endless list of movies about "honest" cops as the backbone of society is a large concession to Hollywood's ideological formulary. Despite his "outcast" bent, Jerry Black is not essentially an anti-establishment figure. In fact, his destruction is partly the result of his attempt to vindicate himself as a policeman and defender of society against inexplicable "evil." Mainstream television and cinema can hardly imagine a drama dealing with extremes in the human condition that does not involve hard-working cops and bloody crimes.

In the film's production notes Penn asserts that the killer and the crimes are only the scaffolding for a psychological examination of the "investigator" as a

type. Presumably he has something more than policemen in mind, perhaps including actors and artists generally, who also “investigate.” However, elements of the story—the monstrous child-murderer and implacable policeman—all too conveniently tend to feed into the current “law-and-order” environment created by the government and right-wing forces. Unhappily, *The Pledge* makes no more genuine attempt to explain why such tragic events take place than the average daily tabloid.

In his discussion with the murdered girl's mother, Black argues that people capable of such crimes as the murder of a little girl, purely and inexplicably evil people, *do* exist. Is that helpful in today's confused social climate? However Penn justified it to himself, his decision not to show the killer's face can only deepen the conviction that such individuals are alien beings, whose crimes are not rooted in the same society that produces a Jerry Black. Penn, the son of a blacklisted writer and director, should know better.

Tension is created in the film by a relentless and angry tone. The filmmaker is obviously concerned by the fate of oppressed people: native Indians, immigrants, children, low-paid workers in poorer communities whose lives are terrible despite nature's riches.

Sean Penn has a reputation, both as an accomplished actor and novice filmmaker, as an individual of integrity, independent from the Hollywood establishment (his refusal to show up at last year's Academy Awards ceremony, for example, although he was nominated). Penn has forthrightly stood up in the past for his artistic values and his work has generally shunned purely market and commercial interests. The long list of exceptional actors (Nicholson, Del Toro, Patricia Clarkson, Eckhart, Helen Mirren, Sam Shephard, Vanessa Redgrave, Harry Dean Stanton, Mickey Rourke), working in this relatively low-budget movie, is indicative of his standing.

Regarding his collaboration with Penn in *The Pledge*, Nicholson described the filmmaker as “poetic. His eye is sensational. His film's are unlike anyone else's films. In the material he approaches, there's room for actors and what we like to do or find challenging to do within it.”

Fair enough, but some consideration has to be given to this problem: how truly unusual is Penn's film? In

what ways, as we have indicated, is it quite conventional?

Penn's stress on integrity, loyalty to a project, “not backing down,” obsessiveness is intriguing, but offers only part, and a relatively small part, of a solution. (In fact, the theme as it is presented in *The Pledge* suggests a certain self-pity: an “authentic” cop in a lonely, misunderstood battle against an abstract evil. Could this perhaps speak to the director's sense of his own situation?) This is a one-sided and purely formal approach, so to speak, to society's and filmmaking's problems.

One needs to be obsessive *about something important*, one needs to pursue a worthwhile and progressive *cause*. For the American filmmaker today this means, first and foremost, the need to cut through the lies and myths about American class society. The absence of this sort of criticism, which Penn is fully capable of making, is a fatal flaw. Penn's preoccupation with what he describes in the production notes as “the moral ambiguity of the pledge itself and the way Jerry follows through on it” is not sufficient by itself to raise the film to the necessary heights, despite its moments of emotional punch. In his refusal, conscious or otherwise, to pursue a social critique, Penn has accommodated himself to the political and artistic status quo in an unfortunate manner.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)