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A Culture of Loyalty and Secrecy: Spotlight and the Power of Organized Religion in America

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Religion is supposed to be an instrument of salvation for humankind. In theory, religion is meant to purify society from the corruption and evil of humanity. But, what happens when corruption comes from within a religious institution? Tom McCarthy's *Spotlight* (2015) deals with this topic. At a superficial level, *Spotlight* is

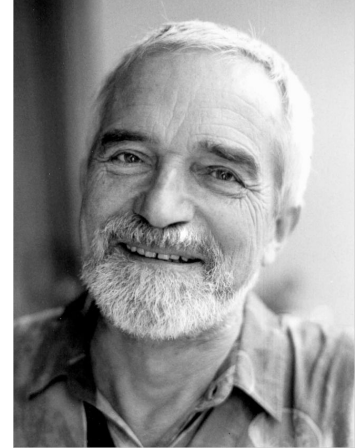
about a team of investigative journalists seeking to uncover a major sexual abuse scandal in Boston's Catholic Church and the challenges that they face trying to do so. But at a subtextual level, the film casts light on the extent of the power of organized religion. An ideological reading of *Spotlight* reveals how deeply rooted Christian values are in American society and challenges this dominant ideology by highlighting the corrupt institutional efforts to maintain a pure image of the Church.

Religion plays an important role in the lives of many people around the world, with some countries identifying as more religious than others. Amongst all religions, Christianity is the most prevalent in the U.S. and dictates much of what is accepted in American society. While many Americans today would like to believe that the U.S. is a country in which the state is independent of religious ideals, America is still undoubtedly a religiously-motivated nation because some of its core ideals derive from Christian beliefs. References to Christianity are constantly manifested in American society in different ways, such as in the pledge of allegiance, taking an oath in court, the monetary currency, political leaders being elected based on their religious principles, and even popular stores like Forever 21 citing Bible verses on their plastic bags. Therefore, religion, and specifically Christianity, is an integral part of the American dominant ideology.

Ideology is defined as the set of ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that affect the ways that people within a culture live and perceive the world (Corrigan, 92). America's dominant ideology is based on a capitalistic system and the items produced within this system, such as the films Americans watch, the

music they listen to, books that they read, news stories they are told, and everything else American society consumes, are thus based on capitalist values. At the same time, these products also simultaneously shape the nation's beliefs and benefit America's economic system.

Robin Wood was a major film critic that wrote about film and ideology. Wood believed that when analyzing a film, one should look at it as a unified whole and consider the collaborative dynamics of genre, the auteur, and ideology, as they all work together to communicate the dominant ideology through the film. In his essay, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," Wood describes what he calls "American capitalist ideology." According to Wood, this ideology consists of the values and beliefs of American society and is continually reflected in films of the "classical Hollywood cinema" (527).



Robin Wood

Wood lists some of the values of the American dominant ideology that Hollywood emphasizes. A few of them include capitalism and private enterprise, marriage, the significance of the work ethic, success and wealth, and America as a happy land, in which everything in the system has a solution (528). Wood claims that, "No critic can be free from a structure of values, nor can he or she afford to withdraw from the struggles and tensions of living in some position of 'aesthetic' contemplation" (527). By this, Wood means that the influence of the American dominant ideology in a capitalist system is unavoidable and functions at a deeper level in films as well. American films feed on the traditions, fears, and values of its culture. Furthermore, Wood believes that ideology is full of inconsistencies. He claims genres are founded on these ideological oppositions and that these contradictions repeatedly extend into various genres by way of a film's auteur (529-530). It is this interaction between the ideology, genre, and auteur that makes a film more effective. Wood refers to this way of analyzing films as a "synthetic criticism" and he also claims that films are more "ideologically safe" when they are depicted in a conventional manner.

Similarly, *Cahiers du Cinema* editors Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni also wrote about film

and the dominant ideology. According to Narboni and Comolli in their essay, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” films are commercial products of a capitalist system, they are political, and they serve to reflect and spread the dominant ideology of this economic system (596). Because of this, the status quo is commonly reinforced in films, as the audiences tend to favor films which do so. However, the films made are not actually based on what the audiences want to see, but on the self-serving ideological beliefs of their economic system. According to Narboni and Comolli, “the tools and techniques of filmmaking are part of ‘reality’ themselves, and furthermore ‘reality’ is nothing but an expression of the prevailing ideology” (597). Films are made to profit the capitalist system in which they are produced. Narboni and Comolli call on filmmakers to challenge this structure in order to separate cinema from its “ideological function” (597).

Comolli and Narboni have created a list of the different types of films that exist based on their ideological function. The most pertinent categories for this essay are A-E. Category A films are always in accordance with the dominant ideology and follow the standard film form. They complacently conform to the economic system and perpetuate the dominant ideology. The majority of Hollywood films tend to follow this category, as they are the most popular and most profitable (597-598). Type B films are highly political and resist the economic system. They do so through criticizing the values of the dominant ideology as well as rejecting the conventional film form (598). Category C films are not explicitly political, but are atypical in their form. Category D films are explicitly political in content, but don’t challenge the system as effectively because they still conform to the conventional film form (599). Lastly, category E films appear to adhere to the dominant ideology, but in an ambiguous way. There is an ideological and formal inconsistency that makes the film’s intentions more difficult to interpret.

Spotlight fits into category D because the film generally follows the conventional film form while simultaneously criticizing the dominant ideology. *Spotlight*’s narrative form is based on the three-act structure and there are also clear protagonists and antagonists established (the reporters versus the Catholic Church). It has a setup in the first act as the reporters learn about and undertake the

investigation, conflict and setbacks in the second act with many people trying to stop them, and a resolution at the end of the third act when they prevail and get their story published. The film is political because it “goes against the grain” by challenging American dominant ideology with respect to the prevalence, influence, and morality of organized religion and Christianity in American society.

The pervasiveness of Christianity in American society is manifested in various ways throughout *Spotlight*. Religious symbols and allusions to this organized religion continually show up. An example of this is how the Church often seems to be in view many times throughout the film. For example, when



Sasha is interviewing a sexual abuse victim, there is a church right in front of them and the victim acknowledges it. Another moment is when Mike is talking to Garabedian about the sealed court

documents on a bench outside the court. Garabedian says that the Church controls everything and when he stands up and the camera cuts to a wider shot, the church is visible in the background. Lastly, another critical moment in which the church is visible is when



reporters Sasha and Matty are going around the neighborhood trying to interview families of victims. As the shots cut from one to the next, and the

reporters go from house to house, the church is visible in most of these shots. There is a final shot where Matty interviews a guy on a balcony and the camera cuts to an extreme wide shot in which the entire church is visible. This is the most powerful of



all the shots of the church. There are other subtler

ways that religious references are alluded to. Some of these include church bells ringing from time to time in the background both diegetically and non diegetically, to victims and families wearing crosses and having religious artifacts in their homes, and to a cross being shown in the background at the school that the reporters visit. The audience is continually made aware of the Church's presence in Boston, and more broadly, of organized religion's ubiquity in American society.



This depiction of Christianity's omnipresence communicates the power that organized religion still has today on American culture. This sense of power is most directly represented in the scene where Marty meets Cardinal Law for the first time. When the Cardinal is first shown, the shot is a close up of his hands held together, as if in prayer, and then the camera tilts up to reveal his face. This camera movement immediately calls attention to him. Once the camera cuts to a wider shot of Cardinal Law, a giant, studded cross is seen hanging around his neck. In the meeting, the Cardinal tells Marty that the community flourishes "when its great institutions work together" indirectly trying to discourage Marty from pursuing the sexual abuse scandal for the newspaper in an almost threatening manner. The cinematography and editing during this scene, along with the words of the Cardinal, help establish an ominous presence of power and authority.



Another way that organized religion's hold on American society is expressed in *Spotlight* is in the way that the Church is heavily integrated both socially and financially into the different institutions in

Boston. The members of the community all know each other. The Cardinal knows the president and administrators at the high school in Boston, the lawyers and even police officers are heavily involved with the Church as well. This is demonstrated in the scene at the Catholic Charity Gala when the institutions all come together for that fundraising event. In this scene, the audience can see how interconnected all the institutions are and the reasons why organized religion is so powerful.



Spotlight also illustrates that when an institution like the Church has a great amount of power over the different groups in the community, the loyalty to that institution engenders a “culture of secrecy” at the price of justice. This can lead to criminal activity going unpunished as a result of the people of the different establishments working together to keep the crimes hidden and uphold a positive image of church. This is definitely seen in the movie as the reporters are met with hostile resistance from various members of the community such as the lawyers, the police officers, school leaders, members of their own family, and even from their fellow reporters as they try to uncover the case.

The film *Spotlight* stresses the role of institutionalized religion in American dominant ideology, emphasizing its prevalence and stronghold on America’s capitalist society. The morality of this power is challenged by exposing the silent atrocities that can occur when a society relentlessly works together to defend the image of a dominating institution.

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Robin Wood