

# Cinesthesia

---

Volume 10  
Issue 1 *Dynamics of Power: Corruption, Co-  
optation, and the Collective*

---

Article 2

December 2019

## Individualism in the Patriarchy: Ideology in Three Billboards

Aaron Ponce  
Grand Valley State University, [macciomk@mail.gvsu.edu](mailto:macciomk@mail.gvsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine>

---

### Recommended Citation

Ponce, Aaron (2019) "Individualism in the Patriarchy: Ideology in Three Billboards," *Cinesthesia*: Vol. 10 :  
Iss. 1 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine/vol10/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Cinesthesia* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

Martin McDonagh, a British filmmaker whose works poke fun at Americans with an outside character's perspective – *In Bruges* (2008) and *Seven Psychopaths* (2012) – directed *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) with no outsider character in sight. His new scenario is set squarely in a middle American town under the shadow of the Ozark Mountains.

These vast opening landscapes are reminiscent of the sprawling shots of westerns, and the plot's defining drive hints at a detective story, demanding an answer to a *who-dun-it?* but providing none. The film is content instead to sustain a back and forth between a community



and its headstrong outcast, forsaking a resolution to its core mystery. It is through this tug of war that *Three Billboards* subverts expectations created by its imagery and plot in favor of an ambiguity that highlights the ideological tendencies of American society towards individualism – in the form of both people and institutions.

In an attempt to underline the inescapable ideological stamp on a film, Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni put together a list of categories to define the ways in which filmmakers may unconsciously address the dominant ideology. As they explain, “no filmmaker can...change the economic relations governing the manufacture and distribution of his films,” making it impossible to escape an ideological underpinning, but can “deform...[and] deflect,” its structure (Comolli 699). It is helpful to first define these categories. Each category is assigned a letter to better separate and navigate their distinctions. There are seven in all, labeled “a” – “g” but since *Three Billboards* is a fictional narrative film and not a documentary, this paper will only focus on categories “a” through “e.”

The largest category is “a.” These are films that are “imbued through and through with the dominant ideology in pure unadulterated form” (Comolli 689). They are filmed in a traditional manner, the editing, composition, and *mise-en-scène* are not set out to confuse or draw attention to themselves but instead are made, like the plotlines, with a sense of ease to guide the story through to a satisfying and wrapped up conclusion (Camolli 689). From the outset, *Three Billboards* seeks to present itself as a category “a” film. The presentation of genre specific iconography, such as the landscape shots of the mountains and the plot’s early focus on crime and punishment in the pursuit of justice, reinforce the dominant ideology’s focus on family values. Mildred Hayes is a mother who seeks justice for her daughter’s rape and murder by challenging the local police department. The opening sequences set up a tradition of a lone fighter, or detective story, which reinforces expectations that genre films often carry with them for viewers. McDonagh eases us into the world by setting up those expectations early on, but later begins to circumvent the expected, thus forfeiting a position in category “a.”

*Three Billboards* has little affiliation with category “b.” These are films that seek to “attack their ideological assimilation on two fronts...” that is in their form and in their content with, “...direct political action” (Comolli 690). These are more experimental films that “do not discuss an issue, reiterate it, paraphrase it, but use it to attack the ideology,” and is only effective if it can breakdown the “traditional way of depicting reality” (Comolli 690). It is for these reasons that McDonagh’s film does not fit into this category as it uses traditional forms of visual storytelling such as continuity editing and a traditional plot structure. Similar to category “b,” category “c” has experimental forms, but unlike category “b’s” direct political strategy to its elements, “c” films defy logical readings of form or content, “...oper[ating] on the level of the

impossible,” which makes it difficult to provide any commentary on ideological norms (Comolli 690).



An argument could be made for the fourth category of “d” for *Three Billboards* as a few of the comments made by characters such as Mildred Hayes about Officer Dixon being a racist police officer conjure up images of America’s political climate. The film does not offer any further investigation of those racist tendencies and indeed ends up featuring characters with various prejudices which makes it near impossible to land on a side of right or wrong in that political debate. Category “d” films are “explicitly political,” but they do not properly offer any criticism of dominant ideology but simply reinforce the traditions. These films champion a political stance but still exist to reinforce dominant ideology because they “adopt its language and imagery” (Comolli 691). *Three Billboards* could



be a political reading of reinforcement of dominant ideology because of a monologue railing against the predatory practices of the Catholic church and its challenge of the racism of police, two institutions that are meant to reinforce dominant values of American communities, but the film does not take a stance nor makes these topics the centerpieces of the content.

The fifth and final category, “e,” is where *Three Billboard* most accurately fits. The previous examples of how the film almost fits into the other categories highlights one of the

defining features of “e” films, “[seeming] at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous manner” (Comolli 691). Through its teasing of genre conventions, and its address of racism and predatory practices by institutions, *Three Billboards* sets itself as going down a familiar and predictable path. In order to investigate how the film rebels against its ideology one must go, “...looking for symptoms; if one looks beyond its apparent formal coherence, one can see that it is riddled with cracks...” and “...end up partially dismantling the system from within” (Comolli 691). By addressing how McDonagh’s film fits into the other categories and by observing a challenge to the ideology, a further elaboration of the “cracks” beneath its surface becomes necessary.

In discussing American dominant ideology, Robin Wood emphasizes “a definition of what we mean by American capitalist ideology – or, more specifically, the values and assumptions...embodied in and reinforced by the Classical Hollywood Cinema” (527). McDonagh’s film, though not a part of Classical Hollywood Cinema, is still nonetheless a product produced to be sold so it is impossible to erase ideology from the picture, and this is true across all films according to the ideological approach. The dominant ideology, steeped in capitalism, highlights “the right of ownership, private enterprise, personal initiative; the settling of the land,” which then contributes to a notion of “honest toil,” that a strong work ethic is, “morally admirable” (Wood 527). This hard work and individual enterprise is reinforced by Mildred Hayes’ determination to hold the police accountable for the unsolved murder of her daughter. Iconographic images and even the music of the western at the outset of the film hints at a lone hero setting out to right the wrongs done to her. Through her persistence she seeks to get the police back on track to figure out what happened to her daughter and seems to be on that path. The chief of police begins looking back into the case file even when told by Officer Dixon

that there's nothing new to find, and it begins to appear that Mildred's righteous crusade may pay off. Then the chief of police commits suicide, the idea of a solvable mystery is subverted, and her crusade is stalled.

There is an individualism apparent throughout the entirety of the film. Mildred can't see beyond her own suffering, Dixon is blinded by his loyalty to his police department, and the entire community as embodied by the priest are against Mildred. Then why does the audience identify with her if she is wrong? That is, in part, because Mildred is what Robin Wood refers to as an "ideal female," the "dependable mainstay of hearth and home" (529). Despite her faults, Mildred is presented as a caring and determined mother on a mission of justice. The audience identifies with her pain and are led by genre conventions to believe that she can solve her case and find closure. While she is indeed a foul-mouthed and angry, bitter character, her attitude isn't misplaced in the context of her pain, but where the "cracks" begin to show is a flashback scene of an argument with her daughter where Mildred says she hopes her daughter is attacked just as she eventually is. This argument stems from the pain of a broken home, and in the following scene Mildred's ex-husband is introduced. The bitterness breaks with the dominant views expressed by Wood in the ideal female as "wife and mother, perfect companion" (529). While



this  
isn't  
a

judgement of Mildred per se, as dominant ideology has shifted regarding divorce, it still presents her in a more negative light (though her ex-husband is revealed to be an abuser).

Individualism also extends to the institutions presented in the film: the church and the police. The Catholic church is directly put in the cross-hairs of Mildred as she regards any member of the “gang” as culpable for an individual’s actions. To Mildred, the institution is all encompassing; every member is guilty, and this condemnation extends to her reproach of Ebbing’s police department. The priest, in turn, talks of community as one lump sum of people that are against Mildred’s crusade against the police, thus becoming a her-versus-them argument. Dixon hides behind and uses his position within the department to arrest Mildred’s employer, and Chief Willoughby asks Red if he really wants to “fuck with the Ebbing’s police department,” even though Red is just doing his job. Dixon and his fellow officers, though racist, still uphold the hierarchy of the institutions they serve when the new black chief arrives to oversee them, and Dixon quietly accepts his firing. This an upheaval of Dixon’s ideological world view. Once he is fired, his fellow officers turn their back on him; he is no longer a part of the institution and no longer protected.

One of the defining features of the dominant ideology in American culture is the patriarchy, the indisputable fact that the culture is male dominated. Chief Willoughby fulfills a traditional role of the patriarchy in *Three Billboards*. He represents the “legalized heterosexual monogamy” of family, has a “homestead” with a wife “whose function is to embody civilized values...through her children,” and embodies the “ownership principle to personal relationships (*my house, my wife, my children*) in a male-dominated society” (Wood 527). That idea of ownership, however, is extended even further as he is the protector of the town and thus serves a purpose as the father to his community. There is a hint of a father-son dynamic between him and the childish officer Dixon, who is emasculated by living with and taking advice from his mother. The fact that Mildred must sell her ex-husband’s tractor trailer to pay for the billboards further illustrates the patriarchy, and even the chief discusses what her ex-husband thinks of the billboards as though she has no property of her own. McDonagh takes this idea of “ownership” one step more, implying through his suicide that Chief Willoughby had a choice in what happened with “*his* body.”

Examining the way *Three Billboards* presents the ideological functions of its plot helps to explain how it subverts expectations. First, it does not resolve its setup of a lone hero as characterized by its western implications. Mildred and Dixon arrive at a crossroads where they decide to team up and probably punish someone who did not do the crime they are seeking to solve. There still ends up being hints of a western ending, only this time it’s a pairing of individuals who are riding off into the sunset following a typical path of revenge – inherent in many westerns. That the crime itself is unsolved teases a resolution from a red herring character and a foreshadow of genre conventions by using a letter to plant the seeds of conventional film plotting. The dwarf character reveals that Mildred isn’t much better than anyone else, and the

audience is left to concur that this is not only true but are also left to question why they might be okay with one prejudice but not the other. If a key value of American society is equality, why are we fit to laugh at the derogatory language tossed at one character and not the other? The media

itself switches sides, asking if

Mildred is responsible for the chief's

suicide. This begins to ask the

question why audiences are so ready

to believe Dixon's racism with only



periphery evidence when it is more probable his issues stem from emasculation, as made clear by

evidence in the film, and the fact that Mildred herself is prejudiced against the dwarf. In its

ambiguous ending, there is no resolution to the apparent central conflict but instead requires the

audience to reassess what they just witnessed. The point of the film may have opened up with a

mystery, but since that mystery is never fully wrapped up in a traditional fashion, it becomes

clear that the plot of the film was something else entirely.

Individualism in American society often translates to isolationism, and not just between people but institutions. It is a tribalism that pits one side against another: a woman versus her community and the institutions that make up that community, such as the church and police. Not only that, but *Three Billboards* seeks to disrupt the dominant ideas of individualism by marking how it refuses to let us see beyond our own sufferings, our own tribe, and to forget the heart of the matter, that things are not so clearly black and white, and that all people have some gray in their soul. The film sets up an ambiguous ending begging the audience to take a closer look, and Martin McDonagh presents a formally conventional film that addresses flaws within American ideology, and, as an outsider, he is in a sound place to effectively address them.

Works Cited

Comolli Jean-Luc, and Narboni, Jean. *Cinema/Ideology/Criticism*. Braudy, Leo and Marshall

Cohen (eds). *Film Theory and Criticism*. 7th edition. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Print.

McDonagh, Martin. *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. Performance by Frances

McDormand, Fox Searchlight. 2017.

Wood, Robin. *Ideology, Genre, Auteur*. Braudy, Leo and Marshall Cohen (eds). *Film Theory and*

*Criticism*. 7th edition. Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.