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Spotlight and the Journalism Film

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Tom McCarthy's *Spotlight* (2015) is unique in the genre of journalism films for its refusal to be simplistic in its moralizing against sensationalism or heroizing those who speak truth to power. Centering on the *Boston Globe*'s "Spotlight" team and their 2003 exposé of the Catholic Church's cover-up of sexual abuse by priests, *Spotlight* draws more drama from its source material than just its crisis and resolution. Instead, it leans into realistic characterization of the journalists involved and their personal ties to the historically protected force they also feel compelled to expose. Through cleverly intertwined studies of how they each face the personal and community fallout that will result from publishing their story, the film comments powerfully on both systemic corruption and just how deeply it can be unknowingly perpetuated.



Spotlight does use what those well-versed in the genre would refer to as the "noble press" trope, but in a unique way. The journalist in this trope is a heroic, ethically driven protagonist who never wavers in the conviction that justice can only result from empowering citizens with truth. There is an easy comfort to such narratives, as the audience is always instantly aware who to root for or against, whose actions to follow and whose to condemn. Other journalism films instead focus on the pull of sensationalism, characterizing all those associated with journalism as the media equivalent of ambulance chasers, as in Dan Gilroy's *Nightcrawler* (2014). *Spotlight* takes a more complex approach, showing characters who struggle to balance their noble-press convictions with their personal qualms about exposing the Church as well as with their professional interests. The film's attention to the newspaper's corporate context hints that the magnitude of this story is a kind of temptation for the time-intensive investigative team facing impending newsroom cuts. It also ends on the revelation that this was not the first time victims of predatory priests had brought their

stories to the *Globe*, only to have them swept under the rug. Such plot choices make it clear that this is not just a film about a wholly noble press seeking justice for victims of abuse, but one about coming to terms with one's own role in systemic corruption.

Spotlight's method is perhaps most purposefully conveyed in its Christmastime research montage, a sequence that accomplishes more than just fidelity to the source story. The sequence begins with audio of a children's choir singing "Silent Night," providing a non-narrative critique while coloring viewers' feelings and interpretations through the ensuing shots. The montage opens with a close-up on a computer document—the story draft with the impending deadline showing prominently at its top. Shots showing the draft develop are then cycled in amid shots of the reporters working in different environments: at the office, at home, in a festive restaurant, etc. By bridging the sequence together with the song and situating the characters in larger environmental settings, the filmmakers skillfully establish the deep entrenchment of the Church within the daily lives of the Boston community and of the journalists now working to uncover its dark secrets.



Stitching these scenes together with children's voices singing religious music certainly does put a dark spin on silence. As the montage goes on, we watch the true depth of the Church's corruption dawn on the journalists who, growing up Christian, had never given the possibility a second thought. In several shots of Sacha interviewing victims, for instance, the camera first captures her diligently taking notes, then moves in to show her growing personal involvement. The viewer is invited on a similar journey. In the first of these shots, Sacha is speaking with three abuse victims in a café, with bright Christmas decorations surrounding the group as they talk. The camera is set at a wide angle and positioned as if it is looking at them through a window, emphasizing how—if we did not already know that this was an interview for the story—it would just look like a group of

people getting food/coffee and celebrating the holidays. This subtly emphasizes the normalization and silencing of horrors behind the bows and bells and positive experiences people in Boston often associate with the Church. Once again, this leads viewers to recognize, along with the characters, that entrenched corruption and cover-ups are all around us. Despite her personal experiences and attachments, though, Sacha chooses to face truth and shine a light on what has been historically shoved into the shadows.



As the montage comes to an end, Michael stands at the entrance to the church where the young children have been singing the hymn. We are to understand this as a moment of confrontation between what was normalized for him through a religious childhood and the corruption he now sees beneath its surface. There is light upon the singing children's heads, indicating their innocence, but Michael stands in the dark. The camera then slowly zooms in on Michael's pained face as discordant, non-diegetic music starts to drown out the children's singing, signifying how Michael, a church attendant in his youth, was "in the dark" about what was going on, but is choosing not to ignore it any longer. He does not choose to go sit with the rest of the congregation, establishing himself as a self-reflective part of the "noble press" despite the personal cost. Through the depth of these characterizations, *Spotlight* offers a refreshingly realistic perspective on the journalism film, contrasting those whose subjects lean too easily into thoughtless sensationalism or easy heroism. ☀

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McCarthy, Tom, director. *Spotlight*. Universal Studios, 2015. DVD.