

## Religion and Pastoral Power: Foucauldian Reading of the Movie *Spotlight*

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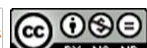
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### ABSTRACT

With the unique portrayal of the unseen 'power' in various levels of society, movie 'Spotlight' directed by Tom McCarthy is a cinematic revelation of the invisible powers that dupe people in the form of religion. Observing the gravitating depths of the manacles, Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984), being a forefather of the structuralist movement from the tradition of Socrates, challenges and questions the existing behaviors of the society and his approach thus becomes applicable to the current study which analyses the invisible ideological manacles of the society. Being a leading thinker in this canon, the mainstream of 'structuralism' emerged to dive deep into the unresolved mysteries of the society and culture to suggest innovative viewpoints towards the society and the social relationships where we live. Unlike the other socio-cultural institutions, religion and its symbolic powers have always been a decisive force of human lives throughout the civilizations as it not only administers human behaviors, but also the human psyche. The current study uses the Foucauldian structuralist approach as the microscope to analyze the movie 'Spotlight' magnifying the distressing strength of the invisible claws of religion in relation to pastors who try to manipulate the freedom of expression.



## INTRODUCTION

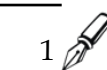
### Aims and Objectives

This paper reviews the movie *Spotlight* within the purview of the concept of power and priesthood discussed by Michel Foucault to identify the symbolic portrayal of firm social hierarchies in society. Since no effort has been made to contextualize this movie within the theoretical discourse of Foucauldian power, this will be a fresh reading for film studies which are of academic nature. It also helps to observe how helpless people become the subjects of religion and how religion could make successful escapes from societal law and symbolic order. This identifies how the societal institutions psychologically subjugate and pressurize individuals to be silent since there are deadly threats against journalists and activists who investigate these issues. Furthermore, this study attempts to identify the power of 'symbols' in society.

### Significance of the Study

*The brighter the lights shine, deeper the shadows loom.*

The movie '*Spotlight*' (2015) is a biographical drama film directed by Tom McCarthy and co-written by Josh Singer, screening the challenging yet the unanimous path of *The Boston Globe- Spotlight* team towards the engrossing revelation of the darker aspects under the masks of religion with the unexpected paradigms of the Roman Catholic priests of Boston area, USA. Their investigation upon a single priest, John Geoghan; eventually leads to reveal a chain of Catholic priests who were engaged in child molestation in the city. Starred by Michael Keaton, Liew Schreiber, John Slattery and Mark Raffalo this groundbreaking movie '*Spotlight*' itself contains the story of a holy war as it excurses the formidable and intricate path against the blind and deaf 'faith and belief'.



When analyzing the imperceptible powers over the individuals, the 'structuralist literary theory' becomes substantially valid in the discussion. The immense power of social institutions upon the individuals had been the thematic concern of the structuralist movement whereas Michel Foucault's tremendous contribution was to unveil the hidden claws that shape the human-stereotypes inside the suffocating blocks. This study merges the Foucauldian structuralist perspective with the realistic portrayal of the rigid control of 'religion' over human physicality & psychology and thus analyses it in a novel perspective.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the article '*Priestly Power that Empowers*' by Mark A. Christian (2009), an 'Official Religion' always seeks to obtain and maintain the '*de jure*' status as it offers prestige, legitimacy and stability as it is advantageous in a maelstrom of religious factionalism. The strongly established roots of religion can be easily manipulated by disguised faith as the movie '*Spotlight*' (2015) outlines.

As explained by Callaghan (2017), the movie *Spotlights*' affiliation with "truth and realism can be described in terms of its subject, social position and craft." In its' portrayal of reality; Callaghan further declares that the movie "delves into a number of themes around this highly charged topic with institutional power and community complicity both explored in particular detail." As the focus of this study falls upon this 'institutional power', Foucauldian structuralist discourse becomes highly pertinent in the study.

According to the French philosopher Michel Foucault, there is a regularity or a "discursive formation" between every object, type of statement or concept. This 'discursive formation' is the unseen order that keeps the things moving on track. His most inspiring book against humanism is *Les Mots et les choses* (*Order of Things*) and the ideologies comprised in this book "enlightens the structuralism" (Caws,8). Throughout this scholarly work, Foucault argues how society is assembled in a structured mode. His articulation of this societal structuralism studies the formation of the underlying, unconscious regularities of human expression. It analyses how these intangible and unobservable structures become visible and observable in human behavior, culture and the society as a whole. Since these structures are not concrete, they become visible only through culture and behavior. This massive iceberg was uncovered by Michel Foucault through a proper analysis of the human mind. In *The Order of Things* (1972); Foucault questions "...what if empirical knowledge, at a given time and in a given culture, did possess a well-defined regularity?". As Woodson (2020), the notion that this "regularity" is established on what Foucault refers to as "the laws of a certain code of knowledge." Therefore, this explicitly explains the knowledge that is being structured by a certain set of codes governed by a variety of laws.

Religion and culture are such rigid institutions which imprison the human mind and body under such a discursive formation. Culture and religion are two such powerful societal structures that set 'ideals' to live.

"He sees his invisibility made visible to the painter and transposed into an image forever invisible to himself. A shock that is augmented and made more inevitable still by a marginal trap" (Foucault, 6). As delineated through the lines, the invisible societal forces such as religion holds the individuals in a 'marginal trap', in the name of God and faith. Focusing more on Foucault (1972), his reference to the 'painter' who entraps everyone under his gaze is symbolic of the power of the structure. "But that place is concealed from us. We are observing ourselves being observed by the painter and made visible to his eyes by the same light that enables us to see him" (Foucault, 7). According to the discussion of Foucault, it is eminently visible that all the people in the world are being governed/ regulated by the unseen powers beyond the control.

Foucault philosophically elaborates the same knowledge of 'power' in a vivid manner in his 1975 book '*Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*' (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*). There he conceptualizes that the genetics of the prisons is rooted where humankind deconstructs the expected

structural values. When the people step away from the structures that determine the societally accepted rules, they become the victims of the societal hatred for not obeying the structural values. The 'societal structure' such as 'religion' and 'priestly power'; that governs the people is another umbrella term that assimilates the power, authority and therefore the determined values of the hegemony.

Furthermore, Jurgen Habermas hails on the fabulous philosophizing in *The Order of Things* as "Foucault investigates the modern forms of knowledge (or epistemes) that establish for the sciences their unsurpassable horizons of basic concepts". Frank Kermode celebrates the book as it "studies the ways in which people accept the taxonomies of an epoch without questioning their arbitrariness" (Foucault 2005).

Foucault further argues how the power and the techniques of punishment depend on knowledge and how the same knowledge gains its authority from the power relationships and the domination. Henceforth he skillfully describes how strict morals, and the wild disciplines have transformed overtime from the corporal punishments to spiritual punishments. His most important argument is the relationship between 'power' and 'knowledge' and they are constructed on "basis of concrete and local 'terrains' and 'technologies' rather than upon 'wills' or 'interests'" (Driver., 2). Henceforth 'power' enters and impacts on all the relationships in society from the primary level to the highest level. These 'micro powers' become the existential force to the more centralized mode of 'global powers' as Foucault describes these micro powers are another kind of geopolitics that are crucial to the exercise of power (Foucault, 77). His further denouncements prove that the mechanisms of power are imported through a "determined distribution of the bodies, surfaces, lights and gazes" (Foucault, 202).

Accordingly, the dark waters of priestly powers which dominate human life are being centered in this study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Foucault and Omnipresence of Power

As per the Foucauldian observation of modern power, he manifests that power is everywhere and the impact of power lies within every human relationship (Lynch, 1998). He further formulates his argument stating that the contours of power are "always there", and no one is "outside the power" relations and unconsciously each and every one is under the spectacular gaze.

Adopting this ideology to the movie *Spotlight*, it is clearly visible that the concept of power is both formally and informally suppress and victimize the sublime populace. The divine power of the black robe and the cross are being manipulated and duped to oppress the followers of God and their belief. The power, the silhouettes of power are ever-present, ubiquitous and lasting.

The Foucauldian portrayal with regard of the omnipresence of power is very robust and solid and gravitating and vehemently cognate to the discussion in terms of the movie *Spotlight* since the church and its nebulous penumbra is perennial.

*The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. (Foucault, 1980, p.93)*

The undeniable presence of the church everywhere and the centralizing and expanding the power at the same time demarcates the overwhelming nature of pastoral power. At the same time, it demarcates how it captures and entraps the faith of people targeting the most suppressed and the weakest. Choosing the baits, observing the most vulnerable and the most fragile again shows the panopticon nature of pastoral power.

On the other hand, in the same way, unconsciously the church is also being monitored by the team Spotlight. Consequently, it is just to state that, panopticon nature of power is universal, and everyone is being watched.

### **Power of Religion as a Spiritual Subjugation**

The *Boston Globes'* team Spotlight begins to uncover a dim reality hidden under the black robes of a group of Roman Catholic priests who are sexually harassing and abusing children those who are from poor families. Most knowingly, religion is something that is so honorably established inside the psychology and the spirits of the common populace. *Spotlight* observes how that faith itself is being manipulated. This movie, which 'is based on true incidents' draws a very sublime line in between reality and fiction.

Marty Baron: "Sometimes it's easy to forget that we spend most of our time stumbling around the dark. Suddenly, a light gets turned on and there's a fair share of blame to go around."

(McCarthy, *Spotlight*, 2015)

Marty Bartons' this statement provides a strong ground for the study to stand. In most of the occasions, humans are being deceived and mis-lead by the authoritative powers that are not seen. As it explains, stumbling around the dark is justifiable whereas it cannot be reasoned out when there is light. It is known that the light of knowledge can break the glass shells. Yet it is debatable whether people are willing to break the institutional glass ceilings that are powerfully established upon the foundations of faith and belief. The holy battle against the corrupted priests as delineated in the movie is such a vehemently strong, yet a difficult battle because it is another social structure which is barely be deracinated from the soils of faith and belief even it sometimes takes the lethal form hidden underneath.

In one hand, these powers are the known powers which we feel their hallucinatory invisible existence. On the other hand, it can be seen as a humorous betrayal of the most prestigious and believed societal structure. The concept of 'religion' is forcibly injected into the spirits through the most powerful societal institution of 'religion'. As the movie itself portrays, the incapability to say 'no' to God itself is a symptom of spiritual vassalage or a psychic subjugation. The dejected inferiority in the face of God or religion is capable of spiritual exploitation which may end in drastic culmination.

### **'Duping' the Religion in the Face of God**

The Catholic God is an eminent figure who is the epitome of innocence, honesty and authenticity. In the face of God, making the God and religion a shield, the corrupted priesthood pawns the religion and make the faith into puppets.

Neal Huff enlivens the character of Phil Saviano who was an American advocate for the survivors of Catholic church's sexual abuse that he has consulted on the movie. He was also a victim of sexual abuse by a priest in late 1060's. In the movie, Neal Huff performing his character takes the pioneering role in the revelation of the chain of sexual abuse of the children by the priests.

Phil Saviano: "I was eleven. And I was preyed upon by father David Holly in Wester. And I don't mean prayed for, I mean preyed upon."

(McCarthy, *Spotlight*, 2015)

This shocking revelation is a turning point in the plot with a tremendous impact upon the spectator. Accordingly, the societal institutions hold the individuals in captivity by manipulating the honor and faith towards religion. Foucault has clearly manifested the ridiculing truth of humans' beguile sensation towards the very institutions that subjugate them.

“The strategic adversary is fascism... the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us.”

(Foucault, 2003)

The masterly portrayal of the dark revelation further denounces how the willing subjugation baits the humans under the cover of faith. The willing obedience itself makes it the prey. The silence and the blind faith make the path of corruption more apparent and definite. In the echoing voice of religion, the victims can be muted forever as majority declines the reality where it associates with the above statement of Foucault. The commanding domination of priestly power that tricks with the religion is too menacing beyond the seeming fathoms. Furthermore, the misleading power of obedient silence itself paves the path to further suppression.

“People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what, what they do does.”

Michel Foucault

The action, the reason and the result are equally and unequivocally substantial in every aspect. The dynasty of priestly power that monopolize the lives of humans can even be observed more or less in various standings of the society as the blind faith without reason can easily be maneuvered.

### **Dismantling the Human Lives through Power Structures**

Foucauldian reading on the power structures is fascinating as it interprets the regulation of the human life by the invisible forces until the grave. Freedom has thus become a mere word of vocabulary as an infant, a child and an adult are being victimized in the vicious regulation consciously or unconsciously. The quote below of a victim, namely Peter Canellos depicts how his childhood molestation by a priest left eternal scars on his mind.

Peter Canellos: “They say it’s just physical abuse but it’s more than that, this was spiritual abuse. You know why I went along with everything? Because the priests are supposed to be the good guys.”

(McCarthy, *Spotlight*, 2015)

The power of the black robe does not define the man underneath it. The very institution that is corrupted can spoil the entirety from top to bottom. The lasting, negative impact of the absurd and ludicrous experience of being abused is skillfully manifested in the movie through the characterization of the victims as Peter Canellos. Foucault explains this below.

Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance, under the surface of images one invests bodies in depth, behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces, the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies.

(Foucault, 1977)

Accordingly, the above lines, each individual is under the powerful surveillance of society at various levels. The vulnerable groups become more unprotected to the grip of power and possible for easy victimization as the movie delineates. Under the mask of ‘divine goodness’ of religion there can be Satanic souls. Those supremacies bear the powers to regulate the lives of individuals.



## Power of Symbols

Symbols possess much power beyond the vision of sight. The robe, the concept of goodness, the utterance of words or any such symbol can signify the power of the institution that holds regularity.

A fundamental conversion of the world of images: the constraint of a multiplied meaning liberates that world from the control of form. So many diverse meanings are established beneath the surface of the image that it presents only an enigmatic face. (Foucault, 2003, p.20)

The priest is ultimately the representer of the God. The very symbolic representation has become the source of corruption as depicted in the movie. In most occasions, public media refrain from revealing such colliding occurrences with serious ramifications due to the power of those institutions. The common 'fear of symbols' and the 'order of the symbols' prevail in every geo-socio-political context as they are manipulated to re-define the regularity and power. Even though child molestation is a disgraceful offence and also a punishable offense, the priests those who were engaged in abusing children were saved without even being fined in front of the law as per the power of their symbolic power of God and religion. The falsified, fraudulent societal institutions are the biggest menace to a civilization. Hence, *The Boston Globe* editor focuses on the institutes.

Marty Barton: "We need to focus on the institution, not the individual priests. Practise and policy; show me the church manipulated the system so that these guys wouldn't have to face charges. Show me they put the same priests back into parishes same again. Show me this was systematic. that it came top to down."

(McCarthy, *Spotlight*, 2015)

Humorously, the impact of the exploitations is being minimized by the society and its leading institutions themselves according to the symbolic representation of the priesthood. The power of the symbols cannot be underestimated whereas the symbolic powers are more viable than the people. People rarely say 'no' to those symbols of religion as the 'system' itself has made a tremendous impact upon the entire society.

## CONCLUSION

According to the study, Foucauldian discussion of structuralism is depicted in multiple layers of the movie. The realistic manifestation of the corrupted religion and corrupted priesthood as a systematic mesh that is woven to entrap the humans, baiting their faith and belief.

Given that, all the societal structures that humankind has built are in a way, 'prisons' that imprison people and their individuality or authenticity in an unconscious manner. With the Foucauldian 'gaze'; nobody is free from the inspection of the societal structures, nor anybody can trespass the expected, unconscious order even though the order itself is an intimidating 'disorder'.

Thus, the 'reason' or the 'rationale' is a tool of exertion of 'power of the structure'. Blind obedience to the structure makes people forever imprisoned among the bars of the social structure. People are unconsciously imprisoned and the physical and psychological aspects of the individuals are governed by the rigid, unconscious societal structures. In this context, media freedom has a huge role to play in correcting these hegemonic institutes for the betterment of wider good.

This is the nature, and the danger of the social structures and social order as explained by the French philosopher Michel Foucault in his intellectual discourse of 'Structuralism'. Humankind is imprisoned and kept under surveillance of these rigid societal structures. Societal institutions are meant to design the 'good and acceptable' humans and engaged in forming and re-forming the behaviours of the people.

Therefore, majority of the populace in the society is not free to live upon their lives without being entrapped in the wicked societal systems formed by the 'powered and privileged' as penetrated through this exceptional discussion on Foucault, Structuralism and the movie *Spotlight* (2015) which manifests the gloomy silhouettes of societal institutions empowering the humankind.

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