

Film and Society:

A Content Analysis of Martin Scorsese's *The Departed*

I. INTRODUCTION

Commercial texts, according to Mimi White, “produce particular knowledges [*sic*] and positions for their users.” [1] This means that each cultural practice, or text, carries with it certain ideologies that attempt to interpellate (Althusser) in its audience into subscribing to them. Hollywood is an ideological apparatus that embeds a set of beliefs and values in each of its products for the consumption of its audience.

A. Statement of the Problem and Significance of the Study

Films are part of today's popular culture reservoir. Popular culture, and in this case films in particular, need to be ruthlessly analyzed on how it positions its subjects. Popular culture is so prevalent that it is a powerful tool that shapes the opinion of the people. And this is precisely why pop culture needs to be studied.

B. Scope and Delimitation

This study takes a closer look at the content and style of *The Departed*. Through the lens of [neo]Marxist theories, this study will study what ideology the film puts forward. Hence, the film's content will be analyzed through formalism and sociological inquiry. In conclusion, this paper will also discuss the weakness of analyzing the film medium through neo-Marxist theoretical perspective and that films has the ability to change the consciousness, and then to mobilize the audience.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Films are ultimately social, says Ryan Michael in his essay “Politics of Film: Discourse, Psychoanalysis, Ideology.”[2] This is precisely why in analyzing films, we should analyze not only through the lens of formalism, but also through sociological perspective. Dana Polan warns us of the discontents of analyzing films purely through formalism in a review of Noel Burche's *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Film*. According to Polan, formalism undermines the context because it assumes that the text (in this case, the film) has a universal meaning.[3]

Michael Ryan also approves of such claims as he writes, through the light of deconstructionist theory, that the dichotomy of formalism/sociological approach in film is flawed. According to Ryan, “The theory of discourse in film formalism must ultimately be a theory of society; and no sociology of film is feasible that is not concerned with discursive and cultural forms...because it draws on and reproduces social discourses and because it is itself a socially discursive act.” [4]

Film-makers borrow from society or reality the raw materials they use. This is why the audience is able to make sense of them. These raw materials are codes (cultural, sociological, historical etc.) are already a part of reality prior to the filmic context. Films, however, can re-codify these pre-codified elements for film discourse through what Ryan Michael calls “transcoding of discourses.” [5]

The way in which a film transcodes discourses shows how it addresses and positions its audience. It also shows the film's position in the subject matter that it is tackling. For instance, existing social codes that are considered phallus-centric are transcoded by feminist films to show their discontents of sexism in society. Such feminist films urge their audience to not let any form of sexism go unnoticed. Hence, the manner in which a film transcodes discourses also attempts to influence the opinion of the audience: shall the audience subscribe to the social order, or subvert it? [6]

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *The Departed*: On Identity, Guilt, and Identifying with Institutions

The Departed tells the story of Colin Sullivan (Matt Damon) and Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio). Sullivan is a cop, and at the same time working for Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson), leader of an organized Irish-American gangster, as an undercover in South Boston state police force. On the other hand there is Billy Costigan, a very intelligent undercover cop ("you should be at NASA") assigned to infiltrate Costello's mob syndicate. As the plot develops more and more we see how Sullivan and Costigan become consumed by their being undercovers.

The film opens with a flashback of South Boston. The narrator in the opening scene, Frank Costello, says some things that are worth considering. He says, for example, that a man shouldn't be shaped by his environment ("I don't want to be a product of my own environment."). It should be the other way around ("I want my environment to be a product of me."). However, materialists would tell us that the environment, or the social reality we are embedded on to, shapes our consciousness, and thus ourselves. In fact, it is the dark side of Boston (the place being a gangland) that had shaped Costello's belief; that nobody will give it to you, and so you have to take it.

It is also the circumstances that shaped the fate of Sullivan and Costigan. Their job as "rats" to opposing groups trapped them in situations that became out of their full control. A scene that shows this, in the case of the Costigan, is when he began to take Valiums just to have peace of mind because of the atrocities he witnesses as an undercover. Even Frank Costello is killed by the situation that he hasn't been able to take control of: He lacks information, for he never discovered who the "rat" is. He even trusted the "rat" (Costigan) more than Sullivan, his own undercover. (Note that Costello recorded a conversation with Sullivan that will betray the latter's true identity as an outlaw.)

Film critic/historian Roger Ebert studies Scorsese films and has come to the observation that the director's films tackle "men trying to realize their inner image of themselves." [7] Sullivan and Costigan confront dangers along the way of realizing their own inner image as they play a role that is different from their real identities. The first allegiance that a person owes to is to oneself. Sullivan and Costigan also failed at this, augmenting the anxiety that they are suffering from. In the beginning of the film the narrator Costello also says that "years ago we had the church. That was only a way of saying we had each other." This implies that a person feels the need to associate him/herself to an institution to have a sense of belongingness to society. When you have trespassed the laws or codes of the institution you identify with, you feel guilt. And guilt another subject matter that, according to Ebert, Scorsese films' subject matter. [8]

A person feels guilty because it is the institution where s/he identifies with that gives the person a sense of identity, or stability. This is alluded to by script on a card in the funeral bouquet on Costigan's sister's funeral: "Heaven holds the faithful departed." And this is where the Sullivan and

Costigan's anxiety stems from: Sullivan deceives the people in the Massachusetts police force that depends on him, the way the Costigan deceives the members of the syndicate group.

B. The Assurance That the Good will Prevail

It is said that the purpose of a film is to make the viewer forget about reality as the person is watching the movie. And then as the film ends, the person is brought back to reality, as if woken up from a dream.

Costigan and the Sullivan were killed in the film, as well as the people who knew their true identities, save Madolyn and Sgt. Dignam. But Sullivan, the "good guy," was killed earlier than the Sullivan. This gives the impression that the latter triumphed. Madolyn seems to have no intentions of telling the authority what she knows.

As a viewer, you will think that there will be no hope. You empathize with Sullivan and think that justice is impossible in this kind of society. Costigan remains in the police department. That makes a viewer even more anxious, thinking that the social institution that ensures the welfare of the community can be peopled with the likes of Costigan.

But right before the film ends, Sgt. Dignam shoots Sullivan dead. Now what does that ending suggest to the viewer? It is an assurance that evil will never prevail; that Costigan, the good, did not die in vain. The viewer's trust towards the police institution is thereby restored. The film ends without leaving any questions or doubts in the viewer's mind.

III. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In *The Departed*, we can read how institutions can shape the fate of an individual. As shown in the movie, a person does not have full control over his consciousness. The institution, and the society at large, plays a vital role on how a person's consciousness is formed. The film also shows how anxiety can ensue upon violating the values that the intuition a person identifies with.

The film borrows from its codes from the tensions in society, particularly that of "good and evil wear[ing] each other's masks." [9] This was transcoded at the ending where the bad guy is killed. And this is how the film as a medium addresses its audience: that evil never wins. And this might bring the audience trust to the authority (i.e. police force). Though the authority can be infiltrated, the "rat" will never prevail and that the authority will always, without fail, bring back order. In the end, the film assures the audience that everything will be alright.

Guided by formalist and critical cultural theories, a critique of film (or any cultural texts for that matter) becomes more fruitful and relevant to criticizing not only the art work, but also of society at large. We must learn how to evaluate a film so that we are aware of how it affects us, and thus we become conscious of how it interpellates us as the spectators with the ideology it bears.

There are more ways to read this film. One can tackle the issue of how the film represents American-Irish peoples. Why do the gangsters have to be American-Irish? Will the film's outcome be different if Scorsese uses another race?

According to Michael Ryan, political reading of films involves looking at how social codes were used. This includes examining if the film transcodes the social conventions it used. [10] But upon

closer inspection, these films may have used pre-existing codes of social reality. But the crucial question is, given that these are pre-existing social codes, are people aware of them? They open the eyes of the spectators to how our society is slowly falling apart. The films position the viewers [as the subjects] in such a way that they are introduced to the social conflicts occurring around them. This film by Scorsese might claim to portray social reality. That is, that even legal institutions (the police department) can be corrupted from the inside. However, the film does not offer any solution to address this problem. It simply portrays what already is, but does not suggest a clear progressive solution.