

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
December 2015

Spotlight (dir. Thomas McCarthy, 2015)

On Camera

Spotlight Team

Robby Robinson Michael Keaton: *Mr. Mom* (83), *Beetlejuice* (88), *Birdman* (14)
Mike Rezendes Mark Ruffalo: *You Can Count on Me* (00), *The Kids Are All Right* (10)
Sacha Pfeiffer Rachel McAdams: *Mean Girls* (04), *The Notebook* (04), *Southpaw* (15)
Matt Carroll Brian d'Arcy James: mostly Broadway: *Shrek* (08), *Something Rotten* (15)

At the Globe

Marty Baron Liev Schreiber: *A Walk on the Moon* (99), *The Manchurian Candidate* (04)
Ben Bradlee, Jr. John Slattery: *The Station Agent* (03), *Bluebird* (13), TV's *Mad Men* (07-15)

The Lawyers

Mitchell Garabedian Stanley Tucci: *Big Night* (96), *The Devil Wears Prada* (06), *Julie & Julia* (09)
Eric Macleish Billy Crudup: *Jesus' Son* (99), *Almost Famous* (00), *Waking the Dead* (00)
Jim Sullivan Jamey Sheridan: *The Ice Storm* (97), *Syriana* (05), TV's *Homeland* (11-12)

The Victims

Phil Saviano (SNAP) Neal Huff: *The Wedding Banquet* (93), TV's *Show Me a Hero* (15)
Joe Crowley Michael Cyril Creighton: Star and writer of web series *Jack in a Box* (09-12)
Patrick McSorley Jimmy LeBlanc: *Gone Baby Gone* (07), and that's his only other credit!

Off Camera

Director-Writer Tom McCarthy: See below; co-wrote Pixar's *Up* (09), frequently acts
Co-Screenwriter Josh Singer: writer, *West Wing* (05-06), producer, *Law & Order: SVU* (07-08)
Cinematography Masanobu Takayanagi: *Silver Linings Playbook* (12), *Black Mass* (15)
Original Score Howard Shore: *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy (01-03), nearly 100 credits

Previous features from writer-director Tom McCarthy

The Station Agent (2003) – Intimate comedy-drama about three misfit loners in a small town
The Visitor (2007) – Drama about professor who finds two undocumented refugees in his flat
Win Win (2011) – Comedy-drama about a high-school wrestling coach who adopts a new pupil
The Cobbler (2014) – Magical-realist fable about a man who can walk in other people's shoes

If you liked *Spotlight*...

All the President's Men (1976) – A classic about Woodward and Bernstein breaking the Watergate case in *The Washington Post*, and a stated influence on the shaping of this film

The Verdict (1982) – An alcoholic lawyer (Paul Newman) attempts to recover his career through a medical-malpractice case that eventually betrays corrupt ties to the Catholic Church

The Boys of St. Vincent (1992) – A landmark three-hour Canadian TV series about sexual abuse within the Catholic Church; reviews were so strong it played theatrically in the U.S.

A Civil Action (1998) – Somewhat underrated adaptation of Jonathan Harr's nonfiction bestseller about a town's legal proceedings against a company that poisoned their children

Zodiac (2007) – Jake Gyllenhaal, Robert Downey Jr., and Mark Ruffalo star in the true story of one journalist's increasingly lonely attempt to track down a serial killer in the Bay Area

The Club (2015) – A Chilean drama that won major prizes at the Berlin and Chicago film festivals, about disgraced priests hiding in a "treatment center" until one victim finds them

Truth (2015) – Cate Blanchett starred in this came-and-went drama last month as Mary Mapes, the news producer whose career collapsed after she and Dan Rather ran an anti-Bush story

Contexts about *Spotlight* you may appreciate...

Spotlight debuted at this year's Toronto Film Festival, where it was a runner-up for the People's Choice Award, placing behind *Room*, our selection from last month. It was the closing film at the Chicago Film Festival in October, where it won the Audience Award for dramatic films.

The staff of *The Boston Globe* cooperated directly with the film, to include the many *Spotlight* reporters who allowed the actors playing them to shadow them for periods of time. At the Toronto premiere, the actors appeared on stage together with the journalists they had played. They also visited the set to verify its verisimilitude, including rearranging their own desks.

Writer-director Tom McCarthy was raised as a Catholic and got his B.A. from Boston College. Paul Guilfoyle, who tries to influence the proceedings at Boston College High School and later lean on Keaton's character at a bar, in fact graduated from Boston College High School.

According to the Internet Movie DataBase, the typeface used in the opening credits of *Spotlight* is the same one the *Boston Globe* uses for its headlines and articles in its print version.

Richard Jenkins, whom McCarthy directed to a Best Actor nomination as the lead character in *The Visitor*, plays an uncredited voice role as Richard Sipe, the ex-priest turned psychiatrist.

McCarthy got the worst notices of his career for his previous and least typical film, *The Cobbler*, but has said making two movies back to back—even that one—helped refine his technique.

Movies frequently change substantially during and after production and get whittled down for weeks or months in the editing room, but *Spotlight*'s initial rough cut was only ten minutes longer than the finished version. Aside from a scene between Keaton's character and his wife, few if any major scenes were removed. The script was essentially preserved.

Broad questions about *Spotlight*...

Pacing: One person I spoke to about *Spotlight* expressed surprise that the movie does not pose more obstacles to the *Globe* reporters once they elect to pursue the story. Someone else in the same conversation found this to be an asset, and even an important point: this story was barely “hiding” during all the time it went virtually unreported, and it’s almost upsetting how quickly major dots get connected once people are trying. How did you react to these issues?

Loyalty and Silence: Much coverage of *Spotlight* has stressed how Marty Baron, the *Globe*’s incoming editor (now at *The Washington Post*), was crucial to kickstarting this inquiry, and how his status as a non-Bostonian and a Jew may have helped him “see” Boston and its culture with fresh eyes. Another way we might approach the same issues is to say that the *Globe*, like the Church, is a place where old loyalties die hard, where colleagues do not say everything they know about their closest colleagues, and where participants have consciously or unconsciously repressed their own institutional history. Where else in the movie do we see characters holding their tongues about sensitive topics, or closing ranks against an “outsider”? Does the film *always* discourage this behavior? What is the key takeaway?

Tradeoffs: Critics have been justifiably quick to praise the depiction of old-school journalists who diligently source their stories over long, careful periods of time. At the same time, the movie is clear about the tolls that this work ethic imposes on journalists and other servants of justice: Ruffalo’s character is separated, Tucci’s and Schreiber’s never married, and even the partnered characters are rarely seen with their spouses or children. In this way and others, how does the film avoid a pure romanticizing of these characters and their work?

Craft: Even when movies like *Spotlight* draw less unanimous praise than this one has, reviewers tend to fawn over the acting, writing, and directing, in more or less that order. Compared to other films we have watched, there may be fewer obvious prompts to praise the lighting, the music, the editing, the framing, the production design, the costumes, the sound mix, and other audiovisual aspects. But did any of these traits of *Spotlight* stand out to you as special?

Specific filmmaking touches worth considering...

Costumes: I chuckled at how all these guys bought five pairs of their favorite pleated khakis six years ago, and how everyone rolls up their sleeves the same way; meanwhile, a female journalist told me after seeing *Spotlight*, “You basically have two options seeing women reporters on screen: 1) the kind who’ll sleep with whoever it takes to get the story, or 2) the kind who’ve only ever bought their clothes off the sale rack at Talbot’s. Obviously, if those are the options, I’ll always pick #2.” Beyond this uncanny bit of newsroom verisimilitude, I like how the clothes in *Spotlight* suggest there is an unofficial uniform at the *Globe*—one of many signs that the newsroom has its own internal codes, and doesn’t always brook change.

Camera Movement: The early tracking shot that follows Matt and Sacha from the party into their basement office, eating cake off a plate as they go, lets us see just how sequestered the *Spotlight* crew is from the rest of the paper, initially suggesting a kind of afterthought in relation to the rest of the paper, but also affording them some valuable privacy. (Notice that Mike Rezendes couldn’t or wouldn’t take the time to go eat cake and listen to the toasts.)

Money: The first thing Sacha has heard about editor Marty Baron is that he cut 15% of his staff in Miami. *Spotlight* is definitely about a moral commitment to intensive journalism that seems to have faded, but also about the economics that either prohibit it or make it possible.

Writing: Marty suggests in his lunchtime interview with Robby that he knows next to nothing about *Spotlight* or how it works. He is also conspicuously reading *Curse of the Bambino*, about the long-benighted Boston Red Sox, to demonstrate that he is catching up on Boston culture. Did you take these gestures at face value? Or given the wiliness of other reporters we meet in the movie, did you take this as a performance of Marty's own eagerness to learn, coupled with an interest in how Robby would describe an outfit Marty's already read up on?

Gender: Eileen McNamara, one of extremely few women in the editorial meeting (just as Sacha Pfeiffer is usually the only woman in any professional context we observe) is also seated in the back of the crowded room, without a seat at the table, even though she wrote the article that alerted Marty to the silence around the abuse cases. Later, Matt demurs from confiding in Eileen about his research: professional necessity, probably, but would it happen to a man?

Acting: John Slattery gives a notably ornery performance as Ben Bradlee, Jr., the son of the fabled Watergate editor. I didn't catch until the second time I saw *Spotlight* that many people expected he might be promoted to Marty's position but that he "may not have raised his hand fast enough." Is that why he's so cranky, as early as the first meeting? Later, I assumed he must be the person who dropped the ball on reporting the church cases more aggressively when information was sent to the *Globe*, but that turns out to have been someone else's call. So why does he act so guilty and defensive? How did you read him?

Newspapers: The *Citizen*, the *Herald*, and the *Phoenix* all get name-checked early in the script (and at later moments, too) as local papers of varying stature that did some early reporting on these scandals but couldn't or didn't sustain the inquiry. Again, economics is important here: the *Globe* may be scrambling for resources, but at least it has the money to sustain this push.

Production Design: The *Globe* publisher has a Harvard chair on display in his office, even though it's not positioned to invite anyone to sit in it—more shows of Boston insiderism.

Costumes: Mike Rezendes' pants pockets are positioned in a funny place, closer in toward the crotch than pockets would often go; they also look small to me and cut almost horizontally. I'd bet this is a costumer's trick to help Ruffalo look even more hunched and stiff, by default.

Resources: Phil Saviano's organization SNAP (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests) is up and running at <http://www.snapnetwork.org>. You can read about the history and staff of the organization, which turns out to be founded not by Phil but by a woman, Barbara Blaine.

Costumes: I know, you didn't think I'd talk about these so much. But the fact that Jamey Sheridan's Jim walks around the links with his golf shirt buttoned all the way to the top while Michael Keaton's Robby at least leaves a few open is one subtle way of suggesting a guy who's even more closed-off than Robby, even if they otherwise seem like peas in a pod.

Circumspection: Here's one surprising instance of that pattern of secrecy I alluded to earlier: when Phil Saviano is challenged by the *Spotlight* reporters about where he allegedly sent his information five years ago, he refuses to say—even though the character who somewhat testily poses the question, Keaton's Robby, later seems to have been the recipient.

Sound: Stanley Tucci's Garabedian resists Mike's journalistic advances until he hears *Spotlight* might cover the case. Clearly the name means something to him. They ride the elevator for a few beats in silence as he considers; when they reach Garabedian's floor, the elevator makes one loud "ding," like a lightbulb going off over his head, and he agrees to cooperate.

Editing: Whether or not *Spotlight* was always scripted this way, the movie cross-cuts between the testimonies of Joe Crowley (the gay man who speaks to Sacha in a coffee shop) and Patrick McSorley (the young father who talks to Mike in Garabedian's office). The two interviews begin with Sacha and Mike asking if they can take notes, in almost the exact same language. This shuttling back and forth in one way highlights the continuity between these dissimilar-looking men's stories, though it may also accentuate some differences, too.

Framing/Editing: I was upset when I noticed the track marks on the inside of Patrick's arm as Mike begins his interview. Only as the interview wraps up does *Spotlight* cut to a close-up insert on these marks, as if Mike is only noticing them for the first time. I don't believe that a reporter as sharp as Mike would have needed that long; the movie seems to be using the spectacle as a dramatic punctuation point on the scene, showcasing the long-term effects of Patrick's victimization. This kind of touch that directors and film editors debate all the time: whether to trust viewers to see these details without forcing our eye, and whether to cut to close-up when it makes more sense for the character or for the emotional beats of the scene.

Backstory: Another symmetry between these testimonies is that both reporters divulge rare bits of personal information: that Sacha grew up in Ohio, and that Mike used to be a cab driver in Boston. Think how much you know about the personal histories or home lives of each of the characters in *Spotlight* (and how much you don't know), and when or how we learn about it.

Writing: "Joe, I think language is going to be so important here. We can't just say 'molest.'" So Sacha advises her subject, but the movie is also advising us—not just about its commitment to telling the story in an unvarnished way, but that it too has been careful with each word.

Acting: Whether this was McAdams's idea or McCarthy's, I love that Sacha walks sideways as she and Joe continue their interview in the public park, almost thrusting her notebook toward him and aggressively writing down everything he says. As careful and empathetic a listener as she is, there is something irreducibly awkward and necessarily invasive about her work.

Editing: *Spotlight* repeatedly makes subtle choices that frame the film in terms of the reporters' own process of discovering the story, not just about the events themselves. One example is the short scene where Sacha follows up with Joe over the phone to ask if he ever contacted a lawyer. The camera stays entirely with Sacha, in real time, as she mentally starts to connect some dots, rather than cutting away to Joe during his parts of the conversation—which also means resisting an urge to show Joe's home, and any details that might fill in his life for us.

Props: “FIRE DOOR: KEEP CLOSED!” “CAUTION: OPEN DOOR CAREFULLY!” These signs are somewhat ostentatiously at the center of the frame as Mike and Robby head down to the archives to see what Matt may have dug up: fairly clear symbols of a Pandora’s box.

Power: Marty shows up to the reception for the Council of Catholic Charities only to find that he is not on their guest list. Thank goodness Paul Guilfoyle’s Pete Conley shows up to vouch for him—yet another bit of theater, one assumes, to make Marty both welcome and humbled.

Camera Movement: The camera zooms or tracks steadily backward from the speakerphone by which Richard Sipe, the ex-priest and psychiatrist, walks through important statistics about celibacy, abuse patterns, etc. The movement almost literally evokes the spread of information emerging from the phone and filling the space, and also avoids a bunch of cuts to close-up.

Music: The piano score, understated and sporadic throughout, accelerates a bit as the Spotlight crew starts uncovering dozens more priests following Sipe’s call. Soon enough, though, the music slows down and saddens into the same motif we heard over the prologue. Even at the level of music, *Spotlight* refuses to *only* get better; progress and lament keep alternating.

Cinematography: After Marty challenges the team to ferret out not just individuals but systemic problems, the camera starts doing something repeatedly it had *never* done up to that point: filming the journalists’ interviews with their subjects from high angles, looking down, rather than at eye level. This affords us some tactful distance from these painful interviews but also suggests a perspective from “on high.” Is it God looking down? Is it the imperiled system?

Emotion: After Sacha’s run-in with Father Paquin, who admits to molesting boys but taking no pleasure in it, she observes two kids on bicycles and a parked school bus. *Spotlight* uses few emotional triggers this overt. Did they work for you, at the few times they arise? As proof of how often *Spotlight* avoids these opportunities, note that Robby later describes his Rhode Island classmate breaking down crying at lunch—but the scene in question cut out before that happened, refusing to wring us for tears or to serve up a victim’s pain for our consumption.

Production Design: I have new idea if a huge billboard for AOL loomed over the *Boston Globe* office in 2001 or 2002, but if that portentous placement doesn’t suggest the fate of internet journalism over print-based news, the downward camera movement reinforces the stakes.

Editing: Almost all of *Spotlight*’s edits are standard cuts, but one rare exception is the dissolve as Mike learns over his car phone that Garabedian will not hold off re-filing his motion with the unsealed documents, possibly costing Mike his exclusive lead on the story. A dissolve is when one image fades out as another fades in. In this case, in addition to moving us ahead several weeks in time, the wispy transition suggests that Mike feels the story slipping away.

Sound and Editing: As Mike reads the text of one of the most incriminating, newly unsealed documents he acquired from the courthouse, *Spotlight* supplies a series of wide shots of Boston during his taxi ride—“scored,” as it were, to this woman’s anguished appeal that the church intervene to do what’s right. By the end of the scene, Mike is reading the letter to his colleagues in the office, but it’s important that for a long beat, he addressed the whole city.