

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE VATICAN THROUGH THE LENS OF AMERICAN IDEOLOGY IN THE FILM CONCLAVE (2024)

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze how the Vatican is represented through the lens of American ideology in the film *Conclave* (2024). The primary data source of this research is the film *Conclave* (2024), including its narrative structure, characters, dialogues, and visual symbols. This study applies to Stuart Hall's theory of representation, particularly the intentional approach, to examine how meaning is deliberately constructed by filmmakers. The research employs a qualitative method, with data collected through textual observation of key scenes and cinematic elements such as settings, symbols, and character interactions. The data are analyzed using interpretative textual analysis to identify ideological patterns embedded in the film. The findings show that the film constructs the Vatican not only as a sacred religious institution but also as a political arena characterized by secrecy, conflict, and power struggles between conservative and progressive factions. Visual elements such as closed spaces, red seals, and black-and-white smoke function as symbols of institutional secrecy and control of information. Furthermore, characters like Cardinal Tremblay and Adeyemi represent corruption, hypocrisy, and political ambition, while figures such as Cardinal Lawrence and Benitez embody liberal American values including individualism, transparency, inclusivity, and reform. The emergence of an intersex Pope is portrayed as a metaphor for a new form of purity based on honesty and identity. Overall, the film reflects and negotiates the hegemony of American ideology in shaping global perceptions of the Vatican as both sacred and politically contested.

Keywords: *American Ideology, Church Politics, Intentional Approach, Representation, Vatican*

1. Introduction

In the contemporary media landscape, films function not only as entertainment but also as influential cultural texts that shape public perceptions of institutions, power, and ideology (Hall, 1989). In recent years, there has been a growing trend in global cinema, particularly in Hollywood productions, to portray religious institutions, especially the Vatican, as spaces filled with secrecy, political intrigue, and internal conflict rather than purely spiritual authority (O'Brien, 2004). This phenomenon reflects a broader cultural tendency within American media to question closed

institutions and promote values such as transparency, individualism, and accountability (Wood, 1987). The Vatican, as the spiritual center of global Catholicism and a unique geopolitical entity, becomes a compelling subject within this discourse. Its portrayal in films is frequently constructed through narratives of mystery, power struggle, and tension between tradition and modernity (Smith, 2010). This condition raises critical questions about how ideological perspectives, particularly American ideology, influence and reshape the global image of sacred institutions.

A conclave is the process of electing the Pope by the Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church, conducted in a strictly secret and isolated environment to ensure neutrality and integrity, where decisions are made by a two-thirds majority vote (Dovalis, 2025). Historically rooted in the thirteenth century through the Apostolic Constitution *Ubi Periculum*, the conclave has evolved into a highly regulated and symbolically rich process emphasizing secrecy and spiritual purity (Hollingsworth, 2019). However, when this sacred process is represented in cinematic works, particularly Western films, it is often reframed through political and ideological narratives. The film *Conclave* (2024), adapted from Robert Harris' novel and directed by Edward Berger, exemplifies this shift by presenting the Vatican not only as a religious institution but also as a complex arena of political negotiation, personal ambition, and ideological conflict (Berger, 2024).

Previous studies have examined representation and ideology in media from various perspectives. Platonov (2024) explains how Stuart Hall's theory highlights the role of media in constructing cultural meaning and power relations, while Prysthon (2016) emphasizes cinema's ability to reinterpret identities in transnational contexts (Cheng, 2016). Similarly, Khoirunnisa et al. (2025) demonstrate how American ideology shape's identity representation in *Pachinko*, and Zahra & Widyaningrum (2025) analyzes gender representation through *Captain Marvel*. In addition, Chakravarty (1993) and O'Brien (2004) note that Hollywood narratives often embed ideological assumptions within their storytelling structures. These studies confirm that media texts frequently carry dominant ideological values that influence audience perception. However, there is

still limited research that specifically examines how American ideology constructs the image of the Vatican, particularly in the context of papal election narratives, as a sacred yet politically contested institution. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by focusing on the film *Conclave* (2024) as a case study.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how the Vatican is represented through the lens of American ideology in the film *Conclave* (2024). Specifically, it seeks to identify how visual elements, narrative structures, character representations, and symbolic meanings are deliberately constructed to convey ideological messages. To achieve this objective, the study applies Stuart Hall's theory of representation, particularly the intentional approach, which emphasizes the role of media producers in shaping meaning. Methodologically, this research employs a qualitative approach through textual analysis, focusing on key scenes, dialogues, and cinematic symbols to uncover embedded ideological patterns. Through this framework, the study provides a systematic explanation of how the Vatican is represented as both a sacred and political institution, while also revealing how American ideological values are projected onto a global religious context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Study of Representation in Film

In media and film studies, the concept of representation plays a crucial role in understanding how media not only reflects reality, but also actively constructs social identities, power relations, and cultural values. Stuart Hall conceptualizes representation as a

process of meaning production through language, images, and symbols, rather than as a direct or objective reflection of the real world (Hall, 1997; Platonov, 2024). This perspective emphasizes that meaning is shaped within cultural and ideological contexts, where power plays a significant role in determining how identities and differences are constructed and communicated.

Hall's theory of representation consists of three main approaches, namely the reflective, intentional, and constructionist approaches. The reflective approach views representation as a mirror of reality, while the constructionist approach sees meaning as socially produced through language systems. However, the intentional approach, which is central to this study, highlights the role of media producers in deliberately shaping meaning based on their intentions and ideological positions (Hall, 1997). This approach suggests that cultural texts, including films, are not neutral but are intentionally constructed to convey particular messages influenced by social, political, and cultural contexts (Chivaura, 2020; Platonov, 2024).

Within this framework, the intentional approach is particularly useful for analyzing how filmmakers encode ideological meanings into media texts. It allows researchers to examine how narrative structures, character portrayals, and visual symbols are deliberately arranged to communicate specific perspectives or values (Yousman, 2007). In addition, this approach is closely related to discussions of power and ideology, drawing from Marxist and Gramscian perspectives that view media as a tool for maintaining cultural hegemony (Platonov, 2024; Vásquez, 2021). Through this lens, dominant groups may use media representation to shape public perception and reinforce societal norms.

At the same time, Hall acknowledges that meaning is not fixed or entirely controlled by producers. Through the encoding and decoding model, audiences actively interpret and negotiate meanings based on their own cultural and social backgrounds, which may lead to multiple interpretations of the same text (Simorangkir, 2025; Yousman, 2007). This highlights the dynamic relationship between producers, texts, and audiences in the process of representation.

In the context of film studies, this theoretical framework demonstrates how cinema can function as a medium that constructs and disseminates ideological meanings across cultural boundaries. Previous studies show that films have the capacity to reinterpret identities and challenge or reinforce dominant narratives (Prysthon, 2016). In this research, Hall's intentional approach is applied to analyze how the Vatican in *Conclave* (2024) is represented not only as a sacred religious institution but also as a site of ideological negotiation, where meanings of power, identity, and morality are deliberately constructed through cinematic elements. This framework enables a deeper understanding of how representation operates within the intersection of media, ideology, and global cultural discourse.

2.2 The Study of Ideology in Media Studies

The concept of ideology, as proposed by Althusser and Gramsci, plays a central role in understanding how social consciousness is formed and power structures are maintained, with Althusser viewing it as a material practice through institutions such as the media, and Gramsci introducing hegemony as domination through cultural consent (Azevedo & Azevedo, 2023). In the context of the article

discussed about the representation of the Vatican in the film “Conclave” (2024), this theory is consistent with the discussion of how American ideology influences the portrayal of the Vatican as a sacred but intriguing entity, where the conclave process reflects the hegemony of values such as individualism and reform that are maintained through the film's narrative (Hall, 1989). Althusser emphasizes the media as an ideological apparatus, seen in how “Conclave” reinforces American values such as the American Dream while criticizing the Vatican, shaping the audience's awareness of global power Gramsci's hegemony explains the integration of dominant values, relating to Stuart Hall's intentional approach in methodology to identify the filmmaker's intent (Hall, 1989). The theme of American ideology in film is consistent with the analysis of the representation of the Vatican through the lens of American culture, although there is potential resistance and the complexity of ideology-culture relations adds another layer to global audiences' negotiation of the representation of the Vatican influenced by American ideology (O'Brien, 2004).

3. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyze the representation of the Vatican in the film *Conclave* (2024) through the lens of American ideology. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of narrative, visual, and symbolic elements that cannot be quantified, allowing researchers to interpret meaning within cultural texts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This design is particularly relevant for examining how ideological messages are embedded in cinematic representation.

The primary data source of this research is the film *Conclave* (2024), a political thriller directed by Edward Berger. The data include the film's narrative structure, character portrayals, dialogues, and visual symbols such as setting, spatial arrangements, and cinematic imagery. These elements are treated as cultural texts that reflect and construct meaning regarding the Vatican as both a sacred and political institution.

Data collection is conducted through textual observation and documentation of selected scenes. The researcher identifies and selects key scenes, dialogues, and symbolic elements that are relevant to the research focus, particularly those that depict secrecy, power relations, and ideological conflict. The process involves repeated viewing of the film to ensure accurate identification of patterns and meanings, supported by note taking and categorization of significant visual and narrative components.

Data analysis is carried out using interpretative textual analysis guided by Stuart Hall's theory of representation, particularly the intentional approach. Representation, according to Hall, is the process by which meaning is constructed through systems of signs and symbols rather than directly reflecting reality (Hall, 1997). Hall's intentional approach emphasizes that meaning is partly shaped by the intentions of media producers, which are influenced by social, political, and cultural contexts (Chivaura, 2020; Platonov, 2024). This approach is used to examine how filmmakers encode ideological messages within the film to convey specific perspectives (Yousman, 2007). At the same time, this study acknowledges that meaning is not fixed, as audiences may interpret and negotiate these messages differently, as explained in Hall's encoding and decoding model (Simorangkir, 2025; Yousman, 2007).

Furthermore, the analysis considers the role of ideology and power in media representation. Hall's framework, which is influenced by Marxist and Gramscian perspectives, highlights how media can function as a tool of cultural hegemony by shaping public perception and reinforcing dominant values (Platonov, 2024; Vásquez, 2021). In this study, the intentional approach is applied to identify how elements such as character construction, narrative conflict, and symbolic imagery are deliberately arranged to reflect American ideological values, including individualism, transparency, and reform, while simultaneously critiquing the Vatican as a closed institution.

The results of this research are presented descriptively and analytically by organizing findings into thematic categories. Each theme is supported by evidence from selected scenes, dialogues, and visual symbols, followed by interpretation based on the theoretical framework. This method of presentation allows for a systematic explanation of how meaning is constructed in the film and how American ideology is embedded within the representation of the Vatican.

To strengthen the analytical framework, the study integrates film analysis as an auxiliary theory to investigate the processes through which meaning is constructed in the audiovisual text. The film analysis in this study does not focus on retelling the plot or describing the film's content, but rather on using a theoretical framework to uncover the meanings constructed through the audiovisual text. In this context, the researcher employs the film analysis theory outlined by Ida Rochani Adi in *Popular Fiction: Theory and*

Methods of Study (2011), which positions film as a narrative text that can be analyzed both intrinsically and extrinsically. Intrinsic analysis encompasses narrative elements such as plot, characters, and point of view, while extrinsic analysis connects the film to the social, cultural, and ideological contexts underpinning it. Thus, the film is not merely entertainment but a meaning-laden representation that can be systematically analyzed through a scientific approach.

In its application, the researcher integrates film analysis with Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, specifically the intentional approach, to examine how meaning in the film is consciously constructed by its creators. Through this approach, the analysis focuses on how the film's symbols, narratives, and characters represent specific ideologies. In line with Adi's (2011) perspective, this study does not stop at description or subjective opinion as in a review. Still, it uses theory and methodology to interpret the film as a product of popular culture that reflects the values, myths, and discourses developing within society.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Findings Based on the Objectives

Following the sudden death of the highly respected Pope, Cardinal Lawrence (Ralph Fiennes) is tasked with managing the secret election of the successor to the Holy See, an ancient process known as the conclave. Behind the closed walls of the Vatican, Lawrence finds himself caught in a whirlwind of political intrigue between

progressive and traditionalist factions vying for power. Tensions escalate when he uncovers a series of dark secrets and scandals behind the reputations of the leading candidates, forcing Lawrence to question both the integrity of the institution and his own personal beliefs.

As the voting process unfolds, Lawrence uncovers traces of conspiracy and scandal left behind by the late Pope, leading to shocking revelations about the strongest candidates. Tension reaches its peak with the arrival of Cardinal Benitez, a mysterious figure who was secretly appointed, ultimately bringing radical change to the final outcome of the election. As noted by The Hollywood Reporter, the film explores the deep conflict between ancient traditions and the demands of the modern world, culminating in a plot twist that shakes the fundamental order of the institution (Rooney, 2024).

The findings of this study, conducted using Stuart Hall's intentional approach, reveal that the film *Conclave* (2024) is a deliberate project of meaning-making aimed at altering public perceptions of the Vatican. Ideologically, the film positions the Vatican as an entity facing a "crisis of legitimacy" due to the clash between rigid ancient traditions and the modern world's demands for transparency. The placement of the narrative within the political "quarantine" of the conclave is not merely an aesthetic choice, but a strategy to dissect how power within a sacred institution operates like a corrupt political machine.

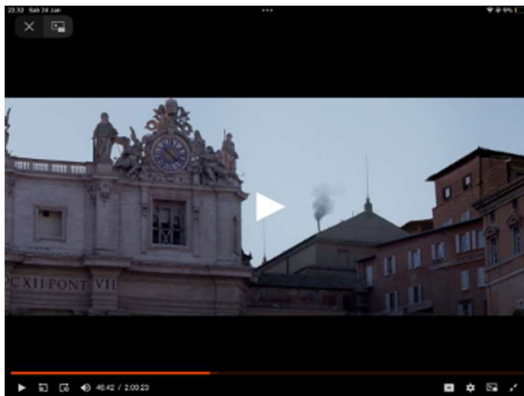
Furthermore, this finding indicates an effort at "re-branding" morality within the film. Characters are pitted against one another to demonstrate that traditional "holiness" often equated with dogmatic obedience and self-enclosure is a fragile form of hypocrisy. As an antithesis, American liberal values such as openness, critical

skepticism (healthy doubt), and inclusivity are positioned as the "new light" needed to save these institutions. Thus, the film implicitly conveys the message that the sanctity of transnational institutions can only be preserved if they are willing to merge into the framework of Western liberal morality.

Symbolically, the film also uses ritual elements to construct new meanings. Red candles and billowing smoke, which historically symbolize liturgy and the divine presence, are deconstructed into opaque instruments of communication steeped in human drama. The black and white smoke rising from the Sistine Chapel is no longer interpreted merely as a technical result of the election, but as a sign of "truth" or "falsehood" monopolized by the church elite. This construction intentionally guides the audience to sympathize with the progressive characters attempting to pierce through that veil of secrecy, while simultaneously validating the suspicion that behind the grandeur of religious symbols lies a power struggle no different from the secular political arena in the West. In other words, the Vatican in this film is portrayed as an "ailing" institution in need of reform in accordance with the standards of humanity and transparency propagated by American ideology.

4.2 The Data Discussion Based on the Objectives

4.2.1 Ritual Symbolism: Red Candles and Smoke as Signs of Institutional Decay



In the film *Conclave* 2024, the director, Edward Berger, deliberately deconstructs the meaning of Vatican liturgical symbolism to critique the institution's "openness." The use of red candles, which historically symbolize the blood of martyrs and the presence of the Holy Spirit's illuminating fire is transformed in the film's cinematography into a visual instrument emphasizing isolation and moral darkness. Through dramatic lighting and the use of sharp shadows within the Sistine Chapel, these candles no longer radiate the "light of truth," but instead illuminate the human intrigues unfolding behind locked doors.

In the film *Conclave*, the red wax seal is a physical symbol of *Sede Vacante* or the vacant throne, which indicates that papal authority has ceased and the late Pope's apartment is now under sacred protection. Traditionally, this seal serves as a guarantee of absolute secrecy (*Papal Secrecy*),

severing the cardinals' ties with the outside world so that the election process remains pure and free from political interference (Gregis, 1996). The red color of the candles also carries a deep liturgical meaning, symbolizing the color of the cardinals' robes, which signifies their willingness to shed blood to defend the integrity of the Church and the Catholic faith.

Even more crucial is the use of the smoke signal (black/white smoke), which serves as the primary communicative indicator in the conclave process. The film portrays the smoke not as a sacred instrument connecting God's will to the faithful, but rather as a highly restrictive and undemocratic form of one-way communication. The billowing black smoke is repeatedly used as a visual device to depict the cardinals' collective failure to reach a consensus, which from an American ideological perspective that highly values checks and balances and transparency is positioned as a sign of "democratic darkness" within the church. This smoke serves as a symbol of how a religious monarchy attempts to monopolize the truth through secret codes that cannot be verified by outsiders. Thus, the director deliberately uses this smoke to provoke the audience into viewing the election process not as a religious ceremony, but as a manipulation of information that shuts itself off from public scrutiny, while reinforcing the liberal critique that any closed institution unwilling to open its doors to transparency will ultimately become trapped in internal chaos it cannot resolve on its own.

4.2.2 The Characters of Cardinal Tremblay and Adeyemi: A Deconstruction of Elite Hypocrisy

In the narrative of *Conclave*, the characters of Cardinal Joseph Tremblay

and Joshua Adeyemi are deliberately constructed by director Edward Berger to serve an agenda of deconstructing hierarchical religious authority. Cardinal Tremblay, with his moderate profile, is positioned as a “politician in clerical robes.” The film uses this character to highlight the practice of the buying and selling of influence often associated with corruption within large bureaucracies. Tremblay is portrayed as a figure highly skilled in using lobbying networks and secret diplomacy to smooth his path to the papal throne, an action that American audiences will immediately recognize as a form of “dirty politics” that contradicts the principles of meritocracy and transparency. When the scandal of his involvement in secret meetings is exposed, his character is no longer seen as an authoritative leader, but rather as a “corrupt” figure whose integrity has been shattered by personal ambition, a narrative warning that power without external accountability will inevitably lead to abuse.

On the other hand, Cardinal Joshua Adeyemi embodies the challenge of rigid religious conservatism in an increasingly modern world. Initially, Adeyemi is portrayed as a figure steadfast in social traditions and church morality—a representation highly respected by traditionalist factions. However, the film gradually dismantles this facade of morality through the revelation of a past scandal involving an intimate relationship he had concealed for years. For American audiences, this revelation is highly significant because it demonstrates that beneath the rhetoric of absolute truth often espoused by conservatives lies a human vulnerability that is actually concealed to preserve the status quo. Adeyemi serves as a mirror of the hypocrisy of elites who prioritize

the “saving face” of the institution over individual moral honesty.

Through these two characters, the film conveys a powerful ideological message: that religious institutions which place heavy emphasis on structure, hierarchy, and rigid doctrine are highly vulnerable to infiltration by political ambition and individual hypocrisy. By exposing these “powerful” candidates, the director not only criticizes individual figures but also attacks the closed system of authority that allows characters like Tremblay and Adeyemi to thrive, thus leading the audience to agree that these institutions require a total overhaul aligned with the values of individualism, transparent honesty, and humility promoted by progressive figures like Lawrence.

4.2.3 The Intersex Pope as a Symbol of “New Purity” and Inclusivity



The narrative climax of *Conclave* the revelation that Cardinal Benítez is intersex is not merely a plot twist, but a carefully calculated ideological strategy aimed at deconstructing the foundations of Catholic patriarchy that have been firmly established for centuries. Within a rigid ecclesiastical tradition, where the highest leadership is strictly limited to the male gender binary, the figure of Benítez functions as a “biological anomaly” that directly challenges this dogmatism. Through Stuart Hall’s intentionalist approach, it becomes evident that director Edward Berger consciously positions this character as the antithesis of the other ambitious cardinals bound by traditional conventions. Benítez’s intersex identity is represented not as a shame or oddity, but as a “suppressed truth” long concealed by a paranoid hierarchical system.

In the context of American ideology, which places such a strong emphasis on identity politics, diversity, and inclusivity, this revelation serves as a symbol of “new purity.” For Benítez, purity is not measured by steadfastness in upholding tradition or the purity of inherited doctrine, but rather by radical honesty regarding his biological identity and his rejection of the ambition for power. This is a powerful moral: the film positions a figure long considered “outsider” or “different” by the system as the one who is, in fact, the most “holy” due to his personal honesty.

By choosing Benítez as Pope, the film conveys a hegemonic agenda that the future of transnational institutions must be inclusive of fluid identities in order to remain legitimate and moral by the standards of a global audience exposed to liberal values. This narrative also offers a veiled critique of

conservative dogmatism; the film asserts that any attempt to maintain purity based on rigid rules will instead lead the institution toward decline and corruption. Ultimately, the figure of this intersex Pope becomes a symbol of America’s effort to negotiate its “dream of inclusivity” into the world’s most ancient sacred space, making the Vatican a stage where Western progressive norms ultimately triumph over traditional doctrines deemed rigid, outdated, and no longer relevant to humanity in the 21st century.

5. Conclusion

Based on an analysis using Stuart Hall's intentional approach, the film *Conclave* (2024) presents the Vatican not as a neutral sacred space, but as a field of discourse where meanings of “holiness” and “power” are deliberately constructed through the choice of signs, scenes, and characters to reflect and critique American ideology. Within this framework, the representation of the Vatican is not read as a mirror of reality, but rather as the result of the director and filmmakers' intention to portray the Vatican as a religious institution that also operates as a closed “intelligence state,” rife with intrigue and prone to moral corruption. A series of visual signs such as locked doors, red wax seals, confiscated gadgets, the use of bug detectors, and a black smoke system –white smoke systems, are arranged as a visual language of secrecy, isolation, and information monopoly by the ecclesiastical elite, which through the lens of American ideology is positioned

as a symbol of “politics behind closed doors” and institutional protection strategies that cover up scandals, not merely the preservation of liturgical sanctity.

Through the portrayal of Cardinal Tremblay and Adeyemi, the film deliberately constructs a paradox between spiritual purity and political ambition, in which Tremblay is presented as a modern figure of “simony” who manipulates the election process, while Adeyemi represents moral hypocrisy with the most traditional appearance but hides personal scandals in order to maintain his position. Neither is presented as a random character, but rather as a sign imbued with ideological criticism of institutions that claim to be sacred but are run by subjects who are subject to the logic of power. Through the lens of American ideology, which is critical of closed institutions, this film directs the audience to see the Vatican as a political arena that is just as dirty as the state or corporations, so that religious authority is reduced to the result of lobbying, scandals, and image games; at the same time, it emphasizes that the sanctity of an institution does not automatically guarantee the purity of the practices of power within it.

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The figures of Cardinal Lawrence and Cardinal Benitez emphasize how the film inserts American liberal values such as individualism, personal honesty, inclusivity, and reform into the representation of the Vatican: Lawrence is constructed as a hesitant but honest “moral center” who prioritizes conscience over hierarchical loyalty, while Benitez's revelation of his intersex identity is positioned as a symbol of “new purity” measured by the courage to acknowledge oneself and reject the ambition for power. The narrative decision to make an intersex figure the new Pope is not just a twist, but a conscious strategy to inject an agenda of diversity representation and identity politics into the image of the Vatican. so that *Conclave* (2024) represents the Vatican as a sacred space that has been “resemantized” through the lens of American ideology: holy yet full of intrigue, sacred yet fragile, closed yet forced to face demands for transparency and reform. Thus, the representation of the Vatican in this film serves a dual purpose: as a critique of religious institutions that are not immune to modern political logic, and as a medium for projecting American dreams, anxieties, and hegemonic values onto the stage of the transnational institution considered the most sacred in the world.

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