

PLSC 4331: Law & Film
May Term 2015
9:00 AM – 1:00 PM

Instructor: Pamela Corley
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Overview of Course

American popular culture has demonstrated an enduring fascination with lawyers, the law, and the legal system. This course focuses on how the portrayal of attorneys and the legal system in films shapes public perception of lawyers, creates viewer expectations regarding law and justice, and may even influence the conduct of practicing attorneys and judges. Specifically, we will use films as illuminating case studies through which to more fully understand the American criminal and civil justice systems.

Student Learning Outcomes

Analyze and critically reflect on the depiction of lawyers and the legal system in films.

Textbook

Law and Popular Culture: A Course Book by Michael Asimow and Shannon Mader (2nd edition), Peter Lang Publishing (2013).

**Additional readings will be posted on Blackboard.

Requirements

Class Attendance/Participation (20%)

Each student is expected to attend class. Each student is expected to have read assigned materials **prior** to class and to be prepared to participate in class discussions. If it becomes apparent that students are not reading, I will give pop quizzes.

Research Paper (25%)

Each student will write a 10-15 page paper analyzing films containing important themes or questions involving the American legal system. The paper must draw on the theoretical materials presented in the textbook readings, additional readings assigned, class discussion, as well as outside research such as case law, journal articles, or law review articles. I must approve the paper topic. The following list contains examples:

Are female attorneys depicted fairly and accurately in film?
Do reel juries differ from real juries?
Do films understand lawyers?
Judging the Judges of the Silver Screen
Does ethics matter in film?
Portrayals of prosecutors in films
The Impact of Legal Movies on How the Public Perceives the Judicial System
Storytelling: Movies getting law wrong
Top Movie Lawyers: Why we like them, and do they really exist

Class Presentation (20%)

Each student will present his/her research paper. The in-class presentation should include, at a minimum, a power-point presentation. Short movie clips may also be shown.

Final Exam (35%)

The final exam may consist of multiple choice, matching, fill in the blank, short answer, and essay. The exam will be based on assigned readings, course lectures, and films.

Course Schedule

Before the first class, read Chapter 1 of *Law and Popular Culture*

5/14 Introduction to the Course
The Adversary System and the Trial Genre
Assigned Film: *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959)

5/15 The Adversary System and the Trial Genre
Read Chapter 2: pp. 23-43

Lawyers as Heroes
Assigned Film: *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962)

5/18 Lawyers as Heroes
Read Chapter 3: pp. 44-59

**Osborn, John Jay. 1996. "Atticus Finch—The End of Honor: A Discussion of To Kill a Mockingbird." *University of San Francisco Law Review* 30(Summer): 1139-1142.

Lawyers as Villains
Assigned Film: *The Verdict* (1982)

5/19 Lawyers as Villains
Read Chapter 4: pp. 60-84

Life of Lawyers
Assigned Film: *Counsellor at Law* (1933)

5/20 Life of Lawyers
Read Chapter 5: pp. 85-104

Legal Education
Assigned Film: *Paper Chase* (1973)

5/21 Legal Education
Read Chapter 6: pp. 105-123

The Jury
Assigned Film: *12 Angry Men* (1957)

5/22 The Jury
Read Chapter 9: pp. 181-200
**Clover, Carol J. 1999. "Movie Juries." *DePaul Law Review* 48: 389.

The Death Penalty
Assigned Film: *Dead Man Walking* (1996)

5/25 No Class: Holiday

5/26 The Death Penalty
Read Chapter 11: pp. 220-240

**Harding, Roberta M. 1996. "Celluloid Death: Cinematic Depictions of Capital Punishment." *University of San Francisco Law Review* 30: 1167.

**Shapiro, Carole. 1996. "Do or Die: Does Dead Man Walking Run?" *University of San Francisco Law Review* 30: 1143.

The Civil Justice System
Assigned Film: *A Civil Action* (1998)

5/27 The Civil Justice System
Read Chapter 12: 241-270

Civil Rights
Chapter 13: 271-301
Assigned Film: *Philadelphia*

5/28 Final Exam

5/29 Class Presentations
Paper Due

Additional Information

Disability Accommodations: Students needing academic accommodations for a disability must first be registered with Disability Accommodations & Success Strategies (DASS) to verify the disability and to establish eligibility for accommodations. Students may call 214-768-1470 or visit <http://www.smu.edu/alec/dass> to begin the process. Once registered, students should then talk with me to make appropriate arrangements.

Religious Observance: Religiously observant students wishing to be absent on holidays that require missing class should notify me in writing at the beginning of the semester, and should discuss with me, in advance, acceptable ways of making up any work missed because of the absence. (See University Policy No. 1.9.)

Excused Absences for University Extracurricular Activities: Students participating in an officially sanctioned, scheduled University extracurricular activity will be given the opportunity to make up assignments missed as a result of their participation. It is the responsibility of the student to make arrangements with me prior to any missed scheduled examination or other missed assignment for making up the work. (University Undergraduate Catalogue).

Note: The course syllabus provides a general plan for the course; deviations may be necessary.