

**PLSC 4331: Law & Film**  
**May Term 2017**  
**9:00 AM – 1:00 PM**

Professor: Pamela C. 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. Additionally, the course focuses on filmmaking, film history, and film theory. Specifically, we discuss how the narratives are constructed, the filmmaker's hidden agenda, genres, and whether the films respect the rules of that genre.

**Student Learning Outcomes**

**Breadth: Creativity and Aesthetics**

1. Students will identify and/or employ methods, techniques, or languages of a particular art form and describe how these inform the creation, performance or analysis of that form.
2. Students will demonstrate an understanding of concepts fundamental to creativity through explanation and analysis.

**Proficiencies and Experiences: Oral Communication**

1. Students will be able to select, organize and use appropriate evidence or information to suit a specific or targeted audience.
2. Students will be able to use appropriate vocal and visual cues to deliver a presentation to a specific or targeted audience.

**Textbook**

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

## 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. You can either examine themes in required films and then add to that by screening similar films on your own, or you can choose a theme that we do not cover in the course but that relates to the course topic: law, politics, and film. The paper must include an appropriate discussion of:

1. At least five films that are relevant to your topic. You must include at least four films that we did not view during class.
2. At least six different sources, such as books or articles, that relate to the films you are discussing. Your textbook only counts as one source.

The paper for this class must be type-written or word-processed, double-spaced, with normal fonts (usually 12 pt.) and margins (an inch all around) and no fancy folders (a solid staple in the corner will do just fine). Make sure that you properly attribute and cite whenever you use information from a source such as a book, article, or film. You may use any accepted citation format such as within-text-cites, footnotes, or endnotes and any accepted bibliographic style. Consult a resource such as the Chicago Style manual or similar work if you are unsure of proper citation/bibliographic formats. This is particularly crucial for internet sources. Also, films should be cited in the bibliography by title and year. See separate hand-out for when to cite.

Before you start writing this or any essay, ask yourself: What is my overall argument/thesis? Am I supporting my position with reasons and/or evidence? Am I structuring my discussion so that it is as clear and comprehensive as it can be? Have I provided examples and explanations for each argument that I advance? What are the possible counter-arguments that my critics might bring up and how would I respond to those criticisms?

In grading your papers I will consider whether you have (a) developed a clear and thoughtful thesis, (b) supported your thesis with a well-reasoned and well-organized discussion, (c) taken into account opposing points of view, (d) demonstrated your familiarity with course materials, and (e) followed the paper requirements including length, sources, and the rules of proper grammar, spelling, and citation/bibliographic format.

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  
Do 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. You will receive additional information regarding the presentation.

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***

5/18 Introduction to the Course

The Adversary System and the Trial Genre  
Assigned Film: *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959)

5/19 The Adversary System and the Trial Genre  
Read Chapter 2: pp. 23-43

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

5/22 Lawyers as Heroes  
Read Chapter 3: pp. 44-59

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

5/23 Lawyers as Villains  
Read Chapter 4: pp. 60-84

- Legal Education  
Assigned Film: *Paper Chase* (1973)
- 5/24 Legal Education  
Read Chapter 6: pp. 105-123
- The Jury  
Assigned Film: *12 Angry Men* (1957)
- 5/25 The Jury  
Read Chapter 9: pp. 181-200
- Military Justice  
Assigned Film: *A Few Good Men* (1992)
- 5/26 Military Justice  
Read Chapter 10: pp. 201-219.
- The Death Penalty  
Assigned Film: *Dead Man Walking* (1996)
- 5/29 No Class: Holiday
- 5/30 The Death Penalty  
Read Chapter 11: pp. 220-240
- The Civil Justice System  
Assigned Film: *A Civil Action* (1998)
- 5/31 The Civil Justice System  
Read Chapter 12: 241-270
- Assigned Film: *My Cousin Vinny* (1992)
- 6/1 Class Presentations
- 6/2 Final Exam  
Papers Due (I will not accept late papers)

## **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.