Law, Lawyers and Justice in Cinema – Hum Bio 94Q

William F. Abrams

Winter Quarter 2015

This course examines the depiction of law, lawyers and justice in cinema, focusing on films involving the application of science and forensic investigation in the legal process. We will consider how accurately the legal system and lawyers are depicted in film, and the influence that movies have on influencing public perceptions and expectations regarding the law and the quest for truth and justice.

The course meets on Monday and Tuesday nights in Building 160, Room 314 from 7 to 9 PM. Films will be screened on Monday nights with an initial discussion of the context and issues, with further class discussion on Tuesday. There will be readings on historical and scientific context for each film, and guest speakers on some topics.

The course is four units.

Course Requirements

1. View all films and read all course materials.

2. Active participation during class discussion. Students are expected to have read the assigned material regarding a particular film before the movie is screened. Class participation is 20 percent of the grade for the course.

3. A research paper analyzing any topic relating to law, lawyers, justice and cinema. The paper is to be based on original research on an original topic that presents an original analysis of the subject matter (“original” is the key word here – the objective is your new, thoughtful, creative, novel and probative consideration of issues relating to justice and film). The paper should be at 12-14 pages in text, not including endnotes, and include interviews with at least three persons who have involvement in the subject matter of the research. The paper is due on March 2 at 11:59 pm PT. There are no “prompts” or assigned subjects for the paper – an important part of the paper is the process of selecting the topic. Students are expected to meet with me before selecting the topic. The research paper is 40 percent of the grade. Further details on the paper will be provided.

4. On January 19 and February 16 you will receive prompts for two page responses on material covered in the course. The responses are due on January 26 and February 23, respectively. The prompts are 15 percent of the grade for the course.
5. There will be group presentations to the class on March 3. The presentations, like the papers, will be based on original thinking and on an original topic with original research. The group presentations will be 25 percent of the grade.

Course Materials


2. Other course readings will be posted on Coursework approximately one week before they will be discussed in class. Students must check Coursework daily for updates.

Course Schedule

We will meet on Monday and Tuesday nights at 7 pm in 160-314. We will meet on Monday night January 19 and February 16 for screenings, notwithstanding the Martin Luther King and President’s Day holidays.

Week of January 5 (First class meets on January 5) - To Kill A Mockingbird (1962) – prejudice, the search for truth, fighting for morality and justice, passion for justice, race in America, the role of film in public awareness of injustice and as a catalyst for change. Reading: Textbook 3-22; 44-59.

Week of January 12 - Philadelphia (1994) and We Were Here (2011) – AIDS and discrimination; the use of forensic science to prove discrimination; the fear of AIDS; the examination of witnesses at trial. Reading: Textbook 271-301 and readings on Coursework.

Week of January 19 - A Civil Action (1998) – using science to prove environmental contamination as the cause of illness; who should be accountable for toxic torts; remedies for toxic torts; how does the legal system work in such cases. Reading: Textbook 241-270 and readings on Coursework.

Week of January 26 – Twelve Angry Men (1959) – the human dynamics of a jury; prejudice and fear; conformity and its effect on decision-making; organizational behavior. We will also see an ABC documentary on a jury in a capital trial. Reading: Textbook 181-200 and readings on Coursework.

Week of February 2 - Inherit the Wind (1960) and Judgment Day: Intelligent Design on Trial (2007) – laws against teaching evolution; clash between science and religion and First Amendment. Reading: To be posted on Coursework.

Week of February 9 - Judgment at Nuremberg (1961) – why do humans do savagely inhumane things? The role of conformity and authority (Milgram, Zimbardo, et al) in human behavior will be examined, and how notions of justice and universal law deal with horrific crimes against humanity. Reading: To be posted on Coursework.
Week of February 16 - The Accused (1988) – proving rape; sexism in the law; prejudice; forensic science. Reading: To be posted on Coursework.

Week of February 23 - Anatomy of a Murder (1959) – classic film that uses science and insanity/diminished capacity and forensics in murder trials. Reading: Textbook 23 – 43 and to be posted on Coursework.

Week of March 2 - Dead Man Walking (1995) – The system of capital punishment, how it is implemented, views pro and con, belief and faith in humanity in the face of savagery. Reading: Textbook 220-240 and to be posted on Coursework.

Administrative

My office hours are Sunday 4- 5:30 pm, Monday 5-6 pm, Tuesday 5-6 pm and by appointment.

My office is in Building 20, Room 22J.

My email is wabrams@stanford.edu and cell is 650.269.7779 (please use email and not text messages unless there is an emergency)