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REAL TO REEL: TRUTH AND TRICKERY IN COURTROOM MOVIES

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Introduction

Trials as sources of justice and entertainment date back at least to ancient Greece, when crowds gathered as orators argued the merits of their positions. Courtroom movies continue this tradition. Viewers are the ultimate jurors to whom cine-lawyers direct their arguments. Popular culture (including movies and television) becomes an important source of information from which its consumers construct beliefs about law, lawyers and the legal system. Movies also teach viewers about historical events and trials, as in *Judgment at Nuremberg*, *Inherit the Wind*, *The Conspirator*, *Amistad*, and *Young Mr. Lincoln*.

The courtroom genre remains endlessly popular with both filmmakers and audiences. A courtroom film can use the trial process to reveal a compelling personal story about people caught up in a legal dispute. A good movie plot requires conflict and suspense. Trial movies always include conflict between the lawyers, judges, and litigants. And the stories have built-in suspense—What will the witnesses say? Is a lawyer about to trick a witness? What will the verdict be? The genre allows filmmakers to explore important political and cultural issues such as racism, corruption, gender roles, the death penalty, and the conflict between law and justice. Filmmakers appreciate that trial films are inexpensive to make since they seldom involve costly special effects, such as exploding cars or sets for future worlds. And some of them, like *My Cousin Vinny*, *Adam's Rib* and *Bananas*, are very funny.

This book reviews over 200 courtroom movies, starting with a 1929 early talky. We focus primarily on movies in which

significant events take place in a courtroom, defined broadly enough to include pretrial discovery hearings, plea negotiations, jury deliberations and appellate court arguments. To keep our book within reasonable size limits, we do not include documentaries, made-for-TV films, or television series, even though each of these categories includes many fine courtroom stories. We include a few foreign language courtroom movies that we thought especially notable.

Our book can serve as a video guide to help you identify courtroom movies you might like to watch. But we hope it is much more than that. We provide gentle legal analyses of the movie's courtroom highlights and background information on the legal and ethical issues raised by the movie. When a movie is based on a true story, we furnish information about what really happened. We hope our reviews entertain you as they deepen your understanding and enjoyment of the movies.

In line with its subtitle, a recurring theme of this book is that while adversarial trials are intended to discover the "truth," they can never really establish what happened in the past. Sometimes, we see the trial process at its best. Truth is revealed. Wrongdoers receive justice, as in *The Accused* or *Philadelphia*, and wrongly charged defendants walk free, as in *The Wrong Man*. But often, the trial process obscures the truth and seems to dispense injustice, as in *A Man for All Seasons*. Witnesses lie and the jury is fooled, as in *10 Rillington Place*. We wonder, in watching *Anatomy of a Murder*, whether Paul Biegler's trial strategy reveals or conceals the truth about what happened between Barney Quill and Laura Manion. Did attorney Jan Schlichtmann in *A Civil Action* uncover the truth about pollution in Woburn, or is truth found only "at the bottom of a bottomless pit?" as his adversary Jerome Facher declares.

Of course, courtroom lawyers are not above employing a little trickery in the service of their clients and some of the best moments in courtroom movies involve such pranks. Did attorney Andrew Morton cross the line with his wine-spilling prank in

Knock on Any Door? How about Tony Lawrence's whiskey-sniffing trick in *The Young Philadelphians*? Or Steve Barnes' gun-waving stunt in *Criminal Court*? Trial trickiness, of course, isn't limited to the lawyers. Clients often try to fool their lawyers, as they do in *Primal Fear*, *Jagged Edge*, or *The Lincoln Lawyer*.

Our goal in this book is to entertain and enlighten, not to criticize movies for "getting it wrong." After all, "real" is different from "reel" justice, and the courtroom genre would quickly disappear if films were faithful to the tedious formalities of actual trials.

American courtroom films are popular the world over because the United States adversary system is at least as well suited to storytelling as it is to dispensing justice. The *mano-a-mano* exchanges between lawyers, witnesses, and judges can provide drama, suspense, surprise or comedy, and turn abstract disputes over such issues as evolution and military discipline into riveting personal battles.

Most chapters consist of longer reviews followed by selected shorts. Our decision to review some movies as selected shorts is based on their limited courtroom activity or analytical value, not on their ability to entertain. We provide gavel ratings for all films based on our judgment of their overall quality and the entertainment value of their courtroom scenes. Four gavels denote a classic, three gavel movies are very entertaining, two gavels are good, while a one gavel rating suggests that you ask for a new trial.

Longer reviews begin with a brief *Opening Statement*, which as in real trials provides a roadmap to the central themes of the movie. *Courtroom Closeups* describe and analyze movies' important courtroom events, and help you distinguish truth from trickery. *Beyond the Courtroom* sections highlight legally salient events that occur outside the courtroom. *For the Record* segments provide information about the actual cases on which many of the

movies are based, the lawyers who appeared in them, and the filmmakers who turn real events into reel ones. Finally, *Spoiler Alerts* warn of twist endings. They refer readers who want to know how a movie ends to the End notes in Appendix 3.

Three Appendices expand the scope of the book. *Appendix 1* describes the Production Code, a censorship system that affected the content of Hollywood movies from the mid-1930's to the mid 1960's. *Appendix 2* provides a brief overview of principal features of American law and justice and cross-references to movies in which those features arise. *Appendix 3* consists of End notes that provide references to additional sources of information for many of the movies.

While we hope that the reviews are enjoyable and educational, they are not equivalent to watching the movies. Our fervent desire is that our reviews will stimulate you to watch movies that you've never seen and to re-watch those that you have. Movies reflect the collective efforts of many talented writers, directors and performers, and "reel" experiences create legal meaning and emotional richness that words alone cannot capture.

Fortunately, digitization continues to create opportunities to watch movies, even the oldest talkies. While future advances are likely to expand these opportunities, at present you can access movies in a variety of ways:

- * Many of the movies are available on DVD or other tangible electronic sources.
- * Television channels such as TCM (Turner Classic Movies) screen movies 24/7.
- * Video streaming services have vast film libraries for rent. Check justwatch.com for lists of streaming services that offer a particular film.
- * Movies are sometimes freely available for online viewing (for example on YouTube).

We invite you to make some popcorn, pull up a chair and have a good time watching and reading about the courtroom movies of the past and present.

