

New Horizons Meet Lost Horizons:

Law, Movies, and the Law Library



Movies have a profound impact on the way we perceive our society and the world around us. Motion picture imagery and language have crept into our consciousness in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. "I'll think about that tomorrow" . . . "May the force be with you" . . . "I'll be back" . . . "We'll always have Paris" . . . "E.T. phone home" . . . "Rosebud"*—these phrases are part of our collective celluloid memory. Through this collective memory, we've loved and lived happily ever after; we've traveled around the world and through space and time; we've fought wars and injustice; we've learned "reel" history and literature, and we've laughed, cried, hoped, and despaired with the rest of humanity.

We all recognize the power of motion picture imagery. But what does that have to do with law or law librarianship? The program "New Horizons Meet Lost Horizons" examined that question. Professor **Michael Asimov** persuasively argued that legal scholars should examine the intersection of law and popular culture. Asimov is a co-author of *Reel Justice: The Courtroom Goes to the Movies* and teaches a law and popular culture class at UCLA School of Law. His premise is that legal popular culture is important and pervasive because it teaches the public about law, lawyers, and the legal system. Asimov argues that powerful visual imagery long survives words spoken in a classroom setting. He notes that films, in particular, are the most important source for the general public on law, lawyers,

and the legal system. Therefore, the legal profession needs to know what is being "taught." Members of the public vote and serve as jurors or legislators and generally rely on their popular education for guidance. Asimov argues that legal popular culture teaches the legal profession as well. This medium identifies problems, such as alcoholism, and offers role models, both bad and good.

Asimov briefly illustrated his premise with clips from three films. He depicted the lawyer role model influence using clips from *The Verdict*, *Knock On Any Door*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. From an audience perspective, most of us have seen these films, either in whole or in part (perhaps with the exception of *Knock On Any Door*, starring Humphrey Bogart, Columbia, 1949). Asimov enhanced our "reviewing" by providing context. He noted what messages about lawyers and the legal process each film gave to its audience (i.e., lawyers as alcoholics, lawyers as heroes). This allowed us to look at the films on a different level. We inherently view film on an entertainment level, but now can also see it on an analytical one. His short examples aptly showed how these celluloid images make powerful teachers.

Marlyn Robinson followed Asimov's presentation with a discussion on collecting popular culture materials. She introduced her subject with a clip from *Casablanca*, her candidate for the best lawyer film of all time. Before you send in your cards and letters to object, note this little-known piece of trivia. The film is based on a play, *Everybody Comes to Rick's*. The stage version provided background information about the mysterious Rick: he was formerly a criminal lawyer. Robinson cites this film as an example of the pervasive presence of lawyers in movies. She also argues that Rick, though a flawed lawyer, ultimately sacrifices and redeems himself in order to make a difference in people's lives.

Robinson echoes Asimov's argument that visual images from movies and television create lasting impressions upon the populace. For that reason, plus the medium's instructional use in the classroom (i.e., as visual punctuation marks), libraries need to collect materials in this area. To assist those who wish to build a legal

popular culture collection, she provided a comprehensive resource list (see <http://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/lpop/howto.htm>). She discussed the best acquisition sources, processing issues (such as subject entries), tattletape, and provided circulation advice. The University of Texas at Austin Jamail Center for Legal Research is a leader in collecting this type of material. The collection consists of works of fiction in all genres, as well as legal humor, plays, comics, pulp magazines, and feature films on video. The primary criteria for an item's inclusion is that it must either include a lawyer as a central character or have been written by a lawyer. Robinson offered invaluable advice and suggestions for those in the infancy of developing their legal popular collections.

It's no surprise to those who know me that I found this program provocative and enlightening. In a former life, I studied film at UCLA. I had classes such as the History of Warner Brothers, History of British Film, and a seminar on American Musical Films. I have also read *Reel Justice* and found Asimov's insights entertaining and thought-provoking. For me, this program generated greater interest for a fuller discussion on legal popular culture.

See you at the movies!

* From, in order of appearance: *Gone With the Wind*, *Star Wars*, *The Terminator*, *Casablanca* (I think the entire script is probably embedded in most filmgoers' consciousness), *E.T. The Extra-terrestrial*, *Citizen Kane*.

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