

THE 6 LAWYER MOVIES

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TYPES OF



MOVIE TROPE TRADING CARDS

Illustrations by Steven Hughes

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When it comes to films about the legal system, spoiler alerts aren't necessary. For the most part, there's little ambiguity about where a law film is going—no real surprises, few cliffhangers and not much in the way of romance. Movie lawyers are not unlike their real-life counterparts: Long days of reviewing documents and writing briefs are not conducive to getting the girl, or guy.

In many ways, however, law films mirror other cinematic genres. For instance, American movies are all but required by law—if not through Hollywood custom—to have happy endings. Movies about the legal system are no different. Legal relief, in movies, actually means what it says: A satisfying resolution accompanies the film's end; a fictional client is likely to feel better after his brush with the law. Audiences, meanwhile, are sent home satisfied that the truth was discovered, justice was done, or just deserts received.

For the price of a movie ticket and a box of popcorn, moviegoers receive from an imaginary legal system what they rarely achieve when coming before the actual law.

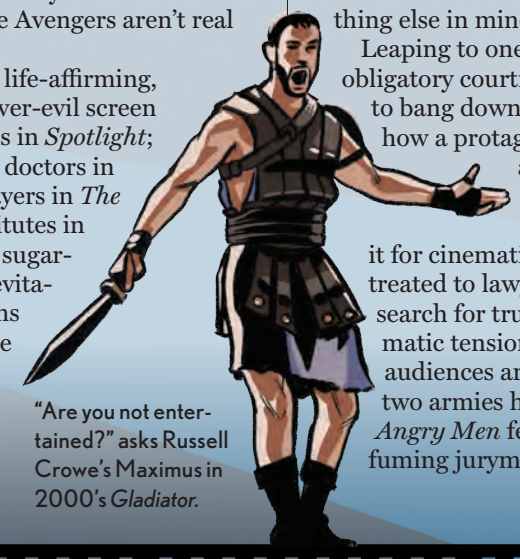
This alternate legal universe of movie magic—where lawyers are virtuous, clients receive their day in court and the public maintains its faith in the rule of law—seemingly troubles very few who are more accustomed to the misery and humiliation that final judgments often bring. Happy endings, and judges dressed up as tooth fairies, occur with the same regularity. Lovers of law films apparently don't mind. The Avengers aren't real either.

All professions are given their life-affirming, redemptive, good-triumphing-over-evil screen tests from time to time: the press in *Spotlight*; teachers in *Mr. Holland's Opus*; doctors in *Patch Adams*, dying baseball players in *The Pride of the Yankees*; even prostitutes in *Pretty Woman*. Yet with all that sugar-coated predictability and the inevitable Hollywood plotlines, law films are not without their own unique charms—the various subgenres and artistic tropes that make such movies both familiar and entertaining.

The legal system—its very existence and its proneness to failure—provides instant drama: two sides pitted against one another with a life, or a higher truth, on the line. Location shots require little imagination. The set pieces are as customary as shoot-outs in the Wild West. Churchly courthouses and mahogany-walled interiors; trim and tailored heartthrobs (or the rumpled and avuncular defender) delivering summations to enraptured juries; the bored bailiffs, weary stenographers, crotchety judges, fretful defendants and betrayed plaintiffs—all in desperate need of a hug.

These films are improbably captivating. Their popularity presents an obvious modern-day paradox. Movies about the law are thrillers without serious “action” sequences—no car chases, dodged bullets or close calls. Murder happens, but often offscreen. Forensics is tedious; cross-examinations are combative but bloodless. And yet somehow the choreography of the law can be made exhilarating in movies. When a director shouts “Action!” in a law film, everyone knows he has something else in mind.

Leaping to one's feet to render an objection—that obligatory courtroom calisthenic that cues the judge to bang down on his or her gavel—is generally how a protagonist builds up a sweat in a movie about the law. Another comes by way of gasps from the gallery upon learning who actually “did it.” That's it for cinematic excitement. Audiences aren't even treated to lawyers squabbling over their fee. The search for truth supplies all the necessary dramatic tension and forward momentum. And yet audiences are as enthralled as when they watch two armies hurtling toward one another. (*12 Angry Men* features a lot of sweating, but the fuming jurymen barely rise from their seats.)



“Are you not entertained?” asks Russell Crowe's Maximus in 2000's *Gladiator*.





Crusading Lawyer

Taking on the mantle of Gregory Peck's Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) are crusading lawyers Rita Williams (played by Michelle Pfeiffer) in *I Am Sam* (2001) and Kathryn Murphy (played by Kelly McGillis) in *The Accused* (1988).

The truth-seeking protagonist is usually a crusading lawyer. There are many films in this category with Atticus Finch, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, first among lawyerly equals. Sometimes the crusading attorney is advocating as much for his own redemption as he is for his client's. Frank Galvin in *The Verdict* comes to mind.

Occasionally the truth exposes a client's guilt, but the crusading lawyer, bound by morality if not legal ethics, goes wherever the truth takes him or her. Ann Talbot

learns this about her father in *Music Box*; Claire Kubik discovers a treacherous truth about her husband in *High Crimes*. There are times when the lawyer isn't as charismatic, or as essential to the plot, as the client. Often that lawyer has much to learn from the client. This is certainly the case for Kathryn Murphy in *The Accused*, Bobby DeLaughter in *Ghosts of Mississippi*, Rita Williams in *I Am Sam*, Bill White in *North Country* and even Jake Brigrance in *A Time to Kill*.

THE HEROIC LAWYER

Most of the time, however, the lawyer is the sharp and savvy hero of the film, such as Paul Biegler in *Anatomy of a Murder*, Sir Wilfrid Roberts in *Witness for the Prosecution* and Mick Haller in *The Lincoln Lawyer*. Speaking of Lincoln (Honest Abe and not the automobile), the silver screen might reveal a lawyer possessing an inkling of presidential timbre, as was the case in *Young Mr. Lincoln*.

Sometimes a judgment is being made about the legal system itself. The law is found wanting, if not guilty of neglect or outright breach of the social contract. A movie places the legal system on trial, charged with dehumanizing those who foolishly believed that the law was worthy of all that high decorum, the pomp and circumstance of coming before the court. The cynicism and corruption of the system become the focal point and plot conceit of the film's dramatic arc.



Heroic Lawyer

Jimmy Stewart stars as heroic lawyer Paul Biegler in *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), while Matthew McConaughey portrays Mick Haller in *The Lincoln Lawyer* (2011), long before actually selling the cars in TV commercials.

LAWYER MOVIE TROPES



Alan Alda plays ready-to-settle lawyer Gregory Lawson in *Flash of Genius* (2008). John Travolta's Jan Schlichtmann from *A Civil Action* (1998) is perhaps legal cinema's most obtuse attorney, but Ian Holm's Mitchell Stephens in *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997) gives him a good run for his money.

And then there are the obtuse attorneys, those who mastered all the secret handshakes of the law—the legal lingo and the strategic places where monkey wrenches get inserted—but lost their humanity somewhere along the way. Duped agents of the law, drunk from Kool-Aid courtrooms, they tragically come to believe that settlement checks and plea bargains are more important than justice, and that truth is easily sacrificed to the rapid disposal of cases. Common courtesies, such as the power of apologies, are all but forgotten. Such films as *A Civil Action*, *A Few Good Men*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *The Accused* and *Flash of Genius* pick up on this theme.

When the legal system fails to dispense justice, citizens are left with no option other than to take the law into their own hands. Such actions of self-help are, of course, illegal; and for this and other reasons, society discourages personalized retribution. But movies about the law have their own logic—they allow citizens to play by different rules. In life, people are expected to abide by a judge's ruling and live with injustice. In art, they are granted the moral imperative to turn a travesty of justice into an outcome that is recognizably just.

The Obtuse Lawyer



THE DISILLUSIONED LAWYER

There are plenty of films about disillusioned lawyers compelled to rethink all the assumptions they once held before taking the bar exam, before the business of the law robbed the profession of its noble virtue of standing up for another in crisis, before the

truth became something to fudge rather than find. This is true in such films as *The Firm*, *Changing Lanes*, *The Rainmaker*, *Michael Clayton* and *Regarding Henry*. The lawyer becomes filled with self-loathing and disgust, having taken an oath to uphold the honor of a profession that is prone to failure and the shady politics of compromise.

The idealism of the 1L gives way to the rote detachment of the senior partner. *12 Angry Men*, although about a jury, has a similar theme: The general public, those without JD parchments, recognizes its own failures and prejudices when serving the law. *Runaway*



Jury accomplishes the same thing by giving jury tampering a good name. It's as if the legal system contaminates all those who come into contact with it—especially the lawyers.

In *Changing Lanes* (2002), Ben Affleck plays a lawyer, Gavin Banek, whose ideals are dashed after a traumatic car accident. Tom Cruise's Mitch McDeere is chased by his employers in *The Firm* (1993), while George Clooney deals with a high-profile client's hit and run in *Michael Clayton* (2007).



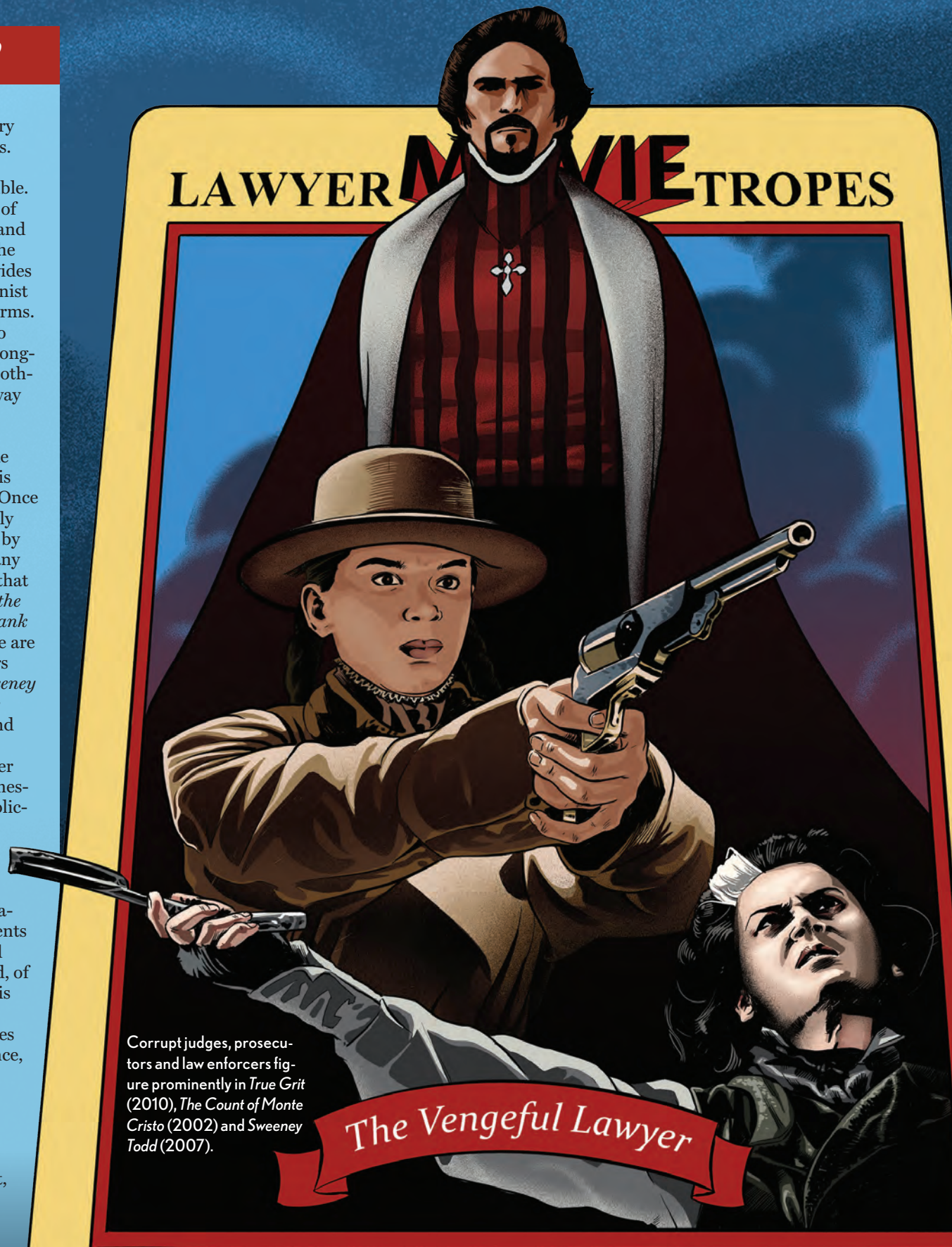
THE VENGEFUL LAWYER

All revenge films are, by their very nature and aesthetics, law films. What is socially unacceptable becomes cinematically irresistible. Moviegoers do not reject celebrations of vengeance by walking out of theaters and demanding their money back. Quite the opposite: The injustice on screen provides the moral justification for the protagonist to settle the score on his or her own terms. Meanwhile, audiences remain glued to their seats. No one moves until the wrongdoer receives what he deserves. To do otherwise, to allow the wayward to get away with it, would be morally unbearable.

The only requirement that gives the revenge film its moral authority to take such liberties with the social contract is the law's failure to do the right thing. Once the law fails, the avenger is instinctively catapulted into action, as if deputized by the law's absence. Failure can take many forms. There are procedural foul-ups that set murderers free in such films as *In the Bedroom*, *Eye for an Eye*, *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Brave One*. There are corrupt sovereigns, judges, prosecutors and law enforcers in films such as *Sweeney Todd*, *Gladiator*, *Braveheart*, *Ragtime* (and its debt to *Michael Kohlhaas*), and the granddaddy of all revenge movies, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. The avenger might be trying to send the system a message about its own cynicism and complicity. *Law-Abiding Citizen*, *Runaway Jury* and *Sleepers* come to mind. In Westerns, the wild and wide-open prairies do not allow for the procedural niceties of insular courtroom dramas. What are required in such moments of rough justice are posses, pistols and nooses. *The Searchers*, *Unforgiven* and, of course, *True Grit* are the classics of this category.

There are, to be sure, other subgenres about the law. Horror films, for instance, are essentially movies about the law. A truth is buried (even if a body isn't), a murder goes unpunished, and the knowledge of "what someone did last summer" must see daylight—even if it requires the dead, coming out at night, to haunt the living to bring it about.

LAWYER MOVIE TROPES



Corrupt judges, prosecutors and law enforcers figure prominently in *True Grit* (2010), *The Count of Monte Cristo* (2002) and *Sweeney Todd* (2007).

The Vengeful Lawyer

Spencer Tracy's prosecuting attorney Adam Bonner is hoisted aloft in court in *Adam's Rib* (1949), while Groucho Marx's standard-setting role as Buffoon at Law in *Duck Soup* (1933) was arguably not outdone until 45 years later by Otter's student hearing pleadings in *Animal House*.



Law films have not been unspared by comedies, which have brought occasional, necessary humor to the legal system—at its own expense. *My Cousin Vinny*, *Animal House*, *Legal Eagles*, *Adam's Rib*, *Bananas* and even *Duck Soup* offer fitting examples of funny, madcap trial scenes.

Locating the various strands and subgenres of legal cinema does not make these movies any less riveting or important. What it does is reinforce the statement they make about the legal system's connection, and disconnection, from the citizens it purports to serve. The artistic tropes of the law resonate widely because they express a longing for the kind of justice we would all like to see—a raising of the bar among members of the bar, a

metaphorical challenge to all jurists who sit on high and forget that those below should not be treated like lowly men and women.

It is the mystery of art that movies about the law offer snapshots and film stills of a calling sorely in need of the projection of more humanity. Perhaps because human beings come before the law dressed in finery yet drenched in vulnerability, the box office matters less than the jury box. Regardless of Oscar nominations, these films linger in memory because they address fundamental truths about justice and injustice, fairness and fraud. Given the longing and wisdom they impart, these films can't be casually dismissed as mere movies. ■

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