



Universidad
Zaragoza

Undergraduate Dissertation
Trabajo Fin de Grado

Beyond a Reasonable Doubt: Justice and
Prejudice in *Twelve Angry Men*

Author

Miguel Ángel Martínez-Carrasco Gómez

Supervisor

Celestino Deleyto Alcalá

Faculty of Arts
2025

Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore and analyse the portrayal of justice, prejudice and morality within the American legal system in Sidney Lumet's *Twelve Angry Men* (1957). The film follows twelve randomly appointed jurors as they deliberate the verdict in what appears to be a clear-cut murder trial; however, one of the jurors' doubts about the guilt of the defendant prompts an exhaustive re-examination of the case. In this way, the film reveals how the legal system can be influenced by prejudice and human emotion, promoting critical thinking and reason.

Key words: jury – prejudice – justice – doubt – legal system

Resumen

El objetivo de este Trabajo de Fin de Grado es explorar y analizar la representación de la justicia, los prejuicios y la moralidad en el sistema jurídico estadounidense en la película *Doce hombres sin piedad* (1957), dirigida por Sidney Lumet. La película sigue a doce jurados designados al azar mientras deliberan el veredicto de lo que parece ser un caso claro de asesinato; sin embargo, las dudas de uno de los jurados acerca de la culpabilidad del acusado originan una reexaminación exhaustiva del caso. De este modo, la película muestra cómo el sistema legal puede ser influenciado por los prejuicios y las emociones, al tiempo que promueve el pensamiento crítico y la razón.

Palabras clave: jurado – prejuicio – justicia – duda – sistema legal

Acknowledgements

To Javi, for asking.

To Raquel, for asking a little bit too much.

To mom, for asking way too much.

Table of contents

Introduction	5
Historical contextualisation	6
The American Legal System: Trial by Jury	7
Hollywood in the 1950's: the Trial Film Genre and Sidney Lumet's Direction	10
Formal analysis	13
First scene: presentation of the characters	13
Second scene: "I guess we talk"	17
Third scene: "I'll kill him!"	20
Fourth scene: Juror 10's racist monologue	23
Conclusion	27
References	29
Films cited	30

Introduction

Law and ethics are two of the core principles of society, through which individuals understand justice and learn to discern between good and evil to be able to behave in society. However, these two concepts are deeply intertwined, and, in some cases, they contradict each other. When law is mixed with human emotions – such as prejudice, personal biases, social pressures or collective thinking –, it can become paradoxically unfair, and lead to unethical decisions and verdicts.

Many films have delved into the topic of law and its practice, in an attempt to elucidate its intricate processes and possible flaws. Sidney Lumet's *Twelve Angry Men* (1957), based on a homonymous play written by Reginald Rose in 1954 and starring Henry Fonda as Juror 8, is a fantastic example of this kind of cinema. The film revolves around a group of twelve men, who, after spending some days attending a court process in which an African American boy is accused of murdering his father, are gathered in a room to decide if they believe the boy is guilty or not, to which they must give a unanimous answer. The movie is a perfect example of how the law and its practice are influenced by human emotions, prejudices and sentiments, and highlights how the ideal legal system is susceptible to the complexities and imperfections of human nature.

The aim of this paper is to analyse how *Twelve Angry Men* explores the topics of law, justice and morality. For that purpose, it will also take into consideration other relevant facts about the context in which the movie was produced, such as the historical period that the film industry was undergoing and the development of the genre of trial films.

Historical Contextualisation

Sydney Lumet's *Twelve Angry Men* was brought to the big screen in 1957 and based on a homonymous play written in 1954 by Reginald Rose. The plot takes place in the hottest day of the summer of that same year. As such, its context – the decade of the 1950s – is a core aspect that has to be taken into account when analysing the themes of the film. This period can be referred to as Postwar America, a period of deep transformation, social tension and ideological polarisation. After the Second World War, the United States emerged as a prosperous country; however, it also had to face its internal anxieties, especially its fear of communism and the influence of the USSR. These two countries embodied two completely opposite economic models: the US was driven by capitalism and the stock market, while the USSR was a communist country. Both countries fought over the influence of external nations in what became known as the Cold War, which lasted for over fifty years (Thompson & Bordwell, 2019).

In the US, the Cold War caused an internal sense of paranoia and social anxiety, with an extreme polarisation of the political landscape. One of the most defining events of the period was the phenomenon of McCarthyism, named after senator Joseph McCarthy. This political crusade against communism, which took place between the late 1940s and early 1950s, was characterised by its aggressive repression and persecution of those who were believed to be communists, in an attempt to spread a fear of communism (Tan & Wang, 2024). This gave rise to a wave of political suspicion and censorship, particularly in the film industry, since, according to senator McCarthy, Hollywood was plagued with communist sympathisers: many actors, screenwriters and

directors were blacklisted and banned from participating in the industry or even jailed, destroying their careers (Thompson & Bordwell, 2019).

In this context, *Twelve Angry Men* can be seen as a work that resists this atmosphere of political polarisation, a film that promotes critical thinking, moral integrity and the defence of one's values and ethical convictions against a dominant ideology, advocating for dialogue and reason over conflict and censorship. The most excitable jurors, especially Juror 3, played by Lee J. Cobb, who may remind us of senator McCarthy himself (Wilson, 2024), represent the lack of reason and dialogue, while Henry Fonda's character, Juror 8, who initially stands alone against the rest to defend reason and fairness, represents the dissent that is necessary for a democratic society to prosper. The jury room, where the entire plot unfolds, can be seen as a microcosm of the whole American society (Marder, 2007) – albeit slightly imbalanced, since it is formed of only white, middle-class males. This also represents how the legal system in the US was prominently a white male domain, where women and immigrants were usually left out (Hans, 2007); in this way, the film critiques this system by showing how white men are also capable of prejudice and bias (Gertner, 2007). Thus, the film engages in topics such as prejudice and the danger of collective thinking, and their potential devastating effects in the correct practice of the law and justice.

The American Legal System: Trial by Jury

One of the key democratic mechanisms through which the United States' values of freedom and equality are meant to be upheld is its legal system, especially the institution of trial by jury. Rooted in its Constitution, the US's trial by jury is a form of popular participation in which ordinary citizens are able to participate in the legal system, and

given the responsibility of ensuring that justice is served. The utopic ideal of a fair trial is based on the values of impartiality and reason; however, this ideal is rarely achieved in practice, as *Twelve Angry Men* reveals. The film focuses on the imperfections and injustices of the legal system when influenced by apathy, prejudice and collective pressure, which lead to a lack of critical thinking. The film puts into question the assumption that jurors will always fulfil their role as law enforcers responsibly and delves into the ways justice can be compromised by the very people who are supposed to uphold it (Gertner, 2007).

One of the most significant elements of the movie is the fact that the jurors are judging a patricide, one of “the most heinous of crimes under Roman law, most subversive of sacred tradition and the social order, and most brutally punished” (Burns, 2007). As Burns points out, the jurors are aware that this is a capital case – that is, if the defendant is found guilty, he will be sentenced to the death penalty and sent to the electric chair. This is a very important detail: the jurors are not merely trying to determine the innocence or guilt of an abstract subject; they are faced with a decision of the utmost importance, for if they find the defendant, this 18-year-old black man, to be guilty, he will be sent to his execution. It is the extreme weight of this responsibility that drives Juror 8 to advise his fellow jurors to examine the case with exhaustive attention to detail. Furthermore, if they fail to make the correct decision and wrongfully send the young man to death, not only will the real murderer still be on the streets, but the damage done will be irreparable. In this way, the film interrogates the nature of the death penalty and whether flawed and inexperienced individuals are the best suited to carry out such an important task.

The death penalty was widely accepted in the United States during the 1950s, with capital punishment being legal in most states and supported by a large majority of the population. While *Twelve Angry Men's* main objective is not to argue against the institution of the death penalty, the film does raise questions against the conditions under which such a punitive sentence can be imposed in a fair manner. The fact that, out of the twelve jurors, eleven of them rush into their verdict and are eager to declare the defendant as guilty, highlights the danger of jumping so hastily to such a consequential conclusion (Landsman, 2007). Therefore, the film suggests that relying on twelve random citizens to take these kinds of decisions is deeply irresponsible and too optimistic.

Twelve Angry Men not only draws attention to the imperfections of the system, but also to the flaws of the individuals who conform the jury (Landsman, 2007). This lack of impartiality takes a particular form for each of the jurors: for example, Juror 10 presents himself as a profoundly racist man; Juror 3 seems to have personal unresolved issues which motivate him to vehemently defend the guiltiness of the defendant; others, such as Juror 7, are indifferent to the proceeding and only wish to finish quickly to go and watch a baseball match. These flaws are emphasised to represent the concern that these juries, composed of human beings with their own experiences, motivations and prejudices, cannot always separate emotion from evidence. By presenting such a flawed group, *Twelve Angry Men* critiques the assumption that jury trials are inherently rational or fair.

However, the film does not offer a cynical view of justice: through the character of Juror 8, the movie also presents a more unbiased, reflective and sympathetic approach to democratic deliberation. Henry Fonda's character does not affirm the

defendant's innocence nor his guiltiness, instead insisting on the importance of reasonable doubts and thorough deliberation. He defends that any assertion about the defendant's guilt must be made without any kind of reasonable doubt, especially in such a case where a young man's life is at stake. His insistence on revising and reevaluating the evidence and trying to find any weak points in the prosecution's claims represents the true aspirations that a trial by jury should have: not perfection, but careful reasoning to give an honest verdict beyond any plausible doubt.

Hollywood in the 1950s: the Trial Film Genre and Sidney Lumet's Direction

The decade of the 1950s marked a transitional and convoluted time in the American film industry: the big screen struggled to adapt to both the socio-political situation and the new technological inventions, especially television, which dramatically altered the cinematic industry. With the rapid spread of television, which made entertainment more easily available to the wider public, cinema suffered from a decline in attendance, causing studios to explore new ways to attract and reengage audiences. As a result, the period saw the rise of new technologies such as Technicolor or Cinemascope, often used in productions such as large-scale epics or musicals to offer a sort of visual spectacle that television was not able to replicate (Thompson & Bordwell, 2019). However, many directors and studios opted instead to turn to another kind of cinema, with more intimate films focused on the development of characters and stories. This gave rise to a number of new genres, among which we can find the courtroom drama or trial film.

The genre of the trial film had existed previous to the decade of the 1950s, but it was during this period that it was refined both thematically and stylistically (Rafter, 2001). Due to the increasing social impact of issues such as the civil right movement or

a growing social inequality, audiences became more interested in films that explored these profound topics; questioning the processes of the legal system was one way of achieving this. These films allowed for an interrogation of these societal questions, framed in the scenario of a courtroom, a space where truth, justice, prejudice and morality collide. Among these films, *Twelve Angry Men* distinguishes itself in its extreme minimalism: based on a play, its plot duration is exactly the same as its screen duration, as the whole narrative unfolds in a single jury room, completely relying on the power of dialogue among its characters. Through this minimalist setting, the film explores the topics of morality, prejudice and justice, and how reason and emotion can intertwine when examining objective facts.

We can find many movies inside the genre of the trial film: some notable examples are *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962), *Witness for the Prosecution* (Billy Wilder, 1957), *Anatomy of a Murder* (Otto Preminger, 1959) or *The Verdict* (1982), a later film by Sidney Lumet. All of these movies devote much of their screentime to the proceedings of the legal system, focusing on the discovery of new evidence or the interrogation of witnesses. The protagonist in all of these films is a lawyer, whose task is to disentangle complicated mysteries inside their cases to reveal the truth and prepare a good defence for their clients. In these films we can find juries, but they are not the main focus; instead, they are more interested in presenting the process inside of the courtroom. This is where *Twelve Angry Men* deviates from the tradition of the trial film genre: the entirety of its plot develops inside the jury room instead of the courtroom, giving the film a different approach to the legal process and revealing flaws about the legal system that other movies are unable to show.

Directing this project was Sidney Lumet, a director who, as of this time, had focused on working exclusively on television; *Twelve Angry Men* was Lumet's first feature film after seven years of television production (Cunningham, 2014). As Cunningham (2014) puts it, the film "treats typical Lumet concerns, such as the necessity for personal responsibility if democratic processes are to survive, and the tendency for humanity's illusions, guilts and prejudices to endanger its legal systems [...]". The director masterfully presents each character with their own recognisable personality, skilfully employing an unobtrusive camera eye that allows spectators to follow the psychological progression of the jurors. For instance, Lumet begins the films with wide shots of the whole room, presenting the spontaneous interactions of the characters and emphasising the collective nature of the group, but, as the narrative progresses, the shots shift to more close-ups, visually enclosing the jurors and focusing on their expressions and nervous gestures, giving a sense of claustrophobia and pressure. Lumet's direction is precise, focusing on the script and the actors' jury performances, and creating a progressive rhythm that makes the spectator engage in the moral debate.

Formal Analysis

First scene: presentation of the characters

Unlike the original play by Reginald Rose, where the entirety of the plot unfolds in the jury room, Sidney Lumet's *Twelve Angry Men* begins in the courtroom, with a short monologue delivered by the judge, who informs the jurors of the details of the case and their role, briefly mentioning the importance of their task. The courtroom is a solemn room, with high ceilings, heavy doors and elegant furniture, conveying a sense of grandeur and the symbolic weight of the judicial system (Fig. 1). While the judge speaks, the camera slowly pans along the benches where the jurors are seated, presenting them for the first time as they listen to the judge's instructions. This is also the only instance where the face of the 18-year-old defendant is shown. This small but significant detail, not present in the original play, helps to underline the seriousness of the case: by having a quick glance at his face, the audience is invited to empathise with him and understand that the decision these twelve men must take is a matter of life and death.



Figure 1: The courtroom.

After this brief introduction, the jurors enter the jury room, where they will remain for the rest of the film. This ordinary and confined space contrasts with the solemnity of the courtroom: while the courtroom conveys a sense of ceremony and

institutional authority, the jury room feels more ubiquitous and commonplace (Fig. 2). The mise-en-scène is notably austere, as the room is barely decorated, only featuring a long table with twelve chairs for the jurors, a coat rack, a water cooler, a broken fan on the wall, large windows and a second, smaller table on the corner with a single chair. The simplicity of the room's decoration reflects the film's theatrical nature; rather than embellishing the room, Lumet opts to stay faithful to the play's setting. This juxtaposition between the courtroom and the jury room highlights the tension between the imposing ideal of justice and the more banal and rather simple human process through which those ideals must be enacted.



Figure 2: The jury room.

Apart from presenting the room, this first scene also works as subtle presentation of the twelve jurors. While the characters wander around the room, sitting down, opening the windows and having small conversations with each other, one of the first things spectators can notice is their clothing. Although they are all formally dressed, as one would expect in a process of this character, their formality varies: for example, Juror 4 is dressed in an elegant suit (Fig. 3), while Juror 7 is dressed in a more casual blazer (Fig. 4), which he eventually takes off to reveal a half-unbuttoned polo shirt. These small details subtly hint at aspects of their personalities: to continue with the same example,

Juror 4 is a very serious and methodical man who seems unaffected by the high temperature of the room and remains completely calm and critical, while Juror 7 is an impatient and sarcastic salesman who wants to get done with the deliberation as quickly as possible.



Figure 3: Juror 4's (bottom right) suit.



Figure 4: Juror 7's blazer.

Aside from their clothing, the main way through which the movie presents the characters are the small interactions they have with each other as they walk around the room before getting started with their formal deliberations. The camera starts the scene with a wide shot of the room as the characters enter one by one, and fluidly moves along the room, following the characters as they move and jumping from one conversation to another in a very unobtrusive manner. These interactions mimic the banality of real-life interactions and show how indifferent to the serious situation the characters are in these first moments, forgetting the importance of their task. Furthermore, through each character's remarks about the weather or the case they have just attended, the spectator can infer the main traits of each character: for example, Henry Fonda's character, Juror 8, is seen looking through the window, meditative and silent (Fig. 5); Juror 3 shows his biases and rough personality while he speaks with Juror 2, who appears as a naive and good-natured character; or Juror 7, who presents himself as a jokester.



Figure 5: Juror 8 looking through the window.

All these small details contribute to giving a sense of individuality to each character, as the group is formed by very different people, each with their own personality, traits, backgrounds and, of course, prejudices. It is also important to notice that none of the characters' names is revealed and will not be for the entirety of the film – except for one instance at the very last moments of the film –, giving a sense of anonymity to them; this reinforces the fact that these are common people chosen at random, which draws the spectators to emphasise with them, reminding us that anyone could be in their place.

At the end of this scene, the movie presents us with the first small deliberation the jurors have: the order in which the jurors should sit around the table. Although this appears to be a minor and insignificant discussion, it sets the tone of the group dynamics that will take place in the film: during this brief interaction, topics such as indifference, apathy, reason and collective thinking are presented. For example, some jurors do not care about where to sit at all and would be happy to be sat at random; others, such as Juror 1, believe this is the most reasonable way to be arranged around the table, while many of them do not even participate in the interaction and simply follow what the group decides.

Overall, this initial scene sets the atmosphere of the rest of the movie: the film presents the tension between the ideal of the judicial system as perfect and infallible and the impact that human nature has throughout the process. Each juror has their own traits, personalities, biases and motivations, and the task of the group is to overcome their flaws and abandon their preconceived ideas in order to deliver the most objective and fair verdict possible. Therefore, from the beginning, the film invites the public to question whether justice can be truly objective when it is entrusted to such a varied and flawed group of people.

Second scene: "I guess we talk"

Following the introduction of the jurors and the setting, the film transitions into a pivotal moment that marks the beginning of the deliberation: the preliminary vote. Once all jurors are seated around the table, Juror 1, the foreman, proposes to take a first vote to see the initial position where they stand: the results are eleven votes for "guilty" and one for "not guilty" – cast by Juror 8 (Fig. 6). Although seemingly customary, this moment is charged with tension and becomes a key point that defines the structure of the film and introduces its central conflict. Before the voting takes place, the tone is casual, as the jurors seem confident that they will reach a unanimous verdict and the process will be little more than a formality; however, tension escalates rapidly the moment they realise the debate will not be so straightforward.



Figure 6: The jurors looking at Juror 8 as they vote “guilty”.

This scene reflects one of the core aspects of the film: the importance of standing by one’s convictions in the face of peer pressure and collective thinking. When Juror 8 raises his hand, all heads turn to him in disbelief; however, rather than taking a step back, he stays perfectly calm and composed, proposing that they take some time to talk. Some of the characters, especially the more excitable ones, such as Jurors 10, 7 and 3, start asking him why he thinks the accused is not guilty. Juror 8, however, does not claim that the boy is innocent, instead admitting that he is not sure; his position is not one of certainty but of doubt. It is clear that Henry Fonda’s character is not easily intimidated and will stand by his opinion even if the rest of the group thinks that he is out of his mind; his goal is not to convince the rest, just to make sure that, after a careful deliberation, everyone is sure of their own opinion beyond any reasonable doubt. As discussed in the introduction, this is one of the topics the film deals with: promoting critical thinking and moral integrity over collective thinking and prejudice.

Another core moment of the scene occurs when Juror 7 and Juror 8 discuss why he has voted not guilty (Fig. 7); here, the fact that this is a capital case, punished with the electric chair, takes great importance. Although the film is not an overt denunciation of the death penalty, this preliminary vote highlights the danger of taking the matter so

lightly, and indirectly questions if a group of biased and uninterested citizens is fit to carry out such a task. Juror 8 states that he would not be comfortable with himself knowing that he has sent an 18-year-old man to the electric chair without even talking about the case first. Juror 7 responds by asking why it is so important to take longer if the outcome will be the same in the end; he says that he has voted so quickly because he truly thinks the boy is guilty, and nobody will be able to change his mind. As we can see, some of the jurors seem to be very narrow-minded, unwilling to change their opinion; the atmosphere at this point is extremely polarised, as the jurors do not seem to be willing to be convinced. This scene works perfectly to establish the attitude of intolerance that the jurors seem to have against those who think different even before they start discussing the case itself.



Figure 7: Juror 7 and Juror 8 debating.

By having the more unlikable characters stand against Juror 8, the film invites the spectators to side with him; his calm demeanour, rational arguments and refusal to succumb to pressure frame him as the voice of conscience and reason. In this way, the movie prompts the audience to be doubtful, to take everything into consideration and debate before making such a consequential conclusion. As Juror 8 himself states, the only thing he wants to do is talk, because he is not fully convinced that the boy is guilty.

He insists on being doubtful, on taking a closer look, on contemplating the possibility that they could be wrong: to send a man to death, one must be sure of his guiltiness beyond any reasonable doubt.

Through this scene, the film underscores the flaws of the jury system when it is carried out by individuals who are biased, indifferent or uncritical. The jurors take the evidence of the prosecution as facts and assume the defendant's guilt without further inquiry. They are not moved by the reality that they are sending someone to their death; to them, the case is simple and discussion unnecessary. This lack of reflection is precisely what the film tries to interrogate: the idea that justice can be left in the hands of ordinary people who may not have either the willingness or the capacity to deliberate with care or fairness.

Third scene: "I'll kill him!"

As the deliberation progresses and the initial certainties of the jurors begin to crumble, the film reaches a crucial moment in which the reliability of one of the eyewitnesses is questioned. In this scene, the jurors focus on the testimony of an old man, a neighbour of the defendant, who claimed to have heard the boy shout "I'm going to kill you!" moments before hearing a body hit the floor, after which he allegedly ran to the door and saw the boy running away. Unconvinced by this testimony, Juror 8 proposes a reenactment of the scene, to test whether this old man – who dragged his leg while walking due to having suffered a stroke – could have realistically gotten out of bed and reached his front door in only fifteen seconds as he claimed. This scene is significant not just for its role in discrediting one of the key testimonies employed by the prosecution,

but also for how it deepens the film's critique of prejudice and the dangers of uncritical thinking within the judicial process.

After examining the diagram of the apartment, Juror 8 begins to measure feet across the room, using chairs to represent distances and the different points the old man would have had to reach on his way to the front door. The framing in this scene is particularly meaningful. For example, while Juror 8 counts his steps, we can see a wide shot of the room in which the rest of jurors are standing and looking at Juror 8 instead of remaining seated (Fig. 8). This is a sign of the room's agitated atmosphere; however, it also indicates that Juror 8 has managed to capture the attention of the group, who are now listening to him and starting to follow his reasoning. The way the camera follows Juror 8 as he reenacts the movements of the old man reinforces this engagement: the low angle from which it is shot allows us to see nothing but his leg as he drags it across the room, builds suspense in the spectators, and reflects the tension of the rest of jurors, who are eager to see the outcome of this experiment (Fig. 9).



Figure 8: The jurors looking at Juror 8



Figure 9: Juror 8 dragging his leg across the room.

The more open-minded characters, such as Juror 2 and Juror 5, help Juror 8 to carry out this reenactment, while others, especially Juror 10 and Juror 7, consider it a complete waste of time; this, once again, is proof of their intolerance. It is perfectly

logical to try to reenact the old man's testimony if it appears to be inconsistent with reality: if the test matches the old man's testimony, it may support the prosecution's argument; but if it does not coincide, it could be a reason to doubt its veracity. This critical, more scientific approach to the evidence heavily contrasts with the irrational certainty of those who oppose the reenactment. Even if they were confident that the old man could have reached the front door in fifteen seconds, they could still have agreed to proceed with the experiment, as its results might have matched their view; however, they believe in the old man's testimony so blindly that they reject any sort of test. Again, this is the message that the film advocates: to be doubtful, to go over the evidence as many times as necessary to ensure that justice is made beyond any reasonable doubt.

However, it is at the end of this scene that we find the clearest example of intolerance and bigotry. Throughout the whole situation, we can see how Juror 3 stands isolated on the corner of the room, apparently uninterested in the proceeding; in fact, he does not engage in the experiment nor comment on its outcome. Instead, while they discuss the old man's version of the story and try to figure out the truth, Juror 3 interrupts the conversation to show his profound biases and hatred. After a small discussion, in which Juror 8 stays perfectly calm and composed, Juror 3, who is extremely excitable, ends up shouting "I'll kill him!" at him (Fig. 10). Framing is very important here too, as Juror 8 is surrounded by most of the jurors, while Juror 3 is seen alone, only being grabbed by two jurors to prevent him from becoming physically violent. In this way, the film strongly condemns aggression, prejudice and hatred, as all the jurors look at Juror 3 with disgust. Furthermore, it is a rejection of hypocrisy, as, moments before, Juror 3 had argued that the boy's threat to kill his father was itself proof of his guilt.



Figure 10: Juror 3 shouting “I’ll kill him!”.

In sum, this scene perfectly encapsulates the broader themes of the film: that the pursuit of justice is a fragile human process, vulnerable to pride, prejudice and personal trauma. The scene highlights how the process of justice depends not only on rules and procedures but on the character and integrity of those who carry it out. Juror 8 does not act with superiority or certainty, but with humility, questioning and re-examining the available evidence; his approach is collaborative rather than confrontational, and his willingness to recreate the witness’s testimony exemplifies his belief that justice requires reason and critical thought. By contrast, Juror 3 seems to be certain about the boy’s guilt, not because the facts support it, but because of prejudice and emotion. The moment Juror 3 erupts in anger and contradicts his own logic serves as a summary of the film’s argument: that the biggest threat to justice is the unwillingness to confront one’s flaws and biases.

Fourth scene: Juror 10’s racist monologue

After another vote, resulting in nine votes for “not guilty” and only three for “guilty”, the film introduces one of the harshest and most dramatic critiques of bigotry: Juror 10’s racist monologue. This speech reveals the underlying racism that has marked this juror’s

judgement from the very first moments of the film and the collective rejection of his words by the rest of jurors serves as a powerful statement against his intolerance and irrationality. This scene perfectly highlights the film's central argument: that prejudice is one of the main threats to the integrity of the judicial system.

Juror 10's monologue is not caused by any specific piece of evidence, but rather by his growing frustration as more jurors begin to question the young man's guilt. As he realises that his view of the defendant's guilt is becoming a minority, he stands up and delivers a speech in which he generalises about the boy's problematic background, associating ethnicity and poverty with a tendency for violence and criminality. The content of this monologue is profoundly racist and based on stereotypes, revealing his hatred and sense of moral superiority. This moment exposes how his certainty about the boy's guilt had nothing to do with rational deliberation or careful analysis of the facts, but with a personal bias that he had never truly concealed, although it becomes unmistakable during this scene.

The reaction of the rest of the group is what gives this scene its emotional and thematic impact and is emphasised by framing. As Juror 10 begins to speak, the camera offers a medium shot of him, slowly moving backwards until it ends in a wide shot of the room that captures the silent responses of the rest of the group (Fig. 11). One by one, the jurors stand up from their seats and walk away from the table, turning their backs to Juror 10 (Fig. 12). This visual rejection is extremely powerful, as, without a single word, Juror 10 slowly loses confidence and starts begging for their attention. Silence is all they need: no one argues with him, no one tries to stop him: they simply refuse to listen. By isolating him in the middle of the frame, the film emphasises his exclusion; he is no

longer part of the group, and his views are not only unwelcome, but completely incompatible with the ideal of a fair jury.



Figure 11: Juror 10 giving his racist speech. Figure 12: The group's rejection of his racist monologue.

It is Juror 4, one of the most rational and methodical of the jurors, who finally tells Juror 10 to “sit down and don’t open your mouth again”. This fact is important, as both of them have voted “guilty”; however, this highlights the idea that this rejection is not based on emotion or ideology, but on the group’s commitment to reason and justice. After Juror 4’s words, Juror 10 slowly walks to a small table on the corner of the room, where he finally sits down, completely defeated. The small pile of books on the table carries a symbolic meaning: his speech is conditioned by prejudice and racism, one of the most dangerous and vile forms of ignorance; these books represent his slow progression towards abandoning prejudice by means of culture and learning, free from his flaws and biases, one of the key arguments of the film (Fig. 13).



Figure 13: Juror 10 seated on the small table with the books.

Beyond disclosing Juror 10's motivations, the scene also highlights how the group has evolved from the beginning of the movie. Earlier in the film, most of the jurors were either indifferent or unconcerned with the possibility of bias affecting their judgement; most of them had voted "guilty" without much thought, confident that the case was crystal-clear. However, by this point, the influence of Juror 8's insistence on reasonable doubt starts to be perceived. Their rejection of Juror 10's speech is not only a condemnation of his personal views but also a rejection of the careless and prejudiced mindset that had initially dominated the room. In this way, the scene serves as a powerful example that the morals of the group have changed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sidney Lumet's *Twelve Angry Men* stands as a compelling cinematic exploration of justice, morality and the human condition, highlighting the complexities and responsibilities inherent in democratic institutions such as the trial by jury. Through its confined setting, deliberate pacing and focus on characters, the film illustrates how truth and fairness depend not only on the legal framework but on the personal integrity and critical thinking of those entrusted with upholding them. *Twelve Angry Men* does not merely present the deliberations of a jury; rather, it exposes the social, psychological and ethical tensions that underlie collective decisions in a democratic society.

Throughout the film, the jury room becomes a microcosm of broader societal concerns, where personal prejudice, emotional trauma and ideological rigidity collide with reason and a sense of moral responsibility. Henry Fonda's Juror 8 emerges as a model of democratic values – not because he is unquestionably right, but because he is willing to question, to doubt and to listen. His insistence on reevaluating the evidence in the face of overwhelming opposition serves as a reminder of the importance of critical thinking and moral integrity; his actions reflect the core democratic ideal that justice is the product of thoughtful deliberation.

The film critiques not only explicit bigotry, as in the case of Juror 10's racist monologue, but also more subtle forms of bias and apathy. The jurors who initially vote "guilty" without reflection represent the dangers of collective thinking, showcasing how easily prejudice can be masked as common sense. The progression of the deliberation, as jurors begin to reconsider their positions, highlights the film's belief in the potential for individual to grow, to change their minds and to rise above their flaws. The

transformation of the jurors from a fragmented and indifferent group of individuals into a more thoughtful and responsible jury reinforces the idea that justice depends on the moral of those who serve it, and that being open to listen to different opinions helps individuals abandon their biases and become more cultured.

Ultimately, *Twelve Angry Men* is a powerful critique on the role of the individual within democratic systems. Its relevance remains undiminished today, as it challenges viewers to reflect on their own beliefs, to confront the prejudices that remain in society, and to uphold the principles of justice not through certainty and blind faith, but through empathy and doubt. In doing so, the film transcends its setting, offering a timeless reflection on the human capacity for reason, fairness and change.

References

- Bordwell, D., Thompson, K., & Smith, J. (2004). *Film art: An introduction* (Vol. 7). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Burns, R. P. (2007). A jury between fact and norm. *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, vol. 82, 643.
- Cunningham, F. R. (2001). *Sidney Lumet: Film and literary vision*. University Press of Kentucky.
- Gertner, N. (2007). 12 Angry Men (and Women) in Federal Court. *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, vol. 82, 613.
- Hans, V. P. (2007). Deliberation and dissent: 12 Angry Men versus the empirical reality of juries. *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, vol. 82, 579.
- Landsman, S. (2007). Mad about 12 angry men. *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, vol. 82, 749.
- Marder, N. S. (2007). The banality of evil: a Portrayal in 12 angry men. *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, vol. 82, 887.
- Rafter, N. (2001). American criminal trial films: An overview of their development, 1930–2000. *Journal of law and society*, vol. 28, 9-24.
- Tan, H. R., & Wang, T. (2024). *McCarthyism, Media, and Political Repression: Evidence from Hollywood*. National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Wilson, E. M. (2024). 'I Just Want to Talk...': Liberalism, Generative Unanimity, and Post-sacrificial Scapegoating in 12 Angry Men. In Rene Girard, *Law, Literature, and Cinema: The Legal Drama of the Scapegoat* (pp. 319-356). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

Films cited

Anatomy of a Murder. Directed by Otto Preminger, Carlyle Productions, 1959.

The Verdict. Directed by Sidney Lumet, 20th Century Fox, 1982.

To Kill a Mockingbird. Directed by Robert Mulligan, Universal Pictures, 1962.

Twelve Angry Men. Directed by Sidney Lumet, Orion-Nova Productions, 1957.

Witness for the Prosecution. Directed by Billy Wilder, Edward Small Productions, 1957.