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Beyond the Verdict: Understanding the Subjectivities of Justice Frameworks through *Primal Fear*

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Abstract

This study examines how Primal Fear (Prime 1996) directed by Gregory Hoblit problematises the ability of traditional justice frameworks in addressing crimes rooted in institutionalised power imbalances. The film uses its intricate narrative structure, nuanced characterisation, and psychological depth to challenge the presumed objectivity and moral authority of the legal apparatus. Central to this exploration is the protagonist Aaron Stampler, whose disrupted mental state not only destabilises the juridical certainties but also transforms trauma into a performative and ambiguous spectacle. The film's depiction of the legal proceedings reveals the tension between truth and the power holding authorities who attempt to conceal it. Hence, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, by situating the film within the realm of law, mental health, and cinematic representations of justice. Finally, it argues that the film offers a potent critique of how legal institutional responses to psychological and social complexities often reinforce, rather than redress, systemic inequities.
Keywords: justice frameworks, mental health, interdisciplinary research, law and cinema, social structures

Introduction

A closer look at the stories on screen may often reveal how individual subjectivities interact with the larger power structures, making the viewers challenge, question, or think about one's social realities. As Elizabeth Higginbotham (2013) rightly points out, "[t]he authors use films as a lens for exploring the complexities of social class, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality…" ("Foreword" x). Beyond entertainment, they often invite close reflection on the institutions that shape one's regular life such as justice, education, religion, and mental health, by dramatizing how these systems often operate, fail, or are manipulated. It becomes even more interesting when films move a step beyond mere representation and go on to capture the dissonance between the societal ideals and the institutional realities. This process prompts its viewers to address the deeper truths about power and accountability.

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This dynamic is perhaps most vividly captured in films that dramatize the legal system, where the stakes of justice and institutional fallibility are foregrounded. Legal dramas and courtroom stories act as fertile ground for examining the notions of morality and subjective human experiences relating to it. Cinema has long served as a cultural mirror, reflecting societal values and anxieties while prompting critical engagement with the institutions that shape everyday life. Within this context, legal dramas have provided especially fertile ground for interrogating the boundaries of morality, subjectivity, and the purported neutrality of justice systems. *12 Angry Men* (1957) for instance, follows the interactions between twelve jurors who determine the fate of a young boy accused of murdering his father. It validates how their personal biases and social attitudes influence the verdict. The film emphasises the fragility of "reasonable doubt" and the persistent influence of prejudice within jury deliberations (Michael Asimow). Even *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) captures the legal manoeuvring of what happens when someone commits a murder while sleepwalking and how it may be used to affect the gravitas of that crime. Another film unpacking an important question of whether individuals who follow corrupt laws are themselves guilty, is *Judgement at Nuremberg* (1961). Consequently, narratives such as that of *The Verdict* (1982) have established the genre's foundations by scrutinising how personal biases, ethical dilemmas, and institutional failures inform legal outcomes. *The Verdict*, for example, centres on an attorney's struggle against corruption, both within himself and the system he serves. Other films such as *Jagged Edge* (1985), *A Cry in the Dark* (1988), *Reversal of Fortune* (1990) and *Presumed Innocent* (1990), tackle with similar complexities.

Primal Fear (1996), which constitutes the focal point of this study, both continues and complicates this tradition. While it shares with *The Verdict* a focus on the morally ambiguous defence attorney and, with *12 Angry Men*, a concern for the ways "a mixture of rational evaluation of evidence and prejudice" shapes juridical truth (Greenfield et al, 161), *Primal Fear* adds an additional dimension by foregrounding psychological trauma and institutional betrayal. Its synthesis of courtroom drama and psychological thriller, coupled with its destabilisation of stable legal identities, positions the film as a particularly nuanced critique of contemporary justice frameworks. It is directed by Gregory Hoblit, which is an adaptation of a novel of the same name written by William Diehl. It follows the quest of defense attorney Martin Vail played by Richard Gere who utilises all his legal acumen to protect an ordinary altar boy Aaron Stampler played by Edward Norton from being convicted for the murder of a Catholic bishop. The film vividly dramatises what John Fiske and Kevin Glynn identify as the "crisis" of the legal system, which occurs "when both truth and reasoning are contingent rather than objective, [and] the legal system experiences crisis." By exposing how courts are "premised upon the achievability of an objective truth and the effectiveness of rationality, as a human universal, as a means of achieving it" (2001, 5), *Primal Fear* resonates as a contemporary legal drama where justice is upended by the instability of truth and the limits of objective reasoning. The existing research on *Primal Fear* is fairly limited and mostly related to the socio-linguistic analysis of how courtroom language has been represented in the film. Hence, this paper examines how *Primal Fear* fundamentally destabilizes conventional notions of justice through its portrayal of intersecting power structures, revealing how institutional authority can pervert the very concept of rights it claims to protect.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical approach. It draws upon representation theory, which examines how culture shapes meaning through symbolic forms; trauma studies, which explore how psychological wounds affect one's behaviour and identity; and critical legal thought which questions the neutrality of legal institutions. The intersections convey the limits of legal reasoning and how it impacts a psychologically fragmented subject. Together, these perspectives allow for a layered reading of *Primal Fear* that interrogates the intersection of agency, justice, and identity.

Central to this engagement is Stuart Hall's theory of representation, which foregrounds the cultural production of meaning as a social and political act. Hall argues that meaning is not simply contained within an image or text, but is actively created through the interaction between the producer, the text, and the audience. As he asserts, culture operates through practices of "the giving and taking of meaning" rather than through fixed symbols or objects (Hall 2). Representation, in this sense, is never neutral; it constructs the very realities it appears to reflect. Within *Primal Fear*, this can be seen in how visual motifs such as the grandeur of the Archbishop's office contrasting with the decay of Aaron's living space encode institutional hypocrisy. Hall's theory encourages one to see these scenes not as neutral representations of space, but as ideologically loaded images that construct narratives about justice, privilege, and abuse. Moreover, audiences "decode" these messages based on their social positions, experiences, and cultural knowledge. Thus, the film invites multiple interpretations: for some, it may reaffirm belief in the legal process; for others, it exposes its failure. Hence, the representation of justice, as with any form of meaning-making, is entangled with ideology and subject to contestation.

Equally significant to this inquiry is Cathy Caruth's formulation of trauma as an experience that resists full narrative assimilation. She argues that trauma is not remembered in a linear, coherent way, and instead returns belatedly through indirect or involuntary means. It is marked by a lateny whose "history…is no longer straightforwardly referential" (Caruth 1991, 182); meaning the trauma cannot be simply recalled or narrated like an ordinary event. In *Primal Fear*, the portrayal of Aaron's dissociative identity disorder can be read through this framework. The figure of Roy does not emerge as a separate being but rather as a forceful return of repressed experience, a manifestation of what was once silenced through rage, fear, and violence. The courtroom, which demands coherence and closure, finds itself destabilised by this psychic rupture. What the law frames as madness or deception may, in fact, be a symptom of ungrievable harm—rendered visible only through its violent reappearance. The performativity of Aaron's breakdown during cross-examination illustrates how legal structures commodify trauma, reducing it to a spectacle for institutional recognition.

These tensions are further elaborated through the lens of Critical Legal Studies, particularly as theorised by Peter Fitzpatrick and Alan Hunt, who challenge the presumption that law is inherently coherent or morally neutral. They argue that legal structures are historically and socially contingent, often reproducing existing hierarchies under the guise of objectivity ("Introduction" 2). In *Primal Fear*, this critique plays out through the character of Martin Vail, whose legal acumen is driven not by justice, but by careerism and reputation. His manipulation of courtroom proceedings, especially the strategic use of the videotape, underscores the idea that law is not a disinterested process but a terrain of performances, each shaped by the interests

and desires of its actors. The courtroom, then, becomes less a space of truth and more an arena where narratives compete for dominance, even at the cost of retraumatising the subject at its centre.

This approach draws on established scholarship at the intersection of law and cinema. Anthony Chase contends that legal films not only represent law but also actively shape and interrogate it, locating legal meaning both within and beyond the cinematic image. Such films function as cultural texts that influence popular understandings of justice and legality. *Primal Fear*, for example, participates in what Chase terms "cinematic jurisprudence" (xiii), using drama to reveal and critique legal systems' flaws. While viewers may not always escape the pull of realism, cinema transforms their perception of justice, a visualisation that cannot be "indefinitely be cordoned off from the sociology of law" (181)—the study of how legal systems and practices are shaped by, and shape, social norms, behaviours, and power relations within society. Lawrence Friedman further contends that legal narratives in film often mirror societal anxieties regarding the law's capacity for justice, especially when institutional trust is eroded (Friedman, 1989). In this sense, *Primal Fear*'s revelations of abuse within revered institutions echo Friedman's observation that cinema provides a vehicle for grappling with legal disillusionment.

By weaving together these perspectives, the study also locates itself within the broader field of law and film scholarship, a domain that recognises cinema as a site where juridical imagination is constructed and contested. *Primal Fear* contributes to this body of work by highlighting the fragility of justice frameworks when confronted with subjects shaped by unresolved trauma and institutional betrayal. Its narrative arc reveals the incompatibility between law's demand for clarity and the fractured, often incoherent lives it seeks to judge. In essence, this conceptual framework enables a reading of *Primal Fear* that foregrounds not only the visual and narrative complexity of the film but also its capacity to unsettle the epistemologies of law, power, and mental health. The film's treatment of dissociation, abuse, and courtroom spectacle resists easy categorisation, instead exposing how legal processes are often inadequate to reckon with the messiness of lived experience. This framework thus provides the necessary vocabulary to analyse the ways in which trauma, performance, and legal reasoning collide, sometimes tragically and sometimes within institutional settings.

Discursivity of Courtroom Justice

The celebrated lawyer Martin Vail, when asked about the truth of a case, boastfully responds that "[t]here is only one that matters. My version of it. The one I create in the minds of those 12 men and women sitting on a jury" (00:01:03-09). This opening sequence foregrounds the film's intention to reveal the cracks in the judicial system, where the road to justice isn't dependent on someone's innocence alone, but rather how well the narrative proving his/her innocence is shaping up and performed by the lawyer. Vail's preoccupation with fame, headlines, and magazine covers in the beginning of the film, establish his role as a performer, even more than a lawyer. It also suggests that high-profile cases serve multiple functions beyond the pursuit of justice, including career advancement and upholding public relations. His fascination towards visibility is what drives him into the action of the film.

The brutal murder of Chicago's loved Archbishop Richard Rushman sends the entire city into a frenzy. The cinematic sequence follows the brutality of Rushman's chopped hands and

genitalia, followed by a young boy aimlessly running away from the crime scene, suspected of his murder. Amidst the chaos, Vail strategically takes on the pro-bono case of Aaron Stampler, the suspect, and secures his participation on what would turn out to be one of the most complex cases their courtroom has witnessed. As they prepare for the proceedings, the performative ethos transpires from their chamber to the newsrooms. The brief depiction of the media trial underscores how legal discourse is mediated by public perception. For instance, the tabloids christening Aaron as "The Butcher Boy of St. Mike's" paints him as a beastly outlier even without any evidentiary support. This encourages the creation of multiple versions by the attorney, the media, and the institutional stakeholders who stand to lose or benefit from its verdict.

This spectacle obscures a more insidious form of influence within the case, such as the economic and political machinations of figures like State Attorney John Shaughnessy. The sub-plot involving his vendetta against Rushman, stemming from the latter's refusal to sell church-owned land for the lucrative South Lake developmental project transforms the trial into a proxy war. Subsequently, Joey Pinero, another stakeholder in the same project, is killed by the state forces, and his death finds its way to Aaron's investigation. Vail, rather than dedicatedly pursuing justice for Aaron, becomes emotionally compromised and subtly sabotages the case as a means of avenging his friend's death. These instances show how justice mechanisms can be co-opted to serve individual interests strengthening the claim of critical legal theory even further. Yet, beneath these power plays lies a more unsettling revelation surrounding Aaron's motive to kill Rushman.

Through the proceedings, it is revealed that when Aaron was orphaned, Rushman took him under his wing and gave him shelter and livelihood. He became an altar boy for the church and sang for the catholic choir. As he turned eighteen and the time came for him to leave, Rushman generously permitted to stay beyond his time, only if he would provide sexual favours in return. He even taped it to pleasure himself later. Aaron's friend, who was also exploited at the hands of Rushman, when confronted about the tape, revealed that "[Rushman] called it "purging the devil". He'd say a sermon for ten minutes and then tell us what to do." (01:07:52-57). This dialogue, going by Hall's conceptualisations shows how religious power is mediated carefully through an orchestrated language use, which turns abuse into a sanctified act. This dynamic also illustrates the weaponization of institutional care, where those who promised to protect turn into the primary source of harm.

The discovery of that videotape creates a complex ethical dilemma where legal strategy and human dignity do not remain mutually exclusive. While the tapes provide crucial evidence of the abuse Aaron endured, its use and the conversation surrounding it, acts as a trigger for the trauma, and reduces his suffering to a performed visual material. It suggests how the legal system lacks adequate mechanisms for addressing cases where the process itself exposes the subject to additional harm. The revelation also marks a critical shift in the narrative's axis, blurring the boundaries between victim and perpetrator. The contents of the tape compel the spectators to empathise with his suffering, even as he stands in trial for a violent murder. This completely destabilizes the clear-cut legal identities, suggesting that victimhood and culpability are not oppositional categories, but may intersect as well as coexist within the same subject. The death of the archbishop also appears to be less unfortunate when his demeanour within the closed walls is revealed.

This violent act, therefore, cannot be understood in isolation, but rather be situated within a broader context of systemic violation. Such an act ruptures the linearity of delivering justice and shadows law's claim to neutrality as addressed by critical legal theory. The elements such as media rush, political diversions, religious manipulation, strategic use of videotape, and the performative breakdowns, all contribute to what the study frames as discursivity of courtroom space. It may also be observed in this instance that unlike *12 Angry Men*, which depends on collective, dialogic processes aimed at consensus, or *The Verdict*, which centres individual redemption, *Primal Fear* exposes the limitations of both communal and personal agency when confronted with the structural realities of abuse and manipulation.

The Unreliable Accused

Another significant angle in the film as well as this study remains Aaron's mental condition. His initial plea that he was unconscious when the murder took place appeared sincere and hence motivated Vail to take up the strategy of there being a third stranger in the room. Visually, Aaron's distress is accentuated through persistent close-up shots and subdued lighting, which isolate him within the frame and indicate his psychological vulnerability. His stutter, hesitant speech, and deflecting eye contact function not only as behavioural traits, but also as cinematic codes for innocence, drawing the other characters into a sympathetic reading of his condition. Subsequently, Vail privately enlists psychiatric assistance for him to understand the reasons behind his blackouts better. This gesture also reinforces the notion that legal truth cannot be disentangled from the subject's psychological reality.

The moment when Vail confronts Aaron after discovering the videotape marks a pivotal rupture in the film, both narratively and psychologically. The audience is shown the footage in the privacy of Vail's viewing; an intentional choice that, Norman Spaulding notes, marks the scene as "pivotal precisely because of this division between what the jury knows and what the viewer knows by virtue of the camera's penetration into private adversarial space." (Sarat et al, 118) This technique compels the viewer to anticipate how Vail might manipulate this discovery in the courtroom. Provoked by Vail's aggression, Aaron's alter-ego, Roy, emerges in a violent and domineering manner which is entirely distinct from the timid persona previously presented. This scene functions as a cinematic embodiment of fractured subjectivity resulting from unresolved trauma. Roy not only reveals himself to protect Aaron in the conventional sense but also personifies his repressed rage and agency. He elicits traits which Aaron was never allowed to express within the moral confines of the Church. The psychiatrist reveals this to be a case of dissociative identity disorder. American Psychiatric Association identifies this as a disorder enabling "[t]he existence of two or more distinct identities (or "personality states"). The distinct identities are accompanied by changes in behaviour, memory and thinking" (www.psychiatry.org). It stems from abuse occurring in the childhood, as was the case for Aaron as well. He lost his mother at a young age and was left alone with an abusive father who physically harmed him. His condition worsened upon being eventually exploited by Rushman as well. Roy thus, is the repressed return of a subject who has been constantly denied voice, legality, and protection. Vail, who initially claimed to be in control over his narrative was unseated by this unpredictable revelation. His discussion with the psychiatrist is of major thematic importance as she asserts that "[t]his is not a criminal [they] are dealing with. It's a sick kid. He's sitting in a cell, and it's not where he belongs." (01:19:25-32) This statement unfolds the failure of the law's symbolic

order, where the legal subject who is ontologically fractured is unable to position himself within the traditional framework of justice. The discourse of care kicks in to defy Aaron's projection as a culpable agent who kills, to an ignored child who was failed by the institutions that were meant to protect and nurture him.

The climactic courtroom sequence strengthens the central critique of justice as a performative and morally ambiguous institution. Vail finds himself in a tricky position as he was unable to change Aaron's plea to insanity mid-trial. He instead strategically hands over the videotape to prosecution, knowing that the visual evidence will provoke an emotional response and encourage Venable (the prosecutor) to aggressively cross-examine Aaron. This is his attempt to manipulate the scenario by weaponizing Aaron's trauma. They attempt to force trauma's visibility, pushing for its linguistic manifestation which according to Caruth, can only be accessed "through its inherent forgetting" (Caruth 187) What unfolds in the court thereafter is Aaron's dissociation being commodified to secure a favourable legal outcome. Venable's questioning provokes Roy into attacking her and revealing himself in the courtroom. Trauma in this case ceases to remain a lived, complex reality, and rather turns to an instrument for achieving a strategic goal. Even though it appears to be a problematic tactic, it highlights the limitation of a structural condition where the proof of a psychic injury demands an aesthetic enactment for juridical consumption. It not only trivializes the pain of the subject but also takes them away from the road to recovery.

The final revelation in the film delivers a devastating shift from everything that has been established until now. When Vail visits Aaron after his legal release, he discovers that Aaron momentarily stops his fragile and stuttering demeanour and slips his awareness about all the events that unfolded during his "blackouts". He owns up to his performance as a traumatised young boy, conveying that he has always been Roy, and it is Aaron who was a calculated construction. His intention was to manipulate the legal system to become an agentic subject and reclaiming his identity which has been stripped off and exploited all the while growing up. This act is why the study views him as an unreliable accused. The justice system required Aaron to be either mentally ill or criminally accountable and yet he exists both within as well as out of these two categories. This final turn reframes the entire trial as a sophisticated manipulation of institutional codes, affirming the film's central argument: that the justice system, in its obsession with appearances and categorical reasoning, is not only vulnerable to deception but complicit in enabling it.

Limitations of the Imagined Legality

While this study primarily pinpoints the film's potential to expose the inadequacies of justice systems, it is essential to also consider the counter-arguments that temper its interpretative claims. One could argue that the film in its attempt in challenging the legal orthodoxy, reaffirms many of the dramatic conventions of a courtroom thriller with its chasing sequences, romantic undercurrents within the opposing legal counsels, or the staged fights. It is executed to "…intensify spectatorial expectations about the kinds of pleasures with courtroom contest, deliberation, and judgement and, more generally, what trials can ultimately deliver" (Sarat et al, 2019) With its climactic "twist" and the deployment of an unreliable defendant, *Primal Fear* arguably leans into the sensationalist mechanics of the genre rather than subverting them. This narrative reliance risks diverting attention away from substantive questions about legal reform

or institutional accountability.

Additionally, the film's portrayal of trauma and mental illness, while narratively complex, could inadvertently contribute to public scepticism about psychological defences in legal proceedings. Aaron's dissociative identity disorder is revealed to be, at least in part, a legal performance, which risks reinforcing distrust toward defendants who invoke trauma as a mitigating factor. This may weaken the film's broader commentary on the systemic production of fractured subjectivity by suggesting that trauma is manipulable and insincere.

Furthermore, when compared to courtroom dramas such as *12 Angry Men* or *The Verdict*, which emphasize collective moral reckoning and ethical evolution, *Primal Fear* comparatively offers cynical portrait of the legal process. Its emphasis on deception, strategy, and institutional entrenchment may foster disillusionment rather than ethical introspection or civic responsibility. While such cynicism reflects real anxieties about power and justice, it also raises the question of whether the film offers meaningful tools for reimagining justice or merely dramatizes its impossibility. In acknowledging these limitations, the analysis acknowledges that its interventions are mediated by narrative conventions that both enable and constrain its critique. These concerns, however, do not necessarily diminish its value, but rather complicate the approach to understanding cinematic justice.

Conclusion

Primal fear offers a compelling critique of the limitations embedded within traditional justice frameworks, particularly their failure to grapple with fractured subjects and institutional complicity. Through the case of Aaron, the film exposes a fundamental contradiction in the legal system: its requirement for a coherent, unified subject to ascribe responsibility. It is juxtaposed against the social realities that routinely fragment individual agency, especially in those shaped by trauma and systemic abuse. Aaron's dissociative identity disorder becomes more than a defense strategy; it symbolically reflects the disintegration of the legal subject under institutional pressure. In demanding a linear account of intent and action, the law proves ill-equipped to process lives disrupted by ongoing psychological and structural violence.

The film's resolution, where Aaron is acquitted through the insanity defense but the institutions that enabled his trauma to remain unexamined, points to the deeper inadequacy of justice systems focused solely on individual culpability. Legal closure is achieved, but moral and systemic accountability are entirely deferred. The court never addresses the exploitative dynamics of the Church, the collusion of political figures, or the socio-economic structures that facilitated Aaron's suffering. In this way, *Primal Fear* reveals how legal mechanisms can function to contain, even obscure, the structural dimensions of harm under the guise of resolution.

While the analysis foregrounds these critical insights, it also acknowledges the film's position within a genre shaped by spectacle and dramatic conventions. Its reliance on narrative twists and psychological ambiguity, as discussed, can complicate its critical intent and potentially undermine the legitimacy of trauma-based defences. Yet, it is precisely in navigating this tension that the film's value lies, using the tools of genre to question the ideological foundations of justice.

To move beyond this model, the film implicitly advocates for a justice framework that centers institutional accountability rather than isolated punishment. Aaron's violence, when viewed not as a singular act of deviance but as a consequence of sustained institutional failure, demands a

shift in emphasis from punishing damaged individuals to interrogating the systems that produce such damage. A more compassionate and ethically grounded legal system would recognize that fractured legal subjects often result from prior abandonment, manipulation, or exploitation by the very institutions now judging them.

Ultimately, the film challenges its audience to reimagine justice not as a binary verdict of guilt or innocence, but as a process of reckoning with the conditions that shape human behaviour. It calls for a more reparative legal vision, one that acknowledges the psychological complexity of those who stand trial and the systemic responsibility of those who often escape it.

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