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The Lincoln Lawyer – Whose Side are you on Anyways?

For those unfamiliar with the film *The Lincoln Lawyer*, released in 2011 by Lionsgate, that unfamiliarity can be a godsend upon watching this movie. For those who are jaded by the various interpretations and biases regarding our legal system – specifically the world of lawyers – becoming familiar with this movie would be highly encouraged. Compound the above recommendations into the Sisyphean task of dissecting this piece of cinema into an ethical dissertation, and about the only thing that doesn't come to mind as a potential topic is the soundtrack.

After sitting back and revisiting the film in question, trying to distil the ethical essence of the movie down to a lowest common denominator, a quote by Detective Lankford (played by Bryan Cranston) becomes prominent: "I don't get you, Haller. Whose side are you on, anyway". From questionable deals in back rooms by Matthew McConaughey's Mick Haller to courtroom snitches being brought forward to put the proverbial nail in the coffin with a hammer of lies, each and every dilemma boils down to that one simple question. Then again, perhaps simple to ask - yet not quite so simple to answer.

Put the protagonist under the microscope, ask that question, and after some deliberation, the best response can only be: Mick Haller is on Mick Haller's side. Case and point being where, in a drunken stupor, Mick discloses to his ex-wife:

“You know what I used to be afraid of Maggie? ... That I wouldn’t recognize innocence, that it would be right there in front of me and I just wouldn’t see it. I’m not talking about guilty/not-guilty, just innocence, y’know. You know what I’m afraid of now? Evil, pure evil.” (McConaughey)

What Mick fears the most is not the compromising of self to stave off the legal consequences regarding his clients’ questionable actions, but threats to his family and his sense of humanity. The film establishes rather concretely that Mick’s clientele ranges from a wide spectrum of undesirables: drug dealing biker gangs, prostitutes, and Mick even offers up an anecdote regarding a client who “...decapitated his ex-wife. Kept her head in the refrigerator”. (McConaughey) Mick continues, showing how he sleeps at night: “the D.A. got greedy, tried to pile on two unsolved murders, trick up the evidence, make it look my guy did it... it’s called the justice system... that’s not the way it is supposed to work” (McConaughey). Ethically speaking, Mick is obligated to ensure his clients get the best defense possible. Mick takes personal pride in his results: a la his custom license plate... NTGUILTY.

So, whose side was that District Attorney on? Justice? Obviously not. That D.A. was on his own side, attempting to pad his own success rate – trying for a higher profile success so he could pad his resume or achieve future ambitions that much quicker. The ethical ramifications of the case padding in question speak for itself. However, does this mean that Mick was on the side of Justice or his client? No, even with his delivery showing an altruistic respect for the Justice System itself, Mick proves again and again that he is in it for the win: personal glory and gain. For Mick, ethics are not privy to the rigors of practicing law: the system is its own beast. As long as one stays within that system, all is fair.

Only when it is revealed that Mick helped place an innocent man in jail with a life sentence does Mick start his plan for “making this right” (McConaughey). One might even assume that this is tied to some root ethical and moral base that Mick keeps locked away at his core. However, under the litmus test of “Whose side are you on, anyway” (Lankford), Mick’s demons are not from an innocent man’s incarceration – they are due to his own personal feelings of failure. He had removed himself so completely from the possibility of innocence that he could not fathom it being an option (case and point: re-examine the above list of his clientele).

The death of Frank Levin (William H. Macy), brings out another side of the *in it for myself* machinations of Mick. Legally obligated to defend his client to the best of his ability, Mick is also convinced that his client is the cause of Frank’s death, and twists the false testimony of a prosecution stooge so that Mick’s client is associated with a killing. Morally and ethically, the use and appearance of this rebuttal witness by both the prosecution and defense are mind boggling.

First off, the prosecution brought forward someone to commit false witness under oath to solidify their case. This is the ethical equivalent of declaring a winner before a contest even commences... “I can think of nothing more prejudicial or corrupt” is the succinct response by Judge Fullbright (played by Reggie Baker) while they are conferring in Chambers. Yet, at the same time, Mick had managed to taint the false testimony by feeding additional details via a contact who was being incarcerated at the same location. This act is both cinematic brilliance and an ethical black hole of *is this for The Greater Good?*

The Greater Good is typically reserved for historical benchmarks such as the Underground Railroad or the hiding of Jews during the Holocaust. Here, however, within the scope of this small cinematic world – the Greater Good can be applied. In the real world, perhaps

not so easily applied. However, this cinematic world is to be saved from a serial killer, even though the sacred act of Law was blasphemed by both the Defense and Prosecution.

Of note: If ethics are moral principles, whose side is the Law on, anyways? The practice of Law is to be of facts and evidence, not the acts of falsehood and corruption. Therefore, the Law, with her sword and blindfold, is on no one's side... Justice is only in it for herself. Mick may very well be practicing Law a bit more accurately than some would care to admit: the letter of the law is observed, and damned be the rest.

Works Cited

The Lincoln Lawyer. Dir. Brad Furman. Perf. Matthew McConaughey. Lionsgate, 2011. DVD.