

Environmental Health in Film

ENVH 205

Winter 2008

Film Descriptions



A Civil Action

The Insider

Erin Brockovich

Libby, Montana

The China Syndrome



A Civil Action

1998

(Touchstone Pictures; 115 minutes)

Cast

John Travolta (*Saturday Night Fever; Grease; Pulp Fiction*)

Robert Duvall (*Tender Mercies; The Apostle; Deep Impact*)

William H. Macy (*Fargo; Pleasantville; State and Main*)

James Gandolfini (*Get Shorty; The Sopranos*)

Kathleen Quinlan (*Apollo 13; Lawn Dogs*)

Director

Steven Zaillian (*Searching for Bobby Fischer*)

This film depicts the true-life story of personal injury lawyer Jan Schlichtmann (Travolta), and his decision to file a lawsuit on behalf of eight families living in Woburn, Massachusetts, a small town about 12 miles NW of Boston. The families (Quinlan, Gandolfini) have all lost a child to leukemia, and believe that toxic chemicals in the Woburn water supply are to blame. Schlichtmann is transformed from skeptic to believer, and takes on two large corporations (W.R. Grace and Beatrice Foods) associated with a tanning factory up river. He must convince a jury that one of the chemicals used by the tanning factory – trichloroethylene – is the cause of the children's cancer. In so doing he bankrupts his law firm, much to the chagrin of the firm's manager (Macy). Based on the best-selling and award-winning book by journalist Jonathon Harr. Both the film and the book shine a none-too-flattering light on our legal system, and the complexities of litigation. Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor nomination for Robert Duvall for his role as Jerome Facher, the lawyer for Beatrice Foods.

Resources

Jonathan Harr, *A Civil Action*. New York, Vintage Books, 1995.

Website of staff reporter and editor for the Woburn *Daily Times Chronicle*, 1979-1989:

<http://home.earthlink.net/~dkennedy56/woburn.html>

Website maintained by W.R. Grace & Company: <http://www.civil-action.com>

Website maintained by Harvard University Law School "Lessons from Woburn Project":

<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/acivilaction/>

Nat'l Cancer Institute: Cancer Clusters: http://cis.nci.nih.gov/fact/3_58.htm

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Cancer Cluster website

<http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/clusters/>

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) website on trichloroethylene

<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/ToxProfiles/phs8824.html>

The Insider

1999

(Touchstone Pictures; 155 minutes)

Cast

Al Pacino *Lowell Bergman*

Russell Crowe *Jeffrey Wigand*

Christopher Plummer *Mike Wallace*

Diane Venora *Liane Wigand*

Philip Baker Hall *Don Hewitt, Senior Producer 60 Minutes*

Director -- *Michael Mann*

An engrossing film about ethics and corruption in the tobacco industry and broadcast journalism. On one side, there is Jeffrey Wigand (Russell Crowe), the former tobacco scientist who violated contractual agreements to expose Brown & Williamson's inclusion of addictive ingredients in cigarettes, casting himself into a vortex of moral dilemma. On the other side is *60 Minutes* producer Lowell Bergman (Al Pacino), whose struggle to report Wigand's story puts him at odds with veteran correspondent Mike Wallace (Christopher Plummer) and senior executives at CBS News. Even if the details aren't always precise (as Mike Wallace and others protested prior to the film's release), the film adheres to a higher truth that was so blatantly violated by tobacco executives seen in an oft-repeated video clip, lying under oath in the service of greed. Received 7 Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture.

“The guilty have a head start, and retribution
Is always slow of foot, but it catches up.”
The Odes of Horace, Book III, Ode 2

Resources

Kessler, David. 2001. *A Question of Intent: A Great American Battle with a Deadly Industry*. Public Affairs, NY. (Account of the brass knuckles struggle between a federal regulatory agency and the tobacco industry; written by former commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration.)

ASH—Action on Smoking and Health (public interest group): <http://www.ash.org.uk/index.php>

Tobacco Documents Online: <http://tobaccodocuments.org/>

WHO Bulletin: Lessons from private statements of the tobacco industry

<http://www.who.int/bulletin/pdf/2000/issue7/bu0690.pdf>

Links to Big Tobacco's Disinformation Campaigns:

http://www.tobaccoscam.ucsf.edu/site_map/index.cfm

Junking Science to Promote Tobacco (Am J Public Health 91 (#11): 1745-1748):

<http://www.tobaccoscam.ucsf.edu/pdf/9.6-JunkScience-Yach.pdf>

Academician exposed as tobacco industry stooge: <http://www.ash.org.uk/html/press/020124.html>

Tobacco Advertising Tobacco Fact Sheet (from 11th World Conference on Tobacco OR Health): <http://tobaccofreekids.org/campaign/global/docs/advertising.pdf>

Conflicts of Interest: Biomedical Research: statement from the American Medical Association

<http://www.ama-assn.org/ama1/upload/mm/369/report95.pdf>

Erin Brockovich
2000
(Universal Pictures; 126 minutes)

Cast

Erin Brockovich . . . *Julia Roberts*
Ed Masry . . . *Albert Finney*
George . . . *Aaron Eckhart*
Donna Jensen . . . *Marg Helgenberger*
Pamela Duncan . . . *Cherry Jones*
Kurt Potter . . . *Peter Coyote*

Director: Steven Soderbergh.

Erin Brockovich is a savvy struggling single mother looking to better her life. She manages to land a job with a small law firm in order to earn a little money. In the course of her work, Brockovich comes across some documents from a water company showing contamination of drinking water in a small town, and later connects information in various medical records with the water company case file. On her own initiative, Brockovich begins to investigate the matter of the contaminated water, and uncovers a major corporate conspiracy to cover-up the environmental pollution and the health threat to the local residents. As the litigation proceeds, she goes door to door in the community to identify more than 600 plaintiffs, and finds the critical evidence to break the case wide open. Eventually the plaintiffs receive \$333 million, the largest settlement ever paid in a direct-action lawsuit in U.S. history. Oscar for Best Actress (Roberts); nomination for Best Picture.

Resources

Official film web site link (with trailers): <http://www.erinbrockovich.com/flasher.html>

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (CDC) profile of chromium 6
<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/ToxProfiles/phs8810.html>

CA Dept of Health Services report on chromium 6 in drinking water
<http://www.dhs.cahwnet.gov/ps/ddwem/chemicals/Chromium6/Cr+6index.htm>

CA Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment fact sheet on chromium 6
http://www.oehha.ca.gov/public_info/facts/chrom6press2.html

The Erin Brockovich Story (45 min): A&E Television Networks, 2001

Documentary that discusses the facts associated with this case; available on video from Odegaard Library (Videorecord AAE034)

Michael Fumento's editorial on the Hinkley case: The Wall Street Journal, Mar 28, 2000
<http://www.fumento.com/erinwsj.html>

Libby, Montana 2004

A documentary film by Drury Gunn Carr & Doug Hawes-Davis

High Plains Films

“Nestled below the rugged peaks of the Northern Rockies and along the crystal-clear Kootenai River lies the small town of Libby, Montana - an ironic setting for a town where many hundreds of people are sick or have already died from asbestos exposure. The Environmental Protection Agency calls Libby the worst case of community-wide exposure to a toxic substance in U.S. history. *Libby, Montana* is a journey into the world of a hard-working, blue-collar community that exemplifies the American Dream gone horribly wrong.”

- <http://www.highplainsfilms.org>

“Equal parts mystery, horror film, black comedy, corporate indictment and human tragedy, *Libby, Montana* sheds what light it can on a menace once mined in that town, the asbestos contaminate vermiculite. Used primarily for the building insulation Zonolite, its pellets and dust have lined the attics of houses for decades, and anyone who inhales it runs the risk of contracting asbestosis or mesothelioma, a potentially fatal cancer. Libby’s population of 2600 has suffered the deaths of 200 miners, family members, and residents. Yet death, lawsuits, the high-profile involvement of the Environmental Protection Agency, and two books — *Libby, Montana: Asbestos and the Deadly Silence of an American Corporation* and *An Air That Kills: How the Asbestos Poisoning of Libby, Montana, Uncovered a National Scandal* — hasn’t been enough to secure the federal funding needed for a thorough cleanup, compensation for the survivors, and aid for contaminated neighboring areas.”

- Ray Young, http://www.highplainsfilms.org/rev_libby_flickhead.html

Readings

Libby, Montana: Asbestos and the Deadly Silence of an American Corporation, by Andrea Peacock. Johnson Books, 2003.

An Air That Kills: How the Asbestos Poisoning of Libby, Montana, Uncovered a National Scandal, by Andrew Schneider and David McCumber. G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2004..

The China Syndrome

1979

(Michael Douglas/IPC; 122 minutes)

Cast

Jane Fonda (Kimberley Wells)

Jack Lemmon (Jack Godell)

Michael Douglas (Richard Adams)

Director: James Bridges

A TV news reporter (Kimberly Wells) and film crew visited a nuclear power plant near Los Angeles to conduct a story, as part of a series on regional energy sources. During the visit, an accident occurs that almost led to a nuclear disaster that could have resulted in a plant meltdown and potentially a major health and ecological disaster from radiation release. The accident was due to human error, but was subsequently found to reveal serious safety design flaws in the plant. The company that manages the plant claimed that the event was a minor chance occurrence that was readily controlled, and therefore posed no future danger. The company was in the midst of negotiating a deal to open another nuclear plant nearby, and was desperate to avoid governmental inspections that might close the operating plant and prohibit opening of a new plant. The company's cover-up of plant safety flaws, that included falsified inspection reports, was ultimately discovered by the plant operations chief (Jack Godell), who this to the news team. Public safety hearings exonerated the plant, although these were also part of the cover-up. Realizing the seriousness of situation, Godell took control of the plant operations at gunpoint in an attempt to cease unsafe operations. A SWAT team, commissioned by the company, broke in and killed Godell before his story could be told. He was portrayed as a mentally unbalanced worker who had become temporarily insane, perhaps due to alcoholism. The movie ends with a caution about the need for vigilance against unscrupulous nuclear industry companies seeking wealth at the expense of worker and public safety.

Resources

Website for Public Broadcasting System (PBS) documentary, *Meltdown at Three Mile Island* (includes transcript)

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/three/>

Website of World Nuclear Association; describes accident at Chernobyl

<http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/chernobyl/inf07.htm>