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Cinematic Antithesis in *12 Angry Men*: The Use of Visual Rhetoric in Contrasting Two Approaches to Deliberative Processes

Abstract: Deliberative processes are far from a favourite subject of filmmakers. Yet the 1957 classic *12 Angry Men* stands as a remarkable exception, its entire narrative unfolding through deliberative exchanges within a jury room. The film has been widely analyzed by scholars of law, politics, and film focused on the power of dissenting voices in a deliberative setting. In this paper, I take a different interpretive approach, focusing on the antitheses employed to illuminate contrasting attitudes toward deliberation itself. I identify key points of contention in the characters’ understanding of the deliberative process, examine how these tensions are cinematically rendered, and explore their deeper significance within the broader context of American deliberative culture.

Keywords: deliberative processes, deliberative culture, cinematic antithesis, visual rhetoric, *12 Angry Men*

1. Introduction

A 1957 classic directed by Sidney Lumet, *12 Angry Men* has been a favourite subject of many scholarly investigations into the power of dissent. The character played by Henry Fonda, who stands alone against the pressures of groupthink, has become a favourite example to illustrate the importance of each different voice in a deliberative process and the responsibility of each participant to express their views with integrity (Babcock and Sassoubre 2007, Estlund and Landmore 2018; Gerken 2005; Patten 2024; Waller, Sohrab, and Ma 2013). The entire action of the film is set within the deliberative process of a jury discussing a

murder case. Reginald Rose, the author of the screenplay, was inspired to write it after serving as a juror.

The tension is built up around the powerful contrast between Fonda's character, who is initially alone in casting a "not guilty" vote, and the rest of the jurors, who believe that the accused's guilt is beyond any reasonable doubt. As their deliberation unfolds, details about the values and the experiences of the jurors are brought to light. The heavy use of parallel visual structures and visual divisions emphasizes these differences. The viewers are thus invited to reflect on how they impact the jurors' positions. A set of other contrasts are gradually revealed to the audience — between those who do not have to question their actions on a regular basis (because their boss does this) and those whose profession requires them to question everything (Fonda's character is an architect), between people who have never seen a knife fight and people who grew up amidst them (one of the jurors grew up in the slum and has directly experienced situations similar to the one that led to the murder), between experienced people who have sat on jury many times (who take on a father figure, trying to dominate the others) and their younger counterparts, who initially agree to take on a rather obedient stance (however, that will change throughout their deliberation).

While most analyses of the film identify the sources of conflict in the positions that jurors take regarding the evidentiary weight supporting or challenging the defendant's guilt (Patter 2024, pp. 295–296, Sarat 2007, pp. 883–886), I argue that there is yet another antithesis that permeates the movie and that is worthy of closer inspection: the antithesis between the jurors' attitudes toward the deliberative process itself.

2. Explicit references to the value of deliberation throughout the film

The value of "talk" is a leitmotif of the entire movie. The dissenting Juror treats deliberation before deciding as a matter of personal integrity:

"It's not easy for me to raise my hand and send a boy off to die without talking about it first [...] I think we owe him a word [...] I just wanna talk. Let us take an hour".

While he openly admits not having any certainties about the case, he is convinced that the deliberative process itself can bring them all in a superior epistemic position. He remains reasonable and willing to listen to

the other jurors during all stages of the deliberation, even when the tension grows, trying to instill a sense of integrity and responsibility in his fellow jurors and convince them that deliberation is valuable:

“We may be wrong. We are just gambling on probabilities. But we have a reasonable doubt. No jury can declare a man guilty unless they are sure”.

Even though he is repeatedly being told that he is alone in this, as a matter of fact, his trust in deliberation is tacitly shared by a part of the other jurors, which becomes obvious as the action unfolds.

On the opposing side, several jurors adopt a deeply skeptical stance toward deliberation, dismissing it as a futile exercise. This skepticism is evident from the very beginning of the film, when one juror expresses the following complaint to another:

“All these lawyers just talk, talk, talk [...]. What is there so much to talk about?”.

The rejection of deliberation recurs throughout the film, voiced by different characters in various forms:

“You wouldn’t change my mind if we talked for 100 years”;

“You guys can talk the ears right off my head”;

“We can talk here forever. It’s still the same thing”.

Many of them are reluctant to engage in a complex deliberative process because they have more urgent individual matters outside the jury room: one of them has three garages to attend to, another one has tickets to a baseball game, yet another is thinking about the advertising campaign he is working on (he even sketches creative concepts while the others analyze the case of the prosecution).

Some of them are even convinced that a more thorough reflection on the available evidence only amounts to useless “hairsplitting” that may ultimately be detrimental to their better judgment:

“You’re just like everybody else. You think too much and get mixed up”;

“Don’t you want to be in Atlantic City at the Hairsplitters’ Convention?”;

“Suppose you talk us all out of it and the boy is guilty!”.

In the beginning of the movie, they represent a loud majority, pointing out that Fonda’s character is the only one who is “wasting their time” with his

insistence to “talk”. But, as we shall see, the deliberative process itself will prove its value in many ways, some of which will be surprising to them, too.

These two visions regarding the use of deliberation can be seen as an overarching antithesis of the movie, one that reveals its deeper significance only when it is analyzed against its larger cultural background (Alcolea Banegas 2009, pp. 271-274, Groarke 2002, p. 145, Sălăvăstru 2024, pp. 230–244). In the following section, I briefly sketch this cultural background.

3. The promises of a deliberative culture

The American jury system has long been celebrated as an effective manner to teach citizens the art of ruling. The idea of extending such institutionalized forms of deliberation in many areas of public life has long been championed as a manner to instill in people a sense of mutual responsibility, civic duty, and an ability to analyze social realities from a broader perspective. One of the scholars who best captured this enthusiasm is Benjamin Barber (1984). He extensively argued that citizens’ capacity to think autonomously and take individual responsibility for common affairs depends on their involvement in deliberative processes:

“Democracy that does not institutionalize talk will soon be without autonomous citizens” (Barber, 1984, p. 190).

Inviting citizens to reflect together on complex issues may increase the chances that their opinions will gradually be supported by better reasons. More importantly, it will provide them with a new self-understanding and a new mode of relating to one another, based on equality and stronger civic capacities. By taking part in formally organized deliberative processes, citizens may enhance their ability to think beyond their immediate private interests (Barber 1984, pp. 4–24).

Deliberation thus conceived is expected to empower citizens’ reflective and reasoning capacities (Goodin 2005; Habermas 1989; Landemore 2020). People who are entrusted with the mission to deliberate about alternative solutions to an issue are expected to learn to ask relevant questions, to weigh arguments, to explore possibilities, even under the conditions of deep uncertainty that characterize most situations that are put up for deliberation (Barber 1984, 129).

Jensen Sass and John Dryzek have used the term “deliberative culture” to describe collective mindsets and practices that invest citizens’

deliberative practices with a central role in decision-making (Sass and Dryzek 2014, pp. 9–13). At the heart of a deliberative culture lies the idea that citizens have the right to question the decisions that concern them and their peers on rational grounds. Such rational grounds are, in turn, the result of common reflection (Habermas 1984, 216, Niemeyer et al. 2024, p.347, Sass and Dryzek 2014, p.14). In this theoretical paradigm, deliberative reason is seen as an emerging group property, as something that happens during deliberation and because of it: blind spots, biases, and other irrational forces may be overcome due to the architecture of the deliberative situation itself (Landemore 2013, Niemeyer et al. 2024).

However, such optimistic outcomes depend on the degree to which micro-exchanges manage to embody the central values of a deliberative culture (Țuțui 2015, pp. 187–190). In this context, relationships that are developed between participants are just as important as the content of the deliberation:

“Talk takes on the sense of a journey in which the going is as important as the getting there and in which the relations among travelers are as vital as the destinations they may think they are seeking”. (Barber, 1984, p. 120).

Quality deliberation also requires a high level of dedication (since participants would have to renounce the private endeavours in which they might have otherwise engaged during that time) and a high level of trust in the process (since participants who do not believe that their effort is worthwhile may tend to free-ride, be dishonest in the positions they express, engage in virtue signalling, and so on). Where citizens treat deliberative settings as arrangements that can be used, adjusted, or discarded according to their own momentary preferences, no deliberative culture can flourish.

Understood against this cultural background, we can see that the notion of “talk” (in its contextual meaning of “organized deliberation”) has a significant weight in American thought. The fascination of the film *12 Angry Men* derives in part from its ability to capture many ways in which deliberation can collapse, and many ways in which it can be saved. In the following sections, I focus on the use of cinematic antithesis in making them salient for the audience.

4. Discovering quality deliberation through cinematic antithesis

In order to identify the different levels at which meaningful antitheses are employed in this film, I draw on the theoretical background

provided by Tseronis and Forceville (2017, pp. 167–172) and Sălăvăstru (2024, pp. 221–240) concerning this rhetorical figure. I therefore include in my analysis: (1) an explicit contrast between entities that are depicted in one and the same shot, that are either placed in a parallel structure, or explicitly opposed to one another; (2) an explicit contrast between entities that are depicted in different scenes throughout the movie; (3) an explicit contrast between what is depicted in the image and what the audience hears; and (4) an implicit contrast between the overarching ideas, meanings, or values to which the depicted elements give rise to. For the last category, it is important to note that one of the terms of the antithesis may not be explicitly represented in the picture, but only alluded to (Sălăvăstru 2024, pp. 236–240). I also take into account the fact that the two terms of an antithesis must lend themselves to being analysed within the same conceptual framework (Sălăvăstru 2024, pp. 221–229).

In what follows, I explore the antitheses that are directly connected with the contrast between the characters' understanding of the deliberative process *per se*.

4.1. The graveness of the responsibility and the lightness of the jury

The opening scenes of the film introduce the viewer to a courtroom setting, where the judge solemnly reminds the jury of their grave mission:

“You’ve listened to a long and complex case [...] It is now your duty to sit down and try and separate the facts from the fancy. [...] If there is a reasonable doubt in your minds as to the guilt of the accused, then you must bring me a verdict of not guilty. If, however, there is no reasonable doubt, then you must in good conscience find the accused guilty. [...] However you decide, your verdict must be unanimous. In the event that you find the accused guilty [...] the death sentence is mandatory in this case. You are faced with a grave responsibility. Thank you, gentlemen”.

However, the detached demeanor of the judge, marked by an air of boredom and drowsiness, does not reflect the weight of his words. The camera then shifts to the accused, whose youth, vulnerability, and resigned expression, create a new powerful contrast with the judge's attitude. It is the first and last time we see the accused.



Figure 1. “In the event that you find the accused guilty, the death sentence is mandatory”.



Figure 2. The accused’s face dissolves into the image of the jury room.
His fate is now in their hands.

As they enter the jury room, the gravity of the responsibility does not seem to have impressed many of the jury members. Most of them are complaining about the heat, the boredom, or telling personal stories. Some are joking disparagingly about the obviousness of the accused’s guilt and about the uselessness of more “talk” on the topic, when everything is “obvious”.

One of the jury members, however, stands apart and is gazing out the window. He does not address anybody. He seems lost in thought.

Another juror approaches him with an air of amusement, inquiring about his thoughts on the case. Although he receives no answer, the man adds that they were *lucky* to get a murder case and that he had not expected such *délice*. The contrast between their dispositions is striking.

Once the members of the jury are seated at the table, they swiftly agree to hold a preliminary vote. Eleven hands raise to declare the defendant guilty. One votes “not guilty”. It is the juror that had been silent by now — Henry Fonda’s character.



Figure 3. The only “not guilty” vote.

His dissent is swiftly dismissed by another juror:

“Oh, there is always one”.

Fonda’s character, *Juror No.8*, explains his willingness to reflect more on the evidence that has been provided during the trial and to see how all the pieces fit together. The others react with impatience:

“Perhaps you could tell us what you’re thinking and we might be able to show you where you are mixed up”.

He proceeds to highlight several weaknesses in the prosecution's case that the defense attorney failed to address. One of them concerns the purported uniqueness of the murder weapon. The uniqueness of the

switchblade knife had been confirmed by the storekeeper who had sold it to the boy and who had testified never having seen any similar knife in his entire life. To everyone's shock, Fonda's character pulls out of his pocket an identical knife, explaining that he bought it for 6 dollars from a store close to the defendant's home.



Figure 4. “It is a very unusual knife”.



Figure 5. “A coincidence is possible”.

The striking visual parallel between the two knives builds tension. One of the characters remarks that the knife had been a very important proof for the district attorney. Now Fonda's character has a case. Therefore he dares to make the following proposition to the other jurors:

"I'm gonna call for another vote. I want you, eleven men, to vote by secret written ballot. I'll abstain. If there are eleven votes for guilty, I won't stand alone: we'll take the guilty verdict to the judge right now. But if anyone votes not guilty, we stay here and talk it out".

Everybody agrees. The answers to this challenge lead us to another powerful antithesis employed in the movie: the one that contrasts those who want to hear more and those who do not.

4.2. A new point of contention: what is the use of listening?

As it turns out, one vote in eleven was "not guilty". Two of the jurors, upset about this result, start inquiring about the reasons for this change. Suspecting that the change came from the juror who grew up in the slum, one of the jurors scolds him for having let his emotions get to him. But another character intervenes:

"He did not change his vote. I did. [...] This gentleman has been standing alone against us. Now he does not say the boy is not guilty, he just isn't sure. Well, it is not easy to stand against the ridicule of others, so he gambled for support. And I gave it to him. I respect his motives. The boy on trial is probably guilty, but I want to hear more".



Figure 6. "I want to hear more".

This willingness to hear more about the case becomes a significant point of difference between the jurors. It also becomes the source of a new overarching antithesis that is present during the course of the film. While some of the jurors are gradually drawn into asking questions, making notes, expressing doubts about different aspects of the case, attempting to make parts of the testimony fit together, the opposing group remains aggressively reluctant to any new interventions. Their skeptical attitude is illustrated by the following lines:

“No, I don’t want you to tell me why”.

“Do we have to listen to this?”

“I don’t have to listen to this mumbo-jumbo”.

As the plot develops, the ones in the group dedicated to mutual listening make substantial progress. Their different life experiences make each one discover something that had been neglected by the others. The younger jurors are visibly enthusiastic about this examination focused on details. A lot of alternative hypotheses are formulated and tested against the evidence. Their collective efforts manage to shatter the certainties with which many of them entered the jury room. They gradually understand the depth of Juror 8’s initial point that, if a testimony is used to send somebody to die, it should be more accurate than the ones that had been provided during the trial. Their mutual listening is paying off. Each piece of evidence that had been provided during the trial turns out to be more feeble than it had initially seemed. With each new round of votes at the jury table, one more jury switches sides and votes “not guilty”. However, the opposing group is ready every time to temper the former group’s enthusiasm and question their method in harsh terms. The following lines, voiced by different characters, are illustrating this attitude:

“You people are only talking about little details”.

“That’s the most fantastic story I have heard”.

“This guy is trying to make you believe things that aren’t so”.

“What are you basing on? Stories this guy made up?”.

This group seems to see the act of listening as a form of weakness. To them, the stakes of the deliberative process seem to be reduced to scoring points and proving the others wrong.

When a juror who had initially voted “guilty” shares his doubts about a particular detail of the accused’s actions, he is swiftly dismissed by a representative of the *non-listening group* with the following line:

“Look, you voted guilty. What side are you on?”

The same competitive attitude is given away by the following lines:

“Ok, I’m giving you that”.

“Ok, now, you pulled a really bright trick, so what?”

To calm them down, one juror reminds them of the larger meaning of the entire process. They have a responsibility to listen to each other, because they are contributing to a decision regarding somebody else’s life. It does not matter whose opinion ends up being modified in the process, if in the end they reach the right decision together. There are no personal stakes other than a final correct decision. His words remind everyone the larger cultural meaning of the jury system in American democracy:

“This fighting...That is not why we are here, to fight. We have a responsibility. This is something that I have always thought is a remarkable thing about democracy. We are notified by mail to come down to this place to decide on the guilt or the innocence of a man we have not heard of before. We have nothing to gain or lose by our verdict. This is one of the reasons we are strong. We should not make it a personal thing”.

His intervention also points to the fact that Fonda’s character did not have such a unanimous opposition to his initiative as it might have seemed in the beginning. Other jurors knew that it was their civic duty to engage in proper deliberation, and actually wanted to exercise it. It just happened for the opposition to be loud enough to intimidate others from expressing their true positions.

The late placement of this line, however, makes us wonder why these are not the words of Fonda’s character in the beginning. The act of deliberating was not an indulgence of his, as some of the other jurors were trying to suggest. A possible answer would be that Fonda’s character knew how to listen to the other jurors’ words as they had initially entered the jury room. He realized he could not force them to do their duty. If he had tried to dominate the others and shame them for not doing their civic duty, he would not have gotten very far. By portraying his invitation to talk as a request based on a personal need, he set a different tone for the ensuing deliberation. He knew that maintaining a spirit of civic friendship was a precondition of making the others listen to his doubts. In other words, his initial listening in silence paid off, too.

However, his peaceful approach is not shared by many members of the jury. While Fonda's character manages to attract more and more of the jurors in his game based on abductive reasoning and to make them passionate about discovering the truth, he is not equally successful in instilling a deep sense of respect and peace in their exchanges, as we shall see in the following section.

4.3. Do angry men achieve more in a deliberative setting?

During the course of the deliberative process, the characters that were initially meek and shy (the immigrants and the low-class workers, the very young and the very old) visibly develop the courage to express their point of view more often. They are empowered by Fonda's attitude towards them. We discover them speak not only more frequently, but also in an increasingly clear and articulate manner. They stand by their beliefs and make significant contributions to discovering the truth, many of them based on their own experiences. The points of difference that initially placed them in contrast to the rest — their age, their ethnicity, the social class, the work they do — become the source of new insights on the available evidence. Their self-efficacy is visibly improved and so is their joy of contributing on equal footing to the deliberative process.

But sometimes they shift towards a disrespectful or outright unfair attitude towards the group who refuses to listen, thus becoming themselves the ones who break the rules of proper deliberation. For instance, the youngest member of the jury, perhaps too enthusiastic about the new egalitarian *ethos* that deliberation brought about, calls one of the oldest members of the group (*Juror No.10*) "loudmouth". The young juror further develops a rather defiant attitude towards him until the end, often answering his comments with the same patronizing tone and sometimes using the same lines that *Juror No.10* had used himself in the beginning. However, this use of anger is rather problematic: it is unclear whether disrespecting the disrespectful is a route to reinstating respect in a deliberative setting.

The same problem applies to the immigrant juror, *Juror No.11*, who seems to apply a double standard in a moment of anger: when one of the jurors says he will vote "not guilty" just because he wants the whole process to end faster, *Juror No.11* corners him and asks him to explain the reasons behind his vote. His insistence on voting with integrity, and not for the wrong reasons, is fully justified. But the audience cannot have forgotten the earlier moment when he himself had changed his vote to "not guilty". At that point, he had firmly stated that he does not have to

defend his position to anybody else. In other words, once his anger gets the best of him, he is willing to require from other jurors something that he had not provided himself. We are now left to wonder if justice in a deliberation can be achieved by behaving unjustly to the unjust.

These verbal sanctions made in anger by the jurors who are theoretically on the “good side” reflects a deeply entrenched belief in boycott, protest, and direct sanction as routes to determine others to behave — perhaps another defining feature of American culture. However, if such penalties are not themselves made in a spirit of justice, peace, and respect, they may further undermine the overall quality of the deliberative process.

We are soon to be offered an example of a collective sanction applied to *Juror No. 10*. While he reiterates his speech about his fundamental distrust of people coming from slum backgrounds and claims that human life does not mean to *them* what it means to *us*, he is sanctioned by the other jurors, who leave the table and turn their backs on him. This type of intervention is no longer acceptable to them. Now, it is them who collectively choose *not to listen*.



Figure 7. “Listen to me!”

While in the beginning his attitude had allowed him to occupy a self-appointed role of an authoritative *father* speaking down on his *kids* (a term he uses fairly often in relation to the other jurors), by the end of the deliberative process, it is precisely this attitude that deprives him of credibility. After this silent protest aimed at him, he symbolically removes himself from the table and sits aside, seated at a smaller table,

until the end of the film. He does not speak again, except when asked about his vote — which is finally changed to “not guilty”.

Another character unwilling to doubt his opinions and constantly angry at almost everyone is *Juror No.3*. His anger does not serve him, either. In his case, another dramatic antithesis is at play. One of his first lines in the movie is his promise that he would not let any personal feelings interfere with his decision. During the entire film, whenever somebody mentions something that resembles a sense of empathy towards the accused, or raises doubts about the accused’s guilt, *Juror No.3* explodes with anger, criticizing them for letting the emotional aspects of the situation matter more than the “facts”.

However, his brutal rejection of all legitimate doubts regarding the accused’s guilt become red flags for the rest of the jury. Towards the end, he remains alone in claiming that there is no reasonable doubt. Fonda’s character, believing once again in the power of talk, asks him to restate his reasons. We watch him go over the case again, in the same angry voice. As he hears his own outline, he realizes that a powerful counter argument has been brought to each piece of evidence that he still holds on to. He breaks down as he wants to consult his notes on the trial, but instead finds a photograph of him and his son. Their own conflict is actually the reason why he wanted this symbolic punishment of a young person so badly. We find out that he had been moved by personal feelings after all. But it is only by talking, and being listened to once again, that he himself could discover that.



Figure 8. “Not guilty!”

5. Concluding remarks

The last scenes of the film leave us with a renewed sense of freedom. After exchanging names for the first time with another juror, Fonda's character is filmed going down the stairs of the courthouse. This sequence creates a powerful contrast with the film's opening scene, in which the courthouse loomed above, its imposing architecture and camera angles creating a sense of powerlessness before an impersonal institution administering justice. Now, however, the perspective has shifted — we are now active agents capable of questioning and shaping the decisions made within its walls. To a certain extent, we are shielded from its abuses.

The antitheses in this last scene point to a powerful connection between deliberation and freedom. Although the accused is free, we do not see a glimpse of him. We do not even see him receiving the verdict. This creates a powerful contrast with the initial scenes of the trial. How could this absence be explained from a rhetorical point of view? Following Laura Mulvey's interpretation regarding the objectifying effect of putting humans on display for others to look at them (Mulvey 1975, p.11), we may say that the accused is symbolically freed even from our gaze. No longer displayed for our scrutiny, as he was in the beginning, he ceases to be an object of evaluation. He is now in full ownership of his own being.

On another level, we feel the freedom that members of the jury gained by confronting their own prejudice, their own cowardice, their own shyness, their own reluctance to engage in deliberation. Perhaps the film's most powerful antithesis is that between the group's initial state and its transformation by the end, with the deliberative process itself causing a series of profound changes in their behaviour, largely cancelling out the initial oppositions. Is such fundamental transformation possible in such a short timespan? Probably not. Sass and Dryzek warn against romanticising deliberative practices (Sass and Dryzek 2014, 13). However, this is exactly what the film does, and maybe with good reason. Perhaps having a portrayal of a deliberative process as we hope it will work (Babcock and Sassoubre 2007, 642) provides an aspirational standard, a model against which we might measure our own engagement in similar processes. The multiple antitheses developed throughout the film provide a mirror in which to see our own deliberative practices, a mirror we must keep close and check frequently, if we intend to contribute to a flourishing deliberative culture.



Fig.9. Outcomes of deliberation. How we would want them to be.

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