

Study examines viewers' role in American death penalty films

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The curtains are opening in the witness chamber during the execution scene in the 2009 film *Law Abiding Citizen* (above). Simultaneously, the curtains are opening on the stage in the cello recital scene (below). Credit: Journal

Over the course of the last 100 years or more, many scenes of execution in American film have offered intimate knowledge of executions, giving viewers a privileged 'backstage' gaze of an execution not available

outside film, the chance to see what executioners see, and a chance to understand the condemned's experience as he awaits death.

These motifs are explored in a recent *Law & Social Inquiry* analysis, in which the authors conclude by asking whether and how scenes of [execution](#) in American film provoke an awareness of the political responsibility inherent in viewers' identities as democratic citizens in a killing state.

"The death penalty is very much in the news and I hope this research will provide a broad context for today's political and legal debate," said lead author Dr. Austin Sarat.

More information: Sarat, A., Chan, M., Cole, M., Lang, M., Scholnik, N., Sidhu, J. and Siegel, N. (2014), Scenes of Execution: Spectatorship, Political Responsibility, and State Killing in American Film. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 39: 690. [DOI: 10.1111/lasi.12084](https://doi.org/10.1111/lasi.12084)

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