

Fathers and sons

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [March 24, 1999](#) issue

Theologians sometimes use films to illustrate religious themes. This can result in a useful correlation of cultural concerns with religious claims, but it can also be a disservice to the films cited if they are employed merely as illustrations rather than engaged on their own terms. As Clive Marsh says, in a book he coedited with Gayle Ortiz, *Explorations in Theology and Film*, "Christian theology cannot simply call the shots. Films can thus not simply be expected to illustrate theology. They may well offer a real contribution to Christian theology."

Film has the capacity to give us what Mircea Eliade referred to as a hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred. Three recent films suggest that a hierophany occurs through the ordinary, which sometimes brings the joyful presence of God's grace, and at other times the dreadful realization of God's absence. These three films capture the essence of father-son relationships not by presenting a formula of parenting but by artfully evoking the dangers and possibilities of the father-son connection.

Life Is Beautiful, an Italian film directed, written by and starring Roberto Benigni, is a fable presented from the perspective of an adult looking back at his childhood. The narrator remembers a deeply loving father. A noted comedian, Benigni begins the film with a series of comedic moments which establish the strong relationship between an Italian Jew and his non-Jewish bride. When the Germans move into Italy, Benigni and his son are sent to a concentration camp; the mother joins them in her own sacrificial act.

Benigni convinces his son that what is happening to them is all a game, played under a set of rules the child must follow in order to win a big prize. This game, in the midst of the horror of a concentration camp, is the heart of the film. Some observers have complained that the Holocaust is not a proper setting for a comedy. But this misses the point. The focus of the film is not the Holocaust but a father's sacrificial love for his son.

One scene stands out: Hidden in a box, the boy sees his father taken away by soldiers. The father catches his son's eye and proceeds to mimic the German goose step, just to show that the "game" continues. The style of the film is designed to evoke the final joyful reality of a great "victory" for the boy, a moment which will forever remind him of his father's devotion to him.

Affliction concerns a father at the opposite extreme—an oppressive, hate-filled father. Based on a Russell Banks novel, *Affliction* is directed by Paul Schrader, who in an earlier film, *Hardcore*, revealed some of his own upbringing in a fundamentalist Dutch Reformed family. Writing about *Affliction* in *Film Journal International*, Kevin Lally notes: "For anyone who's read Peter Biskind's *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, it's hard not to flash on siblings Paul and Leonard Schrader's miserable Calvinist upbringing while watching this tale of two brothers raised by a frighteningly volatile father." In an interview in *Filmmaker* magazine, cited by Lally, Schrader recalled: "My father was not abusive, he was not alcoholic, but there were enough similarities."

Whatever the similarities, *Affliction* is a chilling portrait of the damage an unloving father can do to his sons. It explores the emotional and physical disintegration of Wade Whitehouse (Nick Nolte), a police officer in a small New Hampshire town.

Wade's father, Glen (James Coburn), is seen in flashbacks beating Wade during violent, drunken outbursts of anger. The narrator is Wade's brother, who avoided the beatings by withdrawing from the family and, indeed, from life.

Wade's life has paralleled his father's. He's a drinker, and he has a temper he can barely control. In one burst of fury, he strikes his young daughter, evoking the prideful comment from Glen Whitehouse that the son has truly become like the father. This is a film that evokes the presence of absolute evil in the person of Glen Whitehouse and the implications of its presence in the son.

Whereas *Life Is Beautiful* and *Affliction* embody extremes of love and evil, *October Sky* suggests the ambiguity of most father-son relationships. Based on the true story of NASA scientist Homer Hickham Jr., *October Sky* is Hickham's memory of his high school experience in a West Virginia coal mining town.

Inspired by Sputnik and with the encouragement of a science teacher, Hickham (Jake Gyllenhaal) and three classmates begin to build rockets. Hickham's biggest struggle, however, is not with his rockets, many of which crash to the ground, but with his

father, superintendent of the local mining company who wants his son to follow him into the mines. "I know the mine like I know a man. I was born for this, " the father exults, eager to convince his son he should follow the same path.

Chris Cooper (the sheriff from *Lone Star*) plays the senior Hickham in a remarkably sensitive performance. He is a father limited in parenting skills but driven by a passion for family and work. This is a story not of major crises but of small struggles.

The relationship between father and son in *October Sky* is at times painful to watch. There are no winners or losers when sons go their separate ways. *October Sky* does not illustrate good parenting; rather, it evokes the realization that since parents have only a limited vision of how to shape their children's future, the job requires a huge amount of love and a lot of divine assistance.