

Fatherhood and Hollywood : Dads in Movies

When Disney released Pixar's *Toy Story 3*, on June 15, 2010, it felt something ironic about marking Father's Day with an installment in an animated series revolving around a household headed by a single mother, with a boy named Andy and his kid sister growing up fatherless. Pixar had already given us two of the most **sympathetic and well-developed** father figures in recent family-film history : the widowed Marlin in *Finding Nemo* and the family man Mr. Incredible in *The Incredibles*. In *Ratatouille*, on the other hand, the rat protagonist's father was depicted as a familiar paternal stereotypes : the **old-school reactionary authoritarian who regards his progeny's unique aspirations with dismissive incomprehension** — though like many such fathers he is redeemed by a third-act breakthrough.

Last year's Pixar release, *Up*, featured an **elderly widower**, Carl Fredrickson, who becomes a surrogate father figure — or rather grand-father figure to young Russell who lives with his single mother and is initially in some denial about the **neglect and unreliability of his absentee father**, who is with another woman. Russell's fond memories of trivial moments spent with his father, and his wishful anticipation of his father being there for him at special events when deep down he knows he won't, is one of the most **melancholy evocations of the absent father** in any family film since *E.T.* Films like *Up* and *E.T.*, though hard on individual fathers, are acutely conscious of the **importance of the father**, of the **tragedy of paternal abandonment** and the **loss of the intact family**. Other '*broken family films*', less poignant in this regard, include from Tim Robbins' acceptance of part-time parent status in *Zathura* to Ben Stiller's **inability to accept and cope with the post-divorce reality** in *Night at the Museum*. Going further back, there's the **post-marital snarkiness** of *Santa Clause* and ultimately the **paternal buffoonery** of *Mrs. Doubtfire*, which ends with a homily for children about why it's better for Mommy and Daddy to live separately, but love still binds them all together.

Looking beyond family films, fatherhood has taken hard knocks lately on the big screen : *The Back-up Plan* and *The Switch* featured women conceiving by **artificial insemination**. The hit remake *Clash of the Titans* is all about a mythic hero with an **absentee father** in Heaven, Zeus. *Precious* is a nightmare story about a **monstrous father** who abuses daughter, impregnating her twice — and the Coens' *A Serious Man* features the **über-failure** father !

1 – The Search for the Ideal Father

The Hollywood of today seems to have a problem portraying strong, effective father figures such as **Atticus Finch** or **Captain von Trapp**. The examples, both chosen from the 1960s, highlight the problem of the search for Hollywood's ideal father figure. Both characters are widowers with no fault of their own, surely, but it would be a melancholy thing if fathers appear at their best only where there are no mothers !

a) **Atticus Finch** in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962)

- **The good.** Atticus is unquestionably one of Hollywood's most beloved father figures, and in many ways he does ideally embody the archetypal traditional father. He is **strong but gentle, self-sacrificing but not emotionally demonstrative**, adored by his children and yet distant — his daughter Scout particularly admires his ability to analyze and explain anything. Atticus parents **by example**, modelling **upright and responsible behaviour** while also **standing between his children and the cruelty of the world they live in**. While he has a housekeeper to care for his children, Atticus sacrifices himself for them as well, sitting up all night tending Jem in his sickness. He is even humanized by his failure in the film's central trial — as idealized as he is, he is no Superman.
- **The questionable.** Unlike other cinematic widower fathers, Atticus shows **no interest in remarrying**. Through his dedication to his children, Atticus has transcended the personal need for a wife. Film scholar **Stella Bruzzi** argues in her study *Bringing Up Daddy : Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-war Hollywood* that *To Kill a Mockingbird* presents Atticus as the ideal '**composite parent**', both father and mother to his children, with no need to seek a new wife and mother for his children — such as Miss Maudie Atkinson living right across the street. Atticus's indifference to the lack of a mother figure in the lives of his children is at least an element of ambiguity in an otherwise idealized figure.

b) **Captain von Trapp** in *The Sound of Music* (1965)

Von Trapp is a more typical Hollywood widower father, one whose fatherhood is **incomplete and defective without a complementary maternal presence**. Other examples include *Houseboat* (1958) or *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (1963). Von Trapp's parenting style is an exaggerated comic variation on a familiar stereotype, the **rigid disciplinarian**. To be fair

to the Captain, the film suggests that the pseudo-military order he brings to his household is not necessarily his 'true' paternal style ; rather, he takes refuge in rigidity from the grief of widowhood, banishing play, music and everything proper to a happy family as **painful reminders of his departed first wife**. The **humbled, chastened spirit** with which he finally accepts and rejoins the harmonious spirit that Maria brings to the house indicates that this kinder, gentler *paterfamilias* is his true self — a self he lost with the death of his first wife, and recovers only through the intervention of an appropriate mother figure.

2 – Hollywood Father Figures : **Spencer Tracy** vs. Steve Martin

The 1950s are popularly remembered as the age of the **omnipotent patriarch**. There is truth to this, as far as Hollywood is concerned, but it's also true that 1950s Hollywood is a world rife with **paternal failure and youthful rebellion**. Filmmakers like Elia Kazan, Douglas Sirk and Nicholas Ray made films about **variously weak or overbearing fathers, absent or domineering mothers** and the **misunderstood youths who reject their authority** such as Kazan's *East of Eden* and Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause*, both starring James Dean and both released in 1955. Westerns like *Broken Lance* (1954) and *The Big Country* (1958) depicted **ruthless, domineering patriarchs** whose ways have become obsolete and must be rejected by the next generation.

Spencer Tracy's role as Stanley T. Banks in *Father of the Bride* (1950) then in *Father's Little Dividend* (1951) cemented his status as the quintessential Hollywood 1950s patriarch — a role on which he rang changes in various other films, including his last, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). Both *Father* films were remade in the 1990s with Steve Martin as George Banks ; Martin also played a new kind of archetypal father in films from *Parenthood* (1989) to his remake of another 1950s film, *Cheaper by the Dozen* (2003), and its 2005 sequel. Comparing and contrasting Tracy with Martin, then, offers an interesting benchmark in **how fatherhood has changed over the years**, at least in Hollywood imagination.

a) **Spencer Tracy** in *Father of the Bride* (1950)

Even in 1950s, father figures had **feet of clay**, and films were affectionately indulgent toward **fathers' foibles and insecurities**. The limitations of 1950s fatherhood are evident from the outset in *Father of the Bride*, as Stanley Banks learns belatedly of his daughter Kay's interest in a young man named Buckley only after the engagement is a *fait accompli*. The blustering

indignation with which Stan greets this announcement is a symptom of his own **paternal buffoonery**, but could also reflect **anxiety over his own disconnectedness, his ignorance and sense of powerlessness** regarding his own family's affairs. At least Kay's mother Ellie was aware of Buckley's existence before the announcement and she's resentfully willing to humour the old man when Kay accuses her father of being afraid to confront the boy and question him about his financial position for instance.

b) **Steve Martin** in *Father of the Bride* (1950)

The 1950 film thus divides parental foibles, not necessarily evenly, between both parents. In the 1991 remake, by contrast, **Steve Martin's** Banks **bears the entire burden of parental angst and absurdity alone**. There is never a moment when his wife Nina is ever anything but joyously receptive to their daughter Annie's surprise engagement, or anything but tolerantly critical of George's *worst-case-scenario* fears. Generally speaking, the remake makes the father's surprise less poignant and affords less excuse for his consternation.

In the original movie, when Mr. Banks insists on cutting down the guest list to save money, he also demands to **keep his own favoured guests**, such as a long-time client — but Mrs. Banks equally wants to include members of her club, where she's running for president. This selfish squabbling provokes exasperation from Kay at both of her parents. In the remake, the father is **the only one unreasonably keeping his own favoured guests** on the list.

In the original movie, Mr. Banks turns out to be rather a **garrulous old fool, and a bit overfond of drink**. His concerns about Buckley turn to affectionate approval principally because the young man is a polite listener. Meeting the in-laws for the first time, embarrassingly, Mr. Banks becomes **tipsy, erratically voluble and finally somnolent**. Such **social gaffes** would apparently have been too soft for the writers of the remake. In the 1991 version, after snooping in his hosts' bathroom medicine cabinet and their bankbook, Mr. Banks winds up scrambling out a window, crashing through an arbour, and finally tumbling fully clothed into a swimming pool, along with the bankbook. Later, the father's behaviour becomes so egregious that he is actually arrested and thrown in jail — and, as a condition for bailing him out, Mrs. Banks makes him solemnly promise, repeating after her, to act his age and think of his daughter first. Such **abject humiliations** far exceed anything that the father is subjected to in the original.

There is only one way in which the 1991 remake softens the father's **powerlessness and irrelevance**, a consistent theme in the original : '*From now on, don't answer the phone*', Mrs. Banks instructs her husband, and a friend facetiously says : '*From now on, your only function is to pay the bills*'. Dramatically speaking, as far as the wedding is concerned, the father has almost **no constructive part to play** in the original movie. This can't quite be said of him in the remake, who is given the **dignity** of playing a minor role in reconciling the young lovers after a silly squabble. In the original, Mr. Banks not only **accomplishes nothing** toward the reconciliation, but even delays it by trying to bundle Buckley out the door before Kay changes her mind. In the remake, the father is prodding the lovebirds back together again.

With respect to fatherhood, the remake's most notable innovation comes in a pair of scenes in which the girl and her fiancé shoot hoops in the driveway with her father and younger brother. Scored by a nostalgic soundtrack, Temptations' *My Girl*, this scene is a sweetly **sentimental portrait of a playful father-daughter bond** scarcely imaginable in the 1950s version. Would the respectable patriarch of the 1950s film have played sports even with his boys ? Certainly a proper young lady wouldn't have played such a game in those days. The decades between the two films can be felt. In the process, doubtless, something valuable has been lost and yet even so, it's hard not to feel that something has been gained too.

3 – Fatherhood and Masculinity

The archetypal Hollywood father has always been a good man, but he is not always **the most manly man**. The toughest breed of masculine strength belongs to the lone man — ideally the lone hero, but unfortunately most of all... the lone villain.

The **manly lone man has long been a cinematic counterpoint to the father figure**, at turns representing what the father has given up in becoming a family man, or what side of himself he has suppressed, or simply the wildness of the world which he has abandoned to become his family's protector.

a) **George Bailey vs. Harry Bailey** in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)

Family man George Bailey, with his bad ear, stays in Bedford Falls during the war, while his dashing kid brother Harry wears his country's uniform, goes to war and becomes a **decorated hero** — reversing their childhood roles in which George heroically saved Harry after the accident on the thin ice.

b) **Joe Starrett vs. Shane** in *Shane* (1953)

Proud George is anything but threatened by his brother's heroism, but the contrast becomes more problematic in a movie like *Shane* (1953), even though Shane is befriended by Joe Starrett and his family, and is on their side against their enemies. Both **Starrett's wife and his son feel the effect of Shane's virility** — an uncomfortable state of affairs even if Shane takes a subordinate role. Once Shane has saved Starrett's life, going to town in his place and killing those who threatened him, Shane must leave town. Despite young Joey's plaintive calls for Shane to 'come back', **Shane the hero is too much for Starrett the homesteader** to live in the same town, and they both know it.

c) **Fathers vs. Rogues** in *3:10 to Yuma* (1957) and *Cape Fear* (1962)

Other examples of fathers contrasted with manlier men include Brody and Quint in *Jaws*, **George McFly** and **Biff Tannen** in *Back to the Future* and Murtaugh and Riggs in the *Lethal Weapon* movies. The most difficult variation on the theme involves films like *3:10 to Yuma* (1957) and *Cape Fear* (1962) that **pit the father against a tougher, more virile rogue** who cheerfully puts the family man to the test.

These last two films offer interesting illustrations of cinematic fatherhood, for two reasons :

- First, the fathers in both are played by **actors known for similar roles** in other films : **Van Heflin**, who plays Starrett in *Shane*, plays a similar character in *3:10 to Yuma* and **Gregory Peck** in *Cape Fear* is not unlike Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962).
- Second, **both films were remade** : *Cape Fear* in 1991 and *3:10 to Yuma* in 2007, offering another suggestive case study of **fatherhood's shifting fortunes in Hollywood history**.

3:10 to Yuma casts Heflin as a **subtly impotent home-steader**, Dan Evans, whose life is complicated by the arrival of a **virile man of action** — not a soft-spoken gunslinger as in *Shane*, but a charming outlaw named Ben Wade. Struggling to provide for his family and to show his self-worth, Evans agrees to escort the captured outlaw to justice for a \$200 reward. Wade's **charisma overshadows** Evans from the start ; the outlaw subtly flirts with Evans' wife during an uncomfortable dinner at the Evans homestead, and Wade, half ashamed to speak to his wife because of his poor performance as a provider, is unable to respond effectively. Even so, Evans is man enough to contend with Wade at least as an underdog. On

one occasion, when Wade is attacked, Evans saves his life. Evans also sticks to his duty, eventually refusing the original reward — for a very specific reason, to leave his sons a **legacy of honour** to follow. In the end, Evans has his **self-respect and the respect of his wife**, as well as the outlaw's respect, which makes a crucial difference. Wade may be, by some measures, the better man, but Evans has his honour and his reward.

The 2007 remake of *3:10 to Yuma* exaggerates the contrast between the two men to the point of grotesquerie, diminishing Evans (**Christian Bale**) to a figure of **crippling pathos** and glorifying Wade (**Russell Crowe**) to a figure of **superhuman virility**. Evans is thoroughly emasculated, literally crippled — with a wooden leg from Civil War service —, and despised by his teenage son for his **weakness and inadequacy**. In this remake, self-respect as well as the respect of his family and of Wade elude him right to the end. The remake gives Evans **no chance** to save Wade's life. It deprives Evans of all the moral triumph of the original, as he is given **purely practical reasons** for rejecting Wade's money. The family man remains a figure of pathos to the end, dying with nothing but the pity of his son and the outlaw.

A similar transmutation takes place in the remaking of *Cape Fear*. In the 1962 original, **Gregory Peck** brings all the **paternal righteousness** of Atticus Finch to the character of Sam Bowden, a lawyer and family man who becomes the target of a vendetta by an ex-con, Max Cady (**Robert Mitchum**), who harbours a grudge against Bowden, who testified against him in the trial that put him away for 8 years for rape.

Gregory Peck isn't a weak man by any means, but **his respectable gentility is no match for the insidious figure** of Robert Mitchum. When Cady starts stalking Bowden and his family, Bowden uses his connections with local police to try to get at him through charges like vagrancy, but Cady has studied law in prison and knows exactly how to stay on the right side of the law. As the tension escalates, Bowden begins to grapple with the uncomfortable possibility that to protect his family from Cady he may have to become more like him.

Bowden tries buying off Cady, and even hires thugs to beat him up — a tactic that backfires when Cady gets the better of his attackers. The conflict culminates in a nail-biting *cat and mouse* game in which Bowden uses his family to lure Cady to a secluded place on North Carolina's Cape Fear River, but Cady eludes Bowden's traps and terrorizes his wife and daughter on their houseboat until Bowden intervenes. In the end, Bowden gets lucky and has Cady at his mercy, but refuses to kill him.

Flawed and conventional, the original *Cape Fear* isn't a masterpiece — nor is the far more **lurid remake** directed by Martin Scorsese and starring **Robert De Niro** as Cady. Much like the later *3:10 to Yuma* remake, the *Cape Fear* remake elevates its villain to **Mephistophelian cunning and power while undercutting its hero**, not just physically but morally as well.

An **unfaithful husband with a wandering eye**, this Bowden earned Cady's undying enmity not by honestly testifying as a witness for the prosecution, but by betraying his oath of attorney while *defending* Cady, suppressing evidence that might have aided Cady's cause. Bowden seduces and viciously assaults a woman. Cady also verbally seduces and even kisses and paws Bowden's teenage daughter.

In the overwrought climactic confrontation, instead of defending his family, Bowden is rendered helpless while his teenage daughter takes drastic action to stop Cady — not entering into details here ! Cady, however, is virtually unstoppable by mortal means, and keeps coming back for more. When Bowden does get Cady at his mercy, he **fully intends to kill him** in this version, only fate decides differently, depriving Bowden of effectively carrying out his malign intent. Impotent to the last, Bowden can only watch Cady die at the hand of God.

5 – Fathers and Sons

FORTUNATELY, even when fatherhood is compromised, it isn't always in such a **reductive, nihilistic way**. Few films express **disappointment with paternal inadequacy** more openly than *Back to the Future* (1985) — but that film is also about the **redemption or restoration of the father** and about the **son's wish to be proud** even of a father that has disappointed him. *Star Wars* likewise ended in 1983 with *The Return of the Jedi*'s bold **redemption of one of the most iconic problematic fathers** of all time, Darth Vader. More recently, *Pirates of the Caribbean* attempted to chart a similar course with Will Turner's compromised father, Bootstrap Bill, though the series ultimately lost its way.

Other recent films attest the durability of the father in today's Hollywood. One of the most sentimental father-son stories in recent Hollywood history, *Frequency* (2000), reveals how the son (Jim Caviezel)'s **capacity for loving or unstable relationships is determined by the absence or presence of his father** throughout his early life — a very acute vision. Another movie, *The Rookie* (2003), features a good and loving son with a strained relationship with his own emotionally unavailable father, whose approval belatedly means so much.

5 – The Persistence of Fatherhood

The ubiquity of this pattern of *paternal approval delayed but finally received* can also be found in family films, from *Ratatouille* to *Happy Feet* (2006), *Madagascar 2* (2008) and *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010), which measure the father's stature, even the problematic father.

Conversely, movies from *Batman Begins* (2005) and *Robots* (2005) to *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) dramatize the **life-long impact of loving paternal encouragement**, mostly because the **child loses the father to tragedy**. Again, the tragic absence of faithless fathers in *Spiderwick Chronicles* (2008) and *Where Wild Things Are* (2009) plaintively highlights the defining importance of a father for both good and ill.

There is still a sense that a father is meant to be a hero. In films like *Spy Kids* (2000) and *The Incredibles* he is literally a superhero — albeit not without flaws. **Domestic conflict** is an ever-present pitfall, but when the heroic father and mother stand united, together with their children, they become an **irresistible force and an immovable object**.

For more vulnerable fathers, **heroism is an underdog struggle** to care for their families amid hardship, as in films like *Cinderella Man* (2005), *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), *The Road* (2009) and *The Princess and the Frog*. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) also features a typically Burtonesque theme involving the **emotional crippling** of a son (Johnny Depp's Willy Wonka) by the mistreatment of his own nightmare father.

Other movies in recent Hollywood history with **sympathetic father figures** include *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000), *Because of Winn Dixie* (2005) and even *Twilight*. Even silly father figures are usually at least loving and lovable, and often exemplify positive virtues of one sort or another in *Stuart Little 2* (2002), *Holes* (2003) or *Kung Fu Panda* (2008).

Then there are the crude comedies, like *Knocked Up* and *Juno*, that depict **immature young men** struggling to come to terms with the responsibility of having fathered a child. Hollywood's ambivalence about fatherhood is deeply entrenched. Ambivalence, though, is not mere hostility ; often it is rooted in a **real awareness of the irreplaceable importance of fatherhood**, and in **melancholy or anger over paternal failure in a fallen, broken world**. Ambivalence includes **frustration and resentment** as well as **love and hope**. Even when Hollywood's fathers let us down, there is often, behind the disappointment, a longing to believe in fathers, a yearning for a father who will not let us down...