Act One: Introduction

Frank S. Pittman III

Abstract It has been said that we go to the movies to fall in love. We know that is true and we fall in love regularly with an enormous screen there in the dark. But we also go to the movies to get wisdom about how life works, to predict the future, to learn how to see what is over the next hill, and what is down the next road. For a lifetime, I have looked to the movies for lessons in reality. But none of these sources of the immortal myths and legends by which we structure our lives could compare in reality or in mythic moment with what was taking place as the pictures and stories and faces – never forget the faces – were transferred from the big screen to the even bigger screen in my head.

We have to look quite a way back to find films about families who are earnestly trying to get along, rather than trying to decide whether it will make them happy to remain in the family with their loved ones. Even if no one else does so, at least the therapists must believe that people have the power to make relationships work, to pull together in times of crisis, and to actually live together without driving one another crazy. The primary skill of therapists is optimism, the belief that we humans can change and do whatever needs to be done for our life and for the lives of our loved ones.

It has been said that we go to the movies in order to fall in love. We know that is true and we fall in love regularly with an enormous screen full of Cyd Charisse, Laurence Olivier, Susan Sarandon, Sophia Loren, Meryl Streep, Morgan Freeman, or Gene Kelly, there in the dark. But we also go to the movies to get wisdom about how life works, to predict the future, to learn how to see what is over the next hill, what is down the next road. For a lifetime, I have looked to the movies for lessons in reality.

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My Life at the Movies

I grew up in a series of small Southern Gothic towns with an alcoholic mother, a father off at war, two adoring grandmothers, one the editor of the daily newspaper, the other the undertaker and church organist. What’s more, we had a cemetery full of kinfolk, each with a story or two. When I was not listening to family stories at my grandmothers’ knees, I went down the street to the movies. My first job was delivering fliers for the local picture show. To me, the movies were far more real than the life my family was living in their decaying antebellum mansions with little or no inside plumbing. It was an ideal stage setting for earthy romantic fantasy.

My mother’s cousin Charles, with whom she had been raised, had run the pentathlon in the 1920 Olympics, had won a Rhodes Scholarship and the Metropolitan Opera Auditions, and had gone to Hollywood hoping to play Ashley in Gone with the Wind. He didn’t get the role but he did get on with the telephone company for a while. Mother would send him $50 every Xmas and he would send her a letter about the famous elbows he had rubbed. Hollywood became part of our neighborhood.

I was 2 when Snow White (Disney, 1937) came out and the wicked stepmother scared the BeJeesus out of me; I was 4 when I nestled in my Mammy’s lap in the balcony to see Gone with the Wind (Fleming, 1939), which I still insist is real, more real than either Kansas or Oz in 1939. I learned compassion from the Joads trying to get from their dust bowl in Oklahoma to the gardens of California. I learned morals and character from Hopalong Cassidy (Bretherton, 1935), whose real last name (Boyd) was that of my most loving grandmother. All the war movies fighting it out in my mind starred my missing father; all the love stories starred my once beautiful mother.

I wrote movie reviews in college at Washington and Lee, another mythical atmosphere, and even took courses (from a mentor I shared with Tom Wolfe) on how to watch movies. For 4 years, I did not miss a single flick that came to either theater in the little college town or the theaters at any of the surrounding towns.

In medical school, I was busy and became an amateur movie goer. In time I became a doctor and a husband to another dedicated moviegoer. We could go to the movies again.

I went into psychiatry, of course, perhaps to learn what a normal life was like. I ignored the bloodless diagnoses in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Instead, I read Freud, whose case histories were something between novels and mysteries. (Freud and Sherlock Holmes had more in common than cocaine.) I came to see that I could be more helpful to people when we had together turned their life or situation into a story, as the causes and effects in their lives roll around and enwrap one another. We explored the forces that impacted or determined the things people did, how they came to do them, where they picked up the misinformation about the human condition that would make their self-defeating behavior make sense within the context of their family, their town, and perhaps even within the context of the movies they had seen or the novels they had read.

Interestingly, much of the misinformation people carry through life was picked up from self-help books written by well-meaning people who just hadn’t lived enough life yet to understand how complex it can be, and how simple.
As psychiatry did in those days, our primary goal was to convince people that whatever their parents had told them or modeled for them was well intentioned, even if stark raving mad. Only if people know what other people feel in life can they be compassionate or optimistic or effective in negotiating the interactions of their lives on the same planet with other human beings. One thing that was inescapably clear was that those people, usually men, who read the sports pages but have rarely if ever read fiction, have bypassed the crucial experience of knowing what life feels like to people outside themselves. They may go to movies in which people on screen don’t talk much to one another, while the audience is kept awake by glass shattering and things exploding.

This was of course long before television got to our neck of the woods. When it did come in, I was grown and gone. (My parents then kept several TV’s blaring around the clock, stopping all the conversation that made life with them feel like someone was alive there.) We could watch the little TV screen and see competitive seductions, contests about who would get the girl (or the guy). Around the clock we watched bad guys chase good guys, and good guys chase bad guys, and we might ponder who would live and who would die. Most of the plots were familiar from the polygamous and bloodthirsty Old Testament. Between burning bushes and man-eating whales, brothers killed brothers and fathers killed sons, and kings killed the husbands of the women they lusted after. Sick people got well and bad people got caught and everyone good lived happily ever after.

My hobby is writing movie reviews. For 25 years, my reviews have appeared in the *Psychotherapy Networker* (formerly *The Family Therapy Networker*) with reviews of – or at least comments about – 450 movies. In these reviews I try to underline what the moviemakers are trying to say and trying to do. I want to identify what the movie is showing us, what effect it is having upon us, and what it tells us about the human condition, about the relationships of human beings in their natural state. I may be making some use of the hours I’ve spent in the dark thinking about what sort of creatures we are and what we are doing to one another when we act out the scripts we have been given, directly or inadvertently, in our families.

In therapy, patients and I talk about the messages from the movies. When I teach, I show or explain or even act out scenes from movies that demonstrate the interaction or the emotions people go through in life.

**Marriage: The Mysteriously Fragile Institution**

We talk a lot about marriage, the institution that confuses us most. Marriage in recent decades has somehow become the most fragile of our human institutions. It is not holding and therefore children are growing up with single parents, if any at all, and are failing to grow into adults. It is a disaster for all of us. Children who grow up without fathers do not understand what grown men are about; they cannot become one and they cannot choose one. They may actually think that women who run from marriage are showing great maturity and courage. Yet they somehow have
confidence that, once they get rid of this imperfect husband, they can go to the “perfect husband store” and pick up a shiny new one.

Boys growing up without fathers may become male impersonators, exaggerating the display of masculinity it takes to look like a man. Boys who grow up fatherless are many times more likely to end up imprisoned for violent crimes, jumping from marriage to marriage and running out on kids, terrified of an equal relationship with a female partner.

Marriage is not likely to work if you don’t understand it and instead expect a totally different sort of arrangement, like a high romance or a suicide pact.

The most important things we need to know about marriage are, first, that “Marriage is not marriage unless both partners are working to make it equal, total, and permanent” and, second, that “Marriage is not supposed to make you happy: it is supposed to make you married and thus bring coherence into your life.”

We are supposed to learn such things about marriage from our parents, grandparents and siblings, but our families, even if they manage to stay together and don’t kill one another, protect us from unpleasant reality and hide things from us. Unfortunately we learn about marriage from romantic fantasies, from pornography, or from Cialis 4-hour erection ads. (I don’t know which is worse in raising people’s expectations too high.) Perhaps the worst source of information about marriage would be romance novels. Interestingly, the best place to learn about men, women, and marriage might be women’s magazines.

Television is not a reliable source of insight about what it takes to make a marriage work. The day time talk shows tend to be impatient with imperfect men or indecisive women and they want to get it over with fast, “Leave the jerk! You deserve better. Put the children up for adoption, they’ll be fine. Think of what will make you happy, right this minute. All women are in danger of being romantically disappointed or verbally abused, so you should surely run away from your home and your loved ones.”

Television also tends to dumb marriage down for us, so we must go to the movies to get a close-up, bigger than life, picture of the horrors and splendors of the blessed and cursed state of marriage. There are certain movies that radiate such wisdom, everyone needs to know and understand them. There are many of them, but here are a few I often present to therapists and patients.

**Romance and Suicide**

*Wuthering Heights* (Wyler, 1939) was made from the broodingly romantic novel of 1847 by Emily Bronte. This film makes romance seem dangerous, deadly, and doomed – somewhat of a suicide equivalent. It dramatizes and debunks the notion that marriage has something to do with high romance and soul mates. Narcissistically romantic Cathy (Merle Oberon) is about to marry the rich guy next door (David Niven) but she is in love with the gypsy foundling Heathcliff (Laurence Olivier), with whom she’s been raised and now who is the family stable boy. Oberon demands that Heathcliff “Make the world stop right here. Make the world stand still.
Make the moors never change. Make you and I never change.” Heathcliff says “The moors and I will never change. Don’t you, Cathy.” Her response is “No matter what I ever say or do, Heathcliff, this is me standing here on this hill with you forever.” In other words, “do not let the future happen, since our love would not survive all that reality. We cannot marry therefore our choices are to suicide or to live in misery.” Sure enough, she goes ahead and marries David Niven that afternoon, makes him miserable until she dies and comes back to haunt everyone. Hollywood, forced to offer happy endings to its prospective audience, lets each movie end with true love being requited, so the audience feels a moment of happiness until they stop to think about it.

Woody Allen used to believe in romantic love, yet he let both Jonathan Rhys Meyers playing Chris Wilton in Match Point (Allen, 2005) and Martin Landau playing Judah Rosenthal in Crimes and Misdemeanors (Allen, 1989) escape punishment for murdering their mistresses. In a recent Woody Allen film, Vicky Cristina Barcelona (Allen, 2008), the still more or less married Spanish artist and wild man Juan Antonio played by Javier Bardem invites two American tourists, adventurous Cristina done by Scarlett Johansson and the circumspect Vicky done by Rebecca Hall to share his weekend and his bed. They are soon joined by his homicidal ex wife Marcia Elena played by Penelope Cruz, as Bardem regularly changes partners or just adds to the rotation and explains his actions by assuring us he feels like doing it. The landlady Judy Nash played by Patricia Clarkson wants to join the rondele, or at least some rondele, but restrains herself and instead encourages everyone else to get on the merry-go-round. Allen’s sympathies are clearly with those who make decisions on bases other than the passion of the moment. He, who once was cynical about marriage, now seems to have soured on romance.

Romance is about the measure of true love, i.e., the eagerness to die for it, like Romeo and Juliet (Cukor, Castellani, Zefereelli, & Luhrmann, 1936/54/68/96). One of the more outrageously romantic films of my youth was Duel in the Sun (Vidor, 1946) in which a good brother Jesse McCaules (Joseph Cotton) and a bad brother Lewton “Lewt” McCaules (Gregory Peck) vie for their dangerous half breed cousin Pearl Chavez (Jennifer Jones). When she chooses Cotton, Peck shoots him, so Jones shoots Peck, and Peck, after crawling for bloody miles across the desert, shoots her, and they bleed and die together among the cacti – for love.

The Hill of Beans

As I watch love stories unfold so inevitably, I keep hearing in my head Bogart as Rick’s final words to the love of his life, Ingrid Bergman as Ilsa, at the airport in Casablanca (Curtiz, 1942). She is planning to leave her husband, Paul Henreid as Victor Lazslo, the freedom fighter who is the last hope for Western Civilization. Bogey switches the plane tickets and sends Bergman off to help her husband save the world. He tells her, “Ilsa, I’m no good at being noble, but it doesn’t take much to see that the problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday you’ll understand that, not now. – But we’ll always have Paris.”
It is usual for Hollywood to assure us that true love is the secret of happiness, and refreshing when it suggests that there are other considerations, particularly children whose emotional stability is threatened by threats to the parental marriage. In *Bridges of Madison County* (Eastwood, 1995), Robert Kincaid (Clint Eastwood), a National Geographic photographer in a dirty truck comes to Iowa and seduces a farm wife Francesca Johnson (Meryl Streep). They bathe together and peel carrots at the sink and plan to run off together, leaving behind a perfectly serviceable husband and children. Streep explains to Eastwood why she can’t go (she would know she had treated her loved ones unfairly and she would end up hating the marriage-breaking interloper who blew her honorable little life apart). And, of course, she would always have Paris. She understands that exciting memories are fun, and nice things to have tucked away somewhere.

In the fascinating and talky Patrick Farber play about love and sex, *Closer* (Nichols, 2003/I), Julia Roberts as Anna explains to Natalie Portman as Alice why she took up with Portman’s mate, Jude Law as Dan. “I fell in love with him, Alice.” Portman replies: “That’s the most stupid expression in the world. ‘I fell in love’ – as if you had no choice. There’s a moment, there’s always a moment; ‘I can do this, I can give in to this or I can resist it.’ I don’t know when your moment was, but I bet there was one. – You didn’t fall in love, you gave in to temptation.”

Falling in love, especially when the fallers already have mates, brings great pain to all of the participants and even the bystanders. It is not the reparation of a misspent life. Matching everyone up at the end, as in Shakespeare’s comedies and Hollywood movies of the 60s and 70s and adolescent films for the dating singles, seems puerile, like the solutions offered on daytime TV.

**Marriage of Comfort**

The movie that most totally buried the primacy of romance was *Marty* (Mann, 1955) a deliberately drab film in which Ernest Borgnine as Marty Piletti, a fat ugly butcher, pestered by his mother to get married, meets a girl he describes as a dog when all his friends decree that she is not the girl of their dreams. He is standing her up as he spends the evening with his usual buddies. After listening to their banal chatter, Marty announces: “What are you doing tonight? I don’t know, what are you doing tonight? Miserable and lonely, miserable and lonely and stupid. What am I, crazy or something? What am I doing with you guys? I’ve got something good here. You don’t like her, my mother don’t like her, she’s a dog and I’m a fat ugly man but I had a good time last night and I’ll have a good time tonight and if I have enough good times I’ll get down on my knees and beg that girl to marry me. And if we make a party on New Year’s I’ll have a date for that party. You don’t like her? That’s too bad.” He enters the phone booth and says to one of his friends: “When are you getting married, Angie? You ought to be ashamed of yourself. You’re 33 years old and your kid brothers are married already.”
This man is not expecting to be blown off his feet by physical and emotional perfection. He wants a life, and a family and adulthood. He wants a buddy, a partner, not too much to ask – unless you are a romantic who wants life to be magical. He is seeking comfort, companionship and, if he’s lucky, someone who is willing to live with him, like him, and share his life. The world does not have to stand still for him, as it does for Cathy and Heathcliff.

Perhaps the wisest pronouncement from the movies is Bea Vecchio’s (Beatrice Arthur) words to her son Joseph Hindy as Richie, who at the time of his brother’s wedding in Lovers and Other Strangers (Howard, 1970) announces that he is divorcing Diane Keaton as Joan Vecchio, because he is not happy. She intones in her booming baritone, “Don’t look for happiness, Richie. It will only make you miserable.”

At the point of marriage, what is expected of you? In She’s Having A Baby, (Hughes, 1988) Kevin Bacon as the earnest Jefferson is at the altar to marry the delicately beautiful Elizabeth McGovern as Kristy Biggs. The preacher asks: “Wilt thou, Jefferson, have this woman to be they wedded wife? Wilt thou comfort and keep her in sickness and in health? Wilt thou provide her with credit cards and a 4 bedroom 2 and a half bath house with central air and professional decorating, a Mercedes Benz, and 2 weeks in the Bahamas every spring? Wilt thou try to remember the little things that mean so much, like flowers on her anniversary, a kind word when she’s had a rough day, an occasional “you look pretty today?” Wilt thou be understanding when she’s tired, headachy or upset about something. Wilt thou try not to be such a pig when thou shave and shower. Wilt thou listen patiently to long stories about kids, clothes, and decorator checkbook covers?”

Jefferson: “I will.”

Sometimes, the expectations are up front, and sometimes you gradually realize what you are expected to do, feel, say, and take care of. In Raisin in the Sun (Petrie, 1961), Sidney Poitier as Walter Lee Younger, despite his aspirations, is a chauffer, living with his wife and son on the charity of his mother. His wife, Ruby Dee as Ruth Younger, is not compassionate over how humiliating this all is for him. And even if he is desperately ashamed of his failures, he can’t see what he could do about it, and they bicker and blame each other rather than pulling together. Poitier crawls out of bed when pulled by Dee, and he counters her impatience with: “You look good this morning, Baby.” She glares and he declares: “The first thing a man needs to learn is never to make love to a woman in the morning. You all are some evil creatures early in the morning.”

**Families Surviving**

In Grapes of Wrath (Ford, 1940), the Joad family, uprooted from their dust farm in Oklahoma, head west for the promised land in California. In the family truck, Jane Darwell as Ma Joad dampens the family optimism for work, picking cotton. Ma Joad. “For a while there it looked as if we were beat, good and beat, like we didn’t have nobody in the whole wide world but enemies, like nobody was friendly
no more. Made me feel kinda bad and scared too, like we was lost and nobody cared.”

Pa Joad (Russell Simpson): “You’re the one that keeps us going, Ma. I ain’t no good no more and I know it. It seems like I spend all my time these days thinking about how it used to be, thinking of home. I ain’t never going to see it no more.”

Ma Joad: “Pa, a woman can change better than a man. A man lives sorta, well in jerks, a baby’s born or somebody dies and that’s a jerk. He gets a farm or loses it and that’s a jerk. With a woman its all in one flow like a stream, little eddies, and waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on. A woman looks at it that way.”

Pa Joad: “Well, maybe, but we sure taken a beating”.

Ma Joad, laughing: “That’s what makes us tough.”

If men see life as a series of contests one wins or loses, life will be jerky, but if one views life as a process which unfolds and reveals much the same experiences for everyone, as the human condition is what it is, then there is nothing to fear. None of us will get out of life alive anyway but we can get tough enough with crisis after crisis so we aren’t afraid of the next crisis that inevitably comes our way. That fearlessness in the face of change and adaptation makes women naturally embrace therapy and men shrink from it.

It was not just Ma Joad who survived without prevailing. Even Rocky (Avidsen, 1976) did not win his boxing match, but he hung in there honorably and felt like a man.

The Discovery of Adolescence

Hollywood brought a fair amount of wisdom into our lives, in addition to all the mind numbing pap. It may be that the problem began in 1955 when in Rebel without a Cause (Ray, 1955) James Dean as Jim Stark appeared, discovered (or maybe invented) adolescence, muttered self pityingly and incoherently, and then self destructed in his new Porsche. This was just a decade after WWII, and The Greatest Generation (András, 1985) that went to war and saved the world. We knew then what a man was supposed to be, i.e. a warrior ready to die for humanity. But Dean, and his successors like Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, and Paul Newman offered a quite different model, one of self-absorption and alienation. They were followed by a generation of men who gave little of themselves. Women were expected to find these narcissistic postadolescents so attractive, they tolerated anything from them and provided everything.

In the mid-1950s children disappeared from the family picture on the screen. Shirley Temple, Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney, Margaret O’Brien grew up and retired. The only children we saw on screen were either ersatz adults (like Jody Foster as Iris Steensma in Taxi Driver (Scorsese, 1976), Tatum O’Neal as Addie Loggins in Paper Moon (Bogdanovich, 1973), Alfred Lutter as Tommy in Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore (Scorsese, 1974), Anna Paquin as Flora McGrath in The Piano (Campion, 1993) or, a generation later, Ross Malinger as Jonah Baldwin in
Sleepless In Seattle (Ephron, 1993); children who serve as therapists, matchmakers, and advisors to single parents, constantly reassuring the fragile grownups that their hyper-mature offspring don’t really need parents, so the parents need not grow up.

No matter how resilient the children were, the grownups were quite delicate and must be kept from feeling guilty about the disruption of the family. Those children who were in any way needy were depicted as monsters, as in Omen in 1976 (Donner) and Exorcist in 1973 (Friedkin) and Rosemary’s Baby in 1968 (Polanski), sent from the devil to make us grownups feel guilty for not dedicating ourselves as totally to raising children as we should. It was a wholesale societal denial of the needs and vulnerabilities of children.

The Rediscovery of Childhood

Thirty years later, in the mid-1980s, a series of movies (mostly foreign language) such as The Last Emperor (Bertolucci, 1987), Hope and Glory (Boorman, 1987), Au Revoir Les Enfants (Malle, 1987), My Life as a Dog (Hallström, 1985), and Fanny and Alexander (Bergman, 1982) rediscovered children. Unfortunately the emphasis in the rediscovery that children were indeed children was on preventing sexual, or sometimes physical, abuse. The solution to this, since so many of the abusers were male, was to run fathers even further out of family life. Actually, fathers rarely molest their children: it was stepfathers, or more likely the mother’s live-in boyfriends, who did most of the molesting, torture, or murder of children. But fathers became increasingly afraid of touching their children and a generation of children grew up without being hugged. And, a dysfunctional family, in some circles, was one which still had a man in it.

On TV, there were many fathers – Hugh Beaumont as Ward Cleaver, Bill Cosby as Chet Kincaid, Dan Castellanata as the voice of Homer Simpson, Robert Young as Jim Anderson, and Andy Griffith as Sheriff Andy Taylor in, respectively, Leave it to Beaver (Tokar, Butler, Abbott, Beaumont, Bellamy, Reynolds, Haas, Leader, Barton, & de Cordova, 1957–1963), The Bill Cosby Show (Ruskin, Sandrich, Serensky, Hart, Cosby, & James, 1969–1971), The Simpsons (Kirkland, Moore, Reardon, Anderson, Archer, Anderson, Silverman, Nastuk, Kruse, Moore, Polcino, Lynch, Dietter, Michels, Kramer, Baeza, Polcino, Sheetz, Persi, Scott III, Affleck, Marcantel, MacMullan, Ervin, Kamerman, Clements, Gray, Bird, Butterworth, Sosa, Faughnan, & Oliver, 1989 to present), Father Knows Best (Russell & Tewksbury, 1954–1960), My Three Sons (Whorff, Bellamy, Tewksbury, Kern, de Cordova, Considine, Reynolds, & Sheldon, 1960–1972), and The Andy Griffith Show (Sweeney, Philips, Rafkin, Ruskin, Weis, Crenna, Hayden, Morris, Bellamy, Baldwin, Reynolds, Flicker, Leonard, Irving, Nelson, Ruben, & Dobkin, 1960–1968) – but they were increasingly presented as incompetent and optional. This was contrary to the usual pattern on the big screen in which fathers and father figures are heroic and wise, but find themselves without a partner. Jimmy Stewart as Charlie Anderson in Shenandoah (McLaglen, 1965), Spencer Tracy in Boy’s Town
(Taurog, 1938; as Father Flanagan), or Captains Courageous (Fleming, 1937; as Manuel Fidello), Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch in To Kill A Mockingbird (Mulligan, 1962), and John Wayne as foster father Thomas Dunson to Montgomery Clift as Matt Garth in Red River (Hawks, 1948) were among the classics. Nowadays, Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington play the father often, while Morgan Freeman plays everyman’s father figure or the voice of the father. But the father figure is rarely married, rarely actually in the same home with the rest of the family.

In a recent and a unique great movie, Brokeback Mountain (Lee, 2005), sheep/herder Jack Twist, played by Jake Gyllenhaal, falls in love with cowboy Ennis Del Mar, played by the late Heath Ledger, meets him several times a year for sex, love, and fishing. But Gyllenhaal wants Ledger to leave his children (he’s already left his wife) and set up house with him. Always rebuffed, he insists “I don’t know how to quit you.” Ledger can’t seem to get across that he can’t do that to his children. Whatever else he is or isn’t, he’s a father and that must come first. This has no meaning for the more romantic Gyllenhaal who has no children and gets little from his own father.

The Importance of Fathers

So far, the movies have not done a very good job of pulling the myths of the family together and make us see the importance of fathers in family life and the importance of marriage in the lives of children. Adolescent boys are still showing their vulnerability and entitlement. Rich, skinny, teenage girls seem to have gone to jail and/or rehab a time or two too often, and they have outstayed their welcome. Wives are off somewhere with their new jobs and men are learning to change diapers and wash dishes, but the marriage has not come together well enough to form a sanctuary for people of different generations to live together contentedly ever after.

Harrison Ford as the eponymous title character in the latest Indiana Jones: Kingdom of the Crystal Skull (Spielberg, 2008) manages to finally find himself a wife (Karen Allen as Marion Ravenwood) and a son (Shia LeBeuf as Mutt Williams). Maybe in time, Christian Bale’s Bruce Wayne as Batman Begins (Nolan, 2005) will get a wife and children, or James Bond will do so. Rocky (Avidsen, 1976) did.

But in order to study family relations in our millennium, we have to look to the courtship rituals and careful preoccupation with economics, class, and character in the six very similar novels of Jane Austen, all of which have been filmed repeatedly and inspire readers and viewers to see what life was like back in a more practical and civilized, and a less sexually charged time.

The latest examination of a family on film is the remake of Brideshead Revisited (Jarrold, 2008), from Evelyn Waugh’s novel about the impact of their mother’s rigid, antisexual Catholicism on the relationships of the other members of the family. The new film, with Emma Thompson as the mother Lady Marchmain, cannot compare with the 11-hour BBC series (1981), which takes the time and pace in which to let
us live in the family estate and come to fall in love with the family’s son, daughter, child, and the house itself. We can even come to see the horrors of a religion or philosophy that makes one hate and fear life itself.

Searching for Models of Family Life

We have to look quite a way back to find films about families who are earnestly trying to get along, rather than trying to decide whether it will make them happy to remain in the family with their loved ones. How did family become such a scary place to live, always on the verge of blowing apart, much like standing on an earthquake fault? Did we do this to the world? Even if no one else does so, at least therapists must believe that people have the power to make relationships work, to pull together in times of crisis, and to actually live together without driving one another crazy. Therapists who are afraid that family members may hurt one another, and interfere with one another’s happiness, can blow apart every family they see and do enormous damage that lasts for generations.

Again, the primary skill of therapists is optimism, the belief that we humans can change and do whatever needs to be done for our life and the lives of our loved ones. As therapists, we must above all believe in the human capacity for change.
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