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## Film as a medium for communicating models of fatherhood: Selected examples

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## Abstract

*Film as a medium for communicating models of fatherhood: Selected examples*

Cinema possesses a distinctive capacity to convey psychological depth — not merely through dialogue or narration, but more importantly through visual imagery, rhythm, sound, and silence. Film engages viewers on both emotional and subconscious levels, allowing for a deep sense of empathy with characters' inner lives and conflicts, often without the need for explicit articulation. In 2005, *Сеанс*, the acclaimed Russian film studies journal, published an article inviting readers to reflect on the portrayal of fathers in cinema. "Отцы и сыновья" ("Fathers and Sons"), a piece by Pavel Kuznetsov, presents 24 international films exploring the theme of fatherhood. Kuznetsov examines these works through the lens of their ties to biblical, classical Greek, and Freudian narratives, particularly those centred on tense dynamics between authoritarian fathers and rebellious sons. Similarly, in his essay "Wizerunek ojca w polskich mediach na przełomie XIX i XX wieku" ("The Image of the Father in the Polish Media at the Turn of the 20th Century"), Krzysztof Arcimowicz identifies emerging models of fatherhood such as "the partner and protector of the child" and "the birthing father," which challenge traditional archetypes such as "the breadwinner," "the head of the family," and "the strict disciplinarian." This typology can also be applied to the present selection, which offers a preliminary exploration of the theme through a curated set of 21st-century narrative films. The article presents a selected, chronological, and subjective overview of cinematic portrayals of fatherhood. It does not claim to be exhaustive, but rather aims to outline key directions and representations within a broader discourse.

**Keywords:** cinema, emotional communication, film communication, fatherhood, metaphysics of absence

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In 2005, *Сеанс* [Seans], the renowned Russian film magazine, published a text encouraging reflection on how fathers are portrayed in cinema. In his article "Fathers and Sons" (Kuznetsov, 2005), Pavel Kuznetsov presents a selection of 24 international films, ranging from *Bicycle Thieves* (1948, dir. Vittorio De Sica), a masterpiece of Italian neorealism, to *East of Eden* (1955, dir. Elia Kazan), a classic Hollywood drama, and *The Barbarian Invasions* (2003, dir. Denys Arcand), a Canadian film. The author analyses these films in terms of their strong links to biblical, ancient Greek, and Freudian narratives concerning strained relationships between strict fathers and rebellious sons.

Referring to Hesiod's *Theogony*, an ancient religious poem describing the origins of the Greek gods, Kuznetsov argues that classical myths often depict struggles between male generations. Fearing the loss of power, fathers eliminate their offspring in various ways – through murder or exile – while sons retaliate violently. The author concludes that contemporary popular culture readily draws on these ancient Western patterns of patricide and infanticide, where family conflicts often culminate in violence and bloodshed.

To describe the contemporary epidemic of paternal absence, this article draws on the term of the “metaphysics of absence” (Kořacz, 2017, p. 86). Fatherhood is a timeless theme in culture, literature, and cinema – a reference point for identity, relationships, and memory. The absence of a father figure, whether physical, emotional, or symbolic, occupies a special place in this context. It is not merely a literal absence such as death, abandonment, or distance. More intriguing and significant is the so-called metaphysics of absence: the experience of absence that, despite its invisibility, profoundly influences the psyche, worldview, and everyday life. The father's absence is not just an empty armchair at the table; it is a kind of silence, an unspoken expectation, a constant confrontation with what *could* have been. In a metaphysical sense, the absent father does not cease to be present – on the contrary, he becomes a figure of excess. His absence is so acute that it assumes the role of presence. That which is not given organises reality more than that which is available. In this view, the absent father becomes someone almost absolute – an idea and a shadow that cannot be caught up with, but whose presence is felt in every decision, fear, failure, or need for recognition. It is a situation in which the absence of one person can create an entire emotional universe. This is what the metaphysics of absence is about: how absence becomes the foundation. The father's absence can take many forms. It may be a physically absent father – dead, spurned, or banished from family life. However, the emotionally unavailable father is equally powerful: closed, silent, or seemingly unemotional. For a child, and later an adult, the effects of both figures can be equally profound. They are often accompanied by self-blame, a sense of incompleteness, and a need to mend something that has never been named. On the other hand, “unfulfilled fatherhood is a fundamental, though often unconscious, cause of the lack of happiness in a man's life” (Pulikowski, 2001, p. 95).

In many cultural narratives – from Sophocles to Kafka, from Ingmar Bergman's films to contemporary European cinema – the father appears as

an illegible, distant, and yet omnipresent figure. His absence does not sever the bond; rather, it tends to complicate it. In the absence of words and gestures, a particular kind of legacy is created. It may be called a legacy of emptiness — something children carry within them like an airtight testament.

In today's culture, most men are influenced to some extent by the model of a passive, uninvolved, and absent father. Society too often underestimates the irreplaceable role of the father in the lives of his children. The father is seen merely as the one who provides his family with funds to run the household or to feed and clothe his children. Even more tragically, in some social circles he is considered unnecessary in the lives of his offspring. Two world wars, economic crises, militant feminism, easy access to contraceptives, the media, fashionable trends, and tight work deadlines — along with other social problems — have contributed to the fact that fatherhood is under threat (Augustyn, 2003, p. 22).

The notion of the metaphysics of absence implies that absence is not mere absence; rather, it is presence of a *different kind*. It is a relation to something that cannot be grasped, but which organises the inner world. From a metaphysical point of view, the relationship with the absent father is a relationship with the question: Who was he? Whom *should* he be? What was taken away from me, and what have I built on his absence?

In this sense, the absent father does not cease to shape. His nonexistence — whether emotional, physical, or symbolic — becomes the axis around which identity is formed. “In the traditional paradigm of masculinity and fatherhood, it was the man who created culture and reigned over everything” (Więclawska, 2009, p. 214). We can rebel against absence, attempt to replace it, contemplate it — but we cannot ignore it completely. Contemporary cinema and literature increasingly confront this experience. It is no longer about the myth of the all-powerful patriarch or the punishing hand of the father. Film-makers are searching for the appropriate language to discuss the consequences of absence — about sons and daughters who try to understand their past before it becomes their future. Films such as Magdalena Piekorz's *Pregi* (*The Welts*), Gabriele Muccino's *The Pursuit of Happyness*, or Florian Zeller's *The Father* attempt to touch on something much deeper than the psychology of family relationships. They explore a spiritual dimension of absence. It is there, in the most intimate sphere, that the metaphysics of absence meets reality. The absent father leaves behind more than just a flashback — he leaves behind

a question. However, the answers to this question are never simple. Perhaps that is why we, as a culture, keep asking it again and again.

In his article “Wizerunek ojca w polskich mediach na przełomie XIX i XX wieku” (The Image of the Father in the Polish Media at the Turn of the 20th Century) Krzysztof Arcimowicz notes that, alongside traditional types of fathers such as “the breadwinner,” “the head of the family,” or “the stern educator,” which constitute the traditional paradigm of masculinity and fatherhood, there are also “the child’s partner and protector” and “the birthing father” — new paradigms (Arcimowicz, 2008, pp. 124–141).

The aforementioned typology may be applied to this compilation, which aims to provide an initial outline of the subject matter based on a selection of 21st-century feature films representative of the theme. It is an authorial, selective, and chronological compilation that is by no means intended to exhaust the subject. The selection of films presented in the article is not meant as a comprehensive catalogue, but as an authorial, representative overview of how 21st-century cinema portrays fatherhood. Although the article does not explicitly enumerate selection criteria, several guiding principles clearly emerge from its thematic and methodological approach. First, each film places fatherhood at the centre of its narrative, whether through direct portrayals of father–child relationships or through the profound psychological effects of paternal absence. This absence — physical, emotional, or symbolic — forms the conceptual backbone of the analysis and reflects what the author calls the “metaphysics of absence.” Second, the chosen works embody distinct models of fatherhood, corresponding to the traditional and emerging paradigms described by Arcimowicz. Thus, the selection includes authoritarian patriarchs, emotionally distant or broken fathers, and contemporary figures striving for engaged, empathetic relationships with their children. These contrasting models reveal the evolving cultural expectations surrounding paternal roles. Third, the films were selected for their psychological depth and cinematic expressiveness. They articulate inner states — fear, longing, guilt, hope — through image, rhythm, and silence, making them particularly suited for a psychological reading. The emphasis on internal conflict and emotional experience allows cinema to serve as both mirror and metaphor for the complexities of fatherhood. Finally, the list reflects cultural and stylistic diversity, encompassing European and American productions, intimate dramas and broader social narratives. This variety highlights the universality of paternal dilemmas while acknowledging their cultural specificity. Taken together,

these criteria shape a selection that is deliberately illustrative rather than exhaustive. It offers a cross-section of contemporary cinema's most compelling explorations of fatherhood, pointing to the enduring relevance — and the evolving meanings — of the father figure in today's cultural imagination.

## The analytical method

The analytical method adopted in the article is an interpretive, psychologically oriented approach to film grounded in close reading of cinematic form. Rather than treating films as mere narratives illustrating social issues, the method examines how cinematic language, image composition, and narrative structure express the emotional and psychological dimensions of fatherhood. This allows the analysis to move beyond plot description toward an exploration of internal states, symbolic patterns, and relational dynamics. At the core of the method is a phenomenological sensitivity: the attempt to understand emotional worlds constructed by the films. This involves attending to moments of tension, rupture, and absence, especially where the father figure is concerned. By interpreting these elements not only as narrative devices but as manifestations of inner experience, the analysis uncovers the deeper meanings encoded in everyday gestures, unspoken conflicts, and visual metaphors. The method also draws on psychological and cultural frameworks, particularly contemporary theories of fatherhood and the concept of the “metaphysics of absence.” These frameworks guide the interpretation without imposing rigid typologies. Instead, they provide thematic lenses that help identify recurring patterns, such as the authoritarian father, the emotionally unreachable father, or the father struggling toward renewed connection — and situate them within broader cultural transformations. This analytical method, combining close visual interpretation with psychological insight and cultural contextualisation, reveals cinema not merely as a reflector of fatherhood but as a medium uniquely capable of expressing these complexities.

## The Return (2003)

In his debut film *The Return*, Andrei Zvyagintsev explores the theme of fatherhood — one of the most archetypal motifs in culture. However, this is not

a story about an all-powerful, wise, or protective paternal figure. It is a story about an absent father who returns in a sudden, mysterious, and unsettling manner. Rather than filling the void, he deepens the mystery. Zvyagintsev's film becomes less a psychological drama and more an existential treatise on the enigma of fatherhood — on presence through absence and the metaphysics of absence. The film follows two teenage boys whose father unexpectedly returns home after twelve years. The very next day, he takes them on a long journey to a deserted island. With each passing day, the purpose of the journey becomes increasingly unclear to the boys, and the time spent with their suddenly regained father turns into a test of their maturity and manhood. Conflicts arise between love and hate, ambition and personality, the need for authority and the desire for freedom. What begins as a fishing trip intended to rebuild — or even establish — close bonds quickly turns into an ordeal. Who is this man who appears out of nowhere? Why has he returned? Where has he been all these years? What secret is he hiding? The director multiplies questions and uncertainties, building an atmosphere of tension and ambiguity. The complex relationships between the characters, powerful performances, suspenseful and precisely constructed plot, as well as haunting landscapes, make the film truly unforgettable. The father in *The Return* reappears after twelve years of complete absence. It is unclear where he was, why he left, or what prompted his return. He offers no explanations, does not speak of his past, and does not reintroduce himself into the family's life. He enters it with silence and severity, evoking a figure from myth rather than everyday reality. For the two boys, Ivan and Andrei, his arrival is not a simple fulfilment of their childhood longing, but a confrontation with the unknown — the unknown that bears the name "father."

Zvyagintsev deliberately refrains from giving the viewer clear answers: Who is this man, really? Where was he? Is he truly their father? Is his return intentional? This uncertainty is heightened by the director's cool aesthetic, the characters' silence, and the evocative, almost biblical symbolism. The mystery of the father becomes the narrative axis of the film, and the ambiguity surrounding his identity is not merely a plot device, but a profound metaphor for the contemporary experience of losing role models, authority, and permanence of relationships. The father in *The Return* represents more than just a specific man — he embodies the void left by paternal absence. Throughout the film, it remains unclear who he was in the past and who he wishes to be now. The boys do not recognise their father in him — he is a stranger

they are expected to accept, though they are unsure whether they can trust him. This disjunction between biological fact and emotional rejection lies at the heart of the metaphysics of absence. The father's absence does not end with his physical return; rather, it becomes an insoluble mystery that leaves a lasting imprint on the children's identity.

The film shows that a father can be present in body, yet absent spiritually and emotionally — that he can return and still remain enigmatic. It is this ambivalence between presence and absence that makes *The Return* a deeply metaphysical film — full of silence, understatement, restrained emotion, and existential tension. Zvyagintsev deliberately constructs the story in a parable-like manner. Some critics compare *The Return* to the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac: the journey of father and son that ends in sacrifice. In *The Return*, this sacrifice is more symbolic — a sacrifice of innocence, of childhood, and of idealised notions of fatherhood. Ivan, the younger son, rebels, rejects authority, and refuses to accept violence and emotional distance, whereas Andrei, the older son, tries to conform. Their reactions reflect universal responses of children to paternal absence.

Socially, it is a gradual loss of the ability to control the level of their aggression by young men and to direct it appropriately which is one of the most serious damages caused by the disappearance of initiation practices in the male world. Indeed, learning this control was one of the fundamental aspects of these practices. The effects of this disappearance are all too apparent (Rise, 2005, p. 60).

Moreover, *The Return* is not only a family story but also a social diagnosis. The film is set in post-communist Russia, where traditional figures of power, authority, and identity lie in ruins. Being a figure from the past, the father returns to a world that can no longer accept him — a world in which there is no place for him. His mystery is also the mystery of cultural emptiness, generational insecurity, and the absence of the foundations that once constituted paternal authority. Zvyagintsev's film is not merely the story of a family journey. It is a film about emptiness that wounds more deeply than presence. It is a film about a father who, although returned, remains unreachable. The director offers a universal tale about the mystery of fatherhood, about a lack that cannot be filled, and about love that could never be born. "A father's love for his child has its own unique qualities and is distinct from a mother's. It is not insignificant for a child. A father can offer them



something that a mother cannot” (Bullinger, 1997, p. 188). The mystery of the absent father — present only as a shadow, a flashback, or a fear — finds its most poignant cinematic form here.

## **Pręgi [The Welts] (2004)**

“Under traditional notions of masculinity, men were not permitted to express their emotions. They were expected to rely solely on rational and quantitative thinking” (Arcimowicz, 2003, pp. 55–56). *Pręgi (The Welts)* tells the story of a young man named Wojciech Winkler. His traumatic childhood, marked by violence from his father, profoundly shaped his personality and behaviour. His father is portrayed as

angry and frustrated, constantly critical and humiliating towards others. He is unaware of the harm he causes his loved ones. He believes he helps, but in reality, his family despises him, as his actions bring no good. In a sense, he vents his own failures, lack of success, and unresolved issues with his own father onto his family. Driven by frustration and anger, he continually belittles those around him” (Biddulph, 2004, p. 83–84).

The story begins in 1984. Wojciech is thirteen years old. His mother died during childbirth, and he is raised by his strict father, Andrzej. In an attempt to mould his son into a “real man” Andrzej uses violence as a method of discipline. Although Wojciech is no different from his peers, he suffers extremely harsh punishments for minor misbehaviour. Eventually, he decides to run away from home, unable to endure the abuse any longer.

Later, we see Wojciech at the age of thirty. He is ambitious and independent, yet he is emotionally distant and avoids intimacy. Raised by a violent father, he has become emotionally isolated, building an invisible wall around himself. He spends his time exploring caves and writing newspaper articles. His friends see him as tough, uncompromising, and withdrawn — a cynic. In truth, he hides his sensitivity and anxiety, constantly fleeing from them. “The disappearance of the father’s role as a guide who helps his son harness and direct his strength, and initiates him into social life, signifies a break in the anthropological link between man and traditional masculine culture” (Rise, 2005, p. 57). Wojciech chooses solitude because it feels safer. He avoids emotional involvement, fearing that entering a relationship or starting

a family might lead him to repeat his father's destructive patterns. Even when he encounters love, he instinctively recoils, seeing in every face a reflection of his father's shadow. Over time, however, he begins to reflect on his life. He realises he does not want to follow the same path. He does not wish to die alone, as his father did. He yearns for change. In the second part of the film, viewers follow Wojciech in the present day. Now an adult, he lives a lonely life in a small flat. During a trip to the Tatra Mountains, he meets a woman named Tatiana. She is open and eager to build a relationship, but Wojciech is unable to commit. He still carries the burden of painful childhood memories that prevent him from moving forward.

The film addresses issues traditionally associated with masculinity, but they are presented through a woman's perspective. Magda Piekorz, the director, enters this world and adds a new dimension to the story. Although the protagonist's life lacks a female presence, Piekorz symbolically fills that role. *Pręgi* is a film for viewers who seek something deeper. Its unusual, original, and dramatic structure makes it worth revisiting. While this theme is deliberately exaggerated and somewhat relegated to the background, its impact is unmistakable. *Pręgi* is primarily a story about powerlessness and a struggle to adapt to the world.

## **The Pursuit of Happyness (2006)**

Based on true events, the film tells the story of Chris Gardner (starring Will Smith). Chris is a salesman who struggles with homelessness while raising his young son. He makes every effort to escape this difficult situation. Although the odds are against him, Chris takes a risk and begins working as a stockbroker. He chooses to take a chance in order to secure a better future for himself and his child:

"The twilight of patriarchy has become the beginning of an era of new fatherhood" (Badinter, 1993, p. 148). *The Pursuit of Happyness* is a moving story of Gardner's effort, determination, and perseverance. It is one of the most touching films about fatherhood. Moreover, the leading roles are played by Will Smith and his real-life son, Jaden Smith. Unable to cope with financial difficulties, Gardner's wife, Linda, decides to leave their five-year-old son, Christopher, in search of a better life. Now a single father, Chris uses his sales skills and strives to improve their situation. He is offered an internship at

a prestigious brokerage firm. Although unpaid, he accepts the position, believing it will open the door to a high-paying career and a better future. Due to financial instability, Chris and his son are evicted and forced to spend their nights in shelters, bus stations, and other temporary places. Despite these hardships, Chris remains a devoted and loving father. He does everything he can to maintain his son's trust: "Every birth of a child confronts both father and mother with the fact that a whole new chapter in life opens up before them. It is both a real test of the values the parents embody and an opportunity for their own social, psychological, and moral development" (Witczak, 1987, p. 25).

*The Pursuit of Happyness* does not manipulate viewers' emotions; rather, it portrays an authentic relationship between the characters. The film is based on the true story of a man who invested all his money working as a door-to-door salesman. Fortunately, the filmmakers chose to tell the story in this way. Chris Gardner impresses with his strength and resilience as he fights to improve his son's life. Chris fails only once – when he does not pick up his son from the kindergarten on time. The reason, however, is that he is briefly jailed for unpaid fines. Still, the protagonist is not portrayed as a flawless hero. He struggles to build a healthy relationship with his wife and fails to understand her fears. When Linda says, "I've had enough" he simply replies, "You are weak." He also harshly dismisses his son's dream of becoming a basketball player, suggesting it is better to abandon unrealistic goals than to face disappointment. Although said calmly, his words carry emotional weight. Viewers immediately sense that this moment may leave a lasting wound and undermine Christopher's confidence. However, Chris realises his mistake. He takes a deep breath and says: "Don't ever let somebody tell you, you can't do something. Not even me."

## Kret [*The Mole*] (2011)

Paweł (starring Borys Szyc) and his father Zygmunt (starring Marian Dziędziel) try to grow a family business, hoping for a better future for their loved ones. One day, however, everything changes. Zygmunt's reputation is damaged when a press article is published. Suddenly, Paweł loses the trust of his colleagues, and his marriage begins to fall apart. Determined to uncover the truth and clear his father's name, Paweł embarks on his own

investigation. The trail leads him to a mysterious man (starring Wojciech Pszoniak) who turns out to have been orchestrating events from behind the scenes for some time. The stranger makes an unexpected proposal. Plagued by questions, Paweł finds himself at a crossroads. Many viewers tend to overlook the film's central theme, namely the complex relationship between father and son. There is also the question of how much one can sacrifice for the sake of family. In the 1980s, Zygmunt led a miners' protest against the communist authorities. The demonstration escalated into a riot in which several people were killed. Thirty years later, some journalists uncover documents suggesting that Zygmunt collaborated with the SB (the communist secret police in Poland) during the strike. Overnight, the hero of the opposition is branded a traitor. For his son, this marks the beginning of an internal conflict: was his father's reputation deliberately destroyed, or did Zygmunt truly succumb to the regime's pressure? At this point, we witness a symbolic and emotionally devastating loss of the father: "The disappearance of a father makes the hurt caused by loss and failure really difficult or even unbearable" (Rise, 2005, p. 118). The director opts for a slower pace and avoids dramatic plot twists. Instead, he chooses careful and patient observation. He allows viewers to get closer to the characters—to understand their emotions, motivations, daily routines, and human frailties. The camera consistently focuses on facial details, making it harder to pass clear judgement at the climax. Moreover, the dialogues play a crucial role. Rarely do we encounter such authentic and fluent exchanges in Polish films. For instance, the camera discreetly peeks into the kitchen to capture a shared family meal. Viewers seem to truly penetrate someone's life—one full of small gestures and unspoken emotions. In this world, family is more than just a word. It is a web of difficult relationships that, despite everything, holds people together.

### **Mój rower [My Father's Bike] (2012)**

One autumn morning, seventy-year-old Włodek (starring Michał Urbaniak) wakes up to find his dog demanding a walk. With difficulty, he slides his numb legs off the bed and groans in pain. Frustrated, he starts searching for his wife, who usually takes care of the dog. To his surprise, Basia (starring Anna Nehrebecka) is nowhere to be seen. Instead, he finds a letter in which she informs him that she has decided to leave. Włodek loses consciousness.

Concerned about the elderly man's deteriorating health, the neighbours contact his family. Soon, Włodek's relatives arrive in Poland. His grandson Maciek (starring Krzysztof Chodorowski) comes from England, where he lives with his mother. His son Paweł (starring Artur Żmijewski), a well-known pianist, arrives from Berlin, where he lives and performs concerts. Upon learning of his mother's disappearance, Paweł decides to search for her and persuade her to return. He is joined by Maciek and Włodek, who has recently been discharged from hospital. Their journey leads them to a picturesque lake, where they suspect Basia may be staying. However, it soon becomes clear that they are not only searching for a loved one — there is something deeper at play. As they travel from place to place, old conflicts resurface. There are unspoken grievances between Włodek and Paweł as well as tensions between Paweł and Maciek. During their journey, they attempt to confront the past, but it is also an opportunity for mutual understanding. *Mój rower* is an unusual guide to the male world, because “due to their fresh and unconventional interpretation of many phenomena, a child gives everyone who wants to understand them lots of opportunities for reflection and contemplation. As a result, it can broaden one's view of the surrounding reality and the laws that govern it” (Pospiszyl, 1986, p. 63). The film raises the following questions: Why is it that, regardless of age, men struggle to express love in words? Do differences truly outweigh similarities? Is there even a key to understanding the male point of view?

## Beautiful Boy (2018)

Based on true events, the film tells the story of David (starring Steve Carell) and his son Nic (starring Timothée Chalamet). Despite having a stable and loving family, the boy becomes addicted to drugs. As his addiction worsens, the bond between father and son is put to a severe test. After a series of rehab stays, brief periods of sobriety, relapses and overdoses, David is faced with a painful decision. He must choose whether to continue supporting his son financially, thereby giving him a chance at a quiet life, or to leave him to face the consequences in the hope that the difficult circumstances will prompt change. “The widely accepted new paradigm of masculinity is that men should be fully involved in family life and share responsibilities equally. A father is criticised when he does not participate in child-rearing. Instead,

the benefits of new experiences brought about by men's involvement in family life and childcare are highlighted" (Dąbrowska-Wnuk, 2007, pp. 133–134).

The film is a moving portrayal of a parent's desperate struggle to save his child, of painful choices made for loved ones, and of addiction that tears families apart. Above all, however, it is a story about a father who, despite everything, never loses hope and never stops fighting for his son and his path to recovery. "Despite the overwhelming decay of life around us, we live in both the best and the worst of times. Although many children grow up without fathers, many fathers now prioritise their children in a new way. Fatherhood itself is a direction" (Canfield, 2007, p. 19). David, the main character, is convinced he was a good father. In frequent flashbacks, we see idyllic snapshots of the time when Nic was a child, bathed in the rays of unconditional paternal love. Unfortunately, David's affection has blinded him to his real son. He has replaced him with an idealised image. Rather than providing a sense of security, David's total and unconditional love stifles Nic, setting impossibly high standards of closeness and care – standards that are too much for a growing child to meet. This becomes especially apparent when Nic longs for independence. In such a close relationship, this desire creates a sense of guilt that he must somehow learn to cope with.

## **Father (2020)**

This touching film portrays a man (starring Sir Anthony Hopkins) who suffers from Alzheimer's disease. He struggles to remain connected to the world around him and to his daughter. "Apart from a father's physical absence, there is also his mental absence. It is difficult to determine how often this occurs, as there are no sufficient studies on the topic. However, it can be assumed that mental absence is more frequent than physical absence. Some fathers are present in body but not in mind" (Więclawska, 2009, p. 220). The film explores both the challenges and the beauty of caring for an ageing parent, while offering a unique portrayal of mature fatherhood. It is a poignant depiction of the passage of time and enduring love. Oscar winner Olivia Colman plays Anna, who tries to care for her 80-year-old father, Anthony, as he begins to show signs of dementia. "Fatherhood has lost its importance in modern society. Naturally, this does not apply to every individual father. What is missing, however, is a proper understanding of the father's role – and

without that, it cannot be properly fulfilled” (Pulikowski, 2002, pp. 147–148). Anthony experiences both good and bad days. He can be capricious and often rejects the carers suggested by his daughter. Anna witnesses her father’s gradual decline and comes to understand the true state of his health. Although Anthony sometimes feels perfectly fine, at other times he fails to recognise his daughter or her partner. As his memory loss progresses, Anna decides to hire a nurse. Initially fascinated by his new companion, the elderly man becomes increasingly confused. Disoriented and frightened by his condition, he embodies the downfall of a once strong man who is losing touch with reality due to his illness. Meanwhile, his daughter mourns the loss of a father who is still alive. Month by month, she grieves for the man he once was. The film uses time loops, subtly introduces a reversed chronology, à la Nolan’s *Memento* (2000), avoids clear time markers, and deliberately misleads viewers in their perception of time. These techniques not only reflect the protagonist’s subjective experience but also draw us closer to it in a striking way. Together with him, we move through deceptively similar apartment interiors with identical layouts, suspiciously observing the “intruders.”

Moreover, the deliberate ambiguity of spatial changes causes interpretive confusion, prompting viewers to repeatedly reassess what they are seeing. Despite the sparse storyline, the actors form the emotional core of the film. Anthony Hopkins delivers a brilliant performance that reveals the many faces of Alzheimer’s disease: the man is alternately charming and gruff, docile and threatening, sharp-witted and confused, endearing and irritating. Olivia Colman’s face, without a trace of insincerity, reveals a full spectrum of emotions: love, compassion, understanding and care—but also irritation, frustration, and guilt. Behind her uneasy smile, patient tone and resigned downward glance lies a sensitive woman torn between her duty to her father and her desire to live her own life.

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The concept of the “metaphysics of absence” offers a way of understanding fatherhood not through direct presence, but through the powerful psychological and symbolic effects created by its lack. In this perspective, absence is not a void; it is an active force that shapes emotional life, identity, and relationships. The father who is missing—whether physically gone, emotionally withdrawn, or symbolically incapable of fulfilling his role—continues to exert influence precisely through this absence. His non-presence becomes

a formative experience, generating longing, fear, idealisation, confusion, or unresolved conflict. In cinematic narratives, this phenomenon often manifests through characters who orbit around an absent centre — children who define themselves in relation to a father who cannot be reached, adults who continue to negotiate the emotional consequences of paternal silence, or families whose dynamics are structured by what remains unspoken. Filmmakers capture this metaphysical quality of absence through visual and narrative strategies: empty spaces, withheld encounters, off-screen voices, or prolonged silences that signal a relational gap impossible to bridge. The “metaphysics of absence” therefore highlights a paradox: the father who is not there becomes, in psychological terms, profoundly present. His absence generates a field of tension that organizes the inner world of the characters and drives the narrative forward. By foregrounding this dynamic, contemporary cinema reveals how paternal absence is not merely a social condition but a deeply existential one — an experience that shapes the emotional architecture of a life.

Film art possesses a unique ability to convey psychological content not only through dialogue or narration, but primarily through imagery, rhythm, sound, and silence. Film affects viewers both emotionally and subliminally, enabling them to empathise with the mental states of characters and to grasp their inner conflicts without the need for verbalisation. Film art is a medium that, like no other, can penetrate the human psyche and make it the central character of the story. Film needs not address psychology directly in order to explore themes such as trauma, anxiety, identity, loneliness, or family conflicts. Thanks to its audiovisual capabilities, film can not only depict the emotional states of its characters but also *allows viewers to experience them*. It is within this empathetic power of image, sound and rhythm that film’s unique ability to communicate psychological content resides. No other art form brings us as close to the human face as film does. Facial expressions, micro-expressions, body posture and gestures — all communicate more than words ever could. In realistic psychological cinema, silence often speaks louder than dialogue. In auteur or symbolic cinema, on the other hand, a character’s body may become a projection of their psyche. Film frequently employs symbols to visualise internal processes: *a house, a road, a forest, rain, a mirror, water* — these elements possess their own psychological language. In Andrei Zvyagintsev’s *The Return* (2003), for example, the lake and the deserted island serve as a backdrop for the unfolding of the paternal myth — imbued with mystery, austerity and understatement. The father, though physically present,



remains mentally impenetrable, and throughout the story his sons strive to understand his inner world. Through a combination of imagery, sound, narration and emotionally charged performances, film draws viewers into the heart of the psychic experience. We are not merely observers, but we become participants. This is what distinguishes film from a psychological treatise: understanding is achieved through empathy, not analysis. Film art communicates psychological content through a range of expressive means, which together create a deeply emotional and multidimensional experience. It does not merely tell a story about the psyche — it allows us to *live* it. Through the interplay of image, sound, editing and symbolism, cinema becomes not only a mirror of the human interior, but also a language that articulates what cannot be spoken.

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