

Blunders and Tragedies of Parenthood: Comparative analysis of *Adam's Sake* and *Father*

By Bertalan Timar

Family ties were the overarching theme of this year's Crossing Europe Film Festival Linz, and in its non-competitive European Panorama Fiction section, we found two films that stood out, coming from different cultures and bringing very different storylines, but sharing the topic of parenthood and coming from women filmmakers. Belgian director **Laura Wendel**'s *Adam's Sake* and Slovak filmmaker **Tereza Nvotová**'s *Father* both look through parents' perspective, presenting challenges and responsibilities, but focusing on the harm that they unintentionally cause to their children.

Adam's Sake, Wendel's second feature, premiered in Semaine de la Critique at the 2025 Cannes Film Festival, following up on *Playground* from 2021. The film centres on Lucy (**Léa Drucker**), head nurse at a paediatric hospital, and explores, similarly to Wendel's debut, children's well-being within institutional settings. Seen through Lucy's perspective, we get a glimpse of the life of Rebecca (**Anamaria Vartolomei**), a single mother struggling to raise her four-year-old child, Adam (**Jules Dersart**).

Meanwhile, *Father*, by one of Slovakia's most prominent directors Nvotová, had its world premiere in last year's Orizzonti section at Venice. Inspired by real events, it tells the story of Michal (one of Central Europe's most recognisable actors, **Milan Ondrik**), husband of Zuzka (**Dominika Morávková**) and father of a two-year-old girl, Dominika (**Dominika Zajcz**). Michal is a business owner whose life falls apart when he forgets to drop off his daughter at the nursery, leaving her in the backseat of his car, ending her life.

Wandel opted not to make the struggling parent her protagonist by depicting Rebecca's experience from an external point of view, mediated by Lucy. In this way, she creates a neutral standpoint: the viewer is kept at a distance, forced to assume an objective stance. This is also reflected in the visual style, as the filmmaker adopts a documentary-like approach, following the characters around the hospital with a handheld camera. Instead of being immersed in Rebecca's inner world, we are observers to the action unfolding outside.

Father is structured in a different way; Michal is positioned as the main character, making him the story's central point. He becomes more relatable to the audience and easier to connect with. Unlike Wandel, Nvotová's method invites the spectators to step into Michal's universe, including moments when he experiences hallucinations and nightmares, emphasizing his mental anguish.

Like *Adam's Sake*, *Father* is also filmed mostly with a handheld camera. The difference is that Nvotová employs more flashy stylistic techniques as well, such as when Michal realizes he has killed his daughter and the camera starts making circular tracking shots, orbiting around the character and producing a strong sense of disorientation. Shortly afterwards, he collapses to the ground. While he is lying there, the camera rises up, creating a top-down aerial shot that highlights his helplessness.

Nvotová's picture fluctuates between overly bright shots, filmed under intense sunlight, and dimly lit shots at night, where the characters either seem engulfed in darkness or are illuminated by warm lighting that grants the image a reddish hue. Wendel's movie has a distinct look from the get-go, combining the clean, fittingly sterile aesthetic of hospital interiors with blueish colour grading. This way, the filmmaker reinforces the institution's unyielding and strict personality, its innate coldness, alleviated only by staff members like Lucy.

Both films seem to explore parental care having the same underlying questions: What makes someone a good or bad parent? When do callowness and negligence cease to be flaws and become criminal offenses?

In *Adam's Sake*, there are multiple cases of children affected by their parents' poor judgment and lack of care in the background of the central story. A teenage girl gets admitted to the hospital after suffering physical abuse by her father; another boy is almost denied a consultation because his dad insisted on an experienced doctor. Rebecca makes several questionable decisions throughout the film: she does not approve of her son's diet as prescribed by the medical team and proceeds to feed him something else; she tries to smuggle him out of the institution, even though he suffered a bone fracture and is severely malnourished. These are just some examples of how a parent can hurt their child while having their best interests in mind. Lucy's perspective is crucial to the story, she is the only person who understands what Rebecca's going through - trying to raise her child on her own, without any support.

Nvotová's and Ondrik's Michal, on the other hand, seems to be a good father; he is affectionate and a good provider for his family. Still, he makes this terrible mistake and ends up in court for killing his daughter. The jury finds him guilty but the judge doesn't lock him up immediately, instead, in the film's open ending, he seems to be sentenced to spend the remainder of his days with the tragedy weighing on his conscience.

It's hard to explore difficult subjects like these and not slip into redundancies or clichés. But both Wendel and Nvotová do a great job creating multifaceted stories with complex characters that keep the viewer invested and engaged in these thought-provoking ethical questions.

