

Genius On Hold (2013)

Rated PG. Our ratings: V -0; L -3; S/N -1. Running time: 1 hour 31 min.

Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well.

Ecclesiastes 3.16

Documentarian Gregory Marquette's film about a man cheated by the old Ma Bell begins with a section on the 1929 stock market crash and 2008's Wall Street greed resulting in the hard times that followed. Then he tells the story of how the ingenious Walter L. Shaw while working for AT&T developed and took out patents for the speakerphone, call forwarding, conference calling and more. When the company proved unwilling to recognize and reward him for his work, they parted ways. He was unable to profit from his devices because Congress at that time had given AT&T a monopoly on telephone service, so that anyone who even tried to use a device hooked up to their phone lines would be sued.

As told by Shaw's son and daughter Linda and Walter, the story is a bizarre and bitter one, epic in scale because it spans so many decades. Shaw the father earned a comfortable living for a while offering one of his devices to a mob involved in illegal off-track betting. When the Feds finally caught up with him, he served time in prison. His embittered son became a professional jewel thief. (You can't make this stuff up nearly as well!) Frank Langella's narration weaves together the interviews with Shaw's son and daughter, presenting us with a strong indictment of corporate greed resulting in terrible injustice—Shaw died penniless of cancer in 1996. Although he never benefitted, AT&T's monopoly was withdrawn in 1984, the huge company broken up into smaller divisions and other companies allowed to compete in telephone service.

Sometimes the meek do not inherit the earth, as the author of Ecclesiastes recognized centuries ago. At least now the genius of Walter L. Shaw is memorialized in this visual tribute.

For Reflection & Discussion 1. How is the opening section helpful in setting forth the context of Walter L. Shaw's life? Do you think its judgment on corporate America is too strong? Even in the light of what has happened (or not happened) to Wall Street traders who contributed to the recent recession?

2. How is Shaw's story the opposite of the myth about the creative person being rewarded in America for his work?

3. What do you think of his collaborating with gangsters to make a living?

4. Do you think that the fate of AT&T bears out a belief that ultimately justice will win out?

5. How does this story of the weak contending against the powerful fit in with your view of social justice? Do you see God at work at any point in this film?