No country for old men: utopian stories of welfare society’s shortcomings in A Man Called Ove and The 100-Year-Old Man

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the similarities between the two most successful Swedish films of the past years. Through a focus on the two elderly protagonists the article discusses how the films acknowledge challenges in these men’s lives and in both contemporary and past society, but effectively repackage any serious issue in a form that remains palatable to audiences in Sweden and internationally. Themes discussed include the Swedish welfare state, community and new families of choice, as well as aspects of globalization.

Let me briefly outline the focus, structure, and key ideas of this article. First, in order to narrow the scope and allow a somewhat nuanced analysis, I will use the two elderly male protagonists—the men explicitly highlighted in the films’ titles—as my focal points. There are similarities between these men and how they structure each film. The most important is the combination of a contemporary story about these men, with a series of progressive flashbacks to events in both their biographical and national histories. I will begin by briefly placing these characters in time, space and a welfare-state context, foregrounding the late point in their life when viewers first encounter them. I outline some particularities that come with a focus on old men before I look at three highlighted themes: state individualism, family structures, and contemporary global challenges. Together, these aspects will foreground how serious issues are handled in a distancing and reassuring way in feel-good blockbusters.

Stories of two old men’s past and present lives

The title character in A Man Called Ove is 59 years old and lives alone in a semi attached home in a small-scale suburb, one of those created in the 1970s for the growing middle class. Now the neighbourhood appears cold and grey. Just before the plot begins, Ove’s wife Sonja has passed away, and he intends to commit suicide in order to join her. There are two temporal orders. First, Ove’s continuous but each time suspended suicide attempts drive the series of contemporary events. Together, these events emphasise the value of breaking down barriers between individuals—primarily barriers based on an ideology of self-sufficiency and indifference towards others. Removing such barriers, the film instead...
foregrounds the values of what Thomas Elsaesser has productively discussed as mutual interference—"taking responsibility for the other, while neither imposing on the other nor forsaking self-interest" (Elsaesser 2010, 111–112). Then, there is a series of flashbacks, three more extended and several short ones, narrating significant events in Ove’s life, such as growing up with his father, meeting and marrying Sonja, and the bus accident where he and a pregnant Sonja lost their unborn child, in addition to Sonja losing the use of her legs. Together, these temporal juxtapositions depict a society that increasingly lacks civic engagement, but they also offer a vision of how this may be overcome. Such a vision may soothe any feeling of guilt, for viewers complicit in this social development.

In The 100-Year-Old Man Allan (100 years old, obviously) lives in a small red cottage, alone with his cat, but soon enough he loses his independence and is placed in a home for the elderly in a small town nearby. A remarkable contemporary story begins when Allan literally steps out of his window, and symbolically out of the welfare society’s institutionalized care, and he happens to interfere with both local and global crime. The film uses six rather long flashbacks to Allan’s hundred-year-long life span, highlighting key events and transformations in both Swedish and international history, events where Allan, in a Forrest Gump-like fashion, was surprisingly much involved. The contemporary story—like in A Man Called Ove—appears designed to remove problematic elements and to recreate a small-scale community of good but somewhat marginalized individuals in a utopian setting far away from the welfare state and its un-kept promises.

Old men unexpectedly putting things right

Using elderly men as key figures in films is certainly not unheard of but still somewhat beyond the norm. Part of the reason may lie in the often quite negative social construction of what it means to be old. For example, a study about the care of elderly characterizes the perception of elderly as "lonely, weak, inactive, and sometimes even infantile", adding that this may "provoke feelings of fear and anxiety" (Lill 2010, 23–24, my translation). The early images of both films support such a view. Allan is alone in his cottage, losing his cat companion, and later in his room at the old people’s home. Ove, having lost his wife and work, sees no point in living. These films begin with such images and common understandings of old age, but they do so only in order to stage transformations where the old men exceed these low expectations. Significantly, these elderly men manage to put some things right—both in their own life, and within their closest social surroundings. This strategy optimistically supports the idea that it is possible and necessary to have agency—even for those who live under circumstances where it is difficult to be active. It is a strategy that reminds audiences to engage more fully in life—to rather, like Allan, step out of the window and see what happens, than to, like Ove initially plans, seek to exit life as quickly as possible. It is, however, an unobtrusive reminder, articulated in a fantastic, comical, and melodramatic mode. It is not a judgement designed to leave viewers feeling guilty about being passive, but rather a rosy-eyed view of what may yet be achieved.

In an article within the field of ageing studies Sarah Canham looks beyond a general perception of ageing and aims to specifically understand old men and their sense of suffering. Canham points to control, or lack thereof, as a key to understanding elderly men’s situation. Relating this to masculinity, Canham observes that “because of age-related physical changes, older men may potentially be denied the opportunity to live up to the hegemonic standards of masculinity as well as the ability to maintain control" (Canham 2009, 91). Canham further highlights the importance for elderly men to find ways to compensate for their increasing loss of control over their environment. The means to do so would be to develop secondary control, by formulating internal thoughts, for example by “assigning value to alternative goals or engaging in protective social comparison” (Canham 2009, 91). Ove serves as a good example. A self-appointed supervisor, he routinely checks if everything and everyone meet given standards. Further, he boosts an errorless image of himself by observing others’ failures, often judging them to be “idiots”. Later, however, the film lets Ove, and Allan in The 100-Year Old Man, go beyond such internal feelings of control, allowing the elderly men an unexpected degree of real-world agency.3

So, what issues are put right through these men’s agency? Here, I will first look at the individual in relation to other persons—family structures and community. In these films such relations are initially lacking, but both are restored to some degree. Then I will highlight a more topical theme, primarily relating to migration, in order to see how the films handle something potentially more sensitive.

State individualism and renewed dependence

The Swedish welfare-state model encourages individual freedom and autonomy, granting independence from others in order for citizens to cover their needs. Henrik Berggren and Lars Trådgårdh refer to this as “state individualism” (statsindividualism) and characterize it as:

The Swedish or Scandinavian model is based on the individual standing in direct relation to the state, both in terms of obligations and rights. A safety net
is there, regardless of the individual’s relation to his family, his employer or more or less benevolent charities. The immediate dependence on family, relatives, neighbors, employers and civil society has been minimized (Berggren and Trägårdh 2006, 53).

It is particularly relevant to explore the independence from family, relatives and neighbors in relation to these films. This independence, established early in the plot, is not presented as something valuable, but is rather associated with leaving people feeling redundant, marginalized and lonely. These films formulate fantasies about how state individualism, and its potential negative qualities can be suspended and replaced by meaningful close relationships, including newly found families, friends and neighbors. It seems that a key aspect of their audience success pertains to this.

Such fantasies are clearly articulated in A Man Called Ove. In order to highlight how this transformation towards more dependence is staged, I will focus on an important three-part sequence towards the end of the film. In the first of these three parts Ove and his neighbor Parvane are very agitated, although for different reasons. Ove tries to help Anita, a neighbor who wishes to care for her stroke-afflicted husband Rune at home, rather than being forced to leave him to institutional care. Rune is, however, set to be moved there already the following day. Ove is upset because the administrative officers he talks to cite rules and regulations that prevent him from helping Anita. Parvane is upset because Ove keeps offending and yelling at the administrative officers. She tells him that this is no way forward and “no one can make it on his own. Not even you.” It is typical, from a melodramatic perspective, that the film at this point distracts the audience from expectations of a realistic denouement and instead offers an emotional motivation to Ove’s mind and behavior, and an equally emotional resolution to the let-Rune-remain-home storyline.

In the second part, through a flashback Ove finally tells Parvane about the bus accident. And how Ove later entered the period of “the great darkness”, during which he is at odds with both authorities and neighbors, a period lasting up until the present. The film uses this flashback to furtively and emotionally leave out the important time between Ove’s story and the time remaining until the private welfare company arrives to place Rune in institutionalized care.

In the third part, when the care company arrives for Rune, all neighbors are gathered—and well prepared. They can control the care company and its representative by threatening him with a media investigation of his tax evasion scheme. As this is done a supporting community, or Gemeinschaft in the sense of Ferdinand Tönnies, is gradually revealed. When the company representative says that they want to take Rune for his own good, and for Anita’s too, she responds: “What kind of love is that?” And when asked who could now take care of Rune, Anita responds that she will do that by herself, and, as the camera tracks back and the framing gradually uncovers Ove and the other neighbors standing behind her, she adds, “with a little help”.

What happens in this three-part sequence is constructed as a heart-warming victory. It is a victory achieved without the support of any welfare institution; in fact, it is a victory over the welfare state’s misguided attempts to care for its citizens. Most concretely the critique is addressed against welfare services being outsourced to profit driven care companies and their dubious handymen, the “white shirt men”, who seem to thrive in the cracks of the withering welfare state project. The victors are a group of neighbors (supported by the local news journalist, and thus the fourth power), willing to share the burden of helping those who need help, in this case Anita and Rune. This is clearly a refusal of the state individualism referred to earlier; Rune depends on his wife’s support; and she now prefers to depend on the neighbors’ help, rather than rely on the welfare state and its now privatized care. Only Anita and her neighbors, it seems, can give Rune proper care—and the right “kind of love”. And they can do so only after they have jointly taken back the control and responsibility of their own well-being, that had gradually been entrusted the welfare state. One may falsely assume that it is Ove who should be credited with this victory and reversal of history. After all he is the title character and throughout the film he is shown to act morally and resolutely. Here, however, Ove’s approach does not solve the problem. It is Parvane who questions Ove’s self-sufficing stance and makes room for the thought that something may actually be better achieved with the help of others. This thought comes from an immigrant, still sufficiently unaffected by welfare-state culture and mentality, and it is this contribution that enables progress.

The 100-Year Old Man, on the other hand, does not recreate a long lost Gemeinschaft—perhaps realizing it is already too late for such a vision—but it reconstructs togetherness on a smaller scale, namely on the level of family. This is an equally important topic, and one present also in A Man Called Ove.

Adopting fathers and constructing families
Families are barely seen in these films, but they nevertheless play an important role in articulating a lack within modern Swedish society. The welfare-state project, as mentioned above in terms of state invididualism, had the ambition to make individuals independent from their family by making the state...
responsible for several of the family’s traditional obligations, such as financial support and care (Esping-Andersen et al. 2002, 13). The simultaneous goal was to strengthen the family as an institution by offering support. These films do not, however, grant either of the old men a family. The original families Ove and Allan were born into are dispensed with early—already when the boys were teenagers. Further, Ove and Allan have no children or family of their own. Overall, they lack close family relationships and cross-generational contact, which further contributes to these characters’ loneliness. The films make good use of this atypical lack of family.

The two films differ in how they orchestrate the family motif. Ove misses having children whereas Allan does not seem to care. Still, both appear pleased when they eventually get a surrogate family of sorts. In A Man Called Ove this change is developed into a significant theme. Ove and Sonja expect a child, and the film emphasizes how welcome the child is, and how caring Ove will be as a father. Losing their unborn child changes their lives and becomes a trauma from which Ove never fully recovers. In this way A Man Called Ove cruelly constructs a lack in order to fantasize compensation for it. Early in the film Ove does not show any interest in the children of Parvane and Patrick, but gradually he changes. Out of necessity, and only with great reluctance, he reads books for them and later even babysits them. At the end of the film they are his “family”. Ove is explicitly referred to as Parvane’s father, and her and Patrick’s children call Ove their “grandfather”. In addition to this new family, Ove also “adopts” Mirsad, a 20-year-old who has been rebuffed by his father and instead is welcomed to live with Ove. This part of the story stresses the value of having a family and an extended family. If one does not have a family, the film suggests, there are still ways to put things right.

The bus accident in A Man Called Ove is in The 100-Year-Old Man matched by Allan’s being vasectomized in the Swedish eugenics programme. Both of these plot events effectively thwart any wish to become a father. Although Allan appears indifferent, he too ends the film with a freshly and creatively constructed family—or at least with family-like cross-generational bonds. Throughout the film Allan steadily gains more and more companions, and when the film ends on Bali, Allan is accompanied by four or five persons in a family-like constellation. In the closing image Allan sits next to Julius, like an old couple, overlooking the ocean. He gives fatherly advice to Benny, encouraging him to finally get together with Gunilla, Allan’s “daughter-in-law” to be. Allan also has a father-son relationship with Oleg—a more industrious son who readily helped his new “father” (Allan) with transportation to Bali. Lastly, completing the family is Gäddan, an MC criminal who has lost his mind and memory, and now acts like a young boy, joining his parents (Benny and Gunilla) and grandparents (Allan and Julius) on their trip, but otherwise is happy playing videogames. This narrative project seemingly constructs a modern family of choice, structures described by Anthony Giddens and others two decades ago, when biological bonds or other traditional criteria no longer seemed necessary for belonging together as a family (Giddens 1992). The new family theme is played out rather casually, seemingly careful not to remind viewers too much of families from everyday life.

The extraordinary reasons why Ove and Allan lack children and family place the responsibility beyond their own control—this is just what life had in store for them. If people in the audience miss having a family, or being close to their families, this approach has the advantage of not foregrounding any personal agency, and thus no responsibility or guilt. Agency is, however, required in order to reach the optimistic ending. Such agency may seem easy, but can also be exceedingly difficult: renounce suicide and step out of the window—two synonyms for embracing life.

One may ask why these films handle the family theme in such an extremely brutal (killing parents and children) and compensatory (recreating families) way. In spite of the welfare states’ support for the family as an institution there seems to be a need for stories that start out with shattered families and lonely, elderly men, and gradually fulfill their latent needs by providing them with social company and cross-generational bonds.

Local solutions to global challenges

Both A Man Called Ove and The 100-Year Old Man relate to worrying global challenges. They do so, however, in a very distanced way; Disturbing issues and insights about our world are veiled both by a distance in time and space, and by the films’ comedy-melodramatic mode.

The 100-Year-Old Man touches on contemporary issues, such as civil war, terrorism and the refugee crises, but does so in the film’s characteristic superficial and carefree way. Allan’s early experiences in life show some similarities with those of traumatized refugee children—except that Allan is never shown to suffer any trauma. Narrated through flashbacks we learn a lot; Allan’s activist father was denied freedom of speech, imprisoned, exiled, and eventually executed. His mother dies shortly thereafter, making Allan an orphan who has to get by on his own. Allan sets off an explosion killing the local businessperson who exploited the poor. Eventually Allan is detained in an inappropriate institution (mental asylum) and mutilated for
ideological (racial hygienic) reasons. Although one could—far too easily—match these and other of Allan’s traumatic experiences with issues occurring today around the world, the film’s burlesque mode enables viewers to avoid such uncomfortable associations—and thus to avoid becoming aware of their own, welfare society’s, and the global community’s inability to properly address contemporary challenges.

The 100-Year Old Man further employs a strategy of auto-resolving problems, in the form of three accidental deaths. Through a car theft an MC gang member ends up dead in a car demolition site in Riga, another member is presumed killed in a suicide bombing in the Middle East, whereas the global drug dealer dies in a car explosion in Bali. The viewer is not only presented with three funny sequences, but may also enjoy the poetic justice in getting rid of these criminals in a fashion that even carefully disposes the bodies in the faraway regions of the world associated with the problems.

Such discourses are also present, and also simultaneously veiled, in A Man Called Ove. I will highlight two occasions that call upon a common understanding (prejudices) and deal with it in a way that is comfortable for viewers. A Man Called Ove thematises immigrants’ experiences somewhat more explicitly than The 100-Year-Old Man. It does not matter to Ove that his new neighbour Parvane is an immigrant—to him it is more important what people do than who they are. When Ove gives Parvane driving lessons, on one occasion things just do not work and she is about to quit driving. Ove angrily attempts to encourage her:

Now, you listen to me: You have given birth to two children, are about to spit out a third; you have come here all the way from Iran, escaping war and all kinds of devilish hells; you have learnt a new language; have studied; earn your income; and you are married to an incompetent man; then you can, god-damn it, also learn how to drive. We are not talking about brain surgery here...

Part of what is funny about Ove’s logic, is that it is not logical at all; “successfully escaping war and all kinds of devilish hells” or any other of the challenges Ove mentions, does not make it easier to master the attention and coordination skills required to drive a car. Ove is allowed to acknowledge Parvane’s difficulties and achievements, demonstrating that he is aware of challenges in her life, but is then set to solve problems that are within his area of expertise, problems entirely unrelated to the immigration experience he mentions. The point here is that driving lessons is relatively simple help for him to give; and that he, or the viewer, is never asked to engage with any more serious or affective matters relating to Parvane, her identity, culture or experiences.

A bit later in the film, Ove visits a Kebab diner. In a brief conversation with the immigrant owner’s son Mirsad, it turns out that Mirsad is gay; Ove could not care less, but must not say anything to Mirsad’s father, since he would then kill him. As mentioned earlier, a little later Mirsad turns up at Ove’s home, asking to stay there since his father has found out about his homosexuality and thrown him out. Ove is first irritated and reluctant, not because Mirsad is an immigrant or a homosexual, but because this disrupts Ove’s plans to kill himself. Yet Ove eventually agrees to let him stay and later seems to enjoy his company. On both of these occasions the film departs from rather general ideas concerning the difficulties immigrants may have experienced (war and forced migration, for example) or are still facing (such as conflicting norms regarding sexual orientation identities). Ove, and vicariously the viewer, is in a privileged position; he is given an opportunity to demonstrate non-prejudice, tolerance, and unselfish helpfulness—guided by moral universalist principles (rather than empathy, which is difficult to detect in Ove). His position appears natural and logical, it is fully supported by the plot, and probably also by most viewers. Yet, this level of helpfulness is well beyond what most persons would do in order to help others. It is, in fact, also beyond what Ove himself would do, before he changes his mind. Through Ove, viewers may thus enjoy recognizing themselves as non-prejudiced, well-meaning and latently helpful. The question remains how valuable such vicarious virtues actually are, and if a story like this does not primarily serve to alleviate the burden of guilt people may sometimes feel for not acknowledging challenges immigrants may face in Swedish society and for not taking supportive action.

Together these films present global concerns, including crime and experiences of those who come to Sweden in hope of a better life. Difficulties and traumas are briefly acknowledged, but in a humorous context and before a swift and positive outcome is presented—and before the focus returns to an elderly man’s other concerns. Real issues, worthy challenges for any well working welfare society (and overwhelming challenges for a struggling welfare society) are made present, but with real implications passing unnoticed.

Nostalgia, utopia and the welfare state

As biographical flashback narratives, both A Man Called Ove and The 100-Year-Old Man have a clearly inscribed vacillation between the present and the past, blending the narratively more important contemporary story with past events providing characterization. At the same time, however, the flashbacks achieve a distancing from the contemporary story. Overall, the
films blend an odd sense of nostalgia with what Maureen Turim regards as characteristic of the history flashback form, namely its affinities with “a certain tone of critique and retrospective guilt” (Turim 1989, 122). The combination contains, I believe, a utopian vision of good life and society, as well as an indictment of individuals—from “white shirts” to MC gangs—and structures—from care for elderly to privatized welfare institutions—that steer society in the wrong direction. The past events in both films are conspicuously filled with dark and traumatic happenings—more than the ones I have foregrounded in this text—and do not really constitute an ideal foundation for a nostalgic look back. However, I would suggest that these past worlds still function as valuable alternatives to contemporary modern society. Here, the distinction that Svetlana Boym makes between restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia is useful. Whereas a restorative nostalgia looks back to the past as a perfect moment and image to be retrieved, or indeed restored, reflective nostalgia grants the past—the lost home in the welfare state—a degree of inconsistency. It is possible, Boym suggests, “to be homesick, and sick of home, at once” (Boym 2001, 50). With reflective nostalgia equally present in both films, one notable consequence is the films’ reluctance or inability to formulate a believable happy ending shaped by a past ideal welfare society. Such a society is now lost—it probably never existed—and it appears impossible to restore.

Towards the end both films move their protagonists away from an agonizing contemporary Sweden. This happy ending is premised on an oscillation between nostalgia, utopia, and the current Swedish welfare state. A telling, and very fascinating moment is when Ove dies. In a single take he is simultaneously moving beyond existence (i.e. dying) and back in time to a past moment of happiness. He wakes up, in the same train compartment where he first met Sonja, and in the same way he woke up then. Now he meets her there again; both have aged, and they smile as they hold hands on their way to heaven. The closing movements back in time return to the years around 1970, positioning them at the moment when Allan is born. It may not be fair to say that Allan shows nostalgia towards the few years he had with his mother, Allan is not a person who displays longing, but he used her words of wisdom—the typically passive “it is like it is, and it will be like it will be”—as a motto throughout his life, and when he later in life decided to settle down in his childhood home, he may very well have been a bit nostalgic for this place and his childhood years.

Conclusion

Contemporary Sweden, then, is no country for old men. The utopian visions within which the films endings leave these men are, as the word utopia suggests, located elsewhere—in the past world of memories, in heaven, or in an earthly paradise in the form of a tropical Bali beach. Still, the last moments of the films do not only imagine utopia and nostalgia, but also contemporary Sweden. This is a society left behind by the leading characters. But this is also the society where viewers will find themselves once they leave the cinema. What society is imagined for them?

In A Man Called Ove, the legacy of the old male protagonist’s values and practices is underscored as the neighbours return home after Ove’s funeral; one of Parvane’s daughters turns back, and in an Ove-like fashion makes sure that the neighbourhood gate is properly closed. It is the light-hearted and optimistic vision of what might have changed for the better—a restored community and civic engagement. On a second thought, however, one might sense that these are hollow and unstable changes; a fantasy, possibly lasting little longer than it takes for cinema audiences to return to their homes.

In The 100-Year Old Man, when all criminals have been killed off and the film’s heroes have formed a surrogate family and reached utopia, there still remains a Sweden. The film’s last image of Sweden is of the lazy, incompetent police officer sitting in his car talking to his superior on the phone, realizing that all the problems he was investigating—from the disappearance of the 100-year-old man, to several murders—have miraculously solved themselves. This police officer also realizes that he can now continue doing what he knows best: “nothing”. An amusing last line in the context of the film, but also a disheartening last word from Swedish society and a representative of one of its core institutions.

Contemporary society and institutions of the welfare state are not doing well in these films, being associated with a variety of problems and an overall bleak outlook on life. The films have, through the lens of lonely, elderly men, acknowledged various forms of criminality, challenging aspects of globalization, malfunctioning social institutions and the impact of all this on society and individuals. The films are unable to envision an invigorated welfare state—there are no initiatives or solutions coming
from government plans or representatives. The films do, however, suggest that there is a fair chance of finding good people around you—at least if you bother to reach out to them—who can help resolve your problems and be there for you in meaningful relationships and supportive communities. Both films structure this vision through the unexpected agency of elderly protagonists and their particular kind of open-mindedness—formulating hopeful fantasies that are unlikely but likeable. Apparently this is good enough—at least both films successfully appealed to the largest audiences of Swedish cinema in a very long time. What popular films can help us understand a little bit better is, I believe, both what is sensed to be problems in our society—problems so substantial that good cinematic distractions from them are treasured—and what is envisioned as a more Utopian place where people would rather imagine themselves. This is what the two films offer: utopian stories of welfare society’s shortcomings.

Notes

1. Together they account over three million sold tickets, which is not far from every second ticket sold for Swedish films during their premiere years. The audience figures are: A Man Called Ove: 1 713 558; The 100-Year-Old Man: 1 567 632. During 2013 Swedish films attracted 4,1 million cinema-goers and during 2015 3,4 million. Audience statistics are accessible at the Swedish film institute, www.sfi.se.

2. It should be noted that the argument in this article draws on ideas about popular genres and how their narratives successfully negotiate contemporary concerns. For the two modes that will be mentioned most often, see, i.e. Williams 1998 for melodrama, and Neale and Krutnik 1990 for comedy, and also Grant 2003, for genres and society in general.

3. Two notes relating to this. First, there is an interesting gender aspect to this. Canham points out that “men in particular have been socialized to believe that they can control their world and shape it according to their needs.” (p 91). Allan, who does not seem to care at all about being in control, was rendered less masculine when he early in his life was vasectomized in the Swedish eugenics programme. Second, another interesting matter, that I will not be able to discuss here, concerns how Ove complements the welfare institutions (and thus makes his irritated actions…), but that this complement is rendered unnecessary or unappreciated.

4. The 100-Year-Old Man also presents a bleak picture of contemporary society and institutions. Allan escapes from the old people’s home—symbolically identified as Swedish through the blue and yellow flowers planted outside it, and his companion Julius expresses dark thoughts about growing old in such a place.

5. Private care companies are here represented by Konsensus Vård. The company name ironically recalls samförståndandet, the spirit of common understanding (=consensus), characteristic of the successful negotiations between workers and capitalists that contributed to the welfare state’s initial success in the 1930s. “White shirts” is the expression Ove uses as a general and denigrating term for public servants who are not serving the public, but other, not always understandable, interests (ranging from their own monetary profits to a blind belief in progress or the bureaucratic system).

6. This strategy of alternative or symbolical families is similar to what Peter Krämer has observed regarding prominent family themes in most of the largest US blockbusters over the past decades. These films, be they Star Wars or Lord of the Rings, tend to present a family discourse adapted to the needs of a family audience in the auditorium (Krämer 1998). It should also be noted, a bit surprisingly perhaps, that the two films discussed here do not demonstrate that these new families are sustainable in Sweden (one family is located to Bali, the other exists only briefly, before Ove passes away).

7. There is a more real and serious lack mentioned in A Man Called Ove, namely that Anita and Rune’s child lives in the US and does not come to see them often. To what degree is there a sense of guilt/shame that we do not have close relatives or cannot be there for them, and to what degree do these family depictions offer consolation?

8. Such agency is well aligned with current ideology of stimulating elderly to become more active.

9. A note on these events. In the 1920s, Allan’s father promoted condoms as a way to resolve world hunger problems. Allan’s exploding the local businessman is not an act of terrorism or revenge, but simply an unfortunate coincidence. As a consequence, Allan was deemed unfit of having children and consequently vasectomised.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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