

Family in the Woods

Countercultural Utopia in *Captain Fantastic* (2016)

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1. Introduction: Utopia in America, America as utopia

As utopian studies scholars are well aware, the noun ‘utopia’ but especially the adjective ‘utopian’ have almost as many definitions as the users of these terms. At one extreme, there is Ernst Bloch’s universalist understanding of “the utopian function” detectable in a broad array of cultural products as the anticipation of unrealized hope, fulfillment and happiness;² at the other, there is the traditional, restricted understanding of utopias as specific blueprints proposed by various individuals over the centuries about how a superior social organization should be established and maintained. Between these poles, lots of different instances of the utopian imaginary³ are possible, but despite their bewildering variety, they tend to share a few common features regarding their inspiration: dissatisfaction with and criticism of the status quo; yearning for a better way of existence; and the outlines of an alternative arrangement to achieve or at least approach the desired state. According to Lyman Tower Sargent, such utopian inspirations may manifest themselves in three forms: “literary utopia, utopian practice, and utopian social theory” (Sargent 2010, 5). All three manifestations display close associations with the intellectual concept of America and have left their imprint on the history of the United States. As Krishan Kumar remarks in his summary of 19th century American utopianism, “Everything about America has inspired, and continues to inspire, utopianism” (Kumar 1987, 69).

America as the potential or actual location of otherness and the promise of a different and better way of life loomed large in the imagination of Englishmen as well as other Europeans a long time before actual colonization. A notable example

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² See Bloch 1995, 142–175 on “the utopian function” and his detailed discussions of “medical, social, technological, architectural and biological utopias” as well as utopia represented in art and philosophy (451–920).

³ The expression “imaginary” used as a noun is an English translation of the French term *l’imaginaire*: see Braga 2007, 62–64, and his introduction to the “Utopian Imaginaries” conference of the Utopian Studies Society/ Europe in July 2023 (<http://phantasma.lett.ubbcluj.ro/en/conferences/>).

is the foundational text of the literary genre, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), which projected its eponymous imaginary island somewhere in the (at the time, still half-legendary) New World (More 1989, 10–12). The New England Puritans' venture to found the "City upon a Hill" or a new Christian commonwealth in the North American "wilderness" in the early 17th century (Boorstin 1988, 3–31) has added a utopian dimension to the origins of the United States. The earliest reports about the Edenic lifestyle of the natives evoked ancient Golden Age myths in European travelers' minds (Kumar 1987, 70–71), which is reflected in John Locke's famous metaphor in his *Second Treatise of Government* (1690) that "in the beginning all the world was America, [...] for no such thing as money was anywhere known" (Locke 1952, 29). The presumed emptiness of the vast continent (an idea that consistently disregarded the existence of Native Americans), its abundance in natural resources, and the lack of established social hierarchies or political regimes inspired the imagination of writers and poets, attracted dreamers and adventurers to the new colonies, and provided philosophers and social planners with a clean canvas to sketch their alternative schemes on. "America was, to all intents and purposes, empty, a virgin land ready and waiting for settlement and civilization. Here mankind could make a new beginning" (Kumar 1987, 71).

Kumar argues that the creation of the European colonies in America and the foundation of the United States themselves can be understood as large-scale utopian projects (72–78), but he also borrows an argument from philosopher Robert Nozick to view the young US as a "meta-utopia", or a political and legal framework that allowed a variety of small alternative associations to be established within its boundaries (Kumar 1987, 81; Nozick 1974, 312). In the colonial era, most experimental settlements were founded by religious communities of European origin, like the Moravians of Pennsylvania or the Shakers of New York (Bestor 1970, 23–26). The early 19th century saw the zenith of utopian communitarianism in the expanding United States, especially along the thinly populated frontier: well-known examples include New Harmony founded by early socialist pioneer Robert Owen in Indiana in 1825 (Bestor 1970, 101–110, 160–201); Brook Farm, established in 1841 in Massachusetts and made famous by several Transcendentalists who joined the community, as well as some two dozen other phalanxes inspired by the ideas of French Socialist Charles Fourier and his faithful American disciple, Albert Brisbane (Bestor 1970, 280–282; Fellman 1973, 15–16); or the Oneida Community, a strange heterodox sect practicing "complex marriage", founded by John Humphrey Noyes in 1848 in upstate New York (Fellman 1973, 49–60; Kumar 1987, 87–90). Few of these

experimental communities lasted longer than a couple of years; those established on secular ideologies typically collapsed a lot sooner than religiously inspired ones, but a general decline in the popularity of communitarianism can be observed in the late 19th century (Kumar 1987, 94–95). Nonetheless, the wealth of the American tradition of practical utopianism has few equals in the history of Western culture (see also Claeys 2011, 129–139).

Perhaps it is due partly to the ease of propagating radical reform ideas and the ubiquity of various alternative communities that literary utopia remained an uncommon genre in early American literature. In his meticulous bibliography of English-language utopian literature, Sargent lists only a handful of obscure American utopian works from the early 19th century, the earliest of which was published in 1802 (Sargent 2016)⁴, in sharp contrast to the long history and richness of the British utopian tradition. Kumar concurs:

As a metaphor or symbol, utopia is practically everywhere in American literature. But as a detailed portrait of an ideal society it is relatively rare. It is almost as if, because Americans thought they were already living in utopia, there was no need to represent it in imagination. Utopianism, the idea of America's special destiny, was a central part of the national ideology – almost *the* national ideology. [...] But this ideological or 'pragmatic' utopianism, a unique and almost contradictory blend, had the paradoxical effect of driving out almost entirely the formal literary utopia. (Kumar 1987, 81, original italics)

There was a perceivable uptick of writing with utopian overtones in the 1840s, which coincided with the rising popularity of alternative communities. A Prussian immigrant, John Adolphus Etzler, published several visions of a utopia relying on revolutionary technology harnessing wind, water, and the sun (Sargent 2016). Although his advocacy of clean and renewable energy has since proved prophetic, his inventions turned out to be impractical and unusable. A late novel by classic American author James Fenimore Cooper, *The Crater* (1847), is a sea adventure story, but it depicts the emergence of a small idyllic colony on a Pacific island (Sargent 2016). In 1849, Edgar Allan Poe wrote a strange utopian/dystopian story taking place in the far future, “Mellonta Tauta”, in which he savagely satirized the democratic political institutions of the contemporary US and suggested that the island of Manhattan, destroyed by an earthquake, would become “the emperor’s garden” in the 19th century (Poe 1976, 322).

⁴ The earliest full-fledged literary utopia published by an American author is probably *Equality: A Political Romance* from 1802, attributed to a certain John Lithgow (<https://openpublishing.psu.edu/utopia/content/equality-political-romance>).

In 1852, Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Blithedale Romance*, a narrative based on his experiences at Brook Farm a decade earlier, which expressed his tactful skepticism of the utopian experiment while avoiding a detailed discussion of how the community emerged and how it was organized (White 1998, 80).

Yet none of these can be considered a proper literary utopia, and in the next thirty years, while the nation was preoccupied with the all-consuming conflict over slavery and then the traumatic experience of the Civil War, the genre practically disappeared from American literature, until it made a comeback in the 1880s, under very different circumstances: the new age of rapid industrialization and urbanization, as well as that of drastic social transformation, challenged contemporaries once again to envision better alternatives to the problem-ridden present (Sargent 2016). This new ferment produced the first classic American literary utopia, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), which prophesied that the United States of the millennium would become a single "Great Trust" managing an entirely nationalized economy on essentially socialist principles, in which all able-bodied adults perform a compulsory service in the "industrial army" until retirement (Bellamy 2000, 37–42). Bellamy's book became an instant national success and made a huge impact not only in the US but also in Europe, spawning a network of Nationalist Clubs intent on putting the principles outlined in Bellamy's book into practice (Roemer 1983, 207–210) as well as fictional responses and literary imitations from such significant British writers as William Morris and H. G. Wells (Kumar 1987, 134). The novel's outstanding international success is indicated by the fact that, along with several other European languages, it was also translated into Hungarian as early as 1892 (Mohay 1970).

But Bellamy's book signals the irrevocable end of an era: Fellman argues that American utopianism was replaced by progressivism by the early 20th century, a more practical and reform-oriented movement of social-political innovation, which was also motivated by idealism but dismissed the bold visions of utopists as unrealistic (Fellman 1973, xix). Social utopianism on a large scale would not be revived until the wide-ranging cultural ferment of the 1960s, which produced the hippie subculture and boosted several other kinds of influential countercultural activism from the civil rights movement to second-wave feminism and beyond (for details, see Isserman and Kazin 2000), while also inspiring several "critical utopias" in the 1970s, such as Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*, Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*, or Samuel R. Delany's *Triton* (for details, see Moylan 1987).

The overwhelming majority of 19th century American utopian fiction as well as practical experiments were based on some variety of communitarianism⁵ and egalitarianism: they typically imagined a democratic community guided by elected leaders, sought to provide for all members equally, and limited or even eliminated private property. They also attempted to do away with money in economic transactions in favor of some kind of barter. In all these ambitions, they were clearly opposed to the dominant traits of the young United States: individualism, laissez-faire capitalism, market competition and social-political inequality based on wealth and inherited privilege. Besides this communitarian-socialist version of utopian thinking, inspired primarily by European religious and philosophical traditions, however, there existed another, rival version of utopian imagination in the US which was rooted in the powerful experience of living in proximity to the North American wilderness. While the conventional American imagery invariably pictured wild nature as a female figure and used sexist and militaristic language in relation to it (Bollobás 2005, 82) – wilderness was supposed to be “penetrated”, “explored”, “subdued” and “tamed”, and ultimately turned into a civilized, (hu)man-dominated landscape exemplified by the farm or the garden (Kumar 1987, 72–74) – for a minority, it also represented a refuge from the corruption of civilization, a place where exceptionally robust, disciplined and determined individuals may create their own private utopia, seeking to fulfil another ancient human ambition of living in harmony with nature, a distinct feature of Golden Age myths.

The first literary manifestation of this narrative trope, also known as the myth of the “American Adam”,⁶ is the Leatherstocking tales (1823–1841) of James Fenimore Cooper, whose protagonist, Natty Bumppo (known under a variety of nicknames in the five novels) became the first internationally famous American literary hero. He is a man of the frontier, intimately familiar with and perfectly self-sufficient in the wilderness, who exists continuously at the periphery of the expanding American civilization and has combined his European heritage with vital elements of Indian

⁵ Communitarianism was defined by Bestor as “all those colonies that were established for the definite purpose of creating a richer, nobler, more equitable social life by bringing men and women together to share their lives in closely knit communities. The term is broad enough to include those societies which adopted community of goods as well as those which did not” (quoted in Kumar 1987, 444).

⁶ The term entered wider circulation after R. W. H. Lewis published his eponymous book in 1955, who defined it as the image of a radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; and individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. [...] Adam was the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all before him. (Lewis 1959, 5)

culture through his lifelong friendship with Chingachgook, a Mohican chief. Despite his lack of education and sophistication, he is morally superior to all those rapacious white settlers whose main priority is to enrich themselves from the wealth of the continent and who despise both Native Americans and their respectful view of the relationship between man and nature (House 1987, 96–103).

The classic philosophical statement of this back-to-nature utopian desire in American culture is Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), an essay reflecting on a period of more than two years (between 1845 and 1847) he spent in a self-constructed wooden cabin at Walden Pond outside Concord, Massachusetts (Thoreau 2004, 39–48). Although Thoreau did not exactly renounce civilization, as he remained in the heart of New England (which was by the mid-19th century several hundred miles east of the real frontier), within walking distance from a small town and in the vicinity of Boston, relied on odd jobs from the local community to maintain himself, and dined at his friends with some regularity, his book has nonetheless become a classic American text expounding the virtues of self-reliance and rugged individualism as well as a trenchant criticism of modern civilization. Thoreau carried out and recorded a premeditated experiment to find out what the essential needs for human survival and self-fulfillment are: he came to the conclusion that beyond simple food, shelter and fuel, there is very little that is indispensable for a meaningful and happy life while most of the luxuries offered by civilization isolate people from nature and create material burdens that force them to toil miserably throughout most of their life. His rejection of material comfort and the 'blessings' of civilized life as well as his extolment of the subtle beauties of nature has served as a touchstone for generations of Americans who have wished to abandon and escape from the increasingly urban, mechanized and artificial existence that 20th and 21st century United States offered.

Thoreau's criticism of the materialism and mercantilism of his own age differed from most of his utopian contemporaries in one significant aspect: he put forward his critical views from an emphatically individualist point of view, speaking exclusively in his own name and repeatedly emphasizing that he is not trying to set an example or provide a model way of life for anybody else. As he put it, "I would not have any one adopt *my* mode of living on any account; [...] I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way, and not his father's or his mother's or his neighbor's instead" (Thoreau 2004, 68, original italics). This strong idiosyncratic streak in Thoreau both assimilated him more strongly to mainstream

individualist American thinking than his communitarian-socialist peers and added a strangely anti-utopian frame to his reflections as he expressly refrained from prescribing any ideal way of life for the wider community, in diametrical opposition to standard utopists. Kumar describes the paradox of *Walden* as “the *reductio ad absurdum* of American utopianism. One man does not make a community, even a utopian community” (Kumar 1987, 82, original italics).

The myth of the American Adam and Thoreau’s testimony of how to eke out a livelihood by adapting to one’s environment and utilize all the resources available in wild nature have reverberated in subsequent American culture, creating a special kind of individualist tradition critical of modern technological civilization and ready to retreat from it into the wilderness, the impact of which can be traced up to such contemporary young adult dystopian stories as Susan Collins’s *Hunger Games* trilogy (see Limpár 2021, 181–183). In the following, I wish to examine a representation of the Thoreauvian utopia and its clash with the wider American utopia in the narrative of *Captain Fantastic*, an independent drama that won multiple awards and received mostly appreciative reviews (see e.g. Kermode 2016, Dargis 2016, Debruge 2016, Kohn 2016), although it was also criticized by others (e.g. Brody 2016, Chang 2016, Watson 2016).

2. *Captain Fantastic* as a clash of utopias: from the wilderness to the garden

Thoreau describes the main motivation of his move to Walden Pond in the following famous words:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. [...] I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms (Thoreau 2004, 88)

This quote could have served as a motto for *Captain Fantastic*, written and directed by Matt Ross in 2016. Its protagonist, Ben Cash, a father of six in his late 40s or early 50s,⁷ lives with his entire family in the depth of the forest in the

⁷ A telltale clue regarding Ben’s age is a tattered T-shirt he wears in a late scene (01:33:20), which reveals he was a supporter of Jesse Jackson’s 1988 presidential campaign, so he must have been at least a teenager, but more likely a college student, in the late 1980s, which would put his birthyear around 1966 to 1970.

American Northwest (probably in Washington state⁸) in a self-constructed dwelling, as completely isolated from mainstream American society as possible. Cash and his family can be conveniently viewed as an intentional community⁹ attempting to exist in a Thoreauvian simplicity close to and in harmony with nature. While sheltering his children from the harmful influences of modern civilization and training them to survive in the wilderness, Cash also undertakes an ambitious and radical educational program predominantly informed by left-wing radicalism to inculcate alternative cultural values in their kids, encouraging individual thinking and a strongly critical attitude to mainstream American culture. The plot is set in motion by the sudden suicide of his wife, which forces Ben to return to “everyday America” with his family and confront both the consequences of his parental decisions and his potential responsibility for his wife’s death.

The movie meets at least two fundamental generic criteria of fictional utopias: satire and antithesis. As such narratives inevitably emerge from displeasure with the author’s familiar status quo, they always present some sort of criticism of it, which typically takes the form of (explicit or implicit) satire. The generic subcategory of satirical utopia, employed by certain authors (see e.g. Vieira 2010, 15–16), is actually a misnomer, since all utopias are satirical albeit to varying degrees, as Northrop Frye and Robert C. Elliott have convincingly demonstrated: they take aim at the perceived follies, inequities and absurdities of their own contemporary society in the form of sarcastic references, comic exaggerations or even explicit parodies and build their nonconformist vision on the ambition to correct or replace the exposed deficiencies of empirical reality (Elliott 1970, 3–24; Frye 1990, 223–239, 308–311). The second criterion is the presence of a specific alternative arrangement, an antithesis to the familiar and conventional, as the path out of the predicament of the status quo. This alternative may not be feasible on a global or even on a national level, but it may prove attractive to a small but dedicated group of people; most intentional communities of human history have emerged out of such reformist zeal.

Captain Fantastic ticks off both criteria. It skillfully satirizes some of the characteristic features and attitudes of mainstream American culture through the

⁸ Although their exact location is never precisely identified in the movie, the pine forests and tall mountains suggest the Northern Rockies. While travelling with the family in an old school bus, they are crossing a wide river on a highway bridge in an urban area at 00:31:30, and a quick shot briefly shows a traffic sign: they are on the I-405 to Beaverton, which suggests that they are crossing the Willamette River in Portland, Oregon. Since they are traveling southward toward New Mexico, and Portland is due south of the state border with Washington, their point of departure must have been in rural Washington.

⁹ Note, however, that Sargent excludes nuclear families from his definition of “intentional communities”, arguing that it should be a voluntary combination of at least a few unrelated adults (see Sargent 1994, 14–15).

eyes of the children, cultural outsiders who experience them in person for the first time, and through the confrontations of the father with the conventions and expectations of established society. In fact, much of the movie dramatizes a clash of utopias, as the downsides and failures of the conformist and self-satisfied American utopia (as defined by Kumar above) are subjected to a trenchant criticism from the perspective of the Cash family's private utopia, and the audience is repeatedly invited to compare and judge. Some of the targets of these satirical episodes include rampant consumerism, the obesity epidemic, the underperforming state education system and the lack of tolerance for dissent. Furthermore, the first part of the movie also presents an alternative way of life that is resonant with the primordial desire of reuniting with nature, evoking a rich theme of American culture going back at least to Thoreau's *Walden* and Cooper's frontier tales.

The opening scene (*Captain Fantastic* 00:01:00–00:01:35)¹⁰ is a broad aerial vista of an immense pine forest with sloping mountainsides in the background: a timeless visual representation of the untamed wilderness. The first cut takes us below the canopy: we get glimpses of tall pine trees, a mountain stream and finally a solitary roving deer in the forest. The Edenic idyll is interrupted by a single human face, painted dark, intensely watching the deer while hiding among the foliage (00:02:32). It soon becomes clear that the deer is being hunted in an ancient and brutal fashion: the man jumps at the animal and, after a brief struggle, cuts its throat with a knife (00:02:54–00:03:24). As soon as the prey is killed, a strange company of other humans emerge on the other side of the stream to join the young hunter: several children aged from about 6 to 16, male and female, their faces also painted dark like primeval warriors but wearing a motley of modern clothes, wade across the water accompanied by a single long-haired and bearded adult man (00:03:25–00:04:00). The man takes his own knife and carves out a piece of raw meat, then he makes a sign on the young hunter's forehead with his bloody finger: "Today the boy is dead; and in his place – is a man." (00:04:00–00:04:45). Then he offers the bloody meat to the young hunter, who readily bites off a mouthful and begins to chew. Only then start the opening credits of the movie (00:05:10).

Such an opening of the movie is mystifying, especially in view of the subsequent story: the first impressions suggest a weird primitive tribe or cult practicing sacramental killing and some sort of astonishingly savage initiation ritual.¹¹ Immediately afterward,

¹⁰ In the following, all time codes refer to the same movie, therefore repeated references are omitted.

¹¹ One reviewer interpreted the opening scene as a comment on the cultic character of families: "What are families, after all, beyond autonomous little sects forced to operate within a broader social context?" (Debruge 2016)

however, these dark associations are dispelled: the family washes themselves in the stream, playfully splashing around and making fun, quickly shedding their primeval image. They carry the deer's carcass back to their dwelling and begin to process it. Then the father announces, after glancing at an old-fashioned pocket watch: "Training is in 60 minutes" (00:05:15–00:05:54). The movie's narrative arc opens in a wilderness idyll, shocks the audience with images suggesting feral savagery, but then quickly offsets the disturbing scenes by ushering us into a rudimentary but well-organized small community living in the middle of the forest.

In the following few minutes of the movie, viewers get a quick visual introduction to the family's way of life: we see a wooden cabin where they sleep, a greenhouse where they grow plants; there are rows of pickled vegetable jars, a huge plastic water container, washed-up dishes next to a sink. The inside of the cabin (00:06:35–00:06:40) is anything but nomadic: there are cupboards and shelves full of books, pictures of the family, a sewing machine, even a record player is momentarily visible in the background. The initial images of a savage tribe are soon displaced by glimpses of a family living in reasonable comfort in the forest, not lacking the fundamental necessities of civilized existence.

But the father also trains the children to survive under extreme circumstances in the wilderness and therefore subjects them to a tough physical regimen: they run and exercise every day, climb rocks and learn hand-to-hand combat as well. They spend their evenings by the fire reading and studying, with the father acting as a rather stern schoolmaster, questioning some of them about how they are progressing and reminding them of upcoming tests (00:09:11–00:10:50), all of which reveals that the children are homeschooled, a practice that is legal and not uncommon in the US.¹² This scene offers the first hints at the authoritarian side of the father's personality: his eldest daughter, Vespyr, responds nervously to his questions, while his small blond daughter, Zaja, is reading her book with a gas mask on, as if trying to hide from her father, but later she removes it with a huge sigh of relief (00:10:52). Yet the tension is soon dispelled by the father bringing out a guitar and initiating a spontaneous jam session, with all the children happily taking part (00:10:55–00:13:00).

All in all, the opening part of the movie depicts a closely-knit family living a rugged yet almost idyllic life in the woods under the resolute but loving guidance of their father – but the absence of the mother is conspicuous from the start. Viewers get a passing glimpse of her when a wedding picture is briefly shown inside the

¹² See the data of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) about homeschooling (<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=91>)

cabin (00:06:55) but her absence is unexplained until the kids start asking questions about her (00:13:25–00:14:10): the conversation reveals that she has been missing from the family for months because she has been hospitalized due to her struggle with depression. Soon after, while Ben is visiting a nearby town to sell hand-made trinkets and shop for supplies, he calls a woman called Harper (later revealed as Ben's sister) to find out that his wife, Leslie, has committed suicide (00:16:35–00:17:30).

This unexpected tragedy disrupts what initially seemed a backwoods utopia: the grief-stricken family is further shocked by the attempt of Leslie's father to ban them from the funeral. Jack, who clearly blames the husband for his daughter's illness and death, warns Ben over the phone not to attend or he would be arrested (00:21:45–00:22:55). The children protest in dismay, employing the radical left-wing terminology of social and political criticism learned from their father, denouncing their grandparents as "fascist capitalists" (00:23:32) among other things, but Ben makes it clear that if he were arrested, the kids could be taken away from him, a risk he is unwilling to take.

After attempting to maintain their old routine, Ben – clearly sensing the children's grief and disappointment – makes an impulsive decision: first he lectures the kids about how the powerful control the lives of the powerless and they have to shut up and accept that, then suddenly declares in a defiant gesture: "Well, fuck that" (00:29:08–00:30:00), and they embark on a long trip in an old converted school bus to join the mother's funeral who had been hospitalized by her parents in New Mexico. This decision sets the family on a collision course that threatens to destroy their collective utopia and their entire community. They do not know it yet, but they would never return to the woods.

In *Captain Fantastic*, the journey, which is an age-old plot device of narrative utopias,¹³ is the inversion of the well-established pattern familiar from More's *Utopia* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* down to Bellamy's *Looking Backward*: it is not the representative of the author's familiar society who travels far and away to report on the mysterious land of otherness, but the young citizens of Utopia set out to discover mainstream America – which is mostly a *terra incognita* for the children who have rarely left their home in the forest before. They represent a variety of another utopian trope, the noble savage visiting civilization and revealing its weird and absurd character from an estranged perspective, a ploy exemplified by Voltaire's *L'Ingenu* (1767) or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). This situation offers a

¹³The renaissance utopias after More liked to employ the conventions of contemporary travel literature for satirical effect, both to provide an aura of authenticity to the narrative and concurrently to subvert that impression by various ironic, parodistic or absurdist means. An outstanding example is Robert Hall's *Mundus Alter Et Idem* (1605), see Maczelka 2019, 168–184.

rich source for satire, but also exposes the limits of the children's education and, by extension, questions the father's ambitious schooling program, which is the heart of the parents' backwoods utopian project. While the kids have apparently read and studied widely about the history, culture and politics of the United States, the only person who is intimately familiar with the reality of the outside world is their father, also the supervisor of their entire education, whose philosophy betrays a fundamental contradiction. On the one hand, he promotes an eminently progressive pedagogical program, constantly pushing the kids to be critical and independent-minded in their thinking, not to accept ready-made opinions and unsupported claims. On the other hand, he has deliberately isolated the children from any personal, first-hand experience about the wider world: all the information available to them has been carefully selected and filtered by Ben, which effectively prevents the kids from forming truly independent and self-reliant views. Furthermore, he has inculcated his own radical left-wing critical views about the evils of American capitalism, consumer society, the rule of the wealthy and the corruption of the political system in his kids, so on balance he has carried out a textbook example of ideological indoctrination while preaching the importance of individual judgement and critical thought. Sheila O'Malley, who self-evidently identifies the family's way of life in the forest as a "utopia", severely criticized this aspect of Ben's education in her review, calling the children "little robots" who "parrot back to him his words [and] share his world view without question", and sums up her impression in the following summary judgment: "It's Family as Cult" (O'Malley 2016). In Ben's figure, the narrative compellingly dramatizes the fundamental paradox of parenting: fathers and mothers effectively rule over their children's lives like absolute monarchs, making all the crucial and far-reaching decisions about them and rarely asking their opinion or consent, in the firm conviction that they act in their best interest. Ben's case differs from other families mainly in the radicalism of his parenting choices and the almost total power he exercises over his children.

The fundamental ambiguity of Ben's character is brilliantly if metaphorically summarized by Kielyr's analysis of *Lolita*, arguably the key scene of the entire movie. During their bus trip, Ben notices his daughter reading Nabokov's classic and questions her about it. Kielyr describes the book as "disturbing" because it's written from the main character's point of view, which makes the reader sympathize with him even though he is a "child molester" who effectively rapes the young girl. "But his love for her is beautiful [...] I hate him and somehow I feel sorry for him at the same time" (00:31:40–00:33:05). Although Ben is certainly no child

molester, he does violate his children's freedom in several crucial ways, yet the movie's narrative places him squarely in the center and this way generates mostly sympathy and admiration for his incredible devotion to parenting. Matt Ross, the movie's scriptwriter-director has explicitly identified as the main question of the movie whether Jack is "the best father in the world or the worst" (qtd in Kermodé 2016), and it is small wonder that the complexity and ambiguity of Ben's character provoked diametrically opposite reactions from reviewers: Chang describes him as an "objectively intolerable human being" affected by "raging narcissism" (Chang 2016) and O'Malley calls him a "sanctimonious bully" (O'Malley 2016), while Dargis opines that "The clan's father isn't a superhero, but [...] he's the next best thing" (Dargis 2016). O'Hara offers the most balanced opinion by identifying Ben as "both the hero and the villain" (O'Hara 2016). Either way, the family's clash with the real world exposes the shortcomings of Ben's educational ideals, so the satire ultimately cuts both ways: the values, conventions and underlying contradictions of the great American utopia and the family-sized backwoods utopia are both interrogated and undermined in the story's confrontations.

The journey provides plenty of occasions for satirical episodes: the children have never seen a restaurant or a supermarket before, are completely ignorant about popular culture (like commercial food and fashion brands or TV shows), they are shocked by the obesity of the average Americans. But in another sense, they have been carefully prepared for "the other world" along the lines of Ben's radical anticapitalistic ideology. As the father's instruction of "Remember your training!" (00:35:50) illustrates, he has trained them to treat mainstream America as a dangerous and hostile world, where they should act as a disciplined and coordinated team of outsiders to defend themselves (for instance when they scare away a police officer during a routine traffic stop by pretending to be a fundamentalist Christian sect [00:35:20–00:37:40]), or to obtain supplies by disregarding other people's property (they try to hunt sheep along the road with bow and arrow [00:37:52–00:38:30] and carry out an organized stealing raid in a supermarket [00:40:25–00:42:40]).

The most ironic illustration of Ben's countercultural radicalism is the episode in which the family celebrates "Noam Chomsky Day", apparently one of Ben's intellectual heroes and a famous left-wing critic of the United States (see e.g. Milne 2009). After the successful theft, Ben wants to celebrate with the kids, therefore he presents a chocolate cake and declares that today is Noam Chomsky Day even though – as one of the kids remarks – his birthday is on December 7. It soon becomes clear that this private family holiday serves as a substitute for Christmas: the kids

bring out a portrait of Chomsky, they sing a little song and everybody gets presents – invariably hunting knives, bows and other forest weapons (00:42:40–00:42:40)). But Rellian, the second oldest boy who has displayed a rebellious streak before, is unimpressed and challenges the father: why can they not celebrate Christmas like everyone else? Ben’s response is entirely consistent with his educational philosophy: he calmly offers Rellian the opportunity to argue for his position and try to convince the others. But the game is obviously rigged, since he, the only person of authority present, is firmly opposed to the idea and he has indoctrinated the rest of the family, so Rellian would have an uphill struggle trying to persuade an unreceptive audience. He sullenly and silently walks away instead (00:42:40–00:45:35)).

This episode includes multiple layers of irony: on the one hand, it showcases the typical ambition of an alternative intentional community to consciously differ from the mainstream. Ben strongly dislikes Christianity (which is also illustrated by his subsequent provocative speech at Leslie’s funeral ceremony [01:10:00–01:11:40]) and refuses to celebrate Christmas, enforcing his preference on his family without tolerating any dissent despite his seemingly patient invitation to his son to argue for his opposite position. It reveals the same combination of authoritarian utopianism couched in the language of individualism and tolerance that his entire method of education displays. On a more abstract level, turning Noam Chomsky into the patron saint of a family holiday also works as an absurd joke that can be interpreted as a satirical comment of the scriptwriter-director on the personality cult around some of the intellectual heroes of the American left.

A different kind of cultural clash is dramatized during the family’s visit at Ben’s sister Harper: during the dinner, Ben scandalizes Harper by offering wine to his children but even more when he does not avoid the painful topic of his wife’s mental illness and suicide when asked by one of Harper’s sons (00:46:30–00:51:30). His unflinching and brutal honesty stands in sharp contrast to Harper’s and her husband’s pious attempts to change the subject and pretend that Leslie’s death was natural – in line with conventional American social norms that mental illness and death are unpleasant subjects that kids should be sheltered from. Harper clashes again with Ben the following day when she suggests that he should take the children to school, an idea flatly rejected by Ben. The ensuing argument sharply delineates their opposing priorities: Ben claims he teaches his children to survive alone in the wilderness while Harper says they are kids who need to go to school. In response to that, Ben invites Harper’s teenage sons into the kitchen and asks them about the American Bill of Rights. Their total ignorance and lack of interest is spectacularly

contrasted to his 8-year-old daughter, Zaja, who gives fluent and detailed answers to Ben's questions (00:54:35–00:58:00).¹⁴

Ben wins this argument easily by demonstrating the superior effectiveness of his educational methods. He meets a much tougher opponent, however, in the person of his father-in-law, Jack. When the family arrives late at the scene of the funeral service in quirky colorful clothes, Ben interrupts the priest and makes a provocative speech in which he declares that Leslie hated organized religion, practiced Buddhism, and would never wish to be buried in a coffin. Then he proceeds to read out her last will in which she stated that she should be cremated, and her ashes should be flushed down a public toilet. At this point, Jack orders security guards to forcibly remove Ben from the church (01:08:20–01:12:00).

This scene is the most public and most spectacular conflict between Ben and the “normal world” of America and contains multiple moral contradictions. Ben's bright red suit (Jack calls him a “hippie in a clown outfit” [1:13:33]) and his gate-crashing oration is intended to scandalize the mourners, and his deliberate flouting of funeral conventions, while providing yet another great satirical occasion to parody the empty pieties of a traditional service, feels so outrageous and disrespectful that his forcible removal appears an appropriate response from Leslie's father. On the other hand, Ben and his children have every right to be present at his wife's and their mother's funeral: Jack's arbitrary and unilateral decision to exclude them generates sympathy for the family. Furthermore, Ben essentially acts in accordance with Leslie's written wishes when he announces Leslie's last will, honoring his wife's legacy in his own unorthodox way. Two strong-willed and domineering characters, father and husband thus lock horns over who should determine the final rites of their loved one, and Ben is destined to lose this fight: Jack explicitly threatens to call the police on him outside the church, and when he seems determined even after that to interrupt the funeral, his eldest son, Bodevan, finally stops him with the desperate appeal “Please, we can't lose you too!” (01:12:45–01:14:40).

The confrontation, which illustrates Ben's willful and headstrong character, also exposes the fraying harmony and brewing tensions within the family. After they stop for the night in a trailer park, Rellian tells Bodevan that their father was responsible for their mother's illness (“Dad made her crazy! Dad's dangerous!”) and when the latter reacts with an incredulous chuckle, Rellian bursts out: “Do you think our lives are so great? Do you think Dad is so perfect?” (01:16:00–01:17:30) This exchange makes

¹⁴ At least one reviewer questioned whether an 8-year-old would or even should be able to give such mature answers about the Bill of Rights and found the scene stilted and didactic (Chitwood 2016).

Bodevan finally pluck up the courage to tell his father that he had secretly applied to several top-class Ivy League universities and has been accepted to all. A slightly drunk Ben's reaction is angry and hurtful instead of appreciative: he accuses Bodevan of deceiving him by conducting the entire application process behind his back. He is shocked by his son's reply: "It was Mom. She helped me with everything. We did it together." And when Ben retorts that he has nothing to learn in college, Bodevan also loses his temper like Rellian before: "I know nothing! I'm a freak because of you! You've made us freaks! And Mom knew that, she understood! Unless it comes out of a fucking book, I don't know anything about anything!" (01:17:45–01:19:45)

The harsh and angry words of the eldest son, who has obviously been the apple of his father's eye and the pride of his utopian educational project, eventually throw several hard truths into Ben's face: his schooling program, despite all its merits touted by Ben, is fundamentally deficient because it leaves his children unprepared for the real world, that is, the everyday realities of modern civilization, and they will be unable to fit in due to their lack of social and cultural skills.¹⁵ He is also forced to swallow the embarrassing fact that Leslie was privy to Bodevan's secret desire to go to college, and she helped him fulfill his dream despite Ben's clear disapproval. All this suggests a dictatorial father ruling over an intimidated family rather than Leslie's full and equal participation in parental decisions about the children's education that Ben repeatedly claims.

These conflicts bring into sharp focus the central mystery of the movie's entire plot: the dead wife/mother's character and the circumstances of her illness and death. Leslie is the most conspicuous lacuna in the narrative as she remains practically invisible during the entire story. Except for some photos, the audience only catches fleeting glimpses of her in two brief dream sequences of Ben, in which she smiles at him lovingly and says things like "What we are doing out here is so incredible" and "The kids are amazing" (00:24:30–00:25:00), which seem to confirm Ben's repeated claim that leaving civilization behind and moving to the forest was a joint parental decision with Leslie's complete consent. However, Leslie's true character, her opinions and especially the causes of her mental breakdown are shrouded in ambiguity, as different people reveal contrasting pieces of her personality. Her father, Jack, is firmly convinced that Ben is responsible for her mental illness, and he does not hesitate to tell him in the face; Rellian confirms the same to Bodevan when he says he hardly remembers his mother laughing and her condition was very

¹⁵ The movie's funniest illustration of their social incompetence is Bodevan's brief love affair with a blond girl in a trailer park during the trip, when he confesses his love and asks her to marry him after their first kiss, acting like a 19th century romantic hero from one of the classic novels his father has required them to read (00:58:00–01:06:00).

severe (psychotic episodes, hallucinations, self-harm), blaming his father for Leslie's symptoms. Leslie's presumably violent mood swings are indirectly attested by her last letter her mother shows Ben: she refuses to leave the forest (although a brief reference suggests that she had asked her mother to rescue her in a previous letter) and explicitly identifies their project as a utopian one by comparing it to Plato's famous utopian vision in *The Republic*:

What Ben and I have created here may be unique in all of human existence. We created a paradise out of Plato's *Republic*. Our children shall be philosopher-kings. It makes me so indescribably happy. I'm going to get better out here. I know I will because we are defined by our actions not our words. (1:29:45–1:30:15)

This final letter seems to vindicate Ben, yet it is no definitive proof considering the circumstances: she had apparently written something very different before, and soon after she was finally committed to a mental hospital where she ended her own life. Two crucial questions remain hanging in the air throughout most of the movie: did Leslie fully support the withdrawal into the wilderness, or was it Ben's idea who imposed his iron will on her just like he has done with the kids? Has the tough way of life in the woods contributed to Leslie's mental decline and is Ben indirectly responsible for her death by refusing to give up his utopian dream?

Ben consistently denies responsibility even after Rellian defects from the family and seeks refuge at his grandparents. When Ben turns up to take him back, Rellian yells at him: "You killed Mom!", while Jack coldly and dispassionately confronts him with all his risky and dangerous parental decisions: the theft from the supermarket, presenting the children with hunting weapons, Rellian's accident, the bruises on his body. He accuses Ben of child abuse and informs him that he is ready to file for legal custody over the other children, while Rellian is staying with him (01:21:00–01:24:30). Ben refuses to back down: he instructs Vespyr to climb into Rellian's window from the roof and bring him back to the family. The oldest daughter, however, slips on the tiles and falls from the roof, breaking her leg and hurting her neck (01:24:50–01:26:30).

Vespyr's accident is the last straw to Ben's crisis of conscience: he is forced to finally understand that his willfulness almost cost his daughter her life. The family is taken in by the grandparents, where they seem to enjoy the comfort provided by the large mansion. Struggling with his guilt, Ben makes another radical decision: he tells the children that he is going to leave them with their grandparents and return to the forest alone. When they protest, he admits that he made a "beautiful mistake"

when he believed that living in the forest would make Leslie feel better, but it was “too much” for her, and he was aware of that. With these halting, hesitant, teary-eyed words he finally takes responsibility for his wife’s fate and concomitantly gives up on the utopian project he has pursued for a decade. When one of the smallest kids asks him why they cannot stay with him, he responds tersely: “Because if you do, I’ll ruin your lives” (01:30:40–01:32:50).

If the story had ended here, one could simply describe it as an anti-utopian tract, but the script does not allow the protagonist to fail completely: in a somewhat miraculous and improbable twist, his children all hide on the bus when he leaves the grandparents’ mansion, and they rejoin him after he has already given up on them (1:37:00–1:39:00). While it stretches credibility that six children would be able to hide silently in a small, closed space for half a day, the final twist carries an important moral lesson: this is the first time the children have had a say in their own future, and they all chose to stay with Ben rather than in the safety and comfort provided by the grandparents. At the same time, they also disobeyed their authoritarian father’s will because of their love for him. The new-found agency of the children restores the balance of power between them and Ben: they are no longer subjects – or, depending on one’s viewpoint, victims – of his pigheaded utopian experiment but willing participants in the family community: they exercise the kind of independent judgement and decision-making that their father has repeatedly preached but rarely allowed them to practice. Indirectly, the father’s renunciation of his absolute leadership of his utopian mission brings the most impressive proof of success of his alternative education – while also conforming to Thoreau’s exhortation that each individual should follow their own path rather than the one prescribed by their parents.

The kids even persuade Ben to honor Leslie’s final will, completing the symbolic reunification and healing of the family: they collectively dig up her coffin, giving the children an opportunity to see her for the last time and say farewell, then they burn her body among the mountains in a touching ceremony while Kielyr sings her favorite song (“Sweet Child of Mine” by Guns’n’Roses) and the rest of the family members play music and dance around (1:39:00–1:47:15). Even the dumping of her ashes occurs in a public restroom of an airport where they also take leave of Bodevan, who decides to travel to Namibia, a place he has randomly selected from the map (1:47:15–1:50:05).

The closing scene of the movie carries a strong symbolism, similarly to the opening one: we see Ben and the family living on a farm, with the bus converted to a chicken coop. The kids collect eggs and vegetables from the garden, while Ben

prepares their presumably organic meal in paper bags and warns them that the school bus is coming in 15 minutes. While they are eating their breakfast, reading, and writing their homework, the father is looking around the table and then stares wistfully out through the window (1:50:05–1:52:45).

Such a conclusion to the movie represents an obvious compromise compared to the radical utopian project witnessed by the audience at the outset: the family abandoned the wilderness in favor of the garden, another age-old symbol of English-speaking cultures, and they symbolically also re-entered society by Ben allowing the kids to go to proper school. This decision, which has apparently been made by the whole family as a community and no longer by Ben alone, also carries an echo of Thoreau, who ultimately also gave up his experiment at Walden Pond and returned to civilization. The pastoral ideal, itself a reconciliation of such antagonistic opposites as nature and civilization or the animal and the rational side of humans (see Marx 2000, 102), is depicted in pastel-colored images of the farm, and the harmony of the family breakfast is only slightly ruffled by Ben's pensive, resigned demeanor. Overall, he looks like someone who has finally made his personal peace with civilization and has given up enough of his radical utopianism to be willing to live on its periphery – which is actually the closest approximation of Thoreau's ideal.

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