

Captain Fantastic

(2016, Ross, USA)

Component 1: Varieties of Film & Film-Making (AL)
Component 1: American Film (AS)

Core Study Areas:
Key Elements of Film Form
Meaning & Response
The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area:
Spectatorship
Ideology (AL)

Rationale for study

- Critical Acclaim: Ross won best director at the Cannes Film Festival and the film was chosen by the National Board of Review as one of the top ten independent films of 2016.

STARTING POINTS- Useful Sequences and timings/links

- Opening Scene (0:00 - 04:36) sets up key themes of masculinity, family and affinity with nature.
- Dinner Scene (44:08 -49:36) useful juxtaposition between the two families and different approaches to parenting.

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- Opening shots, extreme long shots of long duration to establish and romanticise the grandeur of the natural world
- Framing of Ben in the rear view mirror in close up is repeated throughout the film establishing that he is in some ways isolated even from his family.
- Contrast between wide shot of open landscape as Steve the bus recedes and the big close up of Ben 'alone' clearly expressing

distress for the first time in the narrative.

Mise-en-Scène

- Hair as symbolic – Ben shaves his beard and Bo, his head, to mark lifestyle changes and transitions in identity
- Costumes of the family suggest they are out of touch with the modern world. This can be most clearly seen in the funeral scene as their brightly coloured clothes contrast with the other mourners and defy traditions. Jack refers to Ben as, “some hippy in a clown outfit”. This sense of being from a different time is reinforced by Ben’s ‘Jesse Jackson 88’ t-shirt in a later scene.
- Lighting in the basketball court scene where Bo and Rellian discuss Ben is very harsh and contrasts with the naturalistic lighting in most of the film. The blackness created here lends gravity to their difficult conversation about whether Ben is “dangerous” or not.

Editing

- The film is bookended with scenes highlighting the rite of passage narrative and foregrounding Bo becoming a man, “the boy is dead and in his place is a man.”
- Matt Ross was keen to avoid conspicuous editing as he stated, “The thing I’ve always hoped for is to lose myself in the movie and then only afterwards say ‘Wow that was a oner. They never cut.’ I don’t want to notice that when I’m watching. I want to feel the intention of it.” Captain fantastic adheres to the principles of continuity editing, almost without exception, to this end.
- Ben’s hallucinations of Leslie break from the editing techniques used in the rest of the film as they are intended to be other-worldly. In these brief scenes there is a visual softness, choral religious music and lighting effects that see her appear, fade away and re-appear.

Sound

- Diegetic music used to symbolise Rellian’s rebellion and assertion of individuality as he uses confrontational drumming to

challenge Ben's acoustic guitar music.

- Playing bagpipe music on the bus suggests they are an army going into battle. This is anchored by Ben saying, "so they know we are coming."
- The train sounds used when Bo looks through his university acceptance letters suggest impending conflict and provoke a sense of anxiety in the spectator.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS – Meaning & Response

Representations

- Rellian and his desire to be like the rest of society, "why can't we celebrate Christmas like the rest of the world?" This can also be seen in the video game scene when he embraces playing while his siblings do not.
- Parenting – the film explores different approaches to parenting and challenges all of them. Ultimately the children decide how they want to be raised and choose their father despite him asserting, "I'll ruin your lives." Key events to explore include Vespyr's fall and discussions about Leslie's death over dinner.
- Gender equality – the children all perform the same tasks and are taught the same skills so roles are not gendered throughout the film. The film's closing scene suggests that greater integration into mainstream society may change this however as Zaja is feminised through costume and styling for the first time in the narrative.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Matt Ross says he was influenced by Simen Johan and this can be seen particularly in the way he shoots the natural world in the film capturing its splendor and majesty.
- The film is immersive and the visual style encourages the spectator to feel they are present, taking part. Matt Ross, "I wanted to shoot handheld because... I felt a more classical or formal manifestation of photography would put you at an arm's length. I wanted to be in the scene, not watch the scene."
- Matt Ross on influences, "The only thing that I was conscious of was that I wanted to create something that was psychically hopeful. I think Pixar does this very well. Their movies are emotional without being empty. They're sentimental but they earn it."

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

Political

- Owen Gleiberman in *Variety*, "We're living at a moment, after all, when Donald Trump is on the right, Bernie Sanders is on the left, and Hillary Clinton is at the center — but the supporters of Trump and Sanders have more in common, in many ways, than either faction has with the supporters of Clinton. The left and the right in America are now selling different versions of anti-establishment fervor, and "Captain Fantastic" doesn't just reflect those two poles; it fuses them. It taps the topsy-turvy sympathies that now rule the political-cultural zeitgeist." Ben and Jack both represent different ideological viewpoints but in some ways both dislike the perception that, as Ben says, "the powerful control the lives of the powerless."

Institutional

- The film got made due to Matt Ross seeking funding from the producer Lynette Howell Taylor at the Sundance film festival and its success and subsequent wider release was due to word-of-mouth and positive reviews. In these ways it is typical of the independent film world. It was also released in a year of very successful independent films and this may have helped this film gain momentum.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Spectatorship & Ideology - STARTING POINTS

- Although the film does not completely encourage identification with Ben it does at key moments of grief e.g. his 'hallucinations' of his deceased wife are shot using close up point of view shots encouraging identification.
- The film represents two very different approaches to life, Ben's and Jack's, and invites the spectator to consider the pros and cons of each. Therefore the spectator's own experiences and ideologies will have a profound impact on the view they leave the film with. Matt Ross, "I didn't want to vilify anyone. No one in this film is the villain. When I met Frank Langella, I told him [his character] is antagonistic towards Viggo's character but that he is not the antagonist. That would have been boring. [His attitude to the kids' upbringing] comes from love. His love is different but just as legitimate."
- Audience expectations play a significant role

in creating a spectator's response and this film being an art-house film and festival success may have created an expectation that its politics will be clearly liberal and left-leaning. The more balanced approach to ideology within the storytelling may therefore provide an interesting challenge to some audience expectations.

- Critique of contemporary American society. One of the film's taglines is, 'Americans are over medicated and under educated' and when the children enter mainstream society they comment on the obesity of those around them, "everyone is so fat", "are they sick?"
- Self-improvement - importance of diversity

in education as the children study academic subjects like literature, politics and quantum physics but creativity, survival skills and physical fitness are valued highly too. A methodical, structured life is encouraged with rotas and timings emphasised.

- Anti-authority messages throughout including the scene where the children pretend to be a Christian cult to disconcert the police officer. Recurring quotes in the film are, 'power to the people' and 'stick it to The Man'.