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| **Context** | | |
| **C. Institutional Context** | **1.** | Captain Fantastic is an independently funded film. This means that the film was not financed by one of the main studios, therefore the production budget was much smaller than traditional American films at $5million and it did not have the marketing and distributing machine that comes with mainstream financing. The film went on to gross $21.3million worldwide. |
| **2.** | The film was 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. |
| **3.** | In July 2014, [eOne Entertainment](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EOne_Entertainment" \o "EOne Entertainment) acquired international distribution rights to the film. In August 2014, it was announced that [Bleecker Street](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bleecker_Street_(company)) would distribute the film in the United States. The film had its world premiere at the [2016 Sundance Film Festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Sundance_Film_Festival) on January 23, 2016. The film was released on July 8, 2016. The film was aired in the [*Un Certain Regard*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Un_Certain_Regard) section at the [2016 Cannes Film Festival](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016_Cannes_Film_Festival), with Matt Ross winning the Best Director prize. |
| **D. Social, Historical and Political Context** | **4.** | Although the film was made during 2014 it was released in the year prior to the American election year of 2016. During this election the two candidates were polarising figures. For the Democratic Party their nominee was Hillary Clinton and for the Republican Party Donald Trump. The campaign for the White House was notable due to the negative and aggressive tone that surrounded it and the conjecture and controversy surround the eventual winner, Donal Trump. |
| **5.** | The political backdrop of America offers a huge contrast to the political views of Ben in the film and his views of American society are voiced throughout the film and offer a narration over the shots of America, anchoring a meaning or position in regards to the corporate chains such as Walmart and Macdonalds, institutions such as churches and schools (education) and suburbia. |
| **6.** | 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 (sic) — 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’.” |

**Knowledge Organiser Film Studies Component 1 – Varieties of Film and Filmmaking Section B – American Film Since 2005 – *Captain Fantastic***

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| 1. **Synopsis** | Ben Cash (Viggo Mortensen), his wife Leslie and their six children live deep in the wilderness of Washington state. Isolated from society, Ben and Leslie  devote their existence to raising their kids -- educating them to think critically, training them to be physically fit and athletic, guiding them in the wild  without technology and demonstrating the beauty of co-existing with nature. When Leslie dies suddenly, Ben must take his sheltered children into the  outside world for the first time. |

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| 1. **Cast and Characters** | | | |
| **Ben Cash** | Viggo Mortensen | **Rellian Cash** | Nicholas Hamilton |
| **Bo Cash** | George McKay | **Harper Cash** | Kathryn Hahn |
| **Vespyr Cash** | Annalise Basso | **Jack Bertrang** | Frank Langella |

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| **Key Scenes** | | |
| **E. Opening Sequence** | **7.** | A series of establishing shots to demonstrate the love of nature. Diegetic sound of the woods to emphasise the link with nature that the Cash family have. A rich colour palette has been used. |
| **8.** | Mid-shot of the deer which creates a sense of anticipation in the audience. There are tracking shots of the deer and with each edit the audience is brought closer to the deer ending in close up. |
| **9.** | Mid shot of Bo Cash who is hunting the deer. He is camouflaged which turns the tranquil setting into one of threat for the deer. This continues to heighten the sense of anticipation which turns to fear for the fate of the deer. |
| **10.** | The audience’s POV is aligned with Bo Cash. |
| **11.** | Series of jump cuts to show the attack and slaying of the deer at the hands of Bo Cash. These jump cuts mirror the frenzied nature and violence of the death of the deer. Extreme close ups are used throughout. |
| **12.** | Mirrored close ups alternating from the deer to Bo Cash – this highlights the lack of sentimentality within the scene. |
| **13.** | Panning shots introduce the rest of the Cash family all dressed in similar outfits with similar camouflaged markings on their faces. |
| **14.** | Mid shot of Ben Cash, the father, emerging from the foliage symbolising how he is allowing the children to take the lead in this activity whilst he supervises from afar. |
| **15.** | A clear rites of passage and coming of age is marked for the eldest Cash child, Bo. |
| **F. Dinner Scene** | **16.** | **Sequence starts with a long shot establishing a modern American trope of the family dinner. The abundance of food on the table heightens the levels of consumerism within Harper’s family.** |
| **17.** | Handheld games consoles can be heard being played by Harper’s children emphasising that the ideal conventional family does not have the levels of social interaction and communication that Ben’s family does. |
| **18.** | A series of close ups on the adults faces as they answer or react to the comments and questions of Ben’s family. |
| **19.** | Conversation around ‘wine’ further emphasises the differences in the two families – as an audience we are forced to look at what is perceived as ‘normal’ and question whether this is actually a good judgement of based on habit and tradition. |
| **20.** | The questioning by the audience is developed further when the honesty issue regarding what is shared with children is discussed. Ross forces us to question whether being dishonest or evading a potentially ‘tricky’ conversation is the best way to raise children. |
| **21.** | Throughout the whole sequence Ross is forcing the audience to examine and question the ‘traditional’ model of a family and what it means to raise children. The dialogue and quick edits allows the audience to follow the conversation as it happens and they are led to sympathise with Ben’s more liberal and alternative choices against his sister’s choices. |
| **22.** | The juxtaposition of the two families force the audience to choose a side regarding where their allegiances lie for the rest of the film. |

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| **Key Elements of Film Form** | | |
| **G. Cinematography** | **23.** | Opening shots, extreme long shots of long duration to establish and romanticise the grandeur of the natural world |
| **24.** | 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. |
| **H. Mise en Scene** | **25.** | **Hair as symbolic – Ben shaves his beard and Bo, his head, to mark lifestyle changes and transitions in identity.** |
| **26.** | 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. |
| **27.** | 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. |
| **I. Editing** | **28.** | 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.” |
| **29.** | 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. |
| **30.** | 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. |
| **J. Sound** | **31.** | Diegetic music used to symbolise Rellian’s rebellion and assertion of individuality as he uses confrontational drumming to challenge Ben’s acoustic guitar. |
| **32.** | 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.” |
| **33.** | The train sounds used when Bo looks through his university acceptance letters suggest impending conflict and provoke a sense of anxiety in the spectator. |

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| **Specialist Study Areas** | | |
| **K. Spectatorship** | **34.** | 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. |
| **35.** | 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. |
| **36.** | The audience are in many ways aligned and form allegiances with a range of characters throughout the film – Ross’ skill has a writer and director ensures that the narrative allows a range of viewpoints and opinions to be explored. |
| **L. Ideology** | **37.** | **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.”** |
| **38.** | 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?” |
| **39.** | 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. |
| **40.** | 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’. |
| **41.** | Marxism is a social, political, and economic philosophy named after [Karl Marx](https://www.investopedia.com/terms/k/karl-marx.asp), which examines the effect of [capitalism](https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/capitalism.asp) on labour, productivity, and economic development and argues for a worker revolution to overturn capitalism in favour of communism. Marxism posits that the struggle between social classes, specifically between the bourgeoisie, or capitalists, and the proletariat, or workers, defines economic relations in a capitalist economy and will inevitably lead to revolutionary communism. |