



# A Level Film Studies

## 'Captain Fantastic' (Ross, USA, 2016)

### Component 1: Varieties of film and filmmaking American film since 2005 (two-film study)

Written examination: 2.5 hours  
35% of qualification

AO1 Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of elements of film  
AO2 Apply knowledge and understanding of elements of film to:  
analyse and compare films, including through the use of critical approaches  
evaluate the significance of critical approaches  
analyse and evaluate own work in relation to other professionally produced work

### CONTEXTS

#### Production | Social and Political | Critical Debate

*Captain Fantastic* was an independent production and was distributed in the USA by Bleeker Street, a smaller and relatively new distribution company based in New York City. It was given its worldwide premiere at Sundance Festival in 2016, a typical release strategy for an independent film. The film is an example of 'indiewood' cinema – films that combine some of the experimentation and artistry of more experimental films with some conventions of Hollywood cinema. These films tend to be described as 'off-beat' and 'quirky'. They tend to have ensemble casts and offer more complex characterisation than blockbuster films.

### SYNOPSIS

Ben Cash, 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 offspring into the outside world for the first time.

### IDEOLOGY AND THEMES

The film does not judge either Ben, Jack (Grandpa) or Harper. Instead, it portrays the complexities of parenting and differing ideologies, suggesting there are benefits and limitations to each. Both Ben and Jack are portrayed sympathetically, as they are doing what they perceive is best for their families.

Ben's ideology and values are far-left, as he rejects capitalism and consumerism. Prominent communist leaders and thinkers referred to by the Cash's include Karl Marx, Chairman Mao and Noam Chomsky.

### TERMINOLOGY

ACTIVE SPECTATORSHIP  
PASSIVE SPECTATORSHIP  
PREFERRED  
NEGOTIATED  
OPPOSITIONAL  
ALIGNMENT

## AUTEUR

*"I hoped to write a film without clear protagonists or antagonists (on a daily basis, we're usually both), where all the characters were complex and imperfect, that allowed me to reflect on parenting and on our country; I wanted to write a film that didn't tell anyone what to think but allowed the audience to read the information given, to hear the questions asked and draw their own conclusions."*

Director Matt Ross

28 Hotel Rooms 2012

Worked on American Psycho, The Aviator

## LANGUAGE AND MISE EN SCENE

At the church funeral, the Cash family wear colourful, unconventional clothing. They are in direct opposition to the rigidity and formality of a Western funeral.

## SPECTATORSHIP

During the dinner sequence we are not aligned with one specific character. The spectator can judge each family according to their own values. We may also question aspects of our own western lifestyles and family rituals.

## NARRATIVE | GENRE

"Captain Fantastic" is the story of a left-wing survivalist, Ben Cash (Viggo Mortensen), martial and authoritarian yet soft-spoken and good-humoured, who's raising his six children (ranging in age from about six to eighteen) in an isolated compound somewhere in the deep woods of the Pacific Northwest.

## KEY SEQUENCES

- Opening Scene – Home
- Shopping
- Noam Chomsky Day
- Dinner at Ben's sisters
- The Funeral

## PAST PAPER QUESTIONS

a) How far do your chosen films demonstrate a constant shift between passive and active spectatorship? Refer in detail to at least one sequence from each film. [40]

Or,

(b) How far do your chosen films demonstrate the importance of visual and soundtrack cues in influencing spectator response? Refer in detail to at least one sequence from each film.