



## Film Spectatorship

The aims of this Factsheet are:

- Explore how audiences are active participants in the meaning films create
- Provide a case study using a set film from the EDUQAS specification
- Consider how the context in which we watch a film affects how we respond to it.

### Introduction

Why do we watch films? What is it that makes sitting in a darkened cinema for two hours watching other people on screen so appealing to us? Most of us have probably never thought about the answer to this question; we just take it for granted that going to the cinema is something we enjoy. But when you think about it, it's quite an odd thing to do isn't it?

Spectatorship studies is the branch of film studies that is concerned with the relationship between the viewer and the film. It is interested in the way viewers make sense of the images on screen and the relationship we have with the films we watch. The classic view of cinema audiences is of a crowd of people, passively sitting in the cinema allowing the film to wash over them, but contemporary film theory suggests that audiences are actively involved in the stories they watch and are constantly negotiating their own meanings from films.

Many of the theories you will find useful for this topic have been covered in previous Factsheets but here we will draw them together. In this factsheet, we will outline the key areas of spectatorship theory that you need to be aware of and use the film *Captain Fantastic* (2016) as a case study to apply these theories to a film you may be studying for A Level. Don't worry if *Captain Fantastic* is not a film you are studying, you can apply these ideas to your own films.

### Captain Fantastic Summary

*Ben Cash lives in a cabin in the woods with his 6 children and no electricity or running water. They grow, forage or hunt everything they eat, make many of their own clothes and the children are all home schooled. The children's mother is not with them and has clearly been away for a while. Early in the film, Ben receives news from his father in law that his wife has committed suicide after a long period of depression. Ben is warned not to attend the funeral but, under pressure from his children, they set out on a road trip to ensure their mother is buried according to her beliefs.*



Matt Ross's 2016 film *Captain Fantastic* is a set text for EDUQAS Film Studies A Level

### Approaching the Exam

For both EDUQAS and OCR film studies, you will be required to consider many aspects of film spectatorship. Make sure you are clear about which films you are studying require considering from the perspective of spectatorship theory. According to the specification, you should consider:

- How the spectator has been conceived both as 'passive' and 'active' in the act of film viewing
- The possibility of preferred, negotiated, oppositional and aberrant 'readings' of film
- Reasons for the uniformity or diversity of response by different spectators
- How spectators' responses are affected by social and cultural factors
- How the spectator is in dynamic interaction with film narrative and film features designed to generate response
- The analysis of narrative, visual, musical, performance, genre and auteur cues in relation to spectator response
- The impact of different viewing conditions on spectator response.

### Passive and Active Spectatorship

The notion of audiences as passive or active can be traced back to Media Studies debates, often focussed on two theories: The Hypodermic Syringe Model and the Uses and Gratifications Model. Through discussions of these theories can be found in Factsheet 6 (Introduction to Audience) and Factsheet 30 (Media and Audiences: The Effects Debate) so we won't discuss them in detail here, a brief summary will suffice:

**The Hypodermic Syringe Model** imagines the film audience as passive, homogenous mass. In this model, the messages and meaning of the film are injected into the minds of members of the audiences where they are accepted uncritically.

**The Uses and Gratifications Model**, on the other hand, sees the audience as a heterogeneous group of different individuals who will react to the film differently and interpret the film in their own way. This theory also suggests that audiences will actively use films for a range of purposes including: entertainment, self-identification, social interaction, and gaining information about the world.

### Preferred, Negotiated, Oppositional & Aberrant Readings

While the theories above may seem attractive at first, a significant weakness of the Hypodermic Model is that it assumes that a film has one fixed meaning that all audiences will take on board. According to Stuart Hall's reception theory, a film only has meaning when it is decoded by an audience and not all members of the audience will decode the meaning in the same way, especially when the text they are decoding is something as complex as a 2-hour feature film. Hall

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suggests that audiences can make a range of different readings and we will consider them here in relation to a scene from the film (you can find a discussion of Halls reception theory in Factsheet 30: Media Audiences, The Effects Debate or in many Media studies textbooks).

On their way to the funeral, Ben and his children spend a night with Ben's sister Harper and her family. Ben and Harper argue about whether Ben's children should go to a "real school". Ben seems to win the argument by questioning Harper's two boys about the Bill of Rights and demonstrating that they know virtually nothing about it. His own youngest daughter is able to recite several passages from memory as well as giving a thoughtful answer about why it is an important part of the US constitution. You can watch the scene on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QgvtmO7c-UU>

### Preferred Reading

The reading that the audience seem to be supposed to make is that home schooling gives children a better education than the American public school system. Ben's daughter gives a more intelligent and accurate description of the Bill of Rights than either of her cousins is able to do. Other features of the scene also push the audience towards this reading, such as the fact that Harper is so shrill and sometimes hysterical in this scene, while Ben remains calm. Harper's boys are sullen and rude in addition to being unable to answer Ben's questions, while Ben's daughter is bright, polite and eager to please. All of this makes Ben a more sympathetic character than his sister and her family.

### Oppositional Reading

However, Hall suggests that audiences will take their own meanings from films, according to factors including their own pre-existing views on an issue and demographic factors such as their age, gender, ethnicity, social class, etc. It is easy to imagine certain audience members actively reading this scene differently. For example, somebody who went to an excellent public school would reject the suggestion that all children who are educated there are bored and have no interest in learning. In addition, Harper's children are both wearing basketball vests in this scene, which links them to the "jock" stereotype which audiences may feel is an unfair characterisation of all high school students. Furthermore, a person who had a bad experience of being home-schooled is also likely to reject the idealised vision of home-schooling, that the film presents, as being unrealistic. Many women may also resent the representation of Harper. The film seems to imply that she is lazily allowing her children to go through a school system that is obviously not engaging without acknowledging the pressures that modern mothers must deal with.



*Ben Cash questions his daughter Zaja about the Bill of Rights while his sister, Harper, looks on*



*Ben's nephews, Justin and Jackson are unable to offer anything but the most basic description of the Bill of Rights*

### Negotiated Reading

In reality, most audiences are likely to make an interpretation of the scene which mixes acceptance and rejection of different messages it contains. For example, audiences may recognise some legitimate criticisms of the American school system, while being aware that the representation of home schooling offered by Ben's family is not typical and is highly idealised. In this way, audiences become actively engaged in taking their own meaning from the film, rather than passively accepting the preferred reading. Other aspects of the film are more critical of Ben's methods, for example a scene early on when he takes the family rock climbing in the rain. The children become cold, wet and scared, offering an alternative view of his regime and permitting audiences to reflect on how they feel about his methods.

**Activity:** An audience's response to a film can be affected by many factors. How might the following viewers respond differently to Captain Fantastic:

- A teenager who has had a bad experience of being home schooled?
- A teacher?
- A Christian minister?
- A middle aged woman?
- Grandparents?

### Audience Positioning

Another key aspect of spectatorship is the way in which audiences relate to the characters on screen and how that is affected by the way film language positions the audience in relation to the narrative. Film language can encourage us to identify with certain characters – that is to say that films may position us in relation to certain characters in a way that encourages us to see ourselves onscreen, rather than the character. However, films may constantly shift the audience's position, requiring us to actively identify with a range of characters at different times, while at other times passively allowing the film to wash over us. The opening scene of Captain Fantastic provides an interesting example.

The film opens with a helicopter shot, swooping over a forest. The camera moves backwards and tilts down, bringing us lower into the trees. There is no music and the only sound is a quiet breeze and some distant noises of birds. At this point, the audience is perhaps passively enjoying the beautiful photography or just relaxing into their seat for the movie. The film cuts to a low angle shot from the floor of the forest. The camera tilts very slowly and calmly down until it reaches eye level. A further cut gives us a shot of a stream. Everything about these 3 shots so far seems to encourage the audience to take a passive position in relation to the film and to relax.

The next shot introduces a stag making its way through the forest. The first shot is fairly long but over a series of cuts the camera moves closer to the stag until we are seeing it in a close up, eating leaves. At this point we are arguably still passive observers but we then hear a sharp noise off screen. The stag turns its head to look for the source of the noise. At this point, both the audience and the stag have been startled by this noise and the film has positioned us to identify with the way the stag feels. We cut to a shot which is surely the stag's POV and we can just about make out a face in the bushes, spying on us.

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The stag holds the figure in its gaze for a moment as if holding its breath, and so do we in the audience hold our breath. In this opening sequence, the film has moved us from a position as passive spectators to actively identifying with a deer.

However, while the stag is holding its gaze, we see it from a shot taken from inside the bushes. The audience have been shifted from a position where we are sharing the stag's POV to a position where we are sharing the POV of the person in the bush. The film is asking us to work quite hard to actively readjust our position of spectatorship from one "character" to another.

A few moments later, the stag is attacked by the figure in the bushes, resulting in a frenetic few seconds of rapid cuts between extreme close ups which seems to position the audience in the middle of the struggle, rather than as passive observers. One shot in particular is a close up of a knife slicing through the stag's neck which is likely to provoke a range of responses from the audience, including disgust, shock, horror, surprise, perhaps laughter at the unexpectedness and extremity of the moment.

Once the stag is down, the film cuts between a number of close ups of the person who has killed it but avoiding showing his face immediately. This moment is disorientating for the audience as the thing we were identifying with up to this point is dead but we have not clearly met the new character yet. Eventually, the face of the boy is revealed in a close up. The camera lingers on him as he regains his breath and we share this moment with him as we need a moment to recover after the killing too. His face remains impassive so the audience must work actively to decide for itself how we should feel about what we've just witnessed. Some are likely to be impressed by the skill of the hunter, while others repulsed at the brutal killing of an animal.

As he stands over the deer, the film cuts to shots of other children emerging from the trees. All are dressed in dirty clothes, suitable for hunting and their bodies are covered in black mud which seems to have been added for camouflage. The film does not yet give us any indication of who these people are so the audience must actively look for answers to these enigmas themselves. Are they a lost tribe? A survivalist cult? A family holiday gone wrong? In only a couple of minutes, the film has asked the audience to take up a number of positions in relation to the story and required us to actively involve ourselves in interpreting what we are seeing on screen.

**Activity:** Watch another sequence from *Captain Fantastic* or a film you are studying for spectatorship. Write your own analysis of how the audience is positioned in relation to the narrative. How are elements of film language used to encourage us to take up positions in relation to different characters? Are we positioned to see the narrative from the point of view of one character, or does our position change at various times in the sequence? Which characters does the film invite us to relate to and which characters do we just observe?

### Viewing Context

Film spectatorship is also concerned with the context in which we watch a film. Where we are and who we are with when we watch a film can have a significant effect on our response to a film.

#### Multiplex Cinema



- Multiplex cinemas are generally where we go to be entertained.
- Snacks such as popcorn, sweets and fizzy drinks are available, which encourages viewers to see watching the film as a relaxing activity.
- Seeing a film with an audience can be a more engaging experience if others are laughing and crying along with the film, it's easier to be caught up in the emotion.
- Big screens and high quality sound emphasises spectacle and visual effects over story.

#### Arthouse Cinema



- Arthouse cinemas tend to show films from independent and foreign producers.
- There might also be a café selling posh coffee and a range of middle class snacks, like wasabi flavour nuts. These help position the spectator into seeing the experience as something more artistic.
- Architecture may be more unique, perhaps the cinema is housed in a converted church or school?

#### Download



- Movies can now be watched anywhere by downloading to a smartphone or tablet.
- Watching a movie can be a way to pass the time on a commute instead of reading a newspaper or book.
- Sharing earphones can allow two people to watch a film together, making it a shared experience.
- The tiny screen does not allow for viewers to experience the full cinematic experience.

#### Streaming



- Services like Netflix and Amazon Prime offer selected films for viewing via the internet.
- Streaming services offer film choices to you based on your previous viewing so can encourage spectators to watch a more limited range of films, rather than encourage them to try out new things.
- "Netflix and Chill" has arguably become the new snogging in the back row of the cinema.

**Activity:** Think of the last 3 films you have seen. How was your response to the film affected by the circumstances in which you watched it? Discuss how your response to each film might have changed had you seen it:

- On a date at a multiplex cinema.
- On your own at an arthouse cinema
- At home on DVD with your family.
- Downloaded to your phone while on the bus to college
- What other viewing scenarios can you think of?

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