

INTRODUCTION

The film "Let Him Have It" is about a murder case that really happened. It portrays events which really occurred and depicts on screen characters who were, in some cases still are, alive. However it is not a documentary about a famous murder trial, it is a film which has a script which is spoken by actors, and it does not attempt to show every aspect of the case but takes a definite viewpoint of the events. This study guide considers this and asks:

1. Why was the film made?
2. What was the viewpoint that is taken?
3. How is this viewpoint put in to practice?
4. How successful are the film-makers in putting this viewpoint over?

THE CASE

The case of "Regina v Derek Bentley and Christopher Craig" is one of the most controversial in British Legal History. It is still studied today by lawyers and discussed both in legalistic and moral terms. It is used as one of the cases quoted by those who object to capital punishment and was a case which at the time caused concern both with the government and the public. It is very difficult to be objective (that is to stand outside and present facts alone without colouring them with the film-maker's feelings or opinions) about the hanging of a young person but there are even more difficult areas to consider in this case.

TASK (1)

Look at the following synopsis. It is the outline of the story of the film as presented by the film-makers. Make a list of the facts in this synopsis:

"In a drab world of the 50's post-war Britain, one particular crime grabbed the headlines, and became a cause celebre. A policeman was shot dead and two South London boys stood accused of his murder. The verdict and sentence passed on them were to be as controversial and shocking as the crime.

Derek Bentley had always been a lost soul. Mentally backward and epileptic, he had been in and out of approved school by 17. Fearing ridicule on his release, he had become a recluse in his darkened bedroom, hiding from the world. Only his kindly sister Iris encouraged him to move out of this self-imposed isolation.

Then Christopher Craig entered his life and changed it irreparably. Craig was a flash, cocky, charismatic hoodlum of 16. Little more than a child, he dressed and postured like an American gangster. Crime ran in his family: his brother Niven was a fully-fledged criminal.

Bentley was dazzled by the style and confidence of Craig and his cronies, and captivated by their world. It was a world to which he could belong, independent of family ties.

When Niven Craig was arrested for robbery and sentenced to 12 years, Chris Craig, stricken with grief and rage, vowed revenge. Bentley's father now put a total ban on his son's friendship with Craig, but soon the boys were meeting again secretly. As a reaffirmation of their friendship, Bentley agreed to accompany Craig on a night-time warehouse raid. And this time Craig was carrying a gun.



But the police had been tipped off. They confronted the boys on the warehouse roof, and Craig, just like the gangsters he emulated, drew his Colt 45. A policeman ordered him to surrender the weapon and Bentley shouted the fatally ambiguous words to his friend: "Let him have it!"

The boys were arrested and tried for murder. Both were found guilty - a sentence which carried the death penalty. Craig was too young to be hanged, Bentley was not.

TASK (2)

Discuss the words which colour the facts in the synopsis. Can you identify the viewpoint of the film?

This synopsis was written after the film was made. Let us go back to the beginning of the process.

WHY WAS THE FILM MADE?

TASK (3)

Imagine you are the producer of the film. What elements of the story would you present to a film company which you think would persuade them to make the film?

Here are two of the statements made by the co-producer Robert Warr:

"It is a classic story of a miscarriage of justice and a classic appeal against capital punishment. On an emotional level it is the story of the destruction of innocence."

"Derek and I went to the same school and it was folklore there".

TASK (4)

It is very useful in selling a film to be able to classify it under one heading. Look at these film headings and decide which one you think "Let Him Have It" is closest to then look at the statements of the film-makers.

DOCUMENTARY

GANGSTER

THRILLER

SOCIAL COMMENTARY

BIOPIC

COURTROOM DRAMA

"We wanted it to seem as authentic as possible."

" 'Let Him Have It' doesn't add anything to the case."

"The Director of Photography was specifically trying to avoid it looking like a gangster film."

"It's very important for me that you get the atmosphere of the family."

"We wanted to show how incredibly quickly he'd gone through the court."

WHAT IS THE VIEWPOINT TAKEN?

The writer of "Let Him Have It" spent over a year researching the case and made various decisions.



TASK (5)

Answer the following questions and decide about the viewpoint of the film.

1. Compare what we see of Chris Craig's family with what we see of Derek Bentley's family in the film.
2. What do we see of Chris Craig's life before he meets Derek?
3. What do we see of Derek's life before he meets Chris?
4. What do we see of the policemen in the film, especially
 - a. Their evidence in court?
 - b. Any background detail of their characters?
5. What do we see of Chris after sentencing?
What do we see of Derek?
6. What do we see of Derek's family after sentencing?

TASK (6)

Having decided upon the viewpoint as you see it, do you agree with the following statements?

1. "We really just wanted to concentrate on a mentally backward boy getting hanged."
2. "We hope the film will be emotionally convincing and cause the whole thing to be discussed. Then the theories could be talked about."
3. "It's a very exceptional subject and a subject that is going to stir up a lot of noise every where."

HOW IS THE VIEWPOINT PUT INTO PRACTICE?

The director of the film Peter Medak felt very strongly about the film. "I wanted to break the audience's heart....I worked with the writers for eight weeks. What I added were scenes at the beginning dealing with Derek's childhood, more detail to the trial and just little touches that I felt fleshed it out. Even just little moments like William Bentley wandering out into the street after the postman..."

TASK (7)

1. Are there any moments in the film that you found particularly moving. Which of the following helped your response?

THE SCRIPT

THE ACTING

THE IMAGES

THE MUSIC

2. Why do you think the film-makers cast relatively unknown actors in the two main roles? What would have been different about the film if they had cast established stars?
3. Iris Bentley, Derek's sister, was a special advisor on the film. Can you see any effect this may have had on the film?



THE USE OF THE CAMERA IN THE FILM

TASK (8)

There is a very strong visual sense in the film and this is helped by some unusual camera work. Consider the moment of Derek's execution when the viewer is suddenly taken on a visual journey through the eyes of the camera:

1. We rush upwards into space
2. Take an aerial journey to Derek's house
3. Down the stairs to the front room clock
4. Opens outwards to see the embracing family.

How do you think these very complicated shots were achieved?

There are some other unusual shots in the film, for example:

- a. The overhead shot of Derek and Iris in the bedroom - the camera goes upward and shows them far away.
- b. After Derek is sentenced and walks down the dock steps, the camera is at his feet looking upwards.

Can you suggest why these shots were taken?

Are there any other shots you found interesting?

Most of the film was shot "on location" and not in a studio. Why do you think this was done?

HOW SUCCESSFUL IS THE FILM IN PUTTING ACROSS A MESSAGE?

TASK (9)

Stage a debate about the Craig and Bentley case.

You could use as the starting point the opening address of Christmas Humphreys who was the Prosecution Council at the trial.

"Bentley incited Craig to begin the shooting and, although technically under arrest at the actual time of the killing of Miles, was party to that murder and equally responsible in law. [.....] With Bentley in custody, Fairfax turned and pursued Craig round the stack; Bentley got away and shouted an observation, heard by three separate officers in the darkness in three separate places, which may be, in your view, the most important observation that Bentley made that night: "Let him have it, Chris". [.....] All three heard it and all three heard the shot which followed immediately upon it. The statement, in the submission of the Prosecution, was a deliberate incitement to Craig to murder Sergeant Fairfax. It was spoken to a man whom he, Bentley, clearly knew had a gun. The shot began the gunfight in the course of which Miles was killed. That incitement, in the submission of the Prosecution, covered the whole of the shooting thereafter."

The argument that Bentley was "mentally supporting Craig" was what hanged him. The argument rested on those fatal words.



OTHER THEORIES ABOUT THE CRAIG AND BENTLEY CASE

TASK (10)

Consider some of these theories.

Were the police lying?

1. A new investigation by Historian M.J. Trow recorded the testimony of Claude Pain who stated that he had been on the roof all the time but in giving his report later did not mention the words "Let him have it". "I did not write it down because I did not hear it. I did not write it down because it was not said."
Claude Pain was not called as a witness at the trial.
2. Chris Craig, although admitting to everything in the crime, said that Bentley did not say it.
3. The only other similar case in legal history, that led to the hanging of a man called Appleby in 1940, revolved around his saying the words "Let him have it, he is all alone."
4. The police wanted a life for a life. They could not have Craig so they would have Bentley.

WAS THERE A THIRD BOY ON THE ROOF THAT NIGHT?

1. If there was a third boy on the roof, why was he not caught when the circle of Craig's and Bentley's friends were so well known?
2. Was Craig denying that Bentley said "Let him have it" - or was he implying that someone else said it?
3. Why did Bentley's defence council make the following statement in his book "Most Of My Murders"?
"It would be unfair at present to disclose the name of the third youth who was on the rooftop that night when Fairfax and the other officers got there, or to give details from which he could be identified; but he should take warning that if he continues to boast about it, as he is at the present doing, he may yet find himself in the dock on a capital charge."

POLICE BULLET THEORY

"P.C. Miles was the victim of a tragic accident; the bullet which killed him was not indeed fired from Craig's gun."

1. The bullet which killed P.C. Miles was never found.
2. Craig used a sawn-off .455 Eley - inaccurate to a degree of six feet over the distance between him and Miles.
3. The door to the roof was at 90 degrees to Craig, yet Miles was shot between the eyes. He would have had to turn and face his attacker face on, despite the fact that he was warned that Craig was there.

TASK (11)

Having gone through the process of looking at the content and style of the film do you consider it to be a fair and impartial record of the events?
What are your own views on the case?

You may want to consider these other films about controversial cases, for example:

"IN COLD BLOOD"

"THE ONION FIELD"

"TEN RILLINGTON PLACE"

"THE ACCUSED"

Bibliography

"My Son's Execution", William Bentley (W.H. Allen, 1957)

"Most Of My Murders", John Parris (Frederick Miller, 1960)

"To Encourage Others", David Yallop (W.H.Allen, 1972)

"Let Him Have It, Chris", M.J. Trow (Constable, 1990)

"The Trial of Craig and Bentley" (Notable British Trials Series), H. Montgomery Hyde (William Hodge and Co., 1954)