

Fantastic version of post-Katrina Louisiana in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

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Directed by Benh Zeitlin, written by Zeitlin and Lucy Alibar

A creation of distinctly American design, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, directed by Benh Zeitlin (born 1982), disturbs and awes with fantastic images and the swelling music of a devastated post-Katrina Louisiana.

Using a magical-realist lens to capture a child's perception of a chaotic world, the film attempts to tackle a painful reality through the precarious understanding of an innocent. The film soars with overwhelming pictures and writing that veers between the sensitive and bombastic, and in the process muddles the serious themes it treats.

"The Bathtub" is an off-the-grid flooded Delta community in Louisiana, isolated from the rest of civilization by a levee imposed by a vaguely glimpsed government. Those that live in the Bathtub eat chicken and shrimp, forage through garbage for supplies and drink whisky with abandon. They play music and set off displays of fireworks; children are reared communally. There is celebration when a baby is born and when someone dies and for the moments in between. The force of nature, a storm that threatens to ravage their community, is opposed with the force of imagination and individual determination.

In this pirate utopia lives Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis), a six-year-old who fashions her house out of a ruined trailer and eats cat food. Here she co-exists with her troubled father, Wink (Dwight Henry), an alcoholic with a fierce but ailing heart. Her mother "swam away," but is heard in whispery incantations from Hushpuppy's intense fantasies.

One of these involves the Aurochs, a race of giant boars that are to be released into the world once the polar ice caps have melted. Like the Horsemen of the Apocalypse

bringing pestilence, war, famine and death, the four creatures are seen throughout the film charging closer to Hushpuppy as her father's health, and her world, slips away. It is up to Hushpuppy to use the survival skills he imparted to her to save him and the life they hold dear. If she fails, they will be condemned to return to land and live in a shelter.

An end-of-the-world film in reverse, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* begins with the aftermath of the deluge, the members of its community rising to the challenge by dint of their idiosyncratic nature and personal rebellion against the status quo. The film plunges the audience into an autonomous zone that is at once garish and dazzling, repulsive and magical.

What the citizens of the Bathtub want is not to rejoin the ways of the modern world "outside the bubble," but to remain within the non-hierarchical, hunter-gatherer confines of the tribe. A climactic scene in which Hushpuppy confronts the ancient Aurochs with the help of her little sisters suggests an alliance between humanity and nature can be possible only with the virtuous spirit of a nomadic children's republic.

Tellingly, the film is produced by Court 13, a New Orleans-based "grassroots filmmaking army." Its manifesto expresses a desire to "make films about communities, as a community," and values "do it yourself" (filmmaking), not as a matter of financial circumstance, but as a spiritual requirement." Zeitlin, the film's director, a Queens, New York native and Wesleyan University graduate, co-founded the collective in 2004.

Regarding the company, Zeitlin explains: "What it's about is trying to create your reality through film. In my life, movies aside, I want to be on boats with my friends, I want to be on frontier locations at the edge of the earth and with film you get to go on that adventure. It's about a giant group of us going and living the story, and out of it comes a movie."

That sense of adventure is palpable in each frame. The production design is uniquely organic and there is an appealing density to the imagery. Shots are literally teeming with life, both human and otherwise. The contrast of scenes of the humid textures of the South with inserts of the polar icecaps melting into the sea is visually arresting. One feels the collective's urgency about the state of things, or at least the state of certain things.

The performances by the largely non-professional cast are integral. Both Wink and Hushpuppy were discovered while the crew was looking for locations. Henry, the owner of a bakery in New Orleans' Seventh Ward, was cast in the role of Wink when his story about staying behind after Hurricane Katrina captivated the filmmakers.

In an interview, Henry said about that time, "Nobody didn't have nothing to eat, nobody had no water. So we broke the glass on the Family Dollar [store]. Everybody went in, got clothes, got water. It was something I didn't want to do, but we had to." Henry has no plans to pursue a career in acting. The performers' chemistry on screen is genuine, guttural. Without a doubt, the film could not have succeeded without their contributions.

There is a trace of Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978), specifically that film's lyrical narration by a young Linda Manz, in the mellifluous performance of child performer Wallis. But the film also contains more unfortunate strands from 1997's *Gummo* (Harmony Korine) in its drunken fascination with American depredation—a theme that presents Herculean dramatic challenges for contemporary artists (when the subject is treated at all).

The facts of economic and social disorder are hinted at in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, but not explored in a way that critiques the circumstances surrounding the Katrina tragedy. In some ways it feels as though the filmmakers, like Hushpuppy herself, wish to be shielded from the true culprits of the terrible event. A film that depicts poverty with such imaginative zeal, but does not also encourage outrage or trace out its origins, is troubling to say the least. Given the privileged pedigree of most of the crew and their interactions with the local cast, one has to wonder if the making of the film might not have produced a more complex, challenging commentary about America and its socio-cultural decay.

There are other issues. Commenting on the impact of the BP spill on the locations and residents during filming, Zeitlin said: "We thought, 'We are actually going to capture the last images of this town.' It made me feel a sacredness to what we were doing. The spill accelerated

the rate of change. Every location that I shot is gone. I lost every single one." One has to ask, then where does "going and living the story," as the production team aim to do, leave those who *actually* live the story?

Of course, this is intricately tied up with contradictions in the commercial film industry as a whole. But one can long for the artist who truly puts his money where his mouth is. Zeitlin continues: "The film is about how you survive and combat the loss of a place, the loss of a culture, and don't let these things crush you. Within the bubble, everything is totally interdependent. Everything is communal, people don't shut themselves in. That's how you survive all the tragedy that can drag you into a dark place."

This sort of work, unhappily, tends to make a virtue out of necessity. Unable or unwilling at this point to envision a profound change in social realities, far too many filmmakers search out "communities" of one kind or another where the present conditions are supposedly made bearable by the intensity of the personal or social relationships. Without meaning to, the artists thereby offer an apology for what exists. After all, if life can be so extraordinary and meaningful (and "colorful" and "magical," etc.) within the prevailing set-up, why does the latter need to be done away with?

Nevertheless, one can say that *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is an expression of the desire within a certain layer of American artists to come to terms with aspects of contemporary social life, and that is something. There will be more to look forward to.



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