Beasts of the Southern Wild. Dir. Behn Zeitlin. Perf. Quvenzhané Wallis, Dwight Henry, Gina Montana. Court 13 Pictures, 2012. Film.

Beasts of the Southern Wild (2012), Behn Zeitlin's mesmerizing first feature-length film, follows Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis), a young girl living with her dying father (Dwight Henry) in an impoverished Louisiana bayou community outside the protection of the levee system. The production marks a series of firsts that also include an inaugural screenplay by writer Lucy Alibar, adapted from her one-act play *Juicy and Delicious*, and a debut performance from Quvenzhané Wallis, who was six years old at the time of filming. Yet, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* presents its magic realist story so carefully and gracefully that it evokes wisdom well beyond the years of its creators.

If anything reveals Zeitlin's and Alibar's incipience, it is the film's freshness. Whether endorsed, critiqued or merely present, cinematic definitions of American culture and society tend towards the uniform. But *Beasts of the Southern Wild* portrays a subaltern culture, one entirely removed from universally recognized American social structures. The film's fictional setting, referred to by the locals as the Bathtub, is a wasteland of forgotten objects from commodified America. Christmas lights provide the lighting for Hushpuppy's (Wallis's) "house" - a trailer propped high to prevent against flooding - and she and her father, Wink (Dwight Henry), travel in a boat constructed from the bed of a pick-up truck. The Bathtub is literally excluded from the prevailing culture by the levee system and the ever-rising water levels mean that its residents are under constant pressure to move elsewhere. After a severe storm that leaves much of the area flooded, Wink and his friends conspire to explode the levee to save their community. This is a disunited America where terrorism is not a foreign threat, but a matter of survival for a domestic culture that would otherwise be left to drown.

It does not matter that this abandoned community is, in part, a fantasy. In fact, fantasy is integral to the universe of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. For Hushpuppy, it is a tool to overcome personal difficulty. In school she is told that ancient aurochs were made extinct during the ice age, but now, her teacher (Gina Montana) explains, "Ice caps gonna melt, water's gonna rise and everything's going under. Y'all are gonna have to learn to survive." Interspersed through the rest of the film are scenes of aurochs breaking

free from melting Antarctic glaciers and journeying northward, causing ruin as they pass through communities. They mirror the destruction in Hushpuppy's own life; her mother's unexplained absence, the devastation of the Bathtub, her community's eventual evacuation and in particular her father's failing health. Confronting her fear of the ancient beasts is how Hushpuppy can learn to survive.

Yet, the aurochs are not the only "beasts" of the "southern wild." Indeed, the film questions the very nature of bestiality. The opening establishes Hushpuppy's close connection to the beasts with which she shares a home; she crafts a mud nest for a chick, feels the heart of a sleeping pig. She and the residents of the Bathtub are also "beasts"; their environment is uncivilized and their behavior primeval. But for them, "beast" is not a derogatory term. When Hushpuppy tries to break open a crab her father tells her to "beast it," after which everyone chants "beast it, beast it." She finally manages to break open the crab and jumps up on the table, roaring and showing her muscles. Lucy Alibar has noted that one of her primary aims in writing *Juicy and Delicious* was to challenge the notion that the emotionally-charged roughness that characterizes Southern behavior is necessarily more destructive than the restraint typical of Northern states (Miller). In the Bathtub, bestial behavior is favored: it denotes courage and a willingness to endure.

It might be said that the truest beasts in the film are the residents of the mainland. While the aurochs' slow encroachment on the Bathtub echoes Hushpuppy's inner world, it simultaneously mirrors official attempts to destroy the Bathtub residents' homes and incorporate them into ordinary society. As the aurochs are pictured eating a dead carcass, Hushpuppy narrates, "Strong animals got no mercy. They're the kind that eat their own mammas and daddies." This is followed by a scene wherein officers violently force the Bathtub residents from their homes and send them to a disaster relief center. At the center, Hushpuppy's typical modest attire is replaced with a clean blue dress and her father is forced against his will to receive mainstream medical treatment. The mainland residents form a stronger community that, like the aurochs, feeds upon its own.

In *Beasts of the Southern Wild,* the scientific reality of melting ice caps is so poetically blurred with myth that its message might be considered unclear. Is this a film about global warming? Yes, it is, but only insofar as

it is about the interconnectedness of the universe and the importance of caring for every small part of it, whether a person, an animal, a community or the greater environment. The disappearing bayous are the result of human recklessness and selfishness, and the film implies that it is equally reckless to protect the dry land at the expense of the communities affected by their disappearance. This implied message is perhaps what most distinctly separates *Beasts of the Southern Wild* from typically individualist American narratives; here, the strength of American cultures depend on each member contributing to a cohesive but also fragile whole. Hence when an enraged Hushpuppy hits her ill father in the chest, causing him to collapse, it instigates the storm because, as she explains: "If one piece busts, even the smallest piece, the entire universe will get busted." Hushpuppy frequently expresses a desire to matter; she draws herself on a cardboard box so that she will not be forgotten and scientists can one day study her. Her explanation: "I see that I'm a little piece of a big, big universe. And that makes things right."

Works Cited

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Miller, Lindsay. "Beasts of the Southern Wild Oscar Nominee Lucy Alibar on the Real Life Story Behind her Surprise Hit." *Popsugar* 10 Jan. 2013. Web. 2 Aug. 2013.

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