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## With An Eye On A Set Of New Eyes: Beasts of the Southern Wild

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## With An Eye On A Set Of New Eyes: Beasts of the Southern Wild

### Abstract

This article focuses on how, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, represents both divergence and transgression from paradigmatic structures that determine how certain visual representations are to be used. Specifically, the cinematic detours taken by the filmmakers, Lucy Alibar and Behn Zeitlin, do not lead to alien places for most viewers; on the contrary, ancient myths, legends, heroes and prehistoric references are recalled in total isolation from current social and political discourse. In this way, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, effectively, highlights mythological structures operating in contemporary American society. Mircea Eliade, Roger Caillois and G.S. Kirk define mythology as a set of narratives that effectively house the sacred, protecting it from the profane, everyday, and temporal activities in life. Thus, this article explores the cultural myths that are disturbed when failure to acknowledge their existence threatens their irrefutable reality. How we think (or should think) reflects certain structural mandates, particularly in the use of representations depicting race, class, or gender. *Beasts* has been dubbed racist, sexist and elitist by some critiques, the most scathing coming from bell hooks on the representation of a young African-American girl. Because the film enlists the imagination to journey down recognizable mythical trails, interpretations tell us more about the reviewer than it does the film. It is more about what the film “left out” than it is about what the film actually says or does. In this way, I examine bell hooks’ critique alongside the role Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* has played in our expectations of representations involving young African-American girls as protagonists.

### Keywords

Beasts of the Southern Wild, mythology, ideology, environmental, social, climate change

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### Author Notes

Dr. Kette Thomas teaches Diverse Literatures at Michigan Technological University. Her work centers on questions regarding identity, agency, and language. She places special emphasis on religion, myth, and folklore. She has published on zombies and their mythical origins; art developed in Haiti following the earthquake of 2010; world literature; and informal constitutions of myth making in America. Currently she is working on a book detailing the rhetorical and representational models of human rights violations dealing with RestAvec, an informal institution of child labor in Haiti.

Of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (*Beasts*), the popular movie critic, Roger Ebert, says, “sometimes miraculous films come into being, made by people you've never heard of, starring unknown faces, blindsiding you with creative genius.”<sup>1</sup> For many, *Beasts* mystifies, but ultimately imparts a grand cinematic experience. For others, Ebert is too generous, as while the film is broadly recognized as an excellent cinematic experience, some critics have denounced it as “squalor porn”, “racist,” “sexist,” and altogether “depressing,” if not problematic in its unreflexive denial of social and political tensions and realities. I agree with Ebert that *Beasts* is an excellent film, containing significant elements that make it worthy of study. My analytic approach to the film highlights its mythological nature. However, I cannot engage *Beasts* without first addressing some critiques that, because of the power they hold, have the ability to distract attention away from some of the film’s finer points and thwart its contemplative potential.

## **Synopsis**

Before delving into the critiques and my analysis of the film, it should be noted that the basic structure of *Beasts* is simple: a group of people off the coast of the American mainland find themselves in the midst of a devastating natural disaster. Through the viewpoint of a child, we encounter this disaster, along with the whole story of creation, our place in the world and what our orientation should

be in the future. The story probably takes place in Southern Louisiana at about the time of a major hurricane. A small village on what looks like a tiny island (more like a tiny patch of land) in the bayou exists almost as a separate country, although it is part of the United States. The inhabitants call their home, “the Bathtub” and they express social customs and constructions, collective pride, cultural rituals and festivals that are alien to what is commonly known as the United States. Its cultural, political, and historical dynamics are mysterious. This is significant insofar as the inhabitants also imagine themselves and their place both in the United States and the world relative to what they reject from the mainland. The film’s protagonist is a young girl about the age of five named Hushpuppy (played by Quvenzhané Wallis). With her, we take a class in the small schoolhouse, we cook in the trailer her mother abandoned and where she lives with her single-parent father, and we go to the rescue ward on the mainland, erected for survivors after the hurricane. Hushpuppy’s encounters with her peers, teacher, father, strangers, and the prehistoric *Beasts*, aurochs, are also seen from her particular viewpoint and they contain worldviews that are intelligent, wise and magical. As told through the eyes of a child, her world is mystical and we encounter her through her narration, imagination, judgments, fears, actions, and, ultimately, hope. This is the story, even though the critiques, as I will argue, erroneously suggest a totally different story.

The critiques of *Beasts* that occupy this essay concern one element of the film that changes a relatively accessible narrative into a complex and potentially contentious one: Lucy Alibar and Behn Zeitlin, the writers, are Caucasian-American and Quvenzhané Wallis is African American. By order of priority, failed attention to race, gender and class occupy much of the criticism levied against *Beasts*, but I suggest that these are guided by particular ideologies and they reflect a core conflict with the film's mythical narrative. Following an analysis of these critiques, I will offer an alternative point of view that prioritizes myth. The criticisms that I address illuminate the importance and power of mythological constructs. Thus, this analysis explores myths developed in *Beasts*, but also those paradigms that might help to explain why such disparate interpretations of the film exist.

### **The Aims of a Mythological Analysis**

My analysis of *Beasts* is grounded in mythological constructs. So to begin, I explain what I mean by myth. Despite the long history of denouncing myths as 'fables,' humans continue to act in accordance with them. Many of these myths contain what humans hold most dear, what are commonly considered "the sacred." Mircea Eliade articulates the difference between the sacred and profane, saying the profane is our everyday tedious, temporal existence, while the sacred is the everlasting element, what is permanent in an ever changing

environment.<sup>2</sup> Myth is a special narrative generated to uphold the sacred. Thus, engagement with the sacred, be it through ritual reenactment of stories or simply reciting them, references a suspension of the profane. Mythical time is sacred time, and this is always sanctified, meaning it is cleansed of death and decay.<sup>3</sup> If a story embodies myth, then things that were profane and subject to death are transformed and elevated to the eternal sacred.

Additionally, myth is often understood through narratives that are “associated with gods and man’s relationship with gods, inextricably bound to religion.” However, as G.S. Kirk observes, some models do not conform to associations made with gods or religion, yet, they can still “invoke supernatural forces.”<sup>4</sup> While the definition of myth continues to attract controversy, for the purposes of this paper, the combination of the sacred in lieu of the profane containing “supernatural forces” will suffice. It is enough to say that when we engage myth, our challenge is to extract the sacred out of the profane. Myth’s role is to orient us in the world through emphasis of those properties that we are charged to protect (i.e. human life, the soul, vegetation, etc.); myths create meaning. In this way, an inconsequential object that is subject to death and decay is now imbued with everlasting principles. We may understand the empirical realities of life, but myth helps us select, order, and prioritize.

## The Ideological Lens

Like myth, ideology orients us to a place and time, but it differs from myth, here, because it is stagnant while myth is dynamic. That is, in this definition of myth, myth can adapt to changes while ideology *will* not. To that end, while myth might incorporate new information, ideology imposes itself, often forcing the environment to adapt to its rule rather than the other way around. More importantly, while myth can operate through positive affirmation of diverse features, an ideological model operates by negating elements until it is the only remaining truth. In this way, and in terms of *Beasts*, ideology is an oppressive force; it distorts or diminishes any threat that might potentially change the paradigmatic model.

The criticisms I present here are directed to academic scholars who engage disciplines focused on diversity. The discourses that inform their analyses of *Beasts* are not necessarily widely known. Secondly, to be fair, the criticisms levied against *Beasts* appear based on reactions to a history of artistic expressions that “justify most other forms of authority, making inequality seem noble and hierarchies seem thrilling.”<sup>5</sup> David Walker states *Beasts* has a “fetishistic view of poverty, in which being poor is a glamorized state of being where the oppressed and under-educated exist, primarily as means of contrast to the idealized—if not unrealistic—perception of the middle class.”<sup>6</sup> The concern is

that people will, once again, glorify the poor and disadvantaged in order to protect the interests of the ruling class. This is a justifiable concern, as the images on the screen do depict poverty, violence, and natural disasters while asserting a hopeful and resilient spirit in a young protagonist. Nevertheless, in “Ways of Seeing,” John Berger points out that “the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.” That is, “we only see what we look at.”<sup>7</sup> He calls looking an “act of choice” and this would certainly apply to *Beasts*, especially where it pertains to the actress playing the protagonist, Hushpuppy. For the critics, when it comes to race, once invoked, we may see neither Hushpuppy nor Quvenzhané Wallis. Thus, neither the actual story nor the performance can escape whatever race informs. What the critics suggest is that what we are “looking at” either conforms to historically racist iterations or fails to conform to established acceptable narratives regarding politicized bodies and economies. What I call ideological in their critiques is not based on observations of violence and poverty alone, but rather, it is in their attempt to convince the viewer, not that they failed to see correctly, but that what they believed to see was never there at all.

### **Ideology and Inversion**

I will attempt to illustrate two characteristics of the reviews that I believe indicate ideological structures at work. Keeping in mind Michel Pecheux’s theory that ideology changes meaning based on the subject’s position, first, everything in



the film that depicts generally accepted positive values is inverted in favor of interpretations signifying degradation.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, many scenes are referenced that eliminate important characteristics, giving rise to a very different narrative. This analysis uses much of bell hook's perspective in her blog article, "No Love In the Wild," as representative of the other reviewers. She appears to have the most scathing and influential criticism of *Beasts*. As there are too many examples to cover them all, I will limit my observations to a few.

The planet, natural resources and the environment now occupy a central place in contemporary discourses, ranging from the arts to business ethics and scientific explorations; demonstrations of a more balanced relationship between humans and the earth is critical to the future of the planet. Yet, though *Beasts* depicts a more engaged relationship between humans and the environment, hooks sees, "from the onset of the film, (Hushpuppy) is depicted as a wild child..." Sardonically, she notes, "(Hushpuppy) finds solace in natural wildness, listening to the heartbeat of animals, envisioning her connection to a primordial world."<sup>9</sup> She, along with other critics, feels it is a racist reiteration of romantic visions of primitives before the coming of white men. The natural environment that surrounds Hushpuppy is described as "all manner of dirt and filth."<sup>10</sup> Leigh Johnson flatly claims, "these 'people' are animals, exactly like all the rest of Nature's *Beasts*...."<sup>11</sup> Agnes Woolley asserts that the film fails to understand

that “Nature is marked by race and gender,” but these critiques suggest that such markings can only be wholly negative.<sup>12</sup>

The imagination is often thought to be a necessary part of creativity and, more importantly, critical thinking. Hushpuppy’s imagination is central to the film’s structure and it is filled with magic and wonder, but Johnson believes this gives a “romantic and sentimentalized picture of privation that anesthetizes us to the tragedy of (her real condition).”<sup>13</sup> Hooks says Hushpuppy’s imagination simply reflects a sad attempt to escape an external world that has failed her. She “relies on myth and fantasy to survive day to day,” adding, “Hushpuppy finds her place of solace or calm in constructing a mythic life, as she can have no meaningful grounding in reality.”<sup>14</sup> In addition, for hooks and other critics, Hushpuppy’s imagination is such that it demonstrates advanced consciousness. Normally this would communicate attributes of genius, a brilliant mind, and a necessity for a hero’s journey, but hooks feels it is racist: “That Hushpuppy has this advanced state of cosmic consciousness is one of the fanciful and irritating aspects of the film. She is only six years old. Of course in the mindset of white supremacy black children no matter their age are always seen as miniature adults.”<sup>15</sup>

Examples like the ones above run throughout the criticism of *Beasts*. Where one’s native land is most often regarded as sacred, the criticisms suggest the inhabitants are foolish, living in filth and fighting for a land that ought to be

abandoned for safer, more civilized shores<sup>16</sup>. Where survival in the face of difficult odds might be an indication of great fortitude, it is yet another racist and elitist iteration associating “the burden of survival with the under-privileged.” The term suggests dehumanization, abandoning people to the jungle where they’ll just have to “make do.”<sup>17</sup> (par. 3). Where self-reliance might be understood as one of the better qualities of the Enlightenment, meaning self-governance, the ability to think for oneself and exercise forethought, for these critics, it is a crude message of “figure out how to fight for yourself because you have no community or support,” passed on to children by teachers and prostitutes.<sup>18</sup> Where caring for dying loved ones might be considered honorable and noble, it reflects racist iterations that young black girls are only valued when taking up their role as caregivers to abusive authority figures.<sup>19</sup> And, where gender and racial harmony have been American aspirations, *Beasts*’ successful representation of a “homogenous conception of humanity” is distracting and politically ineffective.<sup>20</sup> Bell hooks sarcastically states, Hushpuppy lives in a “world where black and white po’ folks create their own community affectionately called the Bathtub. This is the territory they claim as a renegade place of belonging...this six-year-old prophet shares that we must experience our interdependence and oneness with all living beings and with the past, present, future.” She concludes by adding, “Hushpuppy is the only one who has a philosophical take on why the world is the way it is [which hooks interprets as purely negative], but she like everyone else

denies the reality of race.” (par. 6).<sup>21</sup> Thus, representations of a world without racial tensions is incomprehensible.

The point I would like to emphasize here is, for these critics, it is not simply that there is nothing positive in *Beasts*, but rather, *nothing can be*. This ideological way of seeing is further demonstrated if we summarize the narrative as they see it in contrast to the synopsis I offered above.

### **Ideology and Filtering**

If we accept the critics’ perspectives of the story, rather than the film as articulated in my synopsis, *Beasts* is a morbid film about an animalistic, desolate and impoverished community caught in the middle of a hurricane with a young protagonist whose environment is unwholesome, dirty and unsafe. Her life is shattered by blind helplessness and hopelessness. The protagonist’s imagination is nothing more than hallucinations brought on by constant exposure to death and violence. This is a film about abandonment, social failures, political neglect and loss. Hushpuppy is a shell of a child, frightened, battered, and predestined for madness. Hooks says, her “fate is unclear. Given all that she endures she may just end up being the mad black female, talking to herself, wandering in a wilderness of spirit so profound that she is forever lost.”<sup>22</sup> And worse, the viewing audience, with a perverted fascination in degradation, is guilty of bearing “a surreal

imagination that can look past the traumatic abuse Hushpuppy endures and be mesmerized and entertained....”<sup>23</sup>

If we accept these critics’ story as what is actually happening onscreen, we are indeed guilty of voyeurism and taking pleasure in “squalor porn” (Walker)<sup>24</sup>.

This could only be a powerful indictment of any appreciation for the film.

However, the narrative these critics insist takes place on the screen rests on willful changes to the story, scenery, characters, and contextual meanings. One example of this is in hooks’ account of Wink, Hushpuppy’s father. Hooks calls Wink, “the most vocal advocate of a lawless reckless independence.”<sup>25</sup> She sees him as the patriarch who behaves with unchecked violence against civil society and his own daughter. She believes him to be another racist iteration of the “hardass black man.” Finally, she implies that, despite the fact that he wishes his daughter was male, he sexualizes Hushpuppy, identifying her with “her mother’s ass.”<sup>26</sup> There are many assertions about Wink in hooks’ essay that can be refuted, but one example stands out.

Wink is one of the more complex characters in *Beasts*. He appears to be an alcoholic, is abrasive, has a bad temper, and, in one scene, hits Hushpuppy. Nevertheless, he is not one dimensional and I believe the writers are teasing the audience’s probable ideologies about race. In a scene wherein Hushpuppy’s father fails to pick her up from school and is not home when she returns for dinner, it looks like he has abandoned her, perhaps to some irresponsible activity

involving alcohol, sex or violence. But when Wink finally appears, he is wearing a hospital gown and wristband. The fact that he is not wearing street clothes might also suggest he left the hospital before the doctors released him, presumably to return home to care for his daughter. It becomes apparent that a medical emergency explains his absence, and suddenly, rather than the “deadbeat dad,” the scene highlights the difficulties of single parenting. Wink’s character throughout is tied to his illness and impending death. Suddenly his abrasiveness and bad temper reflects anxiety over dying and leaving his daughter alone; the alcohol is self-medication; and when he slaps Hushpuppy, while it’s never acceptable to hit, it is differently contextualized by her burning her trailer down and nearly killing herself, which sent him into the open flames in a desperate attempt to save her. The way hooks sees Wink does not allow these characteristics to frame the context of his behavior. In the film, Wink’s memory of Hushpuppy’s mother is romantic and his belief that he must strengthen his daughter before he dies is sympathetic. It is not that the audience fails to see the alcohol or the slap, but rather, they see through the context. This person is not bell hooks’ Wink.

In summary, racist ideology functions by exploiting opportunities to invert meaning and by filtering out any information that challenges its models. The critiques levied against *Beasts* aim to expose this ideological function. In doing so, they rely on the same tools, creating their own ideological models that reject,

in much the same way, the possibilities for seeing another story.<sup>27</sup> This model is equally rigid, equally negative and equally powerful in its destructive potential.

We need a new story. “Only birth can conquer death - the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new”<sup>28</sup>, and herein lies the advantages of mythology. I offer an alternative way of looking at the film that returns to the power of myth as a counter orientation to the ideological model.

### ***Beasts* as Mythical Text**

There are no religions depicted in *Beasts*. No one really mentions or pays homage to a god or gods. There are no supernatural beings on the screen - that is, the earth, storms and all its creatures (including the aurochs, who are displaced in time but did exist) are real properties of a Darwinian (evolving) planet. There is no underworld or heaven, no controlling agent beyond the atmosphere, and no altars where one goes to appeal to supernatural mediators. It is a testament to the power of myth that despite all of this, there is virtually no debate about the fact that it is a mythical tale. This is a revealing characteristic of engagement with *Beasts*, as for the first time in a long time, the public is using the term properly, with all of its power and ambiguity. This is perhaps by way of sensing that something in it contains the sacred, a clear expression of suspension of profane time. In this way, myth allows anything to be possible. This is where my analysis of *Beasts* begins - in its sacred time.

The voices reflected in *Beasts* are those of a youthful generation trying desperately to get the attention of the “old guard.” *Beasts* is a conversation with an audience, especially in the United States, and in significant ways it responds to ideological paradigms by suggesting they are either inadequate or failing to respond sufficiently to certain modern day anxieties. In other words, it suggests that we have yet to reprioritize our worldview in light of scientific information, globalization and major environmental changes. To do this, the film establishes several components that are necessary to the production of myth: a creation story, a hero on a hero’s journey, and new symbolic order.

### **Creating a New Beginning**

The creation story in *Beasts* is one that we may recognize but have yet to narrate mythically. Mythic time references the time of creation which, in most cases, is prehistoric. This is a critical component, as it immediately reorients us around the scope of the narrative.<sup>29</sup> *Beasts* begins by indicating humans were created sometime between the death of prehistoric creatures, like the featured aurochs (*Bos acutifrons* from the Pleistocene era are the actual *Beasts* referenced in the film and aurochs would have been descendants, but historical accuracy is not relevant here), and Paleolithic man. This account is supported by scientists, but the nature of myth lies in the story that elevates this event to the sacred. It marks the difference between what we know and *what we believe*. The



appearance of aurochs is ambiguous. They are reflected in both Hushpuppy's dream and real time.<sup>30</sup> Later in the film, Hushpuppy is alone in her mother's abandoned trailer where she carves images of herself and family along the walls and on cardboard boxes. This references Paleolithic cave paintings, the earliest known carvings by homo sapiens sapiens (modern humans). I return to the creation story later; what is important at this point is that the appearance of the aurochs signifies a land without humans, while the carvings in the trailer signify the origins of human consciousness. So, when the aurochs are released from their prison within the melting ice caps due to climate change, they symbolize two cataclysmic events that are reflected in most mythical accounts: birth and death.

### **The Hero**

The narrative is presented through the eyes of the hero, Hushpuppy. In this context, Hushpuppy transcends all social classifications of human beings in mainland America. Although she is a child, she carries adult responsibilities; although she is female, her father often refers to her as "the man" and she aspires to male-associated characteristics and behaviors; although she would be African-American on the mainland, race as a classification of human beings is entirely absent in "the Bathtub." As the hero of this mythic tale, she and her journey are symbolic. In this case, she is more of a spirit than mere mortal, and part of her role is to tell us 'our story.' Her journey must, ultimately, lead to a confrontation

with the prehistoric aurochs, as they symbolize the haunting of creatures long extinct by changes in the climate. They are the “heralds,” signifying the past, roaming among us in the present, and foreshadowing an ominous future wherein mankind is another species confronted with the possibility of extinction due to climate change. In *Hushpuppy* there appears a singular purpose: to reconcile humankind with its past and destiny. She must not only be up for this challenge, she must be uniquely qualified for it.

### **A Child for a Hero**

Hushpuppy is on the hero’s journey, but she is unlike traditional heroes such as Gilgamesh, Jesus, or the Buddha. First, she is very young. Although myth can conjure up anything, it does follow rules; in order to believe it, it has to be relatively plausible. At the tender age of five, it might seem implausible to an adult that a child can be ready for a hero’s quest. But let us consider the audience. In *Hero of a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell writes, “In the United States there... is a pathos of...emphasis: the goal is not to grow old, but to remain young.”<sup>31</sup> As he says, youth occupies a sacred place in the collective imagination so that, at this point, children are the ones who bear the qualities of purity and wisdom. In addition, myths owe much to the mystical wanderings of a child’s imagination: “All the ogres and secret helpers of our nursery are there, all the magic of childhood.”<sup>32</sup> Psychoanalysis treats myth as a roadmap leading back to

our childhood desires and fears. Thus, rather than have adults impart the stories that, ultimately, trace back to early childhood fears and desires anyway, why not simply use the source?

Second, Hushpuppy is not born to wealth, aristocracy, or divinity. She does not desire these things; thus, she does not affirm capitalism or aristocratic rule. She is in many ways a vision of the human as valuable in itself, stripped bare of its pretenses and connected to something greater than the acquisition of wealth and power. For a capitalist, consumer- saturated environment, Hushpuppy's material conditions may come across as abject poverty. In terms of current ideologies, this external lack might reflect internal lack as well. Hushpuppy, however, seems richly embodied. Thus, in her capacity and the symbolic role she occupies as the hero of this tale, the question is, what sacred values is she here to impart?

### **Hushpuppy's Great Journey**

Hushpuppy's journey reflects five stages in Campbell's model of the hero's journey: The Call to Adventure or the signs of the vocation of the hero;<sup>33</sup> The Belly of the Whale, or the passage into the realm of night (the hero seems to have been swallowed or has died);<sup>34</sup> Woman as the Temptress, or the moment the hero undergoes temptation and must make a difficult choice;<sup>35</sup> Atonement with the Father, as in many tales, the hero is on a quest to resolve the provocation that

displeased the god or gods, forcing them to threaten the continues existence of the human race;<sup>36</sup> and Apotheosis, or emergence from the ‘terrors of ignorance.’<sup>37</sup> Relative to the film, the stages are not linear. They are simply laid out to reveal the sacred and they involve allusions to and replications of the past. Throughout *Beasts* there are “reactualizations of a sacred history” that recovers the past.<sup>38</sup> In this case, it is the past of our mythic Ancestors. With the stages of this journey, Hushpuppy establishes ritual reenactment. The hero imparts the rituals that we must observe thereafter.

### **Hushpuppy’s Sign of Vocation**

Experiencing the mythical place and Hushpuppy’s place in it happens in *Beasts* immediately. The viewer witnesses the dark screen bringing to focus a trailer home surrounded by wild trees and vegetation oscillating against whirling high winds. It is stormy; winds are howling; the gusts seem poised to burst through windows and doors, threatening to blow everything in their path away. The closer we get to Hushpuppy the more detailed are the sounds, from mosquitoes to roosters and baby chicks, birds chirping, and finally to the sound of a sleeping swine’s beating heart. Hushpuppy is one among many living entities in a soundtrack set to open with the voices of life on earth. This is the context of Hushpuppy’s being. She is thrust, center stage, as one being in the miracle of life. To be guided through her journey, we have to listen:

“All the time, everywhere, everything’s hearts are beatin’ and squirtin’ and talking to each other in a way that ya can’t understand.”

“Most of the time they probably be saying, ‘I’m hungry’ or ‘I gotta poop.’ But sometimes they be talking in codes.”

Hushpuppy does not know what the animals are saying, but there is communication. The images of her lifting small animals to her ear suggest the desire for and possibility of understanding. This opening scene suggests long lost interaction between humans and the earth they share with other forms of natural life. Hushpuppy experiences the world in mystical and expansive terms. She is sensitive to her environment and neither resists or fears it. She develops by learning from everything that surrounds her and by being made unaware of her difference from other forms of life. Where civilization has defined itself in terms that see nature as either an enemy or an object that must be sterilized and tamed, ironically, it is not stronger for it but, rather, weaker and more vulnerable. Hushpuppy, in contrast, grows stronger, braver, and more self-assured because her engagement is of a different sort. Nature’s “Call to Adventure” is reserved for the fearless and inquisitive, the approach Hushpuppy, uniquely, takes towards her environment.

## Her Sacred Land

In mythology, land is critical. Whether it is the land established in primordial times by the gods or the land where the prophet first experienced revelation, land undergoes sacred transformation into the “land of the gods.” Such is the nature of Hushpuppy’s land, as articulated below.

In the joys and madness of a festival, the community heads out in a fashion reminiscent of a carnival parade, paying homage to the land at a billboard that once held a name, crossed out and replaced in handwritten letters: “The Bathtub.” Meanwhile, Hushpuppy narrates,

“Daddy says, up above the levy...on the dry side...they’re afraid of the water like a bunch a’ babies...They built the wall that cuts us off... They think we all gonna drown down here...but we ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

The pitch of music swells; people are drinking; laughing; playing games.

“The Bathtub’s got more holidays than the rest of the world...Daddy always sayin’ that up in the dry worl’ they got none’a what we got...They only got holidays once a year... They got fish stuck in plastic wrappers. They got their babies stuck in carriages...And chicken on sticks and all that kinda stuff.”

As is appropriate to all such visualizations of ritual festivals, Hushpuppy announces the prophecy: “One day, the storms gonna blow, the grounds gonna sink and the water’s gonna rise up so high, they ain’t gonna be no Bathtub. Just a whole bunch ’a water.” The reference is in one sense about the coming of a great

hurricane, and in another about the coming of climate change. We see an image of Hushpuppy petting a crab, placing it by her ear as the soundtrack issues forth the beating of a heart. Then she says, “But me and my daddy... we stayin’ right here... We’s who the earth is for!”

This is complex because the opening scene takes place in the middle of a festival. Festivals are ritual reenactments, often referencing mythical origins. They seem profane but are regarded as sacred. Hushpuppy’s words leap off the screen because they convey the sacred character of place and moment. She stammers out a declaration of allegiance not only to the Bathtub, but also to the meaning of life as defined by her understanding of the world’s creation . When she says, “we’s who the earth is for,” it has a multilayered meaning; it references her and her father, the inhabitants of the Bathtub and all of humanity. It suggests humans have a rightful place on earth and every piece of land is sacred land. This scene is also about having courage in the face of an impending apocalyptic storm. The Hurricane is narrated in terms that are as religious or mystical as those that have narrated great floods in ancient myths, like Noah’s ark or The Epic of Gilgamesh. For Hushpuppy, The Bathtub is not a patch of land in the bayou, but the land of her god, where “everything’s hearts are beatin.” In his essay, “Earth and Gods,” Jonathan Smith articulates the sanctity of land well, saying,

In order for land to be my land, I must live together with it. It is man living in relationship with his land that transfers uninhabited wasteland into a homeland, that transforms the land into the land of

Israel. It is that one has cultivated the land, died on the land, that one's ancestors are buried in the land, that rituals have been performed on the land, that one's deity has been encountered here and there in the land that renders the land homeland, a land-for-man, a holy land. It is, briefly, history that makes a land mine. In Old Testament terms it is the shared history of generations that converts the land into the land of the Fathers.<sup>39</sup>

This scene suggests that the current environmental trouble we are experiencing today indicates a need to revise our approach, to shout out our allegiance to the land, as we no longer have the luxury of treating the land as profane - as disposable. This is perhaps to suggest that we need to approach the earth and environment as Hushpuppy does. Even as we experience earthquakes, hurricanes and tornadoes that devastate indiscriminately, we ought to be celebrating, reenacting the ritual and asserting, "we ain't goin nowhere!"

### **The Dwelling Place of Our Ancestors is a Cave**

Origins in a myth are also crucial to orientation. In *Beasts*, human origins date back to the Paleolithic era and this references the birthplace of human consciousness. Hushpuppy reconnects us with this primordial time. In the film, she initially lives alone in the trailer that used to belong to her mother. When her father fails to return home to provide her supper, she cooks for herself. Upon his return, she, not understanding that her father had been to the hospital, tries to engage her father with new tricks she learned since his absence but he chases her away in frustration. In being rejected, she retaliates by setting the trailer on fire



while hiding beneath a cardboard box and proceeding to use it in order to complete a drawing of a self-portrait. As in Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, the self portrait is a reenactment of Paleolithic cave paintings. In Herzog's documentary, one of the cave painters left a cluster of palm prints all along the walls. The hand prints identify a single author because it has a "slightly crooked finger." For Paleolithic man, according to Dominic Baffier, a scholar of Paleolithic culture, this is as a self-portrait. Hushpuppy articulates several times that she sketched throughout her house so that future scientists might find and record, "there was once a Hushpuppy who lived with her Daddy in the Bathtub." Just as Herzog's documentary is based on the efforts of scientists to study the paintings in the cave, Hushpuppy's aim is to link past, present, and future. Hushpuppy's reenactment of Paleolithic man combines the Three. Mythic time is not profane time, and her actions are not imitations. Like the aurochs, Paleolithic man is made into mythical Ancestors, and ritual recreates the actions of the first humans, bringing them into the 21st century to guide the modern-day human.

The power of the ritual reenactment of "being in the cave" is also one of the rare times in *Beasts* that we witness mysticism. According to Jean Clottes, Lead Investigator at Chauvet Cave, those who entered the cave did so in order to experience "altered states of consciousness and...hallucinations."<sup>40</sup> The caves were the dwelling place of the shamans. Hushpuppy sketched a facial image of her mother on the wall of her trailer. The image, accompanied by an old red

jersey held beneath it, magically comes to life when Hushpuppy is alone. The audio permits the audience to actually hear her mother's voice, singing to her as she dines. This is not merely a sentimental scene depicting a child's longing for her mother's company but a mythical reenactment of the sacred nature of human consciousness. Hushpuppy is not in a trailer; she is in Chauvet Cave. By these and other acts, our Ancestors are ushered to the present.

### **Society's Belly of the Whale**

The hero's journey often involves a moment when the hero appears to have died or been swallowed. Hushpuppy never symbolizes this sort of death or imprisonment herself, but the film suggests she encounters such a moment in her journey. In the film, rescue workers search for survivors along the bayou and find the remaining inhabitants of the Bathtub. Taken to the mainland, upon arriving at the rescue shelter, Hushpuppy considers her new environment, thinking, "they looked like fish in a fishbowl without any water." Her thought-provoking deliberations are spoken in simple language: we are told what we look like from her point of view and it is that we are the ones in the "belly of the whale." In this sense, Hushpuppy suggests that the plexiglas cases we have built around ourselves looks like death or suffocation. With all of the technology and "civility" we have to offer, Hushpuppy's judgment questions our concept of a qualitative, meaningful and purposeful life.

## The Temptation to Civilize

The hero's journey often includes a time when the hero must face a great temptation. There is little indication that Hushpuppy is ever tempted at the level of traditional heroes by anything or anyone. Instead, as in the "Belly of the Whale," the stages of Hushpuppy's journey are redirected to the audience through her. Following the rescue, Hushpuppy is cleansed and made to wear a little blue dress with braided coifs. It strikes many as a violent contradiction. Hushpuppy's presence reflects one who bypassed a cultural rite of passage reserved for women on the mainland. Her intellectual curiosity, sense of belonging and self assurance exist without having had to conform to the rituals of making girls. Berger says, "to be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men." He says, women are taught to see themselves as others imagine them, especially men. Thus, "from earliest childhood (girls have) been taught and persuaded to survey (themselves)." <sup>41</sup> In an atmosphere where young girls are "surveyed" and displayed in reality shows like *Toddlers n Tiaras* or *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, domesticating Hushpuppy is misleading. We must ask ourselves, what will the promise of civilization really accomplish? To what extent does the "little blue dress" confine Hushpuppy's future to a lifetime of self-scrutiny? To what extent does conformity to social gender norms obliterate the unknown potentials reflected in her spirit?

### **Atonement with the Past and Apotheosis**

Hushpuppy is not here to stop the storm, heal her father or find her mother. Rather, the hero is a model for humankind. Aurochs are introduced in the context of Hushpuppy's education. Her teacher, a vibrant and passionate educator, shows her students tattoos of the aurochs on her thigh. She conveys the ferocity of the aurochs and their inevitable demise. She concludes—pointing to a map emphasizing a dotted line where the levy separates the Bathtub from the mainland—by saying to her wide-eyed audience, “Ice-caps gonna melt, water’s gonna rise, and everything south of the levy is goin under. Ya’ll better learn how to survive.” As I pointed out earlier, “learn how to survive” means to prepare, think ahead, exercising forethought. In this context, aurochs are mythical creatures symbolizing time; not so much human time but the time of a species’ birth and its extinction. In this symbolic world, aurochs are timeless; they exist in the past, coexist with us in the present and are symbols of our future. Global warming, then, does not thrust humans back in spaces occupied by liberated prehistoric *Beasts*, but rather, snags humanity in mythic time and destiny. Resurrection of the auroch symbolizes a haunting of apocalypse; it has happened before, it will happen again. Just as the aurochs disappeared during the ice age, so, too, perhaps mankind. But this commentary is not spoken to distress or

frighten in the face of an apocalypse. Rather, the vision is one that suggests development of courage in the face of a reality and the coming changes.

One of the most important scenes of Hushpuppy's journey is the one wherein she confronts the auroch. Aggressive and unfriendly, she alone, prepared by nature and not by politics, calms the ghosts of climate change. When she speaks to the aurochs, they retreat, hearing her say, "you're my friend...kind of... (but) I gotta take care of mine." This is probably the singularly most important scene in the film because it is the moment of explicit purpose. What is heroic? Taking care of mine. Who is "mine?" Our fellow humans.

## **Conclusion**

Many do not remember a climate before 9/11. Many mediate identity and a sense of community through 15 inch screens. Partisan politics, economic recessions, uncertainty about political, financial or material futures, globalization, global warming, and relativism in culture and society round off a picture that is sure to incite anxiety in the most stable person. Traditional discourses and ideologies have done more to incite panic than offer hope or even a plan. The youth of this generation are lost in contradictory messages: "don't be racist," but race is a social reality; "don't be sexist," but girls are still on display; "don't be materialistic," but the rich will "inherit the earth;" "God is dead," but we are in

the middle of a holy war; “protect the environment,” but resources are here to be exploited. *Beasts* is a response.

At the beginning of the film, during the festival, Hushpuppy is seen, center screen, running towards the audience holding two firecracker sticks, one on each hand. Lit, shooting lights on both sides of her while others follow holding lit firecrackers behind her, her figure blurs; she is the shadow of humanity in the midst of life, illuminated by fire. She represents the birth of the human as a mythical creation: sacred. Life, for Hushpuppy, is a celebration. Our views are dwarfed by the power of her security in nature’s story. Hushpuppy is a symbol of humans, not in terms that reference their historical failings, but rather in the grandeur and nobility of having been a participant in the greater play of life on earth. She reinstates the viewer back to a condition of awe and reverence for the miracle of life. In this scene, creation is sublime.

At the end of the film, when the aurochs kneel before the tiny frame of Hushpuppy, it is in all aspects a message of hope. In the end, we know Hushpuppy is more connected, engaged, and secure than most heavily nurtured children in traditional households. Her existence symbolizes a rebirth of humankind, a new beginning. Her orientation towards nature suggests that if we engage the environment, we not only protect the planet but we also gain strength from it. Her confrontation with the aurochs suggests that despite our role in climate change, we do not have to accept the inevitable; we can reconcile

ourselves with the past, reorient ourselves in the present and forge a different future. The final scene where Hushpuppy cares for her dying father makes a mythological point: remember the sacred stories that set us on this path, the ones dating back to the first humans who carved their presence and those of revered properties of nature on cave walls. We are to remember these ancestors and protect the sacred nature of their presence by caring for their descendants, us, and the things they held most dear, the land.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ebert, Roger. "Beasts of the Southern Wild." (2012). Published electronically July 4, 2012. <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20120704/REVIEWS/120709994>. Par. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Eliade, Mircea. *Myths, Rites, Symbols : A Mircea Eliade Reader*. Harper Colophon Books. 2 vols New York: Harper & Row, 1976. Volume 1, Pg 3.

<sup>3</sup> Eliade, Mircea. *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Bollingen Series. 2nd pbk. ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005. Pg 21.

<sup>4</sup> Kirk, G.S. *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*. Sather Classical Lectures,. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970.

<sup>5</sup> Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books, 1972. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Walker, David. "Beasts of the Southern Wild and Squalor Porn: Examining Cinema's Preferred View of the Black Existence in America." *BadAzz MoFo: Pop Culture At Its Baddest* (2012). Accessed May 02, 2013. <http://www.badazzmofo.com/2012/12/10/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-and-squalor-porn-examining-cinemas-preferred-view-of-the-black-existence-in-america/>.

<sup>7</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Strickland, Ronald. "The Western Marxist Concept of Ideology Critique." *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 28, no. 5E (2012) compares and contrasts the definition of ideology from several major theorists. Pecheux's model is more extensive than what I present here, but this particular characteristic in his model suits the definition I am highlighting here.

<sup>9</sup> Bell hooks' "No Love in the Wild." In *NewBlackMan (In Exile)*, edited by Mark Anthony Neal: Google, 2012. Par. 4.

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<sup>10</sup> Hooks, par. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, Leigh M. "Poverty Porn, Pre-Humanism and Beasts of the Southern Wild." In *Poverty Porn, Pre-Humanism and Beasts of the Southern Wild*, edited by Leigh M. Johnson: Google, 2012. Par. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Woolley, Agnes. "The Politics of Myth Making: 'Beasts of the Southern Wild'." Film review, openDemocracy (2012). Published electronically October 29, 2012. Par. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, "Poverty Porn," par. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Hooks, "No Love," par. 18.

<sup>15</sup> Hooks, "No Love," par. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Woolley, "The Politics of Myth Making."

<sup>17</sup> Woolley, "The Politics of Making Myth," par. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Hooks, "No Love," par. 7 and Woolley, "The Politics," par. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Hooks, "No Love," par 17.

<sup>20</sup> Woolley, "The Politics," par. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Hooks, "No Love," par 6.

<sup>22</sup> Hooks, "No Love," par. 20.

<sup>23</sup> Hooks, "No Love," par 1.

<sup>24</sup> In using the term to describe *Beasts*, critics reference David Walker's article and his assertion that, along with other films that have emerged in the last decade, *Beasts* is part of a cohort of films that is developing this genre.

<sup>25</sup> Hooks, "No Love," par. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Hooks, "No Love," par 13.

<sup>27</sup> It should also be noted that, while neither myth or ideology is intrinsically positive or negative, ideology here refers to those that try to oppose a dominant ideology, and in doing so, "confirm (its) power...by accepting the 'evidentness of meaning' upon which it rests" (Strickland, 50). The criticism of *Beasts* focuses almost entirely on racist ideological structures, but in doing so, it affirms the power of those structures as the only lens, and thereby the only meaning, through which we are able to engage external productions.

<sup>28</sup> Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1967. Page 18. Quoting A. Toynbee, *Study of History*, 169-175.



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<sup>29</sup> Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality*. World Perspectives. 1st American ed. New York,: Harper & Row, 1963. Page 21.

<sup>30</sup> In mythology, the lines between dreams and reality may be blurred. The presence of the aurochs as both in Hushpuppy's imagination and in reality reflects the ambiguous nature of myth.

<sup>31</sup> Campbell, *Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Campbell, *Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> Campbell, *Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 36.

<sup>34</sup> Campbell, *Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 90.

<sup>35</sup> Campbell, *Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 121.

<sup>36</sup> Campbell, *Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 128.

<sup>37</sup> Campbell, *Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 151.

<sup>38</sup> Eliade, *Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 33.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. Page 108.

<sup>40</sup> Clottes, Jean, and J. David Lewis-Williams. *The Shamans of Prehistory: Trance and Magic in the Painted Caves*. Trans. Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Collection "Arts Rupestres". New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998. Page 2.

<sup>41</sup> Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46.

<sup>42</sup> I would like to express my eternal gratitude to Dr. Jennifer Slack for her tireless assistance and superior attention to detail throughout the editing process of this article.

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