



4-1-2013

## Beasts of the Southern Wild

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### Recommended Citation

Ruf, Frederick (2013) "Beasts of the Southern Wild," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 1 , Article 30.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss1/30>

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# Beasts of the Southern Wild

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), directed by Benh Zeitlin.

Benh Zeitlin's first feature length film has made quite an impact in critical circles and among the public, sufficient to collect a large number of awards and nominations, among them Academy Award nominations for Best Director and Best Screenplay. Reviews uniformly mention the film's mythic qualities, which may or may not impress those of us in the study of religion for which the term has particular value and appeal. But, in fact, the film does offer many profound insights into myth and myth-making, and it could become a special resource both for teaching and study.

On the surface *Beasts* is just the story of a six year-old girl surviving a Katrina-like storm, and coming to terms with both an abusive, alcoholic father and a missing mother, but that's a bit like saying *Gilgamesh* is just the story of two brothers or Genesis just a tale of Middle Eastern tribes. In fact, the story walks the edge of the ordinary and the extraordinary, of that which elicits our anxious concern and that which propels us beyond mere concern. *Beasts* is a film that absolutely never leaves sight of the concrete but also never allows the factual world to be what common sense tells us it is. In Eliade's definition of myth, it's a true story.

What is most striking about the film is how rooted it is in squalor. The opening shot is of weeds, scrub, a nearby oil refinery, and a trailer home that ought not to be inhabited. In fact it is, by Hushpuppy, the six year-old child, and to describe it as ramshackle is to understate the state of disintegration and collapse in which the child lives. Nearby is a similar structure lived in by her father, Wink, a man as broken down as his home and as apt to hit Hushpuppy as to talk to her. All is squalor: there is no shot of beauty in the film. Every visual would tempt one to yearn for social services or the Red

Cross or disinfectant or pharmaceuticals, and yet such a response would be entirely out of place for the film offers better: Hushpuppy's visions and words.

Early in the film she puts an enormous pot on to cook, and the flames erupt wildly, one of many threats of destruction in the film. Hushpuppy takes her missing mother's filthy, torn Michael Jordan jersey inside a cardboard box and draws images of her mother as though it were a cave of Lascaux. We're not reassured, for the film makes us very aware that cardboard cannot withstand the blast of fire, and yet we're oddly inspired by her devotion and her knack for turning hope into art.

There are many other beasts of this southern wild: Hushpuppy tells us of the aurochs, huge, great-tusked boars in her imagination, owing much to Lascaux again. They threaten again and again, an imagining of the apocalyptic that haunts this young girl and her community of cast-offs and vagabonds. Another is the hurricane that sweeps all away in an unnamed but clear allusion to Katrina (the film takes place in New Orleans) and casts them upon the waters where fish, birds, and cows float dead. There is also a disease that is killing Wink, and his death approaches as steadily as the storm or the aurochs.

Through it all Hushpuppy makes visionary pronouncements, of the unraveling of the universe and the importance of the universe fitting together "just right." She swims to a floating honky-tonk where she dances with someone who just might be her mother. She faces down the charging aurochs. She feeds her own father as he's dying. It's tiny Hushpuppy who pulls the universe together, with her wisdom and her imaginings.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* proposes that myth doesn't come from philosophy or the educated or what we have recently come to call the one percent. Those most subject

to squalor and being just “pieces,” especially the smallest pieces, are the ones who imagine beyond what is sensible or smart or even healthy. And they inspire the rest of us.