

Beasts of the Southern Wild

(2012, Zeitlin, USA)

Component 1: Varieties of Film & Film-Making (AL)

Component 1: American Film (AS)

Core Study Areas:

Key Elements of Film Form

Meaning & Response

The Contexts of Film

Specialist Study Area:

Spectatorship

Ideology (AL)

Rationale for study

- Critical Acclaim: The film won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance festival as well as the cinematography award. At Cannes it was awarded the Caméra d'Or, which recognizes the best film by a new director. Richard Corliss in *Time* magazine said the film, 'speaks in words and images of a clarity and vision nearly unique in today's independent cinema.'

STARTING POINTS- Useful Sequences and timings/links

- Opening scene to 04:00 sets up the subjectivity of the film, the family dynamic and establishes Hushpuppy's affinity with nature.
- (50:07 – 57:41) This is a useful scene for exploring Wink and Hushpuppy's relationship as it includes his vulnerability, evidence of their closeness and him training her to cope without him.

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- The film was predominantly shot on an Easyrig which lends a documentary style to a lot of the footage and also places the audience in

the action creating immersion and, frequently, conveying realism. One useful example is the firework scene where the camera operator joins the party and takes the audience running through the location with the characters.

- Shot on 16mm to give the film a grainy quality that reflects the grittiness of the Bathtub.
- Prevalence of shots from Hushpuppy's perspective or at least from her the perspective of someone her height keeps her at the centre of the narrative and encourages spectators to align themselves with her. The opening scene demonstrates this clearly as the audience, with Hushpuppy, are down with the animals.

Mise-en-Scène

- The homes were constructed by local artists and boat builders to create very idiosyncratic, unique sets that reflected the characters and unusual lifestyles of the inhabitants of the bathtub.
- The filming location of Isle de Jean Charles in South Louisiana is severely affected by land loss so it conveys the sense of peril and emergency very authentically and the people who live there and became involved in making the film have useful experiences to draw on.
- Quvenzhané Wallis' body language conveys defiance and power alongside vulnerability and fear.

Editing

- Hushpuppy was prioritised by ensuring that the majority of shots included her or were from her point of view.
- Wink's demise was predictable from early in the film so the film's predominantly linear narrative was emotive as we watched his inevitable decline with Hushpuppy.
- Use of Wink's flashback of meeting Hushpuppy's mother was lent greater power by being the only such scene in an otherwise linear film.

Sound

- Benh Zeitlin, 'Second-line parade culture, jazz-funeral culture is a huge part of the celebration sequence at the start of the film that defines the town. A funeral in New Orleans

begins with these tragic dirges but then transforms into a celebratory, joyous party.' This sequence, and this music, is crucial in conveying the positive aspects in living in a vulnerable place at a challenging time.

- Use of Hushpuppy's voiceover from the film's opening moments and throughout conveys her isolation as well as giving the spectator insight into how she perceives the world.
- Cajun and folk music score co-written by Zeitlin and Dan Romer reflects the chaotic whirlwind of life in the Bathtub.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

- The Levee as a physical barrier between different social groups can be read as a visual representation of social/racial division.
- Attitudes to gender and strength. Wink tries to encourage Hushpuppy to feel strong by referring to her as a man, "you gonna be the last man in the bathtub" and criticising emotions and weakness, "that's just a side effect of being a stupid little girl."
- Hushpuppy is represented as animalistic from the opening scene to the scene where she is encouraged to 'beast it'. This could be read as problematic racial stereotyping.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including Visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Influenced by a documentary called *Dry Wood* (Blank, 1973) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mexJGJKMR-I>) This extract shows groups of people preparing food together.
- Nature Documentaries inspired Zeitlin as he stated, "I'm really obsessed with nature documentaries. I wanted to explore that child-like fascination with nature by showing it up close and in detail."
- Julius Avery's short film *Jerrycan* was also an influence on the film's aesthetics. *Jerrycan* is available in full at <https://vimeo.com/108550982>

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS - Contexts

Historical

- Inspired by Hurricane Katrina and its

aftermath in 2005. Zeitlin said, 'I live in New Orleans and was interested in telling a story about people who are staying in South Louisiana and why they're holding on. I wanted to celebrate that impulse to stand by this place, in spite of its dangers or flaws.'

Institutional

- The film was shot for just \$1.8m by a collective of artists and volunteers called Court 13. This allowed greater creative freedom away from the guiding forces prevalent in major studio productions. In an interview with *Smithsonian* magazine Zeitlin quotes the photographer Bill Cunningham: "If you don't take their money, they can't tell you what to do."

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Spectatorship - STARTING POINTS

- Prevalence of shots from Hushpuppy's perspective plus her voiceover and the fact that she is in every scene encourages the spectator to align themselves with her.
- Contemporary events may impact upon a spectator's reading of the film i.e. recent demonization of the outsider and suggestions that walls be built to keep 'them' out. As Hushpuppy says, 'They built the wall that cuts us off.'
- The sense of realism created by handheld camera, use of non-actors, authentic locations and sets may intensify the emotional response for the spectator. Conversely, the use of magic realism e.g. the aurochs may shatter this illusion of reality and therefore lessen the spectator's sense of immersion.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - Ideology - STARTING POINTS

- Gottwald, "We're dedicated to making films as a community about communities on the edge of the world. Limitations are motivating forces for us. We love to bust through challenges." Parallels between the filmmakers ideologies and their subject matter.
- The film cheers the underdog throughout as the audience are encouraged to share the joy of these characters surviving in the most challenging of situations. A clear example is the portrayal of the authorities trying to evict the vulnerable and unwell Wink and the young Hushpuppy very forcefully.
- Nature vs Civilisation – contemporary America,

'the dry world', is criticised as inauthentic and ugly throughout the film. Hushpuppy states, "They got fish stuck in plastic wrappers, they got their babies stuck in carriages, and chickens on sticks and all that kind of stuff."