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Beasts of the Southern Wild

Beasts of the Southern Wild is a film dedicated to creating a unique story about climate change, poverty, death, myth, and community. Though the movie seems messy and confusing, it is the simplicity of the characters’ lives that makes the fantastical, mythical story one that is relatable and heartwarming.

Through the opening scenes of the film, the audience can see that clearly the main characters live in poverty. Six-year-old Hushpuppy and her father, Wink, each have their own houses, both entrenched by a heaps of junk. Old tires scattered at every turn, rusted automobile fragments, grass as tall as Hushpuppy herself, and farm animals living in and outside the house. Hushpuppy wears the same orange underwear, raggedy camisole, and ill-fitting jeans for almost the entirety of the film, and the other characters wear old, dirty clothes as well. It seems like a wasteland on all fronts, but the resilience of the Bathtub and the people who live in it show that self-efficiency has value. Wink catches food for everyone, whether it be chicken or seafood, and there seems to be an abundance of it before a massive storm, presumably a hurricane, comes through. Even then, the community bands together to drain the water in an effort to remain independent. Some believe that the film glorifies poverty, like Thomas Hackett, a writer and filmmaker from Austin; he says the film is “…sentimentalizes poverty and glosses over neglect, and that it skirts tough questions by resorting to a half-baked and naïve fable.” The film does not make poverty look like fun. Surely there are moments in the film where there is happiness, floating in the pools of beer, but that goes to show that poor people can have fun too. They can be happy too. There is nothing glorious or romantic about the lives of these characters, they just are not miserable about it. There is a common argument that poor people chose to be poor because they do not work hard enough to climb to socioeconomic ladder to success, but those that live in the Bathtub clearly are not lazy. They work hard to survive; they simply do not want anyone’s pity. As far as Wink’s treatment of Hushpuppy, he obviously is not a gentle father, but he takes care of Hushpuppy and he does love her in his own way. Nothing excuses the moment where he slapped Hushpuppy, but at no other point in the film does the audience have reason to suspect that he is an abusive father. The people of the Bathtub have a culture that is very different from the ones on the mainland, but simply because they are different is not reason to label them “wastrels,” as Hackett describes them. In regards to the comment about the film being a “naïve fable,” Hackett fails to understand that this is a six-year old’s story. If by naïve he means innocent, that is what should be expected of a little girl, on the verge of being orphaned, trying to make sense of the world as it breaks around her. The Bathtub may be defined by grit and grime, unsophisticated in nature, but it is rich in its sense of community.

The Bathtub, formally known as Isle de Charles Doucet, is a fictional island off the coast of Louisiana, which is why the audience can assume that the major storm that hit the island is a hurricane. In the beginning of the film, Hushpuppy is introduced to the concept of climate change. In a quite blunt manner, her teacher, Miss Bathsheba, breaks the news to her students: the Bathtub will sink as a result of polar ice caps melting. She makes it clear that this is a matter of fact, and there is no reason to be upset about it. In Hushpuppy’s imagination, the aurochs are trapped in ice and once the ice melts, they will be free to feed on humans as they did long ago. The aurochs seem mythological in the film, but they actually did walk the earth not too long ago. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, they are an extinct species of the wild ox that roamed Europe until the 17th century. The idea that they all froze during the ice age was fabricated by the filmmakers. The co-producer of *Beasts*, Michael Gottwald, said in a *National Geographic* interview the inspiration behind choosing the aurochs was rooted in director Benh Zeitlin’s fascination with cave paintings he saw in Lascaux, a famous cave in France (Berlin). The beasts are mythical here, but they help Hushpuppy make sense of the world collapsing around her. In the exposition, Hushpuppy understands that all living animals have a heartbeat, but she does not quite know what the heartbeats say. She can only assume that the animals have basic needs as she does, like feeding and excreting; however, there are times where “they be talking in codes,” which are completely incomprehensible. For her, a heartbeat is not the only thing she does not understand.

With her mother gone, Hushpuppy makes sense of her absence by using her imagination. She talks to her as if she is still there and she uses her mother’s old red jersey as confirmation that she is still there with her. The aurochs are no different; Hushpuppy grasps her father’s illness and eventual death through these mythical beings. In the same interview, Gottwald explained Hushpuppy’s relationship with the aurochs: “[w]hen you’re a kid of that age, there’s no separation between reality and fantasy. In Hushpuppy’s world, her dad dying and the storm coming means the world is falling apart. And the aurochs are a key reflection of that” (Berlin). Knowing that she is the only one left in her family, she deals with the idea of being forgotten by determination that she will keep her memory alive. She draws pictures of herself and her family, much like the cave paintings of the aurochs. Hushpuppy believes for most of the movie that because her family is dying out, and the aurochs will come to replace her. But by the end, she realizes she and the beasts are not so different after all. Both of their existences were challenged by climate change, but both were strong animals that outlasted the environment. Not long after she confronts the beasts, she confronts her fear of her father dying. Again, the story may seem fantastically out of reach, but it highlights the very human challenge of dealing with loss and life after loss.

The moment of Wink’s death is another endearing, relatable moment in the film. All throughout the movie, Wink was a hard, brash, guarded father. He braved a harsh face for the harsh world he lived in, but his effort to remain strong in times of difficulty is admirable. No one on the island seems defeated about any adversity, but especially Wink. His great love, Hushpuppy’s mother, left him with Hushpuppy when she was very young, but he seems to easily accept that it is his job to take care of his daughter. At no point does he treat Hushpuppy like a burden; in fact, he empowers Hushpuppy to be strong and independent. It might seem strange to give a six-year-old her own trailer, and maybe it is considering she almost burned herself in it, but Wink knows he is going to die soon. He is preparing her for a world where is not there to take care of her. Wink also empowers Hushpuppy by not instilling the typical gender roles for a little girl. He teachers her how to catch her own fish and calls her “boss lady” and “man.” At one, point, he tells Hushpuppy she is going “to be king of the Bathtub.” Juxtaposed with Hushpuppy’s explanation of the aurochs, “[w]ay back in the day, the Aurochs was king of the world,” Hushpuppy is again a new embodiment of the aurochs. Finally, when Wink is on his death bed, he lets his guard down and allows both himself and Hushpuppy to cry; there is no more hiding from the fact that Hushpuppy is going to be an orphan, but that does not mean she is going to be alone. She has her community, and she knows her mom is out there somewhere. She knows that she will not be forgotten. In the words of Hushpuppy herself, one day scientists will know that “once there was a Hushpuppy, and she lived with her daddy in the Bathtub.” Unfortunately, many people have lost their parents at a young age, whether it be by death or otherwise, which is one reason why this story is so relatable.

In the film, there was a motif of floating dust particles in the air. One of the first instances we see these particles is when Wink relays the story of Hushpuppy’s conception. The food that her mother cooks in the flashback is what causes the floating particles to occur. The next time this is seen is when Hushpuppy visits her mother at the near the end of the film. Never was it explicitly stated that the woman was her mother, but the floating dust in the air from her kitchen indicates to the audience that this is indeed her mother (amongst other indicators like the alligator and beer). So, already, we see that particles and her mother have a connection. Why would the creators make *this* the symbol of Hushpuppy’s mom? In the last lines of the film, Hushpuppy delivers a closing soliloquy: “When it all goes quiet behind my eyes, I see everything that made me flying around in invisible pieces. When I look too hard, it goes away. But when it all goes quiet, I see they are right here. I see that I’m a little piece of a big, big universe.” The invisible pieces that she sees are the remnants of her family, so she knows that they are always with her. The reason they are small is to stay consistent with Hushpuppy’s revelation that she only makes up a tiny fraction of the world, and there is a place for her to fit in, even she and those around her are gone. Just like the beasts, this is her way of making sense of the world. Anyone in the audience could take her wisdom and find strength in it, no matter how mythical or fantastical the story is.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* tells an unconventional story, but one that can connect a wide audience. It is charming in its own way through the use of a little girl determined to be remembered. Though she is young, she is brave. Hushpuppy uses her philosophical imagination to understand why her world is the way it is, what the heart beats are trying to say. By the end of the movie, she accomplishes that, eliminating the literal and metaphorical beasts she feared all along.

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