Once Upon a Time In Louisiana: The Complex Ideology of Beasts of the Southern Wild

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Once Upon a Time In Louisiana: The Complex Ideology of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

On the face of it, Benh Zeitlin’s *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is an intimately scaled production that tells the story of a young girl’s coming of age. Despite its tight focus, the film brushes up against many explosively political issues—post-Katrina disaster relief, climate change, and poverty among them. All films are created from some sort of ideological basis, whether that basis is intentional or unintentional, conscious or unconscious. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* possesses an ideological undercurrent that has implications in social, political, and economic spheres. Through its eccentric aesthetic and subversive subtext, the film rebukes certain tenets of dominant cultural ideology, presenting a world largely incompatible with American capitalism, while implicitly supporting gender roles in that same system.

Robin Wood’s essay “Ideology, Genre, Auteur” is a response to the various schools of film theory that came before it. Wood suggests that the most effective method of criticism combines various theoretical models, pulling notions and practices from each to create a synthetic approach. Rather than rendering the interpretation muddled and confused, Wood says this method allows a critic to be “alive to the opposing pulls, the tensions, of one’s world” (593). In other words, a grasp of the full theoretical spectrum provides a viewer with a more perceptive view of a film’s resonances, acknowledging the forces within and without the production that contribute to its meaning.

Wood stresses the importance of contextualizing any discussion of a given film by identifying the dominant ideology of the culture in which the film was produced. For his purposes in the essay, Wood distills “American capitalist ideology” down to a few salient points (593). These points crystalize many of the dominant forces at work in American life, the often unseen, unnoticed influences that are silently agreed upon and subtly shape American culture, consciousness, and even subconsciousness. Many of these forces will inevitably shape and inform the discourse of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

Wood’s first stresses the importance of capitalism in American society, identifying it as the economic expression of the American values of personal initiative, privacy, and settling supposedly savage lands (593-4). This ideal closely relates to his
next point— idealized American “work ethic” as a force of moral and societal good. Wood also raises the issue of nature in relation to American ideology and describes a bifurcated view: nature either symbolizes a wilderness to be civilized or a virgin land to toil over and farm, a call back to the earlier ideal of an honest, productive job with a constructive work ethic (593). The taming of the wilderness relates to the American model of progress, whether it is industrial or technological. Paradoxically, Americans also value wealth as a symbol of success, yet are quick to accept its capacity to corrupt. Finally, Wood discusses the foundational belief in America as a land of opportunity, where happiness and success await those who work hard enough to achieve it (594).

Wood then examines the fallout of these dominant ideological constructs in various terms. In examining their effect on gender identity, Wood identifies the gender “ideal” as well as the shadow of that ideal. The ideal male, as crafted and dictated by this ideological network, is a powerful, adventuresome type; alternately, the ideal female is a dependably submissive wife and mother. The “shadow” identities cast the male as the dull and settled husband/father while the female counterpart is fascinating, but dangerous, the prototypical femme fatale. According to Wood, these shadow identities arise out of the “staggering incompatibility” of the ideal roles (594). Such disconnection is part and parcel of an ideology that is “inherently riddled with hopeless contradictions and unresolvable tensions” (Wood 594). Wood’s essay emphasizes the way these forces work their way into the fabric of the film, whether it’s in the aesthetic form or the narrative and genre mutations.

Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni’s essay “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” operates as a sort of declaration of principles; however, it also provides an enlightening framework in which to place film as an ideologically motivated medium. According to Comolli and Narboni, “every film is political, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it (or within which it is produced, which stems from the same thing)” (688). The authors believe that cinema is separate from other arts such as literature because the production of a film involves the mobilization of large economic forces; the addition of economics in the very production of the art allows for ideology to
come into the fore. Film acts as an instrument of ideology; that is irrevocable. However, filmmakers can modulate this force through their aesthetic control of the depiction of reality.

Comolli and Narboni offer a system of discrete categories to allow for simplified classification, as well as guiding one's understanding of the ideological effect of the film. The essay outlines seven categories, each expressing a different level of political/ideological awareness and intent; a letter of the alphabet signifies each successive category. According to Comolli and Narboni, Category C films have radical aesthetic strategies that subvert traditional methods, however, those strategies are applied to less overtly political subjects.

In examining *Beasts of the Southern Wild* through each of these critical frameworks, complications arise. Indeed, it is a film fraught with tensions, as Robin Wood would call them. These tensions are first established by the aesthetic of the film. Director Benh Zeitlin and cinematographer Ben Richardson shoot the film in a freewheeling, handheld style, often eschewing compositional elements like focus and framing in favor of a more visceral documentary-like effect. Yet, the film also peers into the imagination of its protagonist, Hushpuppy, a young girl growing up in a fictionalized Louisiana community referred to as “the Bathtub.” The collision of reality and imagination lend the film a sort of magical realist, fable-like dimension. The film mostly fits into Comolli and Narboni’s Category C. Although it appears to be a simple coming of age tale on the surface, it is imbued with a political subtext.

The aesthetic choice of blending reality and fantasy, as well as the decision to tell this story from the point of view of a young child, indicate that what follows will be a radical departure from the dominant American narrative film as described by Robin Wood. In many ways, *Beasts* does depart from dominant values. Although it is replete
with instances of nature and humanity interacting, the film rebukes the assumption that
nature is something to be tamed. Instead, nature and civilization are comingling, a
relationship established in the opening shots of Hushpuppy wandering among a free-
roaming pig, as well as numerous chickens, birds, cats, and dogs. The relationship is also
solidified with Hushpuppy’s opening voice-over:

All the time, everywhere, everything's hearts are beating and
squirting, and talking to each other in ways I can't understand.
Most of the time they probably be saying: I'm hungry, or I gotta
poop. But sometimes they be talkin' in codes.

*Beasts* highlights nature as communication and the
images that accompany this voice over— most
memorably Hushpuppy lifting a bird to her ear to
hear its heart beat—suggest a communion between
animal and human that is uncommon in the
increasingly urbanized 21st century. This
relationship is also established by the seemingly
endless supply of seafood that feeds most of the
Bathtub. These people live among the land, the
animals, and the water and they live off the land, animals, and water.

*Beasts* and its characters have a similarly dismissive view of the traditional
American value of technological and scientific progress. Early in the film, Hushpuppy
and her father Wink are in a boat, floating on the Gulf of Mexico. The boat itself, which
appears to be welded out of the flatbed of an old pickup truck, is a potent symbol of the
characters’ dismissal of conventional culture. Wink looks across the levee— a literal and
symbolic barrier that separates the Bathtub from traditional society—toward a grouping
of looming oil refineries. Snerring, he says, “Aint that ugly over there? We got the
prettiest place on Earth.” The divide between the Bathtub and traditional society is made
explicit when Hushpuppy confides in voiceover, “Daddy says, up above the levee, on the
dry side, they're afraid of the water like a bunch of babies.” By the film’s midpoint, as the
Bathtub is ravaged by a hurricane, this line takes on a slightly less idealized quality. In many ways, it indicates the film’s overall progression. Beasts tracks Hushpuppy’s coming of age and a major part of that evolution involves her coming to terms with and respecting or confronting the power of her environment, as symbolized by the charging, snarling herd of Aurochs. In her narration, Hushpuppy acknowledges this change, referring to herself as “a little piece in a big, big universe.” The portrayal of the Bathtub echoes Hushpuppy’s maturation. It begins as an idyllic place, but in the end is closer to a volatile utopia.

The film implicitly implores the audience to follow Hushpuppy’s enlightened lead with lines like, “The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If one piece busts, even the smallest piece... the entire universe will get busted.” In the historical context of the film, with Hurricane Katrina still fresh in the mind of viewers and inextricably associated with the Gulf region, that line is a plea for heightened ecological awareness.

The portrayal of the Bathtub as a community is complex, perhaps in some unintended ways. Within the community, there seems to be little organization. The characters live off the land, with no apparent need for money. The local school is staffed by a single teacher, Bathsheba, who doubles as a sort of nurse for the community. Her approach to each profession is atypical to say the least. Hushpuppy describes it as having
“more holidays than the whole rest of the world.” The Bathtub has a sense of hedonism utterly foreign to the American capitalist ideology that instead places a premium on work, success, money, and possessions. Bathsheba’s plea that her students “learn how to take care of people smaller and sweeter than you are” has a vaguely Marxist tinge, or at the very least implies a utopian ideal of community. Viewed in this context, the community’s dismissal of all forms of government aid is not an affirmation of an isolationist small town conservatism. Instead, it reflects the utter incompatibility between the prevailing ideology and the culture of the Bathtub.

The most contradictory ideological aspects of Beasts, those that seem more orthodox than the rest, occur right at its center, in the portrayal and development of Hushpuppy. In many ways, Hushpuppy is modeled after another water-bound classic American protagonist: Huck Finn. Indeed, Hushpuppy is repeatedly defined in masculine terms. Her character fits neither the female archetype nor the female shadow as described by Wood. She fits best in the ideal male archetype of individualist and adventurer. Wink repeatedly promises that Hushpuppy will become “King of the Bathtub” and Hushpuppy celebrates an arm wrestling contest with Wink by flexing her muscles and bellowing, “I’m the man.” On one hand, this portrayal could be viewed as a subversion of traditional gender roles but the film ultimately celebrates Hushpuppy on the basis of her rugged individualism, a particularly American ideal. In that context, it plays like a tacit admission that the masculine archetype, rather than any derivative of its feminine counterpart, is the true source of power and agency in this world.

An essential function of film, as well as other art forms, is to allow humans a means to express and understand the collective experience of existence. Yet each piece of art has its own context. No human exists in a vacuum, nor does a film. Beasts of the
Southern Wild comments on, and resonates with, the principles of the age. It subtly critiques some dominant values with its lively, odd aesthetics and notions, but still shows traces of the dominant ideology in which it was created.
Works Cited

