

GCE A LEVEL



WJEC Eduqas GCE A LEVEL in FILM STUDIES

Section B:
American Film Since 2005 - Focus Film
Study Guide:
Spectatorship and Ideology in *Beasts
of the Southern Wild* (Zeitlan, 2015)



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Beasts of the Southern Wild (Zeitlan, 2015)

Beasts of the Southern Wild is set in a community living off the coast of South Louisiana, in a community full of eccentrics and outcasts. Because the film has such a subjective style - almost everything from the POV of Hushpuppy, a six year old child - it is very interesting in terms of spectatorship, especially the way different audiences have responded to it.

The film itself plays with audience expectations in a number of ways:

- The setting at first seems timeless: there are passing references and props that seem fairly contemporary; many of the costumes and other props also feel historical, though it's difficult to pin down a period; and the giant party that forms the introduction to this community could be either medieval - or post-apocalyptic. (A good comparison would be to look at the BarterTown sequence in *Mad Max: Beyond the Thunderdome* - Miller, 1985). Even when we see smoke-belching factories over the Levee, it could be an image from a future dystopia
- Hushpuppy's narration also has the quality of being narrated from the future (she even reflects that she will be remembered in a thousand years).

Task: Watch the 'prologue' / introduction:

- Where is the film set?
- What have you seen in the *mise-en-scène* that places the action in the past? Present? Future?
- Why do you think the filmmakers have done this?

When it is revealed that these people live in the reasonably modern world (the film is set in 2005, during the arrival of Hurricane Katrina), the level of squalor (and lack of health and safety) shocked some audiences. And yet the film was both a critical and popular success, with many critics pointing out how the immersive quality of the narrative and aesthetic 'won over' the spectator, so by the time Hushpuppy confronts the 'modern' world (at the survivor's hospital) we are seeing it through her eyes.

The film won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival amongst numerous others, but there was also a critical backlash who accused the film of "glorifying poverty and recklessness".

Task: As the students watch the film, ask them to record their feelings about the *Bathtub residents* (especially *Wink* and *Hushpuppy*). At regular intervals, ask them to interview each other about their responses and discuss what triggered their response. Some areas to discuss:

- What are some adjectives to describe the people in the *Bathtub*? And the place itself?
- What would be some of the positives about living there? What might be some limitations or drawbacks?
- Do you think this is an appropriate way to bring up a child such as *Hushpuppy*?

Magic realism

This is a film or literary genre where grittily realistic stories (often about people in poverty or oppressed) have miraculous or fantastical elements mixed in. Often the fabulous characters or events act as allegories for political conflict, and put real-world issues into an almost mythical context. It also often features characters with a 'sensitivity' to nature (or supernatural), who can talk to animals.

Task: *What do you think of the 'magical' elements? The aurochs are the most obvious, but are there any other magical or supernatural incidents? What real world events are the magical elements connected to?*

Some ideas:

- The Storm and the release of the aurochs from their icy prison are all connected to environmental change - we see clips of icebergs collapsing, and the water level created by the Levee after the Storm is a foreshadowing of when the sea levels rise.
- The 'ghost' of Hushpuppy's mother guides her as she makes food (using a flamethrower!), showing how her mental processes manifest as 'reality'.

Encoding/Decoding Responses

Using the ideas of Stuart Hall, we can classify a range of different audience responses: the preferred reading, the negotiated reading, and the oppositional meaning.

- **Preferred meaning:** the Bathtub residents are "outlaws without committing crimes"; outcasts who have created a community of like-minded spirits to live apart from the hypocrisies of the modern world - "fish stuck in plastic, babies stuck in strollers" as Hushpuppy puts it.
- **Negotiated meaning:** the community resembles the counter-cultures of the 60s and 70s, where free-spirited people lived "off grid" and created their own alternative to mainstream society. Unfortunately, many of these communities ended up attracting criminal or abusive people. If the adults of the Bathtub want to live like this, that's fine, but it's not a suitable environment for children.
- **Oppositional meaning:** the Bathtub residents are (in words of LA Review of Books) "apolitical, individualist hedonists" that don't represent what people from very poor underdeveloped communities are actually like. The film represents a romanticised and idealistic 'pastoral' fantasy of the filmmakers.

Task:

- *What are some other examples of themes or issues in the film that may elicit a range of responses from different audiences?*
- *What would be the preferred reading that the filmmakers encoded?*
- *What might be a negotiated meaning?*
- *What might be an oppositional reading?*
- *What kinds of audiences with what kind of other beliefs may have these responses?*
- *Which reading would support or challenge with the values of the dominant ideology?*

Ideology and Beasts of the Southern Wild

The film quite proudly represents a community that challenges the dominant ideology of what is considered a safe, healthy lifestyle. Their existence could be described positively as *libertarian* and *anarchistic*.

Task: Look up what these terms mean - where can you see these values being upheld in the *Bathtub*? Use the chart below to help:

Libertarian/ Anarchist Values	Example from <i>Beasts of the Southern Wild</i>
Personal autonomy - live life as you want without interference from the State.	
Abolition of capitalism - communities run on 'barter' system.	
Distrust of authority - children home-schooled, hospitals, police.	
Personal identity - be who you are regardless of gender.	
Individual wealth and property - as well as the trappings of material success - are unimportant.	
Be tolerant of other people's weaknesses - no-one is perfect. Let others go about their business without judgement	

Representation of family

Hushpuppy and Wink's family relationship is unorthodox to say the least. It isn't always clear who has the moral authority or best judgement, and they often seem more like a partnership than father and daughter. At the start of the the film Wink's parental style is both rough, tender, neglectful and loving - as the film goes on, we can see the harsh lessons he taught her (how to be a 'beast') have enabled her to cope with the the storm, the aftermath, and eventually his death.

Discussion Task:

- *What initially seems inappropriate, neglectful or even abusive about Wink and Hushpuppy's relationship?*
- *By the end of the film, how can we see these have been useful lessons for Hushpuppy to learn?*
- *How do they enable her to continue living autonomously?*

Focus Scene Analysis -

A Funeral BathTub Style (00:39:06 - 41:55)

Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography (including Lighting)

The scene is shot on 16mm handheld cameras to lend the film a gritty, but colourful and kinetic quality. Almost all the shots are from the eyeline level of Hushpuppy (or at other times, that of the animals she interacts with) which aligns us with her as our insight into this world. Some spectators may be unsettled by the swaying raucousness of the partygoers - enhanced by the camera movement - but when we cut to Hushpuppy the camera stills, showing in LS her comfortable, confident body language shows she feels at home and secure in this environment.

Mise-en-scène

The prop of the crabs reflects both the abundance of the natural world (a kind of Edenic view of nature as an infinite provider for those who survived the flood) and the feral nature of the people as they tear the crabs limb from limb with no pretence or decorum. The shellfish are poured unceremoniously across the bar table and the dim lighting makes the room look dingy and dirty. Nonetheless, the diners dig in with exuberance, in honour of the dead. The man who tries to show Hushpuppy a more sanitary method with a knife is quickly put in his place by Wink who tears at the crab with his bare hands as the crowd begin to chant. Suddenly the crab has become a rite-of-passage for Hushpuppy, symbolic of her ability to survive without tools or the trappings of civilization.

Editing

When Hushpuppy is shown how to break open and eat a crab, the match-on action cuts between the close ups of the crab, her reactions and in the distance Wink watching. This shows his care and concern for her and his dedication to her being prepared to live without him - despite his drunkenness, physical roughness and habit of going missing for days, he deeply loves his daughter. What is then shocking is him leaping to his feet, grabbing the crab and ordering to 'beast' it, to tear it apart like animal. As Hushpuppy struggles with what has become an ad hoc initiation ritual, the editing cuts between static shots of faces (from Hushpuppy's POV), a camera that circles around the table and group, as if we are one of them, and CU of Hushpuppy's efforts. They speed up until her triumphant feasting and climbing on the table, creating a climactic excitement.

Sound

Whilst the mood is celebratory, but Miss Bathsheeba (the teacher) sounds a note of concern about the floodwaters and raising questions about the practicalities of the community surviving. But the 'beasting' of the crab ritual/test soon re-establishes the almost tribal atmosphere: the beating of fists and chanting intensifies the atmosphere so that the simple act of eating a crab is turned into a moment loaded with significance for Hushpuppy. The frenzied screams of victory show the characters' celebration of survival and pride in their community.

Task: *Can you link the above examples to some of the ideas about spectatorship and ideology? How could theories or perspectives help you understand the scene further?*