

Indigeneity in the Anthropocene

Cracking the Crab and Looking the Beast in the Eye

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If we were to examine the nature of human beings, ‘beastly’ does not necessarily seem misplaced. Benh Zeitlin’s striking independent film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) illustrates that, under extreme circumstances, the only way to survive might entail becoming partly ‘beast’. The movie offers a fictional perspective on a devastating historical event through fairytale-like storytelling and simultaneously addresses audience prejudices about bare life. Its narrative revolves around a six-year-old Afroamerican girl named Hushpuppy who lives with her father Wink in a secluded Louisiana bayou fishers community called “The Bathtub” when hurricane Katrina forcefully illustrates what it takes to survive a (seemingly) natural disaster. *Beasts* is a survival-story on many levels as it offers a window on today’s Anthropocene and postcolonial power structures which become increasingly visible during disasters like hurricane Katrina. The underlying philosophy of the film juxtaposes holistic indigeneity with capitalist consumerism and shows the audience what is truly essential in life.

This essay examines how *Beasts of the Southern Wild* enables us to see what is often pushed aside. A textual analysis of its narrative and aesthetic elements will support the argument that: we are still tied to our beastly nature even-though humankind has evolved and dis-associated from the wilderness. Moreover, our dis-association has resulted in depleting our ecosystem and initiated climate change. This further deepens the gap between classes and proves to have the power to force groups of people to re-embrace their primitive nature.

Hushpuppy (played by Quvenzhané Wallis) continuously reflects on the division between human and non-human agency, between her own life and that of people who live on the other side of a

levee that separates them. The film's opening sequence maps out her living environment inhabited by pigs, chickens and dogs who, together with Hushpuppy, dine underneath a container-house. The Bathtub community is located "in a swampy scrap of territory separated (...) from a world of industry, consumerism and other forms of modern ugliness" (Scott 2012). Where many might abhor the setting and seemingly not well cared for child, the intimate cinematography takes the perspective of the young protagonist and connotes the opposite. Her poor living conditions are poetically captured on 16-millimetre film and accompanied by a serene instrumental celesta and violin score. *Beasts* challenges judgements about a 'perfect' westernised life. Audiences might cringe during scene's, like the one in which a can of cat-food is cooked on a stove (lit with a flamethrower) and burned until the container-house is on fire. Contrastingly, we observe Hushpuppy's high self-esteem; she strongly values her life. While the house goes up in flames, a peaceful shot of her sitting under a cardboard box shows how she draws her life-story "for the scientists in the future", so she will never be forgotten.

Halfway the movie, when hurricane Katrina has settled down, the few people who had stayed behind in the Bathtub reunite in joy to feast on some raw shellfish. Uncle Jean (Levy Easterly) teaches Hushpuppy how to open a crab's shell with a knife until Wink (Dwight Henry) jumps up angry, breaks it open with his bare hands and commands his daughter to do the same while everyone shouts "Beast it! Beast it! Beast it!". The word 'beast' here, doesn't just refer to eating with your hands, it connotes embracing the physical body's ability to primarily focus on survival. The movie poetically plays with the notion that the only way to survive might entail becoming partly 'beast'. "It is powerful to argue that we are all beasts, just one species of many, without special rights or privileges, and yet this very same ethic and the life-ways through which it is cultivated contribute to the animalisation of these very communities" (Burke 2018, 78). Mankind has evolved from its entanglement with and dependance on the wilderness by colonising land and those who lacked behind in becoming 'civilised'. The other, wealthier side of the state's population now depends on technology and infrastructure to survive. The hospital refuge is referred to by Hushpuppy as "a fish-tank without water" where "animals" (people) are plugged into a wall when they get sick. Like Veronica Barnsley (2016, 245) points out, "the only place where Hushpuppy cannot hear hearts beating...". Hushpuppy's voiceover often reflects on this division in the population: "Up in the dry world, they've got nothing we've got. They've only got holidays once a year. They've got fish stuck in plastic rappers, babies stuck in carriages, chickens on sticks and all that kind of stuff". She subtly bashes the American Dream, which the Bathtub community is clearly not living. The fact that, in today's era, mankind's beastly nature seems to hide behind technology and courtesy—attempting to establish a cultivated society—did not only create strong class divisions, it also gave rise to climate change.

Beasts of the Southern Wild shows strong references to ancient indigenous philosophy which recognises nature as a living entity with agency. Brianna Burke's article beautifully formulates that "we have been taught not to see nature as an alive and dynamic being with its own rights; instead, we have come to see it as a machine, each mechanism—mineral, plant, or animal—existing solely for human use" (2018, 67). Hushpuppy very much recognises non-human agency, to her everything has a heartbeat. Her holistic awareness shines through in sentences like: "The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right, if one piece busts, even the smallest piece, the whole universe will get busted." These words are amplified by many nature-documentary-style shots, such as a melting icecap, which indirectly address the Anthropocene and its climate debates. Such debates would argue that natural disasters are not entirely natural anymore. "In the Anthropocene, climate events and associated suffering can no longer be cast as acts of God or nature. They are now at least partly linked to human agency and responsibility" (Ribot 2014, 667). The Arctic shots show how an ancient mythical beast called the "Auroch" is released by the melting ice. It is a personification of the rising water and devastation, which will increasingly appear as the threatening 'enemy' if human communities do not rethink their ways of inhabiting the land. A scene in the mids of the hurricane's full blasting force shows how Wink takes his gun, drunkenly shouts "we ain't scared of no damn storm (...) I am coming to get you storm!", and he shoots at the clouds. "Hushpuppy and her father must live in cooperation with the animals and ecology around them in order to survive. If they break this cooperation, they put their own lives at risk" (Burke 2018, 77). The gun scene implies that the weather has already become our enemy in the age of the Anthropocene. But mankind's true enemy is their own activity which has crossed planetary boundaries. "While one might think that calling our era the Anthropocene would turn attention from nature back to people, it oddly guides gazes back toward hazards. So, in the Anthropocene, the struggle is still to maintain attention on the social and political production and reproduction of risk" (Ribot 2014, 696). Hurricane Katrina, just like many other (natural) disasters, strongly exposes and deepens the division between bare life communities and capitalist middle class. Those already vulnerable suffer the most.

Being so strongly affected by the hurricane, one might ask why the Bathtub community did not want to leave and resisted the help of the social workers. "The devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina exposed a series of deep-rooted problems, including controversies over the federal government's response, difficulties in search-and-rescue efforts, and lack of preparedness for the storm" (Gibbens 2019). In President Obama's words: "What started out as a natural disaster became a man-made disaster — a failure of government to look out for its own citizens (Neuman 2015)." Jesse Ribot (2014, 697) clearly formulates that, "Poverty is not only a basis of vulnerability but it is also disenfranchising – undermining the ability of the poor to influence those who govern".

Once a community is not part of the social and cultural infrastructure, one cannot expect them to integrate after a disaster. Brianna Burke reflects on the political position of the Bathtub community, “Insisting that we recognise other species and the “more than human” as having rights and being worthy of respect is precisely the work of demanding a real-world cosmopolitics, a political process that takes into account that other peoples have differing notions of how the earth works and thus differing notions of how humans must live in relation to it” (2018, 81). The film’s fairytale-like nature allows it to address this political debate without aiming to be an accurate representation of the real-life situation. Director Ben Zeitlin changed the story he initially wanted to tell as he arrived in Louisiana’s Isle de Jean Charles and interacted with the inhabitants (Burke 2018, 64). We can assume that he chose to capture and enlarge the independent, wise spirit of the community.

Negative responses about the film’s romanticisation of blackness and poverty are understandable but should be critically analysed. *Beasts* does use aesthetically pleasing cinematography to depict the harsh living conditions of a poor community and also includes negative connotations of the state’s aid and regime. Thomas Hackett cynically argues that *Beasts* turns poverty into sentimental poetry:

In casting social workers and public health officials who presume to think that a six-year-old girl should be fed, clothed, and looked after by adults as villains, the film tells us that we needn’t worry, that the poor just want to be left to fend for themselves. This is the film’s ugly operating assumption: if you are already poor (being black doesn’t hurt either), you are uniquely suited to thrive in squalor (Hackett 2013).

However, it is important to realise that not all lives can be measured by one standard. This is perhaps the more explicit message *Beast* aims to convey. If we do not try to understand others, we can easily fall blind to thinking that we are superior to them. This is how many issues (often related to coloniality) arise; the assumption that living with less, having to survive in close proximity to nature and not taking part in the globally applied educational systems makes one poor and worth less than those who live “up in the dry world” eating fish in plastic rappers. Unfortunately, this is still a contemporary assumption but let us speculate that we were to change it. Instead of focusing on ‘educating’ and integrating such communities into western culture — to push them away again if they don’t meet the requirements or fail to live up to our expectations — we were to get to know them and understand what they really need. This poses a solution to multiple problems.

Beasts of the Southern Wild confronts us with multiple contemporary problems. Other strong examples of such movies are Disney’s *Pocahontas* and James Cameron’s *Avatar*. Both movies address similar issues related to colonialism and the Anthropocene. The more fiction films incorporate and the less relatable they are to real life, the easier it is for us to open our eyes to

reality. The movie's ending shows Hushpuppy and the Auroch standing face to face, she looks the beast in the eye without fear.

Conclusion

If mankind wants to survive its Anthropocene and overcome the strong class divisions it produces, there is no other way but to re-integrate aspects of indigenous Bathtub philosophy. Even though our human nature has a beastly side, we have been domesticated and culturally pacified by romantic filters and stories to the extent that our senses cannot bear the confrontation with too much raw and painful reality anymore. Perhaps no one would have watched *Beasts of the Southern Wild* if its narrative had not looked through the eyes of an innocent child and had excluded its fireworks and sublime aesthetics. The film manages to break assumptions or judgements one might have about bare life and indirectly invites us to see what we might gain from living with less. As a matter of fact, climate change demands us to re-learn to live with less. Facing the beast (the Auroch which embodies climate change) and looking it in the eye can be done by fictional heroines like Hushpuppy, but it is definitely a challenge in real life. Let us crack the crab (a.k.a cut the crap) and face our inner and outer beasts as well as the damage they do.

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