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Magic Realism in Films: A Study of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

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Abstract:

Magic Realism is a phenomenon in Literature, Art, and film. It has a range of concepts which show a ready acceptance of magic in the rational world. Magic Realism is having its roots in a range of Art forms, initially emerged from a 1920s visual art form of German Expressionism called *Magischer Realismus*. Some viewers, critics and amateur film critics feel magical realism is a sub –genre to Fantasy which questions the reliability and correctness of magical realist films. Magic Realism has proved itself to be a cross cultural and cross arts phenomenon. Many critics see the use of Magic Realism phenomenon by European/ American Arts as the appropriation of the third world by the West, leading to a form of neo colonization or is the diminishing “Empire” retreating into the refuge of imagination? The research paper analyzes how culture assimilates and re-presents this essentially Latin American trend of Magic Realism in their own media (cinema) through the study of *Beasts of the Southern Wild*?

Keywords: Magic Realism, Film Study, Hollywood, Beasts of Southern Wild.

Magic realism has a broadly descriptive definition rather than critical one. This wide definition; generally used to categorise literature which portrays magical, fantastical and seemingly unreal elements in a realistic and conventional environment. Academics and critics have failed to sought out a proper definition for the term. Zamora and Wendy Faris claim its a mode which can explore and “transgress ontological, geographical, political, generic and many other boundaries, such a unique coexistence of separate worlds, spaces, theories and system is rarely possible in any other mode” (Zamora and Faris 5). Critics have stopped trying to set a specific boundary and definition for magic realism. The term has a wide range of features and contexts and its own unique usage. It is not supposed to function according to the academia’s techniques, perceptions and terminology.

Magic realism relies upon realism, the magical elements are depicted as if they were real, stretching the real to its limits and sometimes beyond it, proposes Maggie Ann Bowers. A

magic realist work highlights the complexity inherent in the reality and nature by creating illusionary spaces that recedes into the background. The viewers must interpret these mysterious and hidden parts of an image in order to achieve a complete, in depth understanding of the work. The definition of magic realism is problematic asserts critic J.S. Hurley as it encompasses a range of definitions and is used to refer to a variety of works of Art which belong to various cultures and various forms of Art like visual art, literature and audio visual art which includes cinema. People have started to label “so many different kinds of artistic productions as magic realist that the term has lost its ability to distinguish between genres” (Durix, 116). In magic realism ‘magic’ does not mean a magical act which gives the illusion of something extraordinary happening rather it’s the ‘mystery of life’ as scholar Kaushik Trivedi purposes, here something extraordinary actually happens. Magic realism uses real life, historical settings as well as fantastical elements, the imaginative features are meant to be allegorical of the different states of consciousness and symbolic of the multifaceted reality we live in. The narrative puzzle is left unsolved unlike Mystery films. Maggie Ann Bowers tries to categorise and delimit the mode of magic realism by examining and exploring its relationship with other genres like realism, surrealism, fantasy or supernaturalism, science fiction and post modernism which have common features. Understanding the relationship, it shares with these genres is the key to understand the mode itself. Critic A. B. Chanady says that in fantasy the presence of the supernatural is seen as problematic, attention is drawn to it and the authorial reticence creates a disturbing effect on the readers/viewers. Whereas in magic realism the supernatural is explored in a valid, natural way and the real is not superior/inferior to the unreal. Magic realism observes critic A. B. Chanady does not create a completely different, fictional or fantastical world nor follows conventional reality completely rather transforms reality by creating a world which cannot be understood using conventional codes of perception.

In cinema and literature, the mode is open for contestations and debates and the debate doubles its force when the label is applied to films. One major problem in magic realist films is lifting the literary label and applying it to the cinematic genre says critic David Isaak. Maggie Ann Bowers claims “film is not often considered as magic(al) realist in criticism and neither is magic realism...recognised categories of film. However, it is possible to recognise features of magic realism ...in many films” (Maggie Bowers 104). Critics do not investigate this subject and the research around is little as well. If one has to start research on magic realism in film then one must start from Frederic Jameson’s article “On Magic Realism in Film” 1986 and his later article “Soviet Magic Realism” 1992. Maggie Bowers discusses magic realism in cinema by analysing movie adaptations of magic realist novels and movies like *Being John Malkovich*, 1999 directed by Spike Jonze which are considered magic realist yet are not adaptations. These films have magic realist features out of which the constant feature is that in the film depicts the real world with some extraordinary elements which all the characters seem to accept. She states that the magic realist aspects of these films acts as a means of posing philosophical questions like the existence of god, role of fate and destiny, the idea of self, etc. These questions are posed at the ambiguous end of the movie and extend beyond the films purpose to simply divert one’s attention and entertain.

Magic realism is “officially not recognised as a cinema genre but features of magic realist literature are retained in magic realist films.” (Mary Hurd 73). According to Wikipedia a list of 44 films are categorised as magic realist which includes Woody Allen’s *Alice* 1990, *Purple Rose of Cairo* 1985 and *to Rome with love* 2012 and Emir Kusturica’s *Time of the Gypsies* 1988, are fine examples of magic realist movies. Maggie Bowers asserts that magic realist films are cultural productions like magic realist literature and paintings. She views the employment of magic realism in films as a narrative art. Very few critics consider films as magic realist like Frederic Jameson. Generally, those films are labelled and analysed as magic realist which are adapted from magic realist novels like Laura Esquivel’s *Como Agua Para Choco* 1989 (Like Water for Chocolates), adapted into a movie in 1992 directed by Alfonso Arau. Maggie Bowers asserts that magic realism which enables us to explore the world through our imagination without losing connection to the real world. Magic realist films explore disruptions in the real world, recognising that extraordinariness can also be contained in the world we live in.

Beasts of the Southern Wild is a 2012, American film, directed by Benh Zeitlin, listed under the category of magic realist films by Wikipedia. The film has been globally acknowledged and acclaimed as a magic realist film. It has won several awards at famous international film festivals like *The Sundance* and *The Cannes* film festivals. It won four *Academy Awards* and the Camera De Plame’ award at *Cannes Film Festival*. It is inspired by the play titled *Juicy and Delicious* by Lucy Alibar who has jointly written the screenplay with Benh Zeitlin.

Scholar Kevin Stoda asserts “many films regarding adult issues which utilises the magic realist form to deal with the darker side of childhood, where the child is powerless in the adult dominated world, whose rules do not make any kind of sense to them...films like *The Butcher Boy*, *The Mighty*, *The Tin Drum* and *Pan’s Labyrinths* well as *Beasts of the Southern Wild* fall into this category” (Kevin Stoda n.p). The universal message the film tries convey to the world that “a unique perspective and self-sufficient things that should be fought for and preserved” (Behn Zeitlin n.p.).

The Bath tub Teacher Ms. Bathsheba tells her class the story of the fierce pre historic creatures called the aurochs who ate babies of the cavemen. She also tells them the reality of the food chain, reinforcing the fact that the humans as well as the animals are nothing but meat, this fact the humans had forgotten and started thinking of themselves at being at the top of the food chain. But the fact remains that humans cannot win against nature, nothing can defeat the forces of nature like the storm that happens in the film.

These monsters of the prehistoric past combines with the various lessons that encircle in the mind of the young girl, Hushpuppy who is just starting to make sense of the world around her. She is able to predict the catastrophe which the present actions of the humans can cause, she in her innocence is able to link their present decadent actions and lack of concern for their environment with the resulting global warming and its adverse effects. She is able to understand that such damage to the enjoyment is irreversible, as she comments in the film “sometimes one piece is broken so bad that nothing can fix it” (*Beasts of the Southern Wild*

n.p). While the teacher is warning the children and telling them to wake up to reality by preparing themselves to survive, the aurochs are thawing out their frozen abode, moving southwards towards Hushpuppy. Hushpuppy imagines them coming soon while the warning of Ms. Bathsheba echoes in her mind "... the fabric of universe is coming to unravel...y'all better learn to survive". It seems like the echo of the environmentalists warning to the mankind (*Beasts of the Southern Wild* n.p).

"The aurochs based on the cattle like pre historic creature, based on the cave paintings seen in Lascaux, Pech Merle. The film brings alive these extinct creatures entwining their real existence with the mythic tales of Ms. Bathsheba." (Benh Zeitlin interviewed by Jeremy Berlin n.p.). This makes the foreboding of the storm and its devastating effects look more frightening, specially viewed from the point of view of a child. magic realist films which interlinks real events with myths, traditions and fantasy elements, forming a story which is rich and layered yet rooted in reality. Benh Zeitlin points out that Hushpuppy is presented as the last of her kind, where her community is at the brink of extinction. This fact draws a parallel between her and the aurochs, especially in the scene where she faced them head on and seem to be conversing with them. The scene ends with an assumed understanding struck between Hushpuppy and the aurochs, acknowledging her as someone who they can relate to. Zeitlin adds that Hushpuppy seems to link her situation to the cavemen Ms. Bathsheba had told them about, she like the cavemen needs to protect her community. She wants to leave behind evidence of her existence like the cave paintings, by which we understand how the cavemen lived. The aurochs coming to destroy her and her community maybe a fantasy or her imagination but it's never clear in the film. The lines between what is fantasy and what is happening in reality is blurred; another characteristic of magic realist films.

Michael Gottwald, the producer, proposes that the myth of the aurochs, frames the film's tale of being on the brink of extinction and its devastation. The film forms its own internal myth and shows the teacher as a representation of a wise person passing down knowledge to the future generation. Benh Zeitlin states that the meaning the aurochs hold changes as the film progresses. In the beginning Hushpuppy understands the cycle of nature as eating and being eaten by something that's greater, more powerful than you and that she is tiny in comparison to the force of nature. She realises that everything that has created her is going to be overtaken by something more powerful, her father is dying of an unknown illness, her house has been submerged in water due to the storm and the aurochs are coming. But as the film progresses she evolves and comes to understand that nature is a flowing cycle where everything has its own right place and function, of which she is also a part. She acknowledges this cycle of life and death by coming to terms with her father's death and gains peace and determination to move forward in her life. Michael Gottwald observes that the aurochs represent the devastation and turmoil of Hushpuppy's life which she must face and cope up with in order to move on with her life. The smooth flowing life of hushpuppy is suddenly turned upside down by the devastating storm which damaged property, loss of vegetation and even lives, along with her father's terminal illness. Without a home and without a parent, hushpuppy is left helpless in the world. She learns from her experiences, the teachings of Ms. Bathsheba and her father, gaining confidence to face the adversities of the adult world.

The scene of Hushpuppy coming face to face with these beasts is intense whose intensity is heightened by the triumphant music played in the background and the fearless facial expression on hushpuppy's face clearly shows her unshaken determination, now and for all the adversities that may come her way in the future. The moment before the aurochs' growl at her is filled with pregnant silence. Silence alone could heighten the intensity of the scene. Such utilization of silences, pauses and gaps is a feature of magic realist films, here the real meanings and mystery of life lies. Hushpuppy confronts the aurochs with resilience and determination is very significant. The scene condenses the message that rings throughout the film. The scene shows the aurochs as being gigantic, larger than life almost supernatural having the aura of indefeatability. It is shown via the view point of hushpuppy, the camera is at her height, the aura of innocence and unable to capture the whole mass of the aurochs in one look. It is important to note that the message the film wants to give out to the audience about reality can only be impressively given out though such a fantastical scene. The scene is intense, showing the two nature created animals, the auroch and Hushpuppy, on the brink of extinction, where one is supposed to devour the other. That is the rule of the animal kingdom but these two wise animals at the end have understood that, the greatest sin which one can commit toward s nature is to kill the last of its kind. Humanity is reminded of the extinction of so many species of animals and plants due to their not caring about this fact, from this film. The film ultimately shows that nature functions on a balance of things, as Hushpuppy tells us "the whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If one piece busts, even the smallest piece, the whole universe will bust." (*Beast of The Southern Wild* n.p.). One must remember that we must allow each other to grow and survive.

The characters and locations of this film like any magic realist film are real locations, not fictional. Though the name of the town and the character's names are fictional but the description of such people are real. The events depicted in the film are also real, though presented in fantastical way. Hushpuppy is as critic A.O. Scotts claims "a force of nature" but she is also a little girl who is losing her father and facing a major natural disaster. The bunch of orphaned kids in the film represent the children who have lost their families and their homes in the major nature disasters like the storm in the film. Benh Zeitlin claims that he wanted to show the after effects of the hurricane Katrina that happened 2005, and its effects on the Louisiana bayou that damaged the people physically and mentally. The director wished to show how the people of the bayou coped up with a storm like the hurricane Katerina physically and emotionally which happened in that area. The character's cores are based on real people and their real feeling for instance when Benh Zeitlin asked actress Quvenzhané Wallis, who plays Hushpuppy that when faced with such a situation what will she do? She replied that she would brush her teeth and listen to her parents. That's the core of Hushpuppy she is a good and obedient child. In her imaginary conversation her mother asks her if she is being good and she replies yes. Hushpuppy's good and responsible behaviour towards her family and her environment is how Benh Zeitlin feels natural balance can be restored.

Hushpuppy is very observant and sharp. Though Wink (her father), lacks parenting skills, is mostly drunk and disappears for periods of time leaving her alone. Yet she understands that

he truly loves her and is trying to teach her to survive in this world through his own harsh but effective way. She understands that the bayou is very important to Wink and she too feels it to be an essential part of her own identity. When she along with the bayou people are captured in the shelter, although they have better facilities and healthcare, she feels out of place. The shelter she says is like a fish tank without water. They feel trapped and realises that the bayou is where they truly belong. The dim, dull lighting of the medical shelter conveys these 'civilised' people's intentions. The film does not show the doctors of the shelter behaving badly but the mood and lighting of the scenes convey how they do not really care for them. The warmth and care with which Ms. Bathsheba cares for the children is lacking here. therefore, they escape on the first opportunity they get. The city and its institutions are shown to be uncompassionate and insensitive such people. The scene where the doctor discusses the bad news about Wink's health in front of his little daughter who is unaware of his terminal illness. Magic realist films subtly point at the issue, never directly showing or criticising it. the viewers to decipher the message and contemplate on it. Such a treatment of the bayou people by the city people could also be because they 'live on the wrong side of the levee' (*Beasts of the Southern Wild* n.p.). The film also points subtly to issues of lousy treatment the economically lower strata of society gets from the higher classes. The rich are not concerned about the condition of the poor and only give sympathetic donations, without empathy. Despite their poor living conditions, the bayou people make the most of it. They live happily the Bathtub and where there are no divisions of class, race or religion; everyone is given equal share in the catch and treated equally. They are living in the lap of nature, living off the land and for them this is the prettiest place on earth. Unlike the city filled with their oil processing plants and factories, where there are no trees or rivers and where people eat packaged fish.

Wink may use abusive language and quite hard on hushpuppy but the audience understands, what he does he does out of love. He tries to make hushpuppy tough and independent enough to survive alone. When he learns he was dying, he behaves like any frustrated man would but soon he realises that he has to toughen Hushpuppy up even if it means being rough to her. He loves her and acknowledges that she is his responsibility, while protecting her from the storm he says "I am your daddy and You do what I tell you to do. It is my responsibility to keep you from dying..." (*Beasts of the Southern Wild*). He never abandons her and encourages her to stand up to the adversities of life. Wink acts as any dying father would, telling their child to stay strong and not to cry. Hushpuppy behaviours like any child would whose parent is dying, she feels helpless but tries her best saying "when you are small, you gotta fix what you can" (*Beasts of the Southern Wild* n.p.).

The performance of these two main characters are quite real as both Wink played by Dwight Henry and Hushpuppy played by Quvenzhané Wallis are first time actors. It is Quvenzhané Wallis debut film and Dwight Henry is actually a baker in New Orleans who was convinced by the director to play the part. The director and the crew lived in the area on which they based the fictional Bathtub bayou on, for eight months and they discussed the casting and details in the bakery owned by Dwight Henry. While conversing with them Henry read out the lines for them once and it kind of fit. Henry feels that his own personal experience of the

hurricane Katrina and the hurricane Betsy while living in the area helped him act out the role effectively. It's an intimate, grassroots level film as the non-professional actors bring their experience with life to the screen and the crew and props for the set is procured locally. The character of Hushpuppy represents the spirit of a survivor of a major disaster. Her character becomes relatable and unforgettable because such a situation can occur in anyone's life in reality. She inspires people to have courage in case of such a situation arises. She does not run from the truth she accepts things the way they are without hoping for some external help to come and make it better which happens in fantasies where some fairy comes and makes it better. She has to cope up with the challenges and make it better herself. She realises that the working of the universe is made up of many little visible and invisible pieces which includes her as well. She recognises her place and function within the universe.

Magic realism is used to create the absent character of hushpuppy's mother Marietta. She exists in the fantasy of hushpuppy, functioning like an imaginary friend, invisible to all except her. But this is layered with the awareness of her mother not being there in reality. The mother's presence although invisible is a source of strength and confidence for her. It's a manifestation of her conscience which keeps reminding her to be good, obedient, sharp and responsible in lieu of her crazy and irresponsible father. When faced with the devastating news of her father's impending death she embarks on a quest to search for her mother. When cook of the catfish shack tells her that everyone has to take care of themselves she becomes determined and confident enough to stand by her father and her community to the point of facing the aurochs fearlessly. The mother and her presence works as a mythic heroine from which the future generations gain confidence and strength. Her legend of being upright and fearless woman, who can shoot an alligator about to attack.

The angry moment when hushpuppy frustrated with her circumstances and the rough behaviour of her father punches him on the heart. Caught up in the moment she wishes he was dead but when he falls down with pain which is accompanied by the ominous sounds of nature deteriorating and ice caps falling. She feels that what she did something against the laws of nature. The film presents her personal wrong committed as linked to the greater wrong humanity is committing against nature, something that has broken the regenerative cycle of nature so bad that it cannot be fixed. The natural crisis that comes, brings Hushpuppy and Wink closer in the film. It reflects the filmmakers desire for humanity to come together, forgetting their internal differences and help each other to care for what is left of nature now. Hushpuppy's favourite activity seems to be listening to the heartbeat of the of the animals, seems to remind the audience that even though it is food, still they are an important part of the universe we inhabit. They are living and must be given that respect of being a valuable part of the natural cycle. To the outsiders view the natural, happy world of hushpuppy is one of poverty, deprivation and ruin. But in her view the world is a spectacular place where every being is a living breathing effective part of the universe. Nature is a much greater force than us, Wink fails to realise this when he decides to ride out the storm than evacuate to a safer place. Regardless of the devastating result the film ends at a positive, optimistic note where the coming generation understands the functioning of nature's cycle and their own place in it.

Drew Mcweeny observes that uses the form of magic realism is very effective when telling a story about a child as it's the way a child views the real world. Portrayal of real events from a magical real point of view inspires the optimism that we have lost, somewhere while living our regular lives. Children are open to new ideas and believe in the power of nature. The scenes in the film that seem fantastical serve as an allusion to real events and states of consciousness of normal people. The film's choice of the protagonist makes it even more magical realist, most of the film is viewed from the point of view of Hushpuppy and the audience seems to understand what Hushpuppy understands. In some scenes the point of view shifts to Wink but it is to enhance and elaborate Hushpuppy's point of view. The smooth transition and unique of viewpoints shows the different yet similar aspects of the reality we are living. The scene where the aurochs are tailing Hushpuppy and Wink looks at her getting surrounded. Hushpuppy and Wink look at each other, the view point shifts from Hushpuppy's to Wink's for some moments, but both depict the same message; to face the aurochs/ adversities head on with determination. Stephen Selmon says that magic realism is a reflects speech and cognition within the social postcolonial culture. The scene has no conversation, no voice over; the silence is enough to communicate their feelings to the audience. Magic realism brings out the drama that exists between the gaps, hesitations and silences in life. It helps the protagonist transcend dualities and hybridity's and convey a common human spirit.

The film shows a 6yr old child's worldview, her sensibilities and understandings. The protagonist is at an age where we start to understand the difference between reality and fantasy but also believe in the secret workings of the universe where each heartbeat of being living being beats with the heart of the earth itself. She acknowledges these workings and tries to understand it by listening to the heart beat of each being, the chick, the crab and her father. The magic realist aspect of this film connects this fact with the exceptional existence of Hushpuppy as the last of her kind. The strange behaviour and lifestyle of Bathtub's people is only strange for us as we are aware the conventional way of life. Though she may not have anything to compare it with but the ugly scenes of the city of the city filled with smoke releasing factory chimneys. The film shows bayou people's viewpoint, the city viewed with a mix of hatred and fear of encroachment. The fear of destruction by a force greater than herself most manifests in form of a monster of whom a child has heard frightening tales. The film combines the mythic tales with the rich imagination of a child to manifest the present danger into the fierce monstrous aurochs.

The visual features of the location the story and the use of these settings in the context of specific scenes is an important part of magic realist films. Since the lighting, setting and sounds combined together with the actions and conversations bring out an aspect of the scene which is impressive and unexpected for audience. Magic realist films which are mostly independent films portray a combination of the traditional scenes in a modern way. The understanding the audience gains by viewing such scenes grants them a new perspective to reality. The audience come to know that the bathtub which was formally the Isle de Charles Doucet, formed when the city constructed a levee to separate themselves from the bayou and its people. The city does not care about the people of the bayou until they encroach upon their territory by blowing up the bayou. City people do not realise the plight of the bayou people

they only stick them in shelters rather than help the bayou people re-establish their lives. The audience comes to understand the difference in their basic values that the city people are self-centred and are not concerned about “caring for people smaller and sweeter than you...” (*Beasts of the Southern Wild* n.p.). The director tries to show that the poor have their own ways of taking care of their families and go about their lives. He tries to challenge the audiences preconceived notions about people living in poverty, it’s not necessary that all of them are drunk, violent and irresponsible about themselves and their families. They have their own system and their own things that they value, which may not be money or material possessions. The director wants the audience to recognise the poverty and the percentage of people living in squalor without health care in developed country like America. Magic realism shows this through the wondrous imagination of a child making it impressive, attractive and unforgettable.

The fictional bayou, Bathtub is inspired by the real area in southern Louisiana, called Isle De Jean Charles. Benh Zeitlin in 2006 when he visited New Orleans he felt the city’s post Katrina period was the site the movie aimed to capture. Pat Forbes, executive director of The Louisiana community development states that the area is located on the frontline of the Louisiana coastal land loss area and the risk loss of their ancestral home is very apparent and they are trying to rebuild and resettle their community while facing extreme coastal land loss. Its similar to the Bathtub community rebuilding a settlement after the first storm, storing plants and animals till the flood recedes. A community, which teaches and learns to adapt itself to the natural adversities, preserves their own culture. Benh Zeitlin and Lucy Alibar point out that the aim of the film was not to simply capture the land loss and the damage caused by the hurricane but to show the whole experience of loss. Bathtub shows an alternate world different from the conventional American way of life but this does not mean that such a way of life does not exist in the world. The Louisiana bayou is inhabited by many fishing communities whose way of life surrounds the sea and its produce. They feel the same attachment to the land, the bayou people feel. It’s a place consciously forgotten about by the government. The fearlessness, freedom and acceptability of the Bathtub people may come from the attitude the Southern Louisiana bayou inhabitants have towards life, living so close to the destructive forces of nature. The world the film shows is not a post-apocalyptic world nor is it a dystopic world such a world may come up if the government continues to ignore the state of the poor.

Magic realist movies are acknowledged for accurately depicting the essence of a community’s existence and it’s not escapist in nature because even in its humorous scenes, it tries to convey alternative perspectives to reality. Magic realist films engage and explore reality and are not merely for amusement and entertainment. Magic realism imbues ordinary things with significance, which indirectly show the people values, lifestyle and behaviours to the audience in a unique way. In this film food is one of those things. Critic Anne L. Bower states “food is often use to convey the character’s emotions, their personal and cultural identities and philosophies in a film” (Anne L. Bower 1). She adds that food is universal, displayed on screen for global consumption. Sidney Mintz claims “food that’s eaten have a certain historical background, with regard to people who eat it and the techniques of cooking

and eating it” (Sidney Mintz 7). Food is culturally relative and its consumption has cultural meanings behind it. “In the postmodern world, food becomes the most non-threatening way one can experience the other’s culture.” (Diane Negra 71)

The people of the Louisiana bayou are living off the water, for their livelihood and subsistence, “the food they eat; the way they eat it defines the community itself...It is interwoven with all aspects of their lives, their approach to food, how they eat it and what it means to them is different from other communities.” (Elena N. Kelly n.p.). The scene when someone shows Hushpuppy how to break the shell of the crab with a knife and eat it, Wink says that’s not the way to eat it. One needs to break it with their bare hands, touch their food and eat it with their hands and the bayou people agree with him. Producer Josh Penn points out that the food scenes in the film link to the characters drive to survive and to fend for themselves, it shows Hushpuppy’s coming of age and evolution. Only when we learn to take care of ourselves can we start to take care of others who are smaller and sweeter than ourselves. In the earlier scenes when she is unable to cook for herself and searches for her father at the “feeding time” (*Beasts of the Southern Wild* n.p.), shows her helplessness but later when she procures those nuggets, shows her independence and growth. The feast scenes in the film does not glamourize food in order to encourage hunger rather shows the evolution and journey of the character and their relationship with the land and its resources. Magic realism of the film uses food to trigger nostalgia, the sense of Marietta frying gater nuggets in dust particles suspended in the sunlight parallels to the fantasy like scenes on the catfish shack where the cook, cooks the same dish for Hushpuppy in a surreal lighting like her mother. This makes the audience wonder if these events were merely in Hushpuppy’s imagination.

The film creates a richly layered, imagined universe which is rooted in actual locations, events and people. The young protagonist is trying to make sense of the mysteries around her. The film is an allegory of hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, focusing on the feelings of such a disaster struck community and its hope of resettlement. Their way of life comments A.O Scottis both harsh and idyllic which is threatened by the city authorities and more importantly by a greater force of nature, the storm. The multicultural community that lives there are based on the value of ethnic solidarity and inclusion. Critic Tom Shone states that maybe myth and magic is the form through which America should look at reality on the screen, making magic realism film genre of America now. Film critic Phil Hoad observes the shift from realism to magic realism in America in films. He questions if “American audiences feel the use of magical realism is an effective way to contemplate on America as a nation or [if] America is retreating into the recesses of magical realism” (Phil Hoad n.p.) to avoid confronting the harsh realism. American movies show a move towards magic realism in films rather than the conventional realism. This film seems like a parable warning adults of the adverse effects of destroying nature without thinking of the future. The films end part is the most conventional and realistic, ironically portrayed fantastically. Wink and Hushpuppy are captured by the city dwellers and put in a shelter. It seems unnatural when they are included in the civilisation, Wink is hospitalised and Hushpuppy is dressed as a conventional little girl in a dress. In a realistic film this would be the end where the child gets into foster care and

the father dies. Magic realism of the film combines this real event with the myth of the aurochs and the nostalgic presence of the mother to give it maybe not a happy but a hopeful end. The ending like most magic realist films is ambiguous and open ended. Hushpuppy seems to gain the determination and confidence of surviving and protecting her community, opening multiple possibilities of how the story could end. The worlds of fantasy and reality seem to coexist in the ending scenes. The scenes in the catfish shack/brothel are confusing and ambiguous, it's impossible to know if it's real or just an imaginary wish fulfilment of these orphaned children. The film seems suspended in the space between what's inside her head and what's outside. The storm, her trailer home and the fictional bayou's existence is questionable. What really exists are the emotions and relationships; Wink and Hushpuppy are father & daughter. He fulfils his duty of making Hushpuppy self-reliant and able to fend for herself, by imparting core values of the community to her. Ultimately the film seems to be a tale of survival, defiance and imperfect yet strength giving love unlike Fantasy films pure & perfect love.

Critic Slipa Kovvali claims that the film may seem as an American Indie film at first but it depicts how people's worldview is linked to where they come from. It forces the audience to expand their worldview and observe such people by abandoning their pre-conceived prejudices. It targets the sophisticated portion of the population, who demand to be intellectually stimulated by what they watch. Although "some of the magical realism imagery may not work for everyone" (Christy Lemire n.p.) But most film critics accept the magical realism in the film as the inherent magic that is a part of the reality a 6yr old lives, this helps the director achieve the ultimately hopeful end despite the bleak reality of the situation. The director asserts, the film is not supposed to be interpreted literally or scientifically. The whole story is allegorical and symbolic of real contemporary. The storm was a retelling of 2005 hurricane Katrina in the area of southern Louisiana and the film depicted the after effects of the hurricane and how the communities dealt with it. Thomas Hackett notes the film "turned the tables on the conventions of Hollywood aesthetics and storyline" (Thomas Hackett n.p.). He adds that the film may not win the Oscar but has earned a respectable spot in the international film festivals and won cultural, humanistic prizes.

The B.P (British Petroleum) Oil Spill 2010, affected the Southern Louisiana bayou where the shooting of the film was happening. The risk of damage to the people and the bayou was huge. The real event became a part of the myth of the story. The message that the film tries to convey of being a part of the whole universe and achieving a fearlessness comes from acceptance of such happenings. The importance of being self-reliant and facing an adversity as a collective, cultural community, was happening when the residents of the southern Louisiana bayou were facing the real risk of closing fishing, their sole livelihood for several years. "The story's actually happening...I was rewriting the scenes...based on the moments we were experiencing with this sort of dread." (Behn Zeitlin interviewed by Rachel Arons n.p.).The film shows the independence and power of a subculture. The internal struggle is uniquely depicted in the external world with a childlike inventiveness. The story has a progressive plot being a mainstream Hollywood film but its scenes stand out separately, seems glued together as a part of one progressive story, forming a visionary tale of a

community collectively trying to survive and sustain itself. "At times the film looks like a global natural disaster happening in the future and at other times it seems to be a shabby re-enactment of the biblical flood." (Peter Bradshaw n.p.). Its therapeutic and poetic, shows that disaster victims do not want others charity but respect & empathy as such events can happen to anyone. It inspires a mix of sadness and happiness, gives insight into the lives of a community who live off the land and are directly affected by the changing climatic conditions, renewing the debate of sustainability of such areas. The duty and responsibility towards your family and home when there is the risk of losing it, is questioned.

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