

## **Robert McKee: A Study in Voice Over Narration from two recent films, SAVAGES and BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD.**

Voice Over Narration comes in two varieties: TELLING and COUNTERPOINT. Telling Narration substitutes for dramatization. As the term implies, instead of creating scenes that dramatize story and exposition, Telling Narration recites the story out of the mouth of a character while the images onscreen either illustrate or decorate the verbiage. Counterpoint Narration enriches the film while the story and its exposition are fully dramatized onscreen.

SAVAGES, a film by Oliver Stone, a writer/director whose work in the past I have much admired, opened recently in New York. BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD, co-written and directed by Benh Zeitlin, is also in its first run. For those of you considering the use of Voice Over, these two films will give you an excellent comparison of what works and what doesn't. Both SAVAGES and BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD are told through a female character's point of view. SAVAGES, an adaptation of a novel, unfortunately, is saturated with insipid Telling Narration that pumps out the rather unsurprising life histories of protagonists and antagonists alike. The Voice Over in BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD counterpoints a very brutal tale of survival with a little girl's attempts at creating a life-philosophy for herself, trying to make sense out the clash between nature and mankind, and her confrontation with death and abandonment.

The test of effective narration is this: If all the VO Narration were stripped out, would the story still be beautifully told? If the VO in SAVAGES were cut, the film would shred with it. Its audiences would be lost and indifferent. On the other hand, if BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD went virtually silent, not only removing the young girl's narration but most of the dialogue too, the story would be still told beautifully, image-by-image, moment-by-moment. So should Benh Zeitlin have stripped the VO from BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD? Of course not. The protagonist's VO counterpoints the story's brutality with grace, its animalism with humanism, its primitive ethos with spiritual resonance, expanding and deepening the film's complex and powerful emotions.

Not only does Telling Narration cripple SAVAGES, but to add to the pain Oliver Stone indulges in lame and repeated attempts at *auteur* stylistics--the mixture of black and white with color, collages and montages, all capped with an elaborate and profoundly sentimental false ending that tries to convince us that it's really very hip. Compare all that to BEASTS OF THE SOUTHERN WILD's brilliant image system. I won't give away what it is, but the title gives you a hint. – July 9, 2012