

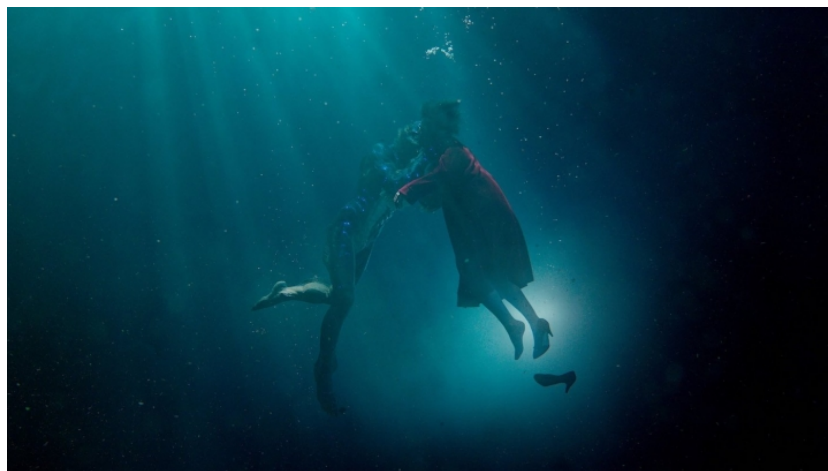
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A Fairy Tale for Troubled Times: Guillermo del Toro's Reconstruction of Humanity in *The Shape of Water*



*Figure 1: The Shape of Water (2017) The Amphibian Man and Elisa*

At only six years old, young Guillermo del Toro lived in the weekly routine of going to mass every Sunday in his hometown Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. Growing up in an extremely religious household, he looked forward to the end of mass every single week so that he could enjoy watching a movie on his old television set at the end of the day. On one of those particular Sunday's, Guillermo would find himself watching the 1954 horror film, *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. After watching the iconic scene where the female lead, Julie Adams, is swimming just above the ancient creature, Guillermo became enamored by the idea of a love story between the two characters and was certain that by the end of the film, their loving relationship would take root and flourish. His hopes were quickly destroyed the moment he realized that he was actually watching a home invasion movie, that would end with the murder of the sea creature. In that

moment, Guillermo promised to one day correct the plot of the film and rewrite the story to reflect the one that he thought should have been told. Forty-six year later, he finally would in the form of his most recent film, *The Shape of Water*<sup>1</sup>.

The 2017 film *The Shape of Water*, is a dark romantic fantasy film that takes place in the city of Baltimore in 1962. Described by the director as “a fairy tale for troubled times,” the film takes the audience on a journey back to a decisive time in the American history that is being echoed by the American Present (Travers 0:03:02-0:03:54). The 60’s was a decade in which the U.S was obsessed with the future; engulfed by a constant paranoia of the escalation of the Cold War<sup>2</sup>. The common sentiment among Americans was that the Cold War was a battle of “us” versus “them,” where the U.S sought to assert itself as the dominant world power by whatever means necessary, even if that meant the degradation of human life. This sentiment of othering was seen closer to home in the early 60’s during the civil rights protests, where African Americans who were treated as second class citizens, fought against the racism and discrimination that followed their daily existence<sup>3</sup>. This time of hatred against humanity in America is one that can be reflected by the current sentiments regarding the future security of America. In 2017, the year *The Shape of Water* first debuted, the most powerful political leader in America not only threatened to construct a wall to halt unauthorized immigration from Mexico, but also implemented discriminatory policies

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<sup>1</sup> To see Guillermo del Toro’s full interview on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* regarding his childhood experience, and it’s influence in the making of this film, go to <https://youtu.be/iZeZHllQ96Y>.

<sup>2</sup> In the early 1960’s America was in the midst of an “ideological conflict” with their former allies, The Soviet Union. (“Cold War History,” 2009). The fear against the spread of Communism led the U.S to engage in a tumultuous relationship with the state, taking part in the “Space Race” to send the first man into the unknown. Both states competed against one another in extend their exploration of the new frontier that was outer space. The agenda of the political system at the time was for the U.S to assert its dominance in the world, by whatever means necessary, even if that meant the degradation of human life.

<sup>3</sup> The Civil Rights movement was a fight for social justice that took place in the 1950’s and 1960’s, where African Americans protested to have equal rights under the law of the United States (Civil Rights Movement, 2009). Even though the Civil War had resulted in the abolition of slavery, the discrimination against people of color persisted, which caused resulted in racial prejudice and violence.

against many Muslim-majority countries; banning their residents from entering into the U.S all in the name of national security. The hatred being inflicted against humanity today is one that reflects the hatred that was shown in 1962; one where the paranoia surrounding the future resulted in the dehumanizing of groups of people in the present. In choosing this time period for his film, del Toro criticizes the monstrous acts that have taken place because of the lack of empathy that continues to exist in our world today. It's a terrible time to fall in love, yet in *The Shape of Water*, true love is actualized between a mute custodian worker of a secret U.S government laboratory and an amphibian man that has been captured by the U.S to be studied and weaponized. Without a single word, the two leading characters established a bond that *Creature from the Black Lagoon* marked as impossible.

The affection that grows between the Elisa and the Amphibian Man is one that starts through a mutual solidarity of feeling alone, fractured, or incomplete. However, overtime, a love blossoms between the two when they find beauty in their attributes that had originally ostracized them from U.S society. The rewriting of the narrative seeks to demonstrate that the demonizing of "the other" is more destructive than learning to love and understand the unknown. *The Shape of Water* does this by showing that things that have been labeled as monstrous may actually be beautiful and have the ability to transform mankind for the better. The film targets individuals that live in today's contemporary world that share the perspective of the antagonist in the film; to reject and dehumanize the other for their own benefit. Although *Creature from the Black Lagoon* serves as the inspiration for creating his film *The Shape of Water*, through a series of inversions of the 1954 film's paradigms, Guillermo del Toro transforms the constructed narrative from one about alienating the other to one about empathizing with the other. Del Toro's rejection of the original black and white film not only demonstrates how the demonizing of the other instead of choosing

to love and understand the other results in the destruction of life, but also that the source of humanity lies not in one's origination, but actually in one's ability to see oneself within an individual that is ostracized from the world. By portraying the amphibian man as a compassionate being that gives life and the human man as a malicious individual that sees little value in the lives of "the other," I will argue that the film challenges the idea that the source of humanity comes from being intrinsically human.

The first inversion that Guillermo del Toro works with to rewrite the story originally seen in *Creature from the Black Lagoon* is through the changing of genres, from a strict 1950's horror film, to a dynamic romantic fantasy fairy tale film that can also be seen as a form of epic theater. Horror films in the 1950's reflected some of the most pertinent aspects of the paranoia sentiment that existed after the World War II era. Patrick Godner, an instructor in English and in the Humanities, argues that the era of the 1950's brought with it an intensification of the use of the primitive creature in horror film, which indicated a deep fear in the population regarding the "tenacious" status of humanity and civilization surrounding the threat of nuclear war from "the other." Instead of criticizing the dogmatic anxieties that were permeating the minds of Americans in the U.S, many horror films in the 50's actually perpetuated these fears into the minds of its audiences (Godner, Par 4). In the black and white film *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, the primitive and monstrous is seen in this ancient subterranean sea creature that falls in love with the female lead named Kate. Even though the creature does not harm the female character, he is alienated from being able to be a part of her human world; seen as a source of destruction. This horror film uses the creature to personify the fear of the unknown; appealing to the paranoia that existed among its audiences at the time regarding anything that went against American homogeneity. The relationship between the two characters is reflected to the audience as one that

is taboo and could never take place in reality. Through the creation of *The Shape of water*, del Toro seeks to critique these norms through the reconstruction of the relationship between his female lead and the amphibian man not through horror, but through a Romantic fantasy film; provoking audiences to actively think about the implications of this indoctrinating fear.

*The Shape of Water* is a film that does not fit perfectly into one specific kind of genre. It crosses borders within the romantic, fantastical, magical, and surrealist to present audiences with an adult fairy tale, provoking audiences to think about the mise-en-scene<sup>4</sup> of the film as they watch. Every scene, prop, costume, name, and set in the film has all been carefully calculated to include references for the audience to catch, and subsequently follow throughout the movie. Even though this film is not a play, I would argue that a fitting genre for this film is that of Epic Theatre. According to Bertolt Brecht, a German theatre practitioner and playwright, he argues that Epic Theatre<sup>5</sup> forces spectators to look at a play's specific situations in such a way that it allows them to offer criticisms regarding the specific situations that are represented by casual relationships on stage (Brecht, Par. 1). Epic theater presents these issues for audiences as moral problems, or social realities in order for them to reflect and think about their role in certain situations. In *The Shape of Water*, the film is set up in such a way to break down the fourth wall of the screen, sending messages to the audience and placing them in a position to think about what would they do if they were placed in a particular position. The film does this in the form of "Easter-eggs," placed in the

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<sup>4</sup> The mise -en-scene of a film consists of the objects, figures, settings, costumes, props, colors, textures, and any other kind of visual forms that exist in the world of the movie (Garceau 2, Slide 20).

<sup>5</sup> For more information regarding epic theatre, visit <https://www.britannica.com/art/epic-theatre>

film for the audience to follow and directly engage with the references to moments in human history when humanity was lost.

Right before Eliza and her friend Zelda enter the underground bunker where the amphibian man will be kept for the first time, the viewers observe the bunker number on the back door reading T4 (see figure 2). In this particular scene, the camera zooms into Zelda as she speaks to Eliza before entering the bunker. However, quickly, the camera zooms out to establish the physical background of Eliza and Zelda's interaction. When the camera zooms out, there is a split second where the number of the bunker becomes extremely focused in comparison to the rest of the action happening within that camera frame. This number was something that was planted in the film for the viewers to see and work to understand. I would argue that T4 is a reference to the Aktion T4 mass murders that took place in Germany, where the Nazi Regime took on "eugenic measures" to restore the integrity of the Aryan race by involuntarily euthanizing thousands of individuals that had any kind of psychiatric, neurological, or physical disability (Euthanasia Program, Par. 1). The Fuher Chancellery, as well as Hitler's private physician, led the killing operation, and coded it with the number T4; representing the street address of their headquarters in Berlin: Tiergartentrasse 4 (Euthanasia Program, Par. 7). By including this number as the identifying name of the bunker, the film challenges its viewers to learn about this dark event in humanity, as well as to question their complicity in forgetting the atrocity. During the Euthanasia Program in Germany, hundreds of doctors and physicians were complicit in allowing for this mass murder to happen, and now, this film places that responsibility on its viewers, provoking them to actively remember the lives that were deemed as unworthy of living. Just like those individuals that were senselessly murdered, the amphibian man in *The Shape of Water* was deemed as a life unworthy of living and was tortured and almost executed in the T4 bunker. In both cases, humans were the ones who committed

monstrous acts against humanity; desecrating the lives of what they thought was “the other.” Even though Del Toro changes the genre of *The Shape of Water* from a horror film to that resembling epic theatre, a monster is still the source of destruction in his film



Figure 2: *The Shape of Water* (2017). Eliza and Zelda entering T4.

The second reversal that del Toro makes in *The Shape of Water*, is that of the identity of the monster depicted in the 1954 film. In *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, the horror film portrays the monster as this primitive sea creature that has this sexual obsession with a female human. This identity is given to the monster even before the creature interacts with any human in the film. When the audiences get the first glimpse of the creature in the black lagoon, we are automatically shown its physical characteristics of its costuming. One can't help but notice the phallic design of the creature's head that surrounds its facial structure. (see figure 1). The design of the monster in this film is essential in the justified alienating of the creature that takes place in the film. Depicted as “an almost-allegorical vision of sexual terror,” the creature's physical appearance, that of which strongly resembles that of the male genitalia, matches his uncontrollable instinctual urges to want to have the female scientist at his very fingertips (McConnell 19). Although the creature does not physically harm Kate, the creature does kill

several of the men in her expedition in order to be able to carry her away into his dwelling. The fear of the sexual violence of the other is personified in the monster of the 1954 film, which is sufficient enough to mark him as the enemy that the plot of the film is working against.



*Figure 3: Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954) The Creature*

In del Toro's rewriting of the monster's character in *The Shape of Water*, audiences are placed face to face with the monster that can exist within human kind. The monster that viewers are introduced to in the film is that of Richard Strickland, an American head security agent that works closely with the U.S government in efforts to combat the Soviet Union. We are first introduced to his monstrous tendencies when he is speaking to Eliza and her coworker Zelda about their custodial work in the bunker T-4, where the creature that he captured is being kept. In that conversation, Strickland asks Zelda, an African American woman, if she has any siblings. When she says no, he responds to her by saying "that's not common for your people" (0:26:35). To further degrade her, Strickland explains to Zelda that her middle name Delila, originates from



that of a sinner in the bible that betrayed a powerful man named Sampson, insinuating that she herself is deceitful. If those statements weren't enough to demonstrate his racism against Zelda, he solidifies it when he starts talking about the creature that he captured. As he stands up in front of the two women while they are sitting down, he explains to them that even though the creature walks on two legs, and seems human, it isn't because all humans are created in the lord's image, and the lord doesn't look like a sea creature, but actually looks human, like him. He makes it clear that God would look much more like him than either of the women he is standing above. As the camera looks up at Strickland in this scene, taking the perspective of Elisa and Zelda, he talks down to the women, demonstrates the position of power and authority that Strickland thinks he has in comparison to Eliza and Delila on the social hierarchy. To him, Zelda is nothing more than a poor black woman and Eliza a disabled mute woman Strickland places himself in a higher authoritative standing than these two women, seeing them as subservient beings whose lives are disposable in comparison to his. Strickland's disrespect and racist attitudes against women are some of the few characteristics that make him the monster of *The Shape of Water*.



Figure 4: *The Shape of Water* (2017). Strickland torturing the “elemental river god”

In addition to showing his racist and misogynist tendencies, Strickland is further characterized as being a monster, when we see the ways in which he tortures the “elemental river god” that he captured from South America (see figure 2). After the amphibian man bites off two of Strickland fingers after he probed him for hours, he chained him outside of the water, where he is vulnerable and cannot protect himself. He torments the elemental being, electrocuting him until he is on his knees, and passes out from the pain. After he is reprimanded for his treatment of the asset by the biologist, he claims that the elemental being is “animal [that] needs to be tamed” (0:39:50). The lack of empathy in his character is solidified at the end of the film, after the biologist, Delila, Eliza, and Eliza’s neighbor Giles, help the elemental being escape from the underground government facility. After Eliza is about to say her goodbyes to her love, Strickland kills her and the amphibian man. At this point, the audience is placed face to face with the monster that the audience was warned about at the beginning of the film. In the first two minutes of the film, the audience is given a long shot of Eliza’s apartment completely underwater. The beautiful scenery is coupled with non-diegetic,<sup>6</sup> whimsical music as well as a narration, coming from the voice of Eliza’s best friend Giles. “The tale of love and loss and the monster...who tried to destroy it all” (0:02:34). This narration foreshadows the fact there will be a monstrous being in the film that will seek to destroy all that is beautiful in the world of the movie. However, the audience is taken aback when it is revealed to them that the monster is not the sea creature that they were expecting but is actually the human being that acted for his own self-interest, no matter how many lives were lost.

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<sup>6</sup> Non-diegetic sounds are those that do not come directly from the world of the movie, and are instead edited into the scenes of the film (Garceau 2, Slide 2).

*The Shape of Water* is one of the first film in which the true monster is intrinsically human. In each one of del Toro's films, his monsters are traditionally a physical hybrid between the monster and the human, creating some kind of humanoid creature that struggles between good and evil. Even though de Toro makes this creative change in his most recent film, this monster still holds some similarity to those of his other works. The shared characteristics that most of del Toro's monster's share is that they are humanoid in their own way and that they only have a specific characteristic that makes them look "out of place" (Davies 30). A Professor in Spanish and Latin American Studies, Ann Davies, argues that this kind of monster brings us fear because it "blurs the boundary between the self and the other" due to the fact that it's not completely different from the self and the monster (Davies 32). Strickland in this film completely blurs the line between the human and the monster; his character challenging the idea that the two are strict binaries of each other. In the film, his character proves that monstrosity can exist in the perceived human the same way in which humanity can exist in the perceived monstrous. Del Toro in this film gives the amphibian man an array of human characteristics that encourages the audience to feel empathy towards him because of the fact that he is able to show love to others. In contrast to *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, del Toro designs his "elemental river god" to be very handsome, with a structured jaw, full lips, large eyes, and colored body, with blue and gold detailing (see figure 3). In addition to physical characteristics, the amphibian man is capable of understanding other beings and cultures unlike his own. He is able to learn sign language, understand music, and what is considered food. The amphibian man is humanized under del Toro's direction which allows him to form connections with other human's in the film; something that was rejected in the original 1954 film.



*Figure 5: The Shape of Water (2017). The Amphibian Man*

Guillermo del Toro continued to rewrite *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, by carefully making use of color in his film instead of creating it in black and white. All throughout *The Shape of Water*, the color palette of the film is very monochromatic, making use of complementary colors such as different muted hues of greens, blues, greys, golds and tans. However, in the film, there are occasional colors used that stand out from the rest of the palette. The first is the use of a bright, almost neon green, that makes several appearances throughout the movie. At the beginning of the film, as Eliza walks past the television shop on her way to work for her night shift, the neon sign illuminates the street in a bright green color. However, when one takes a closer look at the television sets on the store window, we are bombarded with different scenes of the building up of the American military after the victory of World War II. In each set, we can see the image of the president of that time, John F. Kennedy giving a speech, an American flag waving proudly in the air, planes and helicopters flying in the skies, and the building up of missiles. The significance of the use of color in this section of the movie is

revealed in the following scene in which the color is not only again physically seen, but actually verbally addressed.

In the next scene, Eliza's best friend Giles is getting ready to present an art piece that he created to see if it is worthy enough to be chosen as the cover of a local magazine. The piece consists of a happy family, and a mother holding a gelatin parfait that is red. However, after he shows his work to the CEO, he responds with "green... they want they gelatin to be green now... new concept, that's the future now... green" (0:22:56). Throughout the film, there is a constant association with green and how that color represents the future. According to *The Book of Symbols*, the color green has a duality of meanings, which could be hope of reaching one's goal in the face of discouragement as well as the coming of death, decay, and illness (Symbols, 646). This duality of meanings can appropriately be applied to the understanding of these two scenes and their interaction with the color. In the year 1962, there was an obsession with the future of the country. Del Toro alludes to this in the film with the overwhelming amounts of clocks that are used by the characters in the film. Coming out of World War II in the 1960's, John F. Kennedy bought into the Space Race and promised America that in that same decade, the country would land the first man on the moon. In addition to the Space Race, the U.S was working to build up the power of its military for what could be a new confrontation with the Soviet Union. By shading these images with a bright green haze in the film, del Toro could be suggesting that there is a toxicity that exists within America's obsession with future; their neglecting of the people in the present to protect the integrity of the future.

The other color that seems to manifest itself continuously throughout the film is that of the color red, which is embodied by the female lead, Eliza. In the first half of the film, her clothing blends into the monochromatic color palette of the movie. However, after Eliza brings

the amphibian man to her apartment after she removed him from the underground government bunker, she starts to appear wearing red accessories, starting with a headband, and ending with a large overcoat. In an interview with the director, Guillermo del Toro states that he wanted to “keep red for passion” and that the color would only start to appear in the film when Eliza started to fall in love with the creature (Shaping of Waves 0:02:40). As her love for the amphibian man grows stronger, Eliza’s costuming in the film becomes further decorated with the color red. The boldness of this color reflects the strength of the emotion of love that the director wants audiences to understand. In the film, it is strongly suggested to the audience that Eliza and the amphibian man become completely immersed in one another and make love to each other. That scene quickly cuts to Eliza sitting in a bus on her way to another night shift at the facility. However, in this scene, she is wearing a red head band, a red overcoat, and red heels (01: 24:08). Without saying a word, Eliza’s wardrobe shows the audience how deeply in love she is with the amphibian man, and how her thoughts now revolve around him. Del Toro confirms Eliza’s sentiments in one of the most important scenes in the film.

The most important reversal that del Toro makes in *The Shape of Water*, is the actualization of the love story between Eliza and the amphibian man that was neglected to him in *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. The love between the two characters is one that beginnings as a bond of friendship through mutual solidarity and understanding, that blossoms into a love for one another powerful enough to survive in the face of all adversity. To demonstrate the strength of the love that has manifested between the two characters, del Toro made the decision to include a scene in the film showing the sexual union between Eliza and the amphibian man. Before the two characters come together, Eliza signs to him “You and me together” (01: 29:16). At that moment, Eliza goes on to fill her entire bathroom in water to be completely submerged in the

world that she has always longed to be a part of. As they hold onto each other in a beautiful embrace, the amphibian man's skin begins to glow a striking indigo color that captivates the audience's eyes (see figure 4). The sexual union between the two characters "intimates the twoness in oneness and also the inherent oneness of what is apparently two" (Symbols, 414). The union of these two characters not only solidifies the solidarity that these two characters share in the fact that they cannot speak, but also foreshadows the ending of the movie, where ultimately, Eliza becomes the being that she was always destined to be. Her, and the amphibian man become one in the same. The scratches on her neck that she thought were the source of her inability to speak, are transformed into gills that allow her to breath underwater, and most importantly, to stay together with the love of her life. Her journey in finding herself was completed through the finding of true love, one of the most powerful human characteristics in the world.



*Figure 6: The Shape of Water (2017): The Sexual Union of Eliza and the Amphibian Man.*

*The Shape of Water* is and always will be film that challenges its viewers in ways that no other film will. Even though Guillermo del Toro started this film as a way to correct the love story that was neglected in *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, his film ended as one that criticizes

the lack of empathy for “the other,” personified by the fantastical being of the leading amphibian man. Each reversal and correction that del Toro made in his film was made with the purpose of provoking its audiences to take time to reflect on their own identity, and what it means for they themselves to be human. This film looks back at the dark past of human history that has mercilessly discarded millions of lives in the process of looking forward in order for audiences to learn from the past and choose to actively challenge violations of human life that will come in the future. *The Shape of Water* warns that if the human race continues to dehumanize the other as a way to justify their exclusion, discrimination, and extermination, then all humanity in the world will be lost.

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