
How Does Human Look? The Monster as the Ultimate Other in *The Shape of Water*

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Early in *The Shape of Water* (2017), Guillermo del Toro's latest film, US government agent Richard Strickland summons the janitors who have just rescued two of his fingers from a laboratory that doubles as torture chamber. A few hours earlier, the "asset" —an amphibian creature that Strickland has dragged from the Amazon to a military facility in Baltimore— had slashed those fingers, most likely in self-defense. The janitors, Elisa (Sally Hawkins) and Zelda (Octavia Spencer), are not only women but also mute and black, respectively, which prompts Strickland (Michael Shannon) to reveal his prejudices by patronizingly defining "human" for them:

Strickland: Now, you may think that thing looks human. Stands on two legs, right? But, we're created in the Lord's image. You don't think that's what the Lord looks like, do you?

Zelda: I wouldn't know, sir, what the Lord looks like.

Strickland: Well, it's human, Zelda. He looks like a human, like me. Or even you. Maybe a little more like me, I guess. (00:28:44-00:29:17)

A white man in a position of power, married, father of two kids and owner of a house in the suburbs, Strickland's appearance of mainstream normalcy —the standard of humanity in his view— will soon be put into crisis by a band of outcasts intent upon saving the amphibian creature. Co-written by del Toro and Vanessa Taylor, and situated in the context of the Cold War era in 1960's Baltimore, *The Shape of Water* embraces an alternative view of humanity that disengages the human from a particular set of physical traits. By representing the emotional and physical connection between a woman and a "monster" not only as plausible but as exquisitely beautiful, del Toro's fairy tale departs from past and current conventions for depicting humanity, in a way that highlights their arbitrariness.

Known for breaking boundaries between genres, and for creating hybrids that tend to mix historical reality with fantasy^{1, 2}, the Mexican director Guillermo del Toro delivers in *The Shape*

1. According to McDonald and Clark, through "the intersection of fantasy and reality" Guillermo del Toro explores "the tensions and conflicts of human history and politics" (2). While they see this characteristic appear even in Del Toro's

of *Water* a “horror-monster-musical-jailbreak-period-spy-romance” (Lane) that is, nevertheless, held together by the underlying presence of fairy tale motifs. My analysis will focus on how these (considerably altered) motifs subvert common conventions for representing the human. According to Jack Zipes, ever since the oral folktales were recorded in writing and then transformed in literary fairy tales in the fifteenth century, “the genre became a conflicted cultural field, in which different social institutions and individual writers and artists used the tale either to bring about conformity or to question conformity to the dominant civilizing process of a society” (x-xi). In Disney’s appropriations of the fairy tale, for instance, we may find a contemporary example of the impulse to promote conformity (191-210), while a film like *The Shape of Water*, the story of a mute janitor who falls in love with an amphibian being kept captive in a laboratory, encourages us to contemplate alternatives to the status quo.

How does del Toro, then, alter the workings of the fairy tale? And what kind of effect does this alteration produce? Paraphrasing the director’s comments about *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan’s Labyrinth*, 2006), Debora Shaw affirms that, according to del Toro, “it is possible to preserve the structure of the fairy tale and deconstruct characters, or to deconstruct the fairy tale and preserve the simplicity of the characters, but that it is not possible to do both, as the fairy tale would be unrecognisable” (85). In the case of *Pan’s Labyrinth*, del Toro retained “the fairy tale archetypes ... , while reconfiguring essential structural elements of the fairy tale” (85). I contend that the same strategy underlies *The Shape of Water’s* treatment of the genre. This directorial decision becomes evident in the way that the film treats one of its central preoccupations, the representation of the Other², through its characters. As the ultimate Other, the creature captured by the US military in the Amazonia is a metaphor for all those Others that Western civilization has historically placed below the line of humanity: women, people of color, individuals with disabilities or with non-heteronormative sexual orientations... Not coincidentally, then, the gang of misfits that risks saving the captive from death by the hands of the true monster (Colonel Strickland), is made up of a mute white woman (Elisa), her African American co-worker (Zelda), and a closeted gay white man (Elisa’s neighbor and friend, Giles). Although some critics have seen this choice of othered characters as overkill (Nayman 15), del Toro is just taking advantage of a staple of the fairy tale, the use of easily recognizable archetypes, to give himself ample room to play with the structural aspects of the fairy tale without falling out of the genre. Thus Strickland, for example, in his consistent and rather hyperbolic evil nature, is the villain of this story in the same unmistakable way that “the Captain” fulfills that archetypal role in *Pan’s Labyrinth*.

Now, let’s take a look at those motifs and narrative aspects of the fairy tale that del Toro does

Hollywood films, it is a trait most commonly attributed to his films in Spanish: *Cronos* (1993), *El espinazo del diablo* (*The Devil’s Backbone*, 2001), and *El laberinto del fauno* (*Pan’s Labyrinth*, 2006).

2. Popularized by Edward Said in *Orientalism* as a key concept for postcolonial theory, the term Other refers to those who do not fit squarely within the frame of Western, Christian, white and heteronormative civilization, and who are “othered” (homogenized, essentialized). The process of othering occurs within a binary in which the “self” is the western power, philosopher, artist, scientist who produces the Other from the perspective of the hegemonic discourse.

alter in *The Shape of Water*. The most striking one is the representation of a romantic and far from platonic relationship between Elisa and the amphibian creature (Doug Jones). The motif of the impossibility of falling in love with the Other, often a “monster,” is rather old. The premise of *Beauty and the Beast* comes to mind. From its original version as a fairy tale written by Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve in the 18th century, to the 1991 Disney’s animated adaptation, to the musical film released in 2017 (once again by Walt Disney Pictures), it remains clear that while Belle may learn to appreciate the soul of the good “Beast,” physical attraction is impossible. By kissing the Beast out of desperation and fear that he has died, Belle turns him again into the handsome white prince that he once was, and only then romantic love and mutual physical attraction are possible. In a similar fashion, in Disney’s 1998 animated version of Hans Christian Andersen’s³ *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel yearns for a kiss from her beloved prince, which should allow her to outsmart the Sea-Witch and become a human permanently; that kiss, however, will not happen until when Ariel has already lost her tail and grown legs, thanks to Tristan’s (the mermaid’s father) decision to grant her wish. The erotic kiss, or the beginning of the dissolution of physical boundaries between two beings, is safely kept within the realm of conformity when the frightening Other—the Beast, the frog, the monster, even the mermaid—turns out to really be, or becomes, an attractive white exemplar of the opposite sex.

In *The Shape of Water*, on the other hand, Elisa connects with the amphibian creature immediately, as the fact that neither of them can speak becomes a foundation for bonding over food, sign language, music, dance, and sexual desire. She is drawn to the creature for who he is, and the “monster” never turns into some more palatable object of affection. In a way, del Toro’s film is revisiting here some daring variations of fairy-tale motifs introduced by previous films and upgrading them to a subversive dimension. *The Shape of Water* includes, for instance, at least a couple of homages to *Splash* (Dir. Ron Howard, 1984). Like Madison (Daryl Hannah), the mermaid in the romantic comedy, the amphibian creature spends some time in a bathtub filled up with salty water; also like the mermaid, del Toro’s “merman” will bring his loved one’s breath back with a kiss under water. But, most importantly, both films revert the fairy tale theme of the “human” kissing the Other into humanity; instead, *Splash*’s Allen Bauer (Tom Hanks) and del Toro’s Elisa, the presumed human protagonists, are the ones that become water creatures of a sort through the kiss.

Another film that *The Shape of Water* brings to mind is *Shrek* (Dirs. Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, 2001), notable for its playful take on fairy-tale commonplaces. In this animated comedy, the feisty princess Fiona (Cameron Diaz) is looking for a “first love kiss” that would remove the spell by which she turns into an ugly ogre every night; against Fiona’s expectations, it is Shrek the ogre (Mike Myers) and not a human prince who kisses her for the first time, finally triggering the removal of the spell. As it turns out, the spell had “condemned” her to being a conventionally

3. In Hans Christian Andersen’s original story, the little mermaid never gets kissed, sacrifices herself so that the prince could live, dies and becomes a “daughter of the air.”

beautiful “human” during the day; once the spell is removed Fiona becomes an ogre permanently, she marries Shrek, and “they live ugly ever after.” Unlike *Shrek* or *Splash*, del Toro’s film does not present us with a straight-forward happy ending—a classic structural feature in fairy tales as much as in romantic comedies—and its end leaves much to interpretation. Giles’ voice-off narration over the final images of Elisa and her amphibian lover floating in deep water might suggest that their story is just starting... It might also just be Giles’ imaginative way of coping with a tragic loss.

In any case, even more than the absence of a happy ending, what makes *The Shape of Water* radical in comparison with related films is that the camera looks at the amphibian creature with the same curious and empathetic gaze that Elisa, her friends, and even Dr. Hoffstetler—a Soviet spy who has managed to infiltrate the research project—direct at him. Whenever confronted with the “asset,” colonel Strickland cannot see but a monster. By contrast, when Giles, Elisa’s gay neighbor, encounters the amphibian creature for the first time, he is not scared or repulsed: “He gazes, with the practiced eye of an artist, and with the hunger of somebody starved of love, and then declares, ‘He’s so *beautiful*’” (Lane). Del Toro’s storytelling treats the creature in that same caring way. Let’s consider, for example, how *The Shape of Water* distances its amphibian protagonist from more traditional horror/monster film iconography. Although we learn pretty early that the captive has chopped off a couple of Strickland’s fingers, this significant event happens off-camera. In fact, the most gore involving the amphibian creature appears on screen when, out of fear, he attacks one of Giles’ cats. Violence and blood are not scarce in the film. However, rather than originating in the usual suspect, the “monster,” they are caused by Strickland’s (literally) rotting hand. Toward the end of the film, the colonel tortures Dr. Hoffstetler (Michael Stuhlbarg) in a painstakingly graphic scene; meanwhile, and in plain contrast, the amphibian creature and Elisa dance gracefully across the screen, as the mute protagonist daydreams of a musical number where she has a voice and can sing about their love (1:39:15-1:41:05).

The black and white musical scene is clearly the product of Elisa’s imagination, but the emotional and erotic connection that she and the fugitive creature have developed while he has been hiding in her apartment is not. In del Toro’s hands, the erotic relation between a woman and an amphibian creature—a transgression that could have easily resulted in some clumsy sexual scenes—becomes not only plausible, but almost conventional. When Giles finds them embraced in Elisa’s flooded bathroom, for example, we are placed in his point of view. The camera pulls in to reveal Elisa’s grin as her arm crosses the creature’s back tenderly; tiny blue lights traverse his body in response, but neither the camera nor Giles make a big deal of the sight. Sometimes above water, sometimes under, the scenes where Elisa and the amphibian creature embrace passionately are dominated by greens and blues, the colors of deep water. As the camera pulls away and the melancholic soundtrack lingers, what is revealed is the sheer beauty of two creatures and their dissimilar bodies being affectionate with each other.

Del Toro has admitted what several critics detected when first seeing *The Shape of Water*: that it shares DNA with *Creature From the Black Lagoon* (Dir. Jack Arnold, 1954). According to the

Mexican director, upon seeing that film as a child, he felt “a longing in his heart” that he “could not name.” “I kept thinking I hope they end up together and they didn’t. So this is me correcting the cinematic mistake” (Keegan). And correct it he did! Rewriting the story within the generic framework of the fairy tale makes it totally possible for the amphibian creature to get at least a kiss from his beloved human “princess” —in his voice-over narration, at the beginning and the end of *The Shape of Water*, Giles refers to Elisa as a princess. However, del Toro then takes the fairy tale genre to its limits by letting the kiss develop into a full blown romantic relationship between the princess and a creature that never turns into a human prince. This transgression —of the rules of the fairy tale as well as of current and past social conventions— appears, nevertheless, cinematically represented as such a “natural” expression of erotic desire between beings capable of caring for each other, that it questions “common sense” definitions of the human. Del Toro’s film, in this sense, dialogues with posthuman theorists, who for at least a couple of decades have been questioning the liberal humanist view of the self that tends to take human exceptionalism as a given⁴. Within this new conceptual framework, the central position of the human among other species gets delegitimized “by acknowledging the permeable boundaries of species in the naturalcultural continuum,” while at the same time recognizing “the profound interconnections between different forms of life in the composite world where we previously had seen separations” (Opperman 25).

Perhaps embracing this posthuman view, *The Shape of Water* takes the disruption of human exceptionalism up a notch, by proposing that its amphibian protagonist might be, against Strickland’s interpretations of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, not just “created in the Lord’s image,” but a god of its own. While showing the chained “asset” to his boss, General Hoyt, Strickland reveals in passing some interesting details about the captive:

Strickland: You know, the natives in the Amazon worshipped it like a god.

Hoyt: Doesn’t look like much of a god now, does it?

Strickland: Well, they are primitive, sir. You know, they would toss offerings into the water. Flowers, fruits, crap like that. Then they tried to stop the oil drill with bows and arrows. That didn’t turn out too well... (00:41:46-00:42:04)

In fact, during his stay with Elisa, the amphibian creature has performed little miracles, and at the end of the film, when he comes back from what seemed a sure death, Strickland, seeing him return, blurts: “fuck...you ARE a god” (my emphasis, 1:55:00-1:55:41). Throughout the film but particularly in this moment, Strickland —and, for that matter, Hoyt— stands as a metaphor for

4. As Katherine Hayles —a pioneer of posthuman theorizing— explains, the posthuman signals “the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice” (286).

Western civilization and the unbridled arrogance embedded in the ambition of shaping the world “in its own image.” Seen through the condescending lens of that arrogance, the Other’s ancestral knowledge, beliefs and relationship with nature seem “primitive” —which historically has meant a code word for “less than human” and, therefore, expendable. By investing the amphibious creature with the powers of a god —who may not look like a Western representation of divinity but happens to resurrect like Jesus Christ in biblical accounts— del Toro’s film is proposing that the human, as the divinity after which it may or may not have been created, does not fit in any particular form or shape.

This religious theme acquires full meaning at the very end of *The Shape of Water*, when Giles’ voice-over narration closes the story loosely quoting a poem written in the 12th century by the Sufi poet Hakim Sanai⁵ (41). “When I think of Elisa —Giles relates— the only thing that comes to mind is a poem, whispered by someone in love hundreds of years ago.” He then recites these verses:

Unable to perceive the shape of you,
I find you all around me.
Your presence fills my eyes with your love.
It humbles my heart, for you are everywhere (1:57:50-1:58:28).

Meanwhile, on the screen, the camera slowly pulls away from a long shot of Elisa and her lover holding each other, until they become small silhouettes suspended in the water. The passionate verses that Giles just read, however, are not romantic; Hakim Sanai’s words of love are addressed to God. Having brought up earlier the Judeo-Christian theme of the human as “created in the Lord’s image,” the film now proposes that we consider how that theme dialogues with the Sufi poet’s belief that God can be found in everything and everywhere⁶. How does human look?

As if pondering an answer for this question, *The Shape of Water* finds a spot where these contrasting views seem to overlap: Like water, the human may take an indefinite number of shapes. Just as the choice of playing with the format of the fairy tale, or the sympathetic representation of the presumed “monster,” this additional layer of meaning strengthens the moral at the core of the film: A definition of humanity cannot rely on a certain set of physical or visible attributes, but on our capacity for empathy, for solidarity or, as a mystical poet put it hundreds of years ago, on our ability for seeing the world through “eyes filled with love.”

5. See Peter Armenti’s “Who wrote the poem at the end of ‘The Shape of Water,’ ” for extensive information on how the poem got incorporated into the film.

6. A belief that resonates also with the ways in which posthuman theory has challenged human exceptionalism.

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