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The Shape of Water

Ken Derry

University of Toronto, ken.derry@utoronto.ca

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The Shape of Water

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Shape of Water* (2017), directed by Guillermo del Toro.



The Shape of Water (2017), dir. Guillermo del Toro

In various ways, Guillermo del Toro’s wonderful new film *The Shape of Water* is not very subtle. This is perhaps fitting for what is essentially a kind of adult fairy tale; heroes and villains, triumphs and tragedies, are drawn in big, broad strokes. In the opening voiceover the main character is referred to as “the princess without voice,” while the man who opposes her is “the monster that tried to destroy it all.” One of the film’s themes involves the dangers of knowledge and hubris, and so of course there’s a cat named Pandora who (spoiler alert!) comes to a bad end by sticking her nose where she shouldn’t. This is a movie that tends to express its views very directly, much like the creature at the center of its story.

Set in Baltimore in 1962, the fairy tale that del Toro is telling begins with Elisa, who can hear but not speak and so communicates with her body in various ways, including American Sign Language, dance, gestures, and an array of powerful facial

expressions. Elisa watches old movies with her neighbor Giles by day, and at night she and her friend Zelda are cleaners at a secret research facility. The film's plot gets underway when the facility acquires an "Asset": an amphibian male humanoid captured in the Amazon who looks very much like the eponymous figure in *Creature from the Black Lagoon*.¹ The Asset is tortured by Colonel Richard Strickland, the "monster" of the opening monologue, who has been tasked by the U.S. Government with uncovering the mysterious being's secrets. Elisa is drawn to the creature, sneaking in to the lab to feed him eggs and teach him signs and play him records. She eventually decides to free him, enlisting the help of Zelda and Giles in the prison break. No one's life is the same after this.

One of the primary ways in which *The Shape of Water* is not subtle, then, is in its celebration of diversity and equality, its deeply liberal politics, its concern with those who are marginalized and mistreated, its critique of people and systems of power who abuse others or who support such abuse with their silence. Considering that certain groups in North America over the past year have been given even more license for their abusive behavior than normal, I for one am very happy that del Toro decided to make such an unsubtle film. It may be a cliché, but at this moment I think we could use more movies like this one that are, as he has said, about "love against fear."²

As it happens, religion for del Toro is mainly on the side of "fear." The two people who are explicitly religious are Strickland ("the monster") and Fleming, the man who manages the research facility. The latter repeatedly chastises people for "blasphemy,"

¹ The resemblance is deliberate, as del Toro has said that when he first saw the film as a child he was very disappointed that it was not a love story; with *The Shape of Water*, he is correcting that mistake.

² *Hollywood Reporter* interview with Guillermo del Toro and the cast of *The Shape of Water* (<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/shape-of-water-venice-2017-1034220>).

but at no point objects to the former's overt cruelty. For his part, Strickland sees himself as a holy warrior, identifying explicitly with Samson as a man given the divine task of fighting the enemies of God, and, in the end, as a man betrayed by a woman. His religious perspective thus easily justifies the harm he causes. When Elisa expresses concern for the creature's suffering Strickland declares that, unlike "the Asset," people are "created in the Lord's image." But in his eyes, not all people are created *equally* in this image; this is why Strickland believes it is acceptable to dominate, harass, and eventually assault Elisa and her friend. As he explains to Zelda: God "looks like me or even you. A little more like me I guess." Strickland's god, in other words, is both racist and sexist.³

In addition to its critique of Christianity specifically, the film seems to take a dim view of religion more broadly in its depiction of ritualized behavior as stultifying, the sign of a moribund existence. Strickland's daily activities are heavily structured, predictable, awful. Elisa's repetitive pre-work routine, in which she engages before meeting the creature, highlights the loneliness and lack of verve in her life. The creature brings her not only joy and meaning and love, therefore, but spontaneity. *The Shape of Water* is also sufficiently clear-eyed to point out that sometimes taking a risk and breaking habitual patterns does *not* bring the results we desire. Giles ritually buys pies from a man to whom he is attracted; he does not eat the accumulating desserts just as he does not tell the man how he feels. When he finally works up the courage to reveal his attraction the exchange ends far worse than simply being rejected as a suitor — but the film shows us that Giles is still better for taking that risk, and for learning the truth.

³ While Strickland's religious discourse, like much of the film, often seems overdone, del Toro has said that it was directly inspired by the dialogue of the door-to-door Bible hucksters in the 1969 documentary, *Salesman*.

In this respect it is intriguing that a film so enamored of fantasy should be so fully on the side of reality, no matter how stark or unpleasant. This point is made with particular force when we see Giles recoil from the broadcast of Civil Rights protestors being violently hosed by the police; he changes the channel immediately to a comforting, familiar musical. In this way we are shown repeatedly how important it is to face both ourselves and others, warts and all; imagination can enrich our lives, but it should never obscure the truth, particularly when the truth concerns the oppression of already marginalized people.

The ritual that the film frames most positively, the repeated act that enhances rather than diminishes, is dancing. Over and over, dancing connects characters with one another, liberating them from routine, oppression, and ignorance. There is a lovely and surreal dance fantasy between Elisa and the creature that is all about revealing truths, not hiding them. With respect to the amphibian man himself, del Toro suggests that dance has the power to break us out of not only personal and social constraints, but physical ones as well: at first we see the creature swim-dance in his prison tank when Elisa plays records for him; later, Elisa choreographs the intricate performance that breaks the creature out of the institution. Dancing in this film is del Toro's religion of choice: it is truth, and it sets us free.

As the central image and metaphor of the film, water itself is like dance — transgressive and fluid, pushing against boundaries. It is used to clean and to heal by thoughtful characters like Elisa. It is used to imprison and to harm by abusers like Strickland, who traps the amphibian man in an aquarium and who shatters a glass of water specifically so that he can corner Elisa in his office, where he physically and

sexually intimidates her. He buys a car the color of water, but unlike water the car is rigid, static, regressive. The water that Elisa uses, on the other hand, like Elisa herself, will not stay in place. In a particularly exuberant, climactic scene, water explodes out of its containment in her apartment, pouring into the movie house below.⁴ And in the film's violent and tender conclusion, water — like dance — is linked to freedom, to sacrifice, to courage and love in the face of fear. As I said: this is not a subtle film. But its lack of subtlety is a key part of what makes it so wonderful and frightening and moving, like all good fairy tales.

⁴ This scene was filmed at Toronto's beautiful Elgin Theatre, which, not coincidentally, is the venue where *The Shape of Water*'s premiere was held at TIFF. When the theatre first appeared during the premiere, and the audience saw on screen the place where they were sitting, cheers erupted. It was a great TIFF moment.