Falling for the Amphibian Man: Fantasy, Otherness, and Auteurism in del Toro's *The Shape of Water*

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Abstract

Guillermo del Toro's reputation as one of the world's most esteemed filmmakers builds on fairy tale and horror-inspired films featuring monsters, such as *Hellboy* (2004) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006). Not only is del Toro's obsession with the fantasy genre often emphasized, it also incorporates the theme of embracing otherness, which is demonstrated through the allegory of monstrous entities in most of his works. As a Mexican director, del Toro strives to insert his status as "the other" in his movies. This article addresses Guillermo del Toro's 2017 Oscar-winning film, *The Shape of Water*, through auteur theory with references to fantasy film principles. In a range of aspects, from visual style to its rooted themes, del Toro's films make use of a distinctive set of features with dark green colour, special effects makeup, as well as the theme of resistance against oppression and marginalisation. Using *The Shape of Water* as a case study, the argument is that the film serves as a critique as well as a defiance against the widespread issues of rising bigoted slurs, immigration bans and racial resentment in the United States, which have occurred ever since the victory of President Donald Trump in early 2017. Indeed, del Toro's triumphs at the 90th Academy Awards have solidified the importance of fantasy films as counter-narratives.

Keywords: Guillermo del Toro, *The Shape of Water*, fantasy, otherness, auteurism

Introduction

The years 2017 and 2018 were crowded with protest hashtags: #MeToo, #TimesUp, #WomensMarch, #TakeAKnee, #BlackLivesMatter, #MuslimBan, #DACA, and #NoBanNoWall. From sexual abuse scandals surrounding former film producer Harvey Weinstein to President Donald Trump's controversial policies, social movements were on the rise in the United States and other countries all over the world. As a result, many artists, writers, and filmmakers have tried to commemorate these occasions through creating works which embody some of these issues. Among them, one of the most notable is Mexican director Guillermo del Toro's latest fantasy romance film, *The Shape of Water* (2017), which garnered numerous international awards, positive critical responses and high ratings from film critics. The movie received praise for its unique love story, and its implied messages of acceptance, regardless of skin colour, sexual orientation, and way of life (David, 2018; Scott, 2017).

Like many of del Toro's movies, *The Shape of Water* revolves around a monstrous figure, an Amazonian amphibious humanoid (similar to Abe Sapien, the amphibian field agent who possesses psychic powers in *Hellboy* and *Hellboy II*) known as "the asset", who acts as the catalyst for the movie's main plot. The protagonist is a mute woman named Elisa Esposito who works as a janitor in a secret government lab and later falls in love with and rescues the amphibian man from being vivisected. Other supporting characters are Colonel Richard Strickland, a controlling military soldier who leads the research team on the amphibious creature, Zelda Fuller, a Black woman who befriends and works with Elisa as a janitor, Robert Hoffstetler, a Soviet spy working as a scientist at the lab, and Giles, Elisa's neighbour and a struggling illustrator who helps rescue the creature. As well as accentuating monsters as personification, del Toro also portrays his characters to have disabilities and other 'imperfections' (concerning race, gender and sexual orientation). These characters are portrayed to be using their abilities, intuition, and intelligence in determining their fate and the fate of others.

In one of his interviews, del Toro claims to have been inspired by *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, Jack Arnold's 1954 film, in which the amphibian creature falls for the female protagonist, but they end up separated (Gray, 2018). *The Shape of Water* grossed $63.9 million domestically and $195.2 million internationally (Mojo, 2018). It received numerous prestigious awards such as Best Picture, Best Director, Best Production Design, and Best Original Score at the 90th Academy Awards; Best Director and Best Original Score at the 75th Golden Globe Awards, and a Golden Lion for Best Film in 2017. This achievement solidified del Toro's status as one of the 'Three Amigos of Cinema' along with his two compatriots, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Alfonso Cuarón. Internationally, del Toro is famous for producing Academy Award-winning fantasy film *El laberinto del fauno*/*Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and directing mainstream American sci-fi-action films namely *Blade II* (2002), *Hellboy* (2004), *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008), and *Pacific Rim* (2013).

Indeed, Guillermo del Toro is a visionary filmmaker with many interests: fairy tales, ghosts, gothic horror, historical fantasy, giant monsters, vampires, classic literature, and comics. In the United States, del Toro is regarded for his works of horror and dark fantasy, which are heavily ingrained with malformed and monstrous beauty. He is an eccentric who is obsessed with demonic characters, insectile and religious imagery, elements of Catholicism, labyrinths, underworld and clockwork patterns, and other things that do not fully conform to the standards of Mexican, Spanish or American films in general. As an accomplished novelist and screenwriter, del Toro writes most of his own scripts and is known to be a detail-oriented and

hands-on director. He makes intricate notes for storyboarding, and designs each of his characters in sketchbooks – some of which he has published in a compilation entitled *Cabinet of Curiosities: My Notebooks, Collections, and Other Obsessions* (2013).

In addition to all of these, del Toro is also famous for using special-effects make-up in his films for aesthetic purposes, going as far as hiring practical effects crew to build, sculpt, and paint prosthetic bodysuits for his non-human characters. He also hires digital visual effects teams to give more effects to the practical make-up while filming. As a filmmaker, the nature of del Toro's works also lies in the characterized tradition of his collaboration with a band of transnational actors in numerous projects, namely Argentinian Federico Luppi (*Cronos, El espinazo, El laberinto*), and Americans Ron Perlman (*Cronos, Blade II, Hellboy, Hellboy II, Pacific Rim*) and Doug Jones (*Hellboy, Hellboy II, El laberinto, The Shape of Water*), as well as cinematographer Guillermo Navarro (*Cronos, The Devil's Backbone, Hellboy, El laberinto, Hellboy II, Pacific Rim*) (Tierney, 2014, p. 2). His consistency in using "paranormal chaos" which challenges human corruptness as a background also serves as another signifying point to his filmmaking trademark (Atkinson, 2007, p. 52).

Some of del Toro's films are also centred on children and ingrained with cult film and comic book styles (*Blade II, Hellboy, Hellboy II*). He has also blended some crucial but still-coherent genres: fantasy (all of his movies), horror (*Cronos, Mimic, El espinazo,* The Strain Trilogy Novel, and to some degree, *El laberinto*), and action-adventure (*Blade II, Hellboy, Hellboy II, Pacific Rim*) (Tierney, 2014, p. 2). As a world-renowned filmmaker, del Toro also challenges the 'general' norms of directorial work since the line which separates his English-language and Spanish-language films is not steadily established (Davies, 2007, p. 135; Guillermo Del Toro, 2008, p. 38). In support of his distinguished status, del Toro's films are rich in disturbing historical elements, as seen in *El espinazo del diablo* and *El laberinto del fauno*, which use the backdrop of fascism during the Mexican revolution and the Spanish Civil War (Lazaro-Reboll, 2013, p. 44). In *The Shape of Water*, del Toro adjusts the movie to the American socio-cultural background by using the Cold War era, (approximately 1945–1989), with ruthless authoritarian military figures who become villains.

I argue that *The Shape of Water*, which celebrates the presence of misfits with its genre, together with the auteur theory, visual style and themes, can be framed as del Toro's signature approach that challenges traditional conventions in genre and narrative. I build my argument on directorial interviews and review excerpts as comprehensive material for framing my analysis. In the following section, I will explain how del Toro's signature approach gives significant influence and contribution to his latest film, *The Shape of Water*.

Framing del Toro's Signature Approach

Auteur Theory
Pinpointed as a film history theory, American film critic Andrew Sarris states that auteur criticism focuses on the long-built reputation of senior directors whose films have shown a certain thematic blueprint and visual signature marker (1968, pp. 26–27). First and foremost, the word "auteur" literally means "author" and is understood as having affiliations with literary personalities (Sarris, 1968, p. 27). Initially formulated as a way to establish rankings, categories, and lists of film history, the term "auteur" was triggered by the remark of Paul Valéry in the initial publication of the French cinema magazine, *Cahiers du Cinema*, in 1954, who states that, "Taste is made of a thousand distastes", thus using it to identify the rapidly-verifiable works of

European filmmakers (Sarris, 1968, p. 27). Subsequently, the theory is utilized to critique and analyse the works of Hollywood directors.

Auteur theory is used to examine directors who have already directed numerous films and established certain styles of cinematography. Hence, the works of "new" directors are rarely analysed using this theory, making the theory known for focusing on "senior" directors who possess distinctive visions and established trademarks. The "*la politique des auteurs*", the authorship policy coined by Francois Truffaut in *Cahiers*, is later utilized by Sarris to categorize the status of his "pantheon", a nine-part hierarchical system of film ranking based on his standards (Corrigan, 2012, p. 411; Watson, 2003, p. 137). Yet, this categorisation is later seen as inaccurate since "it is less a fully worked-out theory than a critical method", with the theory diminishing the fact that films are made of crucial contributing aspects such as collaboration, commerciality, and the use of advanced special effects (Corrigan, 2012, p. 411). Thus, films are barely the products of a single authorial vision of directors.

The "essential" auteur in a movie, is, in fact, the one with the most intense personality and creative intentions – it might be the scriptwriter, the director or the dialogue writer (Mitry, 2000, p. 6). It is often the director who is worthy of the title, since he has the principal authority to reassess, rearrange, and connect his personal concept to those of his colleagues, regardless of their position (Mitry, 2000, p. 6). However, if the director only focuses on the technical execution of an already-planned project presented to him, then the main auteur is the scriptwriter.

Meanwhile, auteur critics are prone to be labelled as figures who choose to perceive films for commerciality rather than quality purposes. Francois Truffaut makes use of American films as a tool to counter the snobbish tendencies of French films, hence granting the auteur theory a reputation of siding with "uncultured" filmmakers and alleviating their status in the cinema world. Auteur theory's most challenging notion is its tendency to glorify certain directors, not as an acknowledgement of individual creative aptitude, but for the sake of aggressive commerciality (Watson, 2003, p. 136). This concept is a critical strategy for classifying "high-art" movies to "low-art" ones, categorising directors to be "metteurs-en-scène" – directors with technical competence but do not infuse personal signature style – and auteurs – directors with genuine and recognisable styles in most of their films (Watson, 2003, p. 136). Therefore, auteur criticism is more of an attitude than a theory, which is aimed more at directorial autobiography than film history (Sarris, 1968, p. 30).

Nevertheless, auteur theory continues to be a significant means in film studies. Film scholars James Naremore and Graeme Turner suggest that the authorship framework facilitates people to discern films accurately; it can perform as an offence and a mode of defiance towards conventions, particularly if mingled with cultural studies as well as methods of contemporary film analysis (Naremore, 1999, pp. 22–23; Turner, 2006, p. 55). Evaluating his own claims, Andrew Sarris states how both "strong" and "weak" directors have to be taken into account since they sustain one another's existence (1968, p. 31).

Indeed, auteur theory serves as the tool to examine the influence of directors in terms of their filmic characteristic styles that make their works stand out among those of others. Here, Sarris also highlights how critics who want to utilize auteur theory should place the director and his films in terms of historical positioning. He claims that, "auteur critics should avoid judging the present in terms of the past, and should opt to relate the past to the present in the most meaningful way possible" (1968, p. 33). It implies that relating the director's latest work with

his preceding movies is only valid when we try to interpret or highlight specific political and socio-cultural viewpoints implied in his films in order to support our arguments. Peter Wollen asserts that the true challenge of applying auteur criticism is not necessarily found in the canonical nature of a filmmaker's work, but in movies which initially give an impression to be unconventional (2000, p. 74). Debates regarding film authorship have discussed various filmic features that are fundamental in emphasising the authorial existence, such as visual style and techniques, elements of narrative, and themes. In this vein, I will explore *The Shape of Water* using the *auteurist* approach, aiming to perceive it as a social critique, with del Toro as a filmmaker who mixes genres and breaks conventions.

del Toro's Approach to Filmmaking
Since narrative, theme, and visual style are the most explored features of del Toro's filmmaking among critics and commentators, I will elucidate several reflective points here. First, the use of repressed but secretly rebellious female characters with dark pasts, supernatural powers, and disabilities who are often in their early teens or mid-twenties is a regular feature in del Toro's narratives, causing his work to be intriguing from a feminist perspective. Ana Vivancos remarks that by making those characters "silenced", "denied the power of action", and "reduced", del Toro shows how his female characters determine their fate by choosing complete submission or exercising autonomy (2012, pp. 883–884). In *The Shape of Water*, the female protagonist and the female supporting character, Elisa Esposito and Zelda Fuller, are constantly marginalized. Since Elisa is mute and Zelda is Black, these women secretly collaborate and support one another, taking charge of their lives amid adversity and tyranny from Strickland, and finally obtaining their freedom. Elisa is particularly significant to the story in rescuing the amphibian asset, as she creates an escape plan for the creature with Giles and later receives help from Zelda and Hoffstetler. In doing so, the five characters – portrayed as the abused and the marginalized – manage to confront Strickland's dictatorship, who is an epitome of white supremacy and domination.

Secondly, monsters have been a lifelong obsession for del Toro (he built a house called Bleak House, which was full of a collection of books, framed art, and sculptures which depict monstrous figures). Many of his films consist of grotesque inhuman entities as central characters to the plot and a central narrative element: sarcastic red demon Anung Un Rama and sceptical amphibious humanoid Abraham "Abe" Sapien in *Hellboy I* and *Hellboy II*, the eccentric Faun and horrifying Pale Man in *El laberinto*, the half-man, half-lizard amphibian in *The Shape of Water*. Strikingly, the two aquatic humanoid characters (Abe Sapien in both Hellboy films and the amphibian creature in *The Shape of Water*), the Faun and the Pale Man (in *Pan's Labyrinth*) – all played by contortionist and mime Doug Jones – also emerge frequently as an explicit narrative pattern in del Toro's movies that frequently embody an inverted form of humanity or society.

As an illustration, the theme of *The Shape of Water* focuses on representing the mistreatment and marginalization of "the other". This manifests in the brutal torture and exploitation of the amphibian asset to serve the space race and Cold War. It is also seen in the marginalized of lower-class characters like Elisa and Zelda for being mute and Black respectively, and Hoffstetler for being an "enemy" as a Russian and a traitor for helping rescue the creature. The asset receives constant torture due to its status as an inhuman being with unique supernatural powers that are hard for humans to understand. The theme may be related to del Toro's exposure to race-based marginalization while living in the United States. Being Mexican, del Toro is acutely aware that his presence has often been perceived as "the other" – foreign, alienated, and ostracized – which corresponds to the characteristics of monsters. Our

subconscious interest in monsters stems from the fact that first, they more or less resemble us, and secondly, their existence poses a challenge toward the cultured way of thinking, representing aspects of impurity that the society wishes to get rid of – hence, monsters are perceived as scapegoats who are held responsible for all the troubles in the society and have to be sacrificed (Davies, 2014, pp. 29–30). Knowing these facts makes del Toro subsequently set up this overarching pattern in his films.

Third, for the visual approach, del Toro uses a set of specific choices of colour as a strategy. In *The Shape of Water*, del Toro has mostly used teal, the medium blue-green colour, for the amphibian humanoid and the water, red, and dark green for the human characters' clothes. These two colours are significant in accentuating the melancholic and solemn atmosphere of Elisa's muted world and later relationship with the amphibian creature, as well as the strict, perfectionist, authoritarian world of the military figures. In an interview, *The Shape*'s cinematographer Dan Laustsen mentions how del Toro wanted him to use particular colours for the award-winning movie: "Greens and blues were chosen to represent water, and red was brought in for life, love and death. And then we focused on shadows and contrast" (Pritchard, 2018). Laustsen also mentions that while the costume of the creature was already well-crafted, the cinematography crew did not need to do much about the light for the amphibian creature, and later opted for CGI. Del Toro's long-time fascination and preference for special-effects make-up also influences the style of his movies, manifesting in his collaboration with highly experienced makeup artist crews to build his monstrous figures. For *The Shape of Water*, del Toro requested the special-effects crew make a small-sized sculpture from his hand-drawing design, and then build the prosthetic costume in meticulous-detail before applying it to actor Doug Jones. The crew also used VFX to add the floating and underwater effect to particular scenes where Elisa and the creature interact (Pritchard, 2018).

Fourth, the strongest traits of del Toro's themes in *The Shape of Water* is the profound existence of water, the gloomy colours of green, teal, and red, and the liquidity of transition and transformation. I argue that the images of translucent underwater space in which Elisa dreams in her sleep, the flowing water in her bathtub, and the creature's underwater tank contribute to the critical aesthetics and thematic shifts of the film. It could be said that the metaphorical sensations we generally correspond to water and deep ocean diving, into the representational zone of bleak corridors of the lab and dimly lit bathroom – where many of the activities in *The Shape of Water* take place – are crucial in representing the "unknown" and "unclear" future of the Cold War era.

Fifth, the compassionate visual and sensual sensations of the film are composed of surreal contradictions: the passionate love-makings of two different-species lovers, the brash and violent acts of hitting, hurting and electrocuting, the gentle and forlorn actions of silent communicating and dancing. As we correlate the element of water with these motions, they actually fall into place. These aspects signify how del Toro induces hatred, anger, love, empathy – universal emotions that exist within the everyday lives of people – as his theme to represent real life in his movies.

This cinematographic effect characterizes a consistent feature of del Toro's works, which emphasizes how the unimaginable or disconcerting supernatural phenomena can be adjusted or negotiated within the borders of logic. Del Toro's visual style represents an infiltration of the fantastical realm into reality. Indeed, it is explicit in *The Shape of Water*, with the problematic and challenging presence of the captured amphibian man who constantly rebels against his torturers. In this sense, del Toro wishes to introduce something irrational and

"unpredictable" that defies the "well-adjusted" world. This reflexivity does emerge and dictate the flow of del Toro's films, for he has always been principled in presenting the issues of otherness in his works.

Moreover, since *The Shape of Water*'s is set in an actual historical time and place, this mode of expression is a much-explored portion of the film. In one scene, Zelda and Elisa are seen cleaning the inside area of a rocket lab where there is a space capsule heat shield hanging from the ceiling. Many scenes display people driving teal-coloured Cadillacs on the streets, which highlights the 1950s period in Baltimore, United States. In these scenes, del Toro exhibits reflexivity regarding the form of fantasy, as well as its implied messages and potentials, which somehow are typical in his films. Therefore, through contemplating all of these aspects, del Toro is not merely producing films with monsters; he is purposefully establishing his cinematographic trademark and criticising the social and political implications surrounding them.

Furthermore, we can take a look at how del Toro creates his films by deriving from fable and fairy tale, as well as myths from different cultures, allegory, historical fiction, horror fiction, comic-based supernatural superhero materials, and sometimes science fiction. For instance, in *The Shape of Water* (2017), the characters come from different race, gender and cultural backgrounds. The background is also a vital historical moment during which geopolitical tensions persist between the Soviet Union and the United States. The world of *The Shape of Water* is a narrative which combines a world of black-and-white movies, teal Cadillac cars and green jellies (which characteristically portrays the romanticized futuristic era led by President Kennedy), and a fantasy realm where humanoid creatures exist. All of these aspects are tell-tale signs of the classical Hollywood cinema.

Thus, I argue that del Toro has benefitted from the way classical Hollywood facilitates the invention of myths just as much as archaic fairy tales do. The specific framework of *The Shape of Water* integrates the principles of Hollywood's Golden Age – since the principal storyline shares definite echoes with *Creature from the Black Lagoon* – with a narrative constructed to appear universal to differing cultures in the world, thus resulting in a fantastical allegory about the relationship between an individual and the "other". Another strategy used in *The Shape of Water* is del Toro's drawn influence from films by Terry Gilliam and classical Hollywood actors and actresses such as Charlie Chaplin and Audrey Hepburn for creating the character of Elisa, thus reinforcing his tenet of drawing inspiration and knowledge from Hollywood's Golden Age. In this way, we may recognize del Toro as an imaginative traditionalist who grounds his work on traditional (even archetypal) configurations across cultures and filmic modes, at the same time providing them with personalized traits that defy some of their indispensable cores.

Still, del Toro's work is unique in terms of the genre and narrative means from which he derives. Kristian Moen notes that transformation and metamorphosis are two primary aspects which exist in cinema's fairy tales, that may occur in various forms (2013, p. xiv). One of the crucial purposes of fantasy and fairy tale cinema is that they help "articulate the ways in which we might see, understand and feel the effects of a changing modern world" (Moen, 2013, p. xvi). In many ways, del Toro's films would suit best under the "paradigmatic" classification as they tend to operate within the boundaries and conventions of classic Hollywood cinema that generally have fundamental literary or pictorial narrative associations, such as folk or fairy tales. However, a twist always exists in del Toro's movies, thanks to his cultural background and personalized creative input.

The Shape of Water as Epitome of Social Movement

In his book, *Cabinet of Curiosities* (2013), del Toro states that "It's only through art that you're able to glimpse otherness" (p. 477), referring to his frequent creations of monstrous entities to help the audience perceive foreigners as something that is intimate, common, and invaluable. Indeed, the theme of embracing otherness has often been in del Toro's agenda for decades as he plays with representations and symbols. Film theorist Bill Nichols explains how ideology, image, and representation can mutually support one another. Nichols states that symbols serve as "delegates" which exemplify what we ascribe to, and that they act as our "representatives", thus making them representations (1981, p. 1). Meanwhile, an ideology uses a set of arranged images and levels of representation to convey certain aspects to the audience, showing them "this is how it should be" (p. 1). By carefully taking all of these concepts into account, del Toro chose to give his film the Cold War politic climate with villainous bureaucrat figures, socially-misfit characters, and a fish god through which to deliver his political and social-conscious message.

In an interview about the film, del Toro emphasizes that setting *The Shape of Water* during the height of the Cold War hysteria in 1962, is representative of the situation of being a minority living in America during the divisive Trump government in 2017:

> They're actually talking about an America which never existed," he says. "In 1962, everything was idealised about the future, but it was a future that never really came to be. The cars had jet fins, the kitchens are beautiful, everything is automatic, everything is modern, but in '63 Kennedy is shot and that Camelot collapses. It never really happens. So it's not a movie about '62. It's a movie that tells you that the racism, classism, sexual mores, everything that was alive in '62, is all alive now. It never went away (Applebaum, 2018).

During the Cold War era, the United States was engaged in an ideological battle against the Soviet Union, and the segregations in the society along racial, class, and gender boundaries threatened to tear the "internal" society apart and tarnish America's reputation abroad (May, 2008, p. 8). In their propaganda messages, American rulers promoted an "the American way of life" closely aligned with the glorification of capitalism. Images of a stable domestic ideal were promoted in which wealth, life in the suburbs, and white bourgeois nuclear family were presented as aspirational goals (May, 2008, p. 8). However, poverty and racism prevailed, leading to discrimination, segregation, and brutality, in which people of colour could not have the privileges of American affluence (May, 2008, p. 9). Therefore, I argue that del Toro's representation of the "perfect", "well-ordered", and "futuristic" world of Richard Strickland, the most influential antagonist in the movie who embodies all of these Cold War "qualities", is actually intended to highlight the flaws in an exaggerated ideal American image. The representation of Richard Strickland is a direct criticism against white supremacy, which has caused more damage than benefit to marginalized people for decades. What is more, this culture-sanctioned superiority and racism only serve as blinders for Strickland – a representation of white and male supremacists – which prevent him from examining his flaws and dealing with his insecurities (Adji, 2018, p. 176).

Film critic Renuka Vyavahare (2018) comments on how del Toro manages to create a combined world of fairy tale and reality:

> Reading from the word go; the visionary filmmaker paints a visual and emotional masterpiece that strikes an incredible balance between reality and fantasy … More than its visual brilliance, what captivates you the most is del Toro's ability to capture the minutiae of his ordinary characters' everyday life. An unlikely amalgamation of supernatural, spiritual and sci-fi elements, *The Shape of Water* at heart, is a simple tale of hope and empathy. It rebuilds your faith in love, which isn't and shouldn't be defined by a certain shape or form.

This comment supports my argument that del Toro's realistic narrative tries to portray how these "different" figures live their lives, support and interact with one another – which turns out to be not that much different from the so-called "majority". Another critic, Mihir Fadnavis (2018), confirms this idea by stating that:

> But even in the familiar moments there is much to love and adore about this fairy tale for adults. Nowadays we seldom see films that are crafted with so much love and care, where even the violence becomes a work of art. Del Toro's philosophy is prescient, in that we've become so disillusioned with this world we tend to turn towards monsters to take us to a different world, and without a proper voice we wish every night to find someone who can give us one.

Thus, I argue that "embracing otherness" conveyed in *The Shape of Water* is not only about America. "Embracing otherness" in a global era has developed into a more complicated, multi-faceted, and integrated process of arbitration, negotiation, and allotment. All of these aspects occur in the web of the film's political and emotional backdrop. They signify specific signs that concern the narrative, its ideology and influential elements, as well as the new approach of encrypting them. Del Toro has, I believe, lifted the "textually coherent fantastical allegory" of myth archetypal Hollywood to another level, which is the level of "discernible disruption", leading towards that of visionary "sensibility".

To induce the theme of "otherness", filmmakers generally create allegories by combining narrative materials with folkloric roots and origin, ending up with crossbreed films. Patterns from fables and mythological archetypes as well as fairy tales and war-violence stories are commonly intertwined and crafted together. Moreover, post-classical Hollywood is notable for producing hybrids of perpetual classics (Elsaesser, 2011, p. 252). Critic David Edelstein identifies the cinematic ancestry of *The Shape of Water* thus:

> I can guess what's in it after seeing his Venice Film Festival-prize-winning *The Shape of Water*, which screened in Toronto and opens commercially in December. *The Creature of the Black Lagoon*, with *Beauty and the Beast* and *E.T.* (and *Splash*?). *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The excellent British monster film *Death Train* (a.k.a. *Raw Meat*), which del Toro talked to me about 13 years ago before a Lincoln Center screening, citing subterranean tunnels of objects of fascination when he was growing up in Mexico City.

Another critic, Peter Travers, being simplistic, summarizes the story like this:

> His latest is a Cold War romance about a mute cleaning lady (Sally Hawkins) who falls hard for an amphibious creature (Doug Jones) being used for secret scientific experiments. The film doesn't fit in any of the usual Hollywood boxes; it's a thing of beauty and terror that can't be defined and dismissed as "lonely

girl finds love with the Creature from the Black Lagoon," either… through there
is a little of that in it, too (Travers, 2017).

Without casting aside its capability to serve as a narrative, the hybridity grants more space for "contents", "aspects", and "signs" to attribute themselves to the film. *The Shape of Water* is similar to its much-mentioned all-time classic muse, Jack Arnold's *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), which received high praise but at the same time stereotyped in its time for having the modus operandi of using terrifying "cross-species eroticism" (Bergstrom, 2015) with a half-man and half-fish creature, a scream-horror queen, and male dominant figures. *Creature* succeeded in outlasting the critics and became a permanent classic. The half-man and half-fish creature even became one of Hollywood's most iconic beasts, joining the Frankenstein monster, Wolf-man, Mummy, and Dracula.

The ideological message of the movie appears to suit del Toro's critique of contemporary US immigration and international policies that were (around 2017 and 2018) increasingly nationalistic. This manner focuses on how racial exclusion and social inequality patterns are explored and applied to capture the ways of life of the "others" – each within their distinct elements. Del Toro (aside from his political views) was well aware of America's intensely disputable international role, and its situation of being caught in a geopolitical tension between two competing superpower countries. Connected to the years of 2017 and 2018, del Toro was of course very much aware of the victory of a white, Republican business-mogul-turned president whose campaign focus was to change the immigration policy by building barriers along the Mexico-United States border and thus affecting the fate of younger immigrants vernacularly called "Dreamers" (Parker, 2019). This strongly resonates with del Toro' s status as a Mexican immigrant himself; a point he has highlighted in accounts of experiencing marginalisation in the United States:

> I may have light skin and sort of lighter hair, but the moment I open my mouth
> in immigration, all that goes away. When I'm stopped many times by a cop on a
> traffic violation and I speak, I am immediately a Mexican. So these are things I
> am trying to say [in the film] (Applebaum, 2018).

It is significant to remember that "embracing otherness" is a key strategy for the director. As an auteur, a director holds the power of controlling the flow of the narrative and providing his self-representation in his movies. The core of del Toro's narrative is that of the wonder-struck child who, from such a young age, was so drawn to mythologies, fairy tales, monstrous entities, dark and horror fantasies, fairy tales, and religious relics and artefacts that he spent hours drawing fictitious beasts, designing clockwork motifs, reading comics, writing stories and collecting monstrous toy figures and trinkets. Del Toro establishes juxtaposing links among these genres, being both a storyteller and a horror-and-fantasy maestro with a vivacious imagination, who is always fascinated by "the horror of biology" (which motivated him to study special-effects make-up professionally), "very gory religious imagery" (Wood, 2006, p. 30), red colour, and traditions from old folklores. Much of this personal narrative serves as an excellent catalyst for *The Shape of Water* as del Toro draws on fantastical influences for his preferences for misfits in the film. His interest in mythology, fairy tales, monsters, as well as his passion for special-effects make-up indicates a pro-otherness message of someone whose undertakings and hobbies hold such high regard and respect for ancient beings, traditions, beliefs, and their mysteries. It expresses the strong enthusiasm and curiosity of a fantasy director, which makes the contemporary dark mystical realm of the humanoid amphibian and the misfit characters less threatening and more humanized. Thus, del Toro, who was once

known as a cheap-budgeted horror movie director, has successfully elevated his status to a serious filmmaker through being consistent in instilling social and political issues in his fantasy films.

Conclusion

Through applying auteur criticism and other relational critical approaches, *The Shape of Water* can be understood as a whole because the approach acknowledges the importance of creative existences behind films. A cultural perspective allows us to perceive that *The Shape of Water* operates well within the context of American, Mexican, or Spanish film, as well as del Toro's frequently used themes. *The Shape of Water* also has references to the artistic cinematographic styles and influences from other films. The success of del Toro's *The Shape of Water* signifies a consistent set of filmmaking strategies, particularly in terms of the genre and narrative resources from which they derive. I have proposed that del Toro might be known as an "imaginative traditionalist", whose films engage in balancing between the restricting forces of tradition, convention, and reality, as well as the peculiarity and unprecedented "surprises" that the fantasy realm holds. This portion of personal creative intake signals a change of direction in the international fantasy cinema.

Del Toro is also perceived to be successful in instilling monstrous creatures in his films to represent otherness. In *The Shape of Water*, the captured amphibian asset acts as a delegate for the marginalized, whose rights are often uncertain and abused by the ruling government. Although set against the backdrop of the Cold War, the film represents present-day social and political hardships occurring in the United States during the Trump government, which bear many similarities to the one established in the film. It might be plausible to say that the timing of the film release, the director's visionary themes and ideas, the film's uniqueness, as well as its success in receiving high accolades and prestigious film awards contribute to the film's position as an iconic epitome of social critique and movement. I argue that del Toro has successfully positioned himself – through a cross-cultural and transnational framework – as a fantasy auteur, dissociating himself from his counterparts, thereby conveying a new switch in the global fantasy cinema. Furthermore, I also argue that del Toro has successfully maintained the theme of "otherness" in his latest film and established it as a social movement against all kinds of oppression.

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