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## WHO'S AFRAID OF ELISA ESPOSITO? : WOMEN, DISABILITY AND SEXUALITY ON THE SCREEN

MADHUBANTI DE

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**Abstract:** How is knowledge of the body produced and mediated? Anne Waldschmidt argues that conceptions of dis/ability relate to already prevailing symbolic structures and institutional practices (25). The ‘cultural turn’ in disability studies sheds some light on this problem, focusing on meanings attributed to human bodies, their interpellation, and the material consequences of the same. This paper aims to situate itself within these contact zones of cultural studies and disability studies by way of examining the representation of disabled women and their sexuality in cinema, with specific reference to Guillermo del Toro’s *The Shape of Water* (2017) and its generic intertexts and antecedents. While physical disabilities appear onscreen in a number of ways, disabled women are depicted as active sexual agents only in the ‘body’ genres of horror and fantasy. Reading *The Shape of Water* in comparison with other horror, fantasy, and science fictional texts thus examines what it is that the genre allows. If they constitute an other to mainstream genres, can they be mined for empowering representations of disabled women’s sexuality? If systems of representation function through an economy of desire, it is possible to trace where desire is placed onscreen. Finally, this paper will aim to examine the methodology to read a text via the ‘cultural model’ in disability studies, which sees disability as both structuring and structured by culture. Addressing the intersectional nature of disability, race, ethnicity, and gender through *The Shape of Water*, it shall test the possibility of an epistemological shift: the creation of a new ‘language’ to address desire and disability.

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Is the knowledge of the body a given, natural ‘fact’, or is it produced and mediated? Anne Waldschmidt argues for the relation of conceptions of “dis/ability” to social, political, and economic structures<sup>1</sup>. In her reading, these conceptions are entangled with prevailing symbolic

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<sup>1</sup> Waldschmidt notes that the cultural turn in disability studies brings in the concept of “dis/ability”: “The introduction of the slash indicates that one should no longer problematize just the category of disability, but rather

structures and institutional practices of producing binaries between categories of normality-deviance, self-other, familiarity-alterity (2017: 25). The processes whereby forms of subjectivity and identities come into being thus require reflection. The cultural turn in disability studies attempts to address these questions by viewing ‘dis/ability’ in its cultural and social forms. The focus on patterns of meaning attributed to human bodies, the manner in which they are interpellated, and the material consequences of this interpellation shows the path towards an interrogation of cultural products such as films, television serials, or web serials, and the strategies of representation they employ.

Taking as its primary focus Guillermo del Toro’s *The Shape of Water* (2017), this essay intends to examine the representation of disabled women and their sexuality in cinema. In order to read through the social and cultural production of what constitutes dis/ability, this essay will take the film as an instance, delving into its intertexts and generic<sup>2</sup> antecedents. Further, this paper will also attempt to interrogate the nature of the film as trans-generic, blurring the boundaries between horror, science fiction, fantasy, and fairytale.

While physical disabilities appear onscreen in numerous ways, disabled women are usually depicted either as evil and/or non-sexual beings, or passive recipients of sexual violence and aggression. It is only in the generic realms outside the mainstream that they appear as actively desiring subjects. The relegation of this dangerous discourse (Shildrick 1) to such ‘lower’ or body genres indicates the anxiety elicited by an engagement with disability, and the critique this poses to stable understandings of subjectivity, sexuality, and organized social relations. Keeping this in mind, it would be fruitful to examine what it is that the genre allows. If

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the interplay between ‘normality’ and ‘disability’” (2017: 25). Rogers and Swadener in their volume on Semiotics and Dis/ability further argue that the use of “dis/ability” foregrounds the multiple markedness of the “dis”, allowing the reader to appreciate the otherwise obscured ground of “ability”, setting into motion a consideration of multiple relative abilities. For further discussion on the use of “dis/ability” or “(dis)ability” as indicative of an entire system of references to the field of disability-ability, and “disability” to refer to specific instances of the same, see Rogers, J. Linda, and Beth Blue Swadener, *Semiotics and Dis/ability: Interrogating Categories of Difference* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), and Schalk, Sami, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018) respectively. For the purposes of this paper, however, the term “disability” will be used to refer to Elisa’s specific experience of disability in *The Shape of Water*.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Genre’ and its derivative ‘generic’ are used in this paper to refer specifically to the understanding of ‘film genre’ as a concept used in the study of cinema. As Altman writes, “genre” is a complex concept with multiple meanings. It stands in for a formula that programmes industry production; a structure on which individual films are founded; a label intended to communicate to distributors and exhibitors; and as a contract, that is, the viewing position required by each genre film of its audience (14). For a more nuanced debate around the concept of genre and its inherent contradictions in film theory, see Altman, Rick, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), and Neale, Steve, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2005).

it is a troubling other to the mainstream, can it be mined for empowering representations of disabled women's sexuality?

Finally, this paper will aim to read the filmic texts at hand through the cultural model of dis/ability. Addressing the intersectional nature of dis/ability, race, ethnicity, and gender through *The Shape of Water* and other film texts, it shall test the possibility of an epistemological shift: the creation of a new language to address desire and disability.

### 1. Are Disabled Identities Produced?

In "Feminist Disability Studies", Rosemarie Garland-Thomson brings disability studies in conversation with feminism, insisting that disability be read not as a lack, flaw or an excess. Instead, seeing disability as a "cultural interpretation of human variation" (Garland-Thomson, 2005: 1557) allows it to be understood as a contingent category, one that is open to contestation. According to Garland-Thomson, the important intervention made by feminist disability studies is the understanding of disability itself as similar to race and gender, a system of representation that marks bodies as subordinate.

The question that must be asked in this light, however, is why such a theorization may be productive. As Ellen Samuels notes, by virtue of its status as a system of representation, the very conceptualization of disability entails its imbrications in larger political and economic formations (Samuels, 2014: 11). Any community is consolidated through a process of exclusion of certain identities marked as other, and it is in the interest of a practice of inclusive politics to open up the formation of such community to further elaboration.

The field of inquiry opened up by feminist disability studies examining the overlapping nature of identities and their constructions with regard to race, gender, and sexuality is at the edge of this elaboration. In understanding what Samuels terms as 'fantasies of identification' (2014: 2), the nature in which bodies or subjectivities are defined as 'normal' or other becomes exposed and open to opposition. What is interesting to note here is Samuels's insistence that these fantasies of identification merge imagination and the real "through desire" (2014:3); a desire that manifests in material effects on actual people's bodies and lives. While the material consequences of these identification(s) are hotly contested in wide-ranging fields, it is of importance to this paper to note the central role of desire in the 'making real' of these fantasies.

### 2. Desire and the 'Monstrous' Other: The Disabled Woman and Sexuality on Screen

Systems of representation function through an economy of desire, therefore, but this desire is not often placed in the hands of the ‘represented’. In most cultural products, as Garland-Thomson notes, in contrast to normatively feminine women, women with disabilities are stereotyped as undesirable, asexual, and unsuitable as partners. In a great deal of representation, they are also depicted as passive victims of sexual aggression, with the perpetrators more often than not casting him/herself (though the aggressor is typically male) in the role of a benevolent sexual partner who does a ‘favour’ to the victim who is otherwise perceived as undesirable.

This is why, to a number of critics and spectators, del Toro’s *The Shape of Water*, though problematic, created a marked difference in representational practices around the desiring disabled woman on screen. Kristen Lopez, a disabled film critic who writes extensively on pop-culture and cinema and argues for better, more inclusive representation, argues that the majority of disabled narratives in the mainstream focus on women. Strong disabled women with agency and an active sexuality are primarily to be found in the horror genre, and Lopez lauds *The Shape of Water* for breaking down barriers about sex and disability by placing an openly sexual disabled woman at the forefront of a ‘mainstream’ Hollywood film<sup>3</sup>(Lopez, 2021). In the first few moments of the film, we see Elisa Esposito, the mute protagonist of *The Shape of Water*, masturbating in her bath-tub as part of her morning routine. According to Lopez, this sequence “removes the presumed barriers that separate people with disabilities from the able-bodied.” While this may be an overtly optimistic reading of the film, this scene opens up a consideration of the nature of representation of female desire in the film. This scene has been read as gratuitous by some, but a study of the use of visuality in it reveals more.

*The Shape of Water* tells the story of Elisa Esposito, a young mute woman who works as a cleaner at a government laboratory during the Cold War. She leads a strictly routine life that changes dramatically when she meets a mysterious humanoid amphibian captured by the

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<sup>3</sup> Other examples Lopez and other critics such as Jess Jasper Blair and Cara Buckley cite for their inclusive representation of disabled women as active agents include *Hush* (2016), in which a D/deaf woman defends herself against a killer, *Curse of Chucky* (2013) and its sequel, with the protagonist shown as a sexual woman capable of looking after herself, and *Planet Terror* (2017), which includes a scene where the formerly abled (now disabled) female protagonist and her lover engage in sexual activity. For more, see Blair, Jess Jasper, “Changing the Narrative- Disabled Women Dismantling Harmful Horror Tropes”, *Screen Queens*, July 23, 2019, <https://screen-queens.com/2019/07/23/disabled-women-dismantling-harmful-horror-tropes/>, Accessed 27 April, 2022. Also see Buckley, Cara, “Scary Is How You Act, Not Look, Disability Advocates Tell Filmmakers”, *The New York Times*, Nov 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/17/movies/witches-movie-disability.html>, Accessed 27 April, 2022.

American state from a South American river<sup>4</sup>. The sequence in question begins with Elisa looking at visible red scars on her neck in the mirror. There is no disappointment on her face, just a calm regard, before she undresses. The spectator is shown one shot of her naked back and legs as she steps into the bathtub, and a brief frontal shot of her breasts before the camera moves away to focus on the timer she places on the basin. She then proceeds to masturbate, an activity treated by the camera as mundanely as her other routine acts of boiling an egg for breakfast. While it cannot be said that the scene does not participate in a voyeuristic gazing at the sexualized body of the female actor on screen, it also disrupts the economy of the gaze to some extent even before the spectator is apprised of the specific nature of Elisa's disability<sup>5</sup>- her body is not presented as a 'smooth' object of desire, but as one marked by a visible violence. This already opens up a gap within the narrative of the film. According to Garland-Thomson, disability confounds any notion of a stabilized and generalizable physical identity (2005: 24). The resistance of disability to identification and the inherent incoherence of the category is introduced into the narrative with this initial sequence that disrupts spectatorial expectations by presenting Elisa's body as occupying a liminal position between passive-active, sexual-aseual, and desirable-undesirable.

The use of masturbation in this sequence has been read by some critics of the film as testifying to Elisa's isolation, an ableist comment on her not having a sexual partner simply by virtue of her disability. This cannot be denied as a possible reading of the film. Neither can one claim with a great degree of certainty that this sequence is not meant for participation in a libidinal economy whereby the spectator is invited into a masquerade, with a wink as it were, indicating the able-bodied (desirable) female actor in her role as disabled as an object of desire engaging in autoerotic stimulation for the purposes of titillation. In an article on the 'myth of feminine pleasure', Jen Corrigan notes:

Compared to the incredible publicness of the female body in television, film, and other mediums dominated by the male gaze, the sexual wants of women are relatively unexplored, particularly transwomen, queer women, women of color, and disabled women; either these women are

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<sup>4</sup> The film also later explains the story of Elisa's own origin: she was found abandoned as an infant with the wounds already on her neck by the side of a river. From the very start, thus, her affinity with the Fish Man/God is established by the narrative.

<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that at this point in the film, there has been no indication of Elisa's disability apart from these wounds; it is only when she speaks in sign language to her neighbour that the audience is let into the secret of why the narrator dubs her "the princess without voice."

completely fetishized or portrayed as non-sexual, with little middle ground. At both ends of the dichotomy, these women's respective autonomies and complexities are disregarded. The only time women's bodies are kept secret is when it comes to our desire.

[Corrigan, 2018]

In this context, therefore, the sequence, as well as the film itself, creates a disruption. In my reading of the scene, Elisa's sexuality is not shown as a repressed, and therefore, destructive irrupting force. On the other hand, in this scene as well as others, her sexuality is shown to have something of the 'magical', much like the healing qualities (accompanied by the ability to wound) that the Fish Man/God she falls in love with harbours.

This links to yet another cognate quality Elisa shares with the 'monster' she falls in love with- not only are they both other to the repressively ordered human society they are depicted in, they are both of ambiguous sexual identification. While Elisa is depicted as a disabled character capable of sexual desire, she also occupies the position of woman. Through the quintessential horror narrative concerning women's sexuality, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Hollinger argues that the woman is in the place of an implicit identification with the monstrous other. Sexually active women, in Hollinger's reading, are usually defined as linked to the alien forces which threaten, in all horror (or fantasy) narratives, from the outside<sup>6</sup> (1989: 107-33). Like the monster, thus, the sexually active woman is an "intertext", inhabiting a position between human and other, mediating between the two in a way which demonstrates the artificiality of an opposition which is *difference* and nothing more. In my analysis of *The Shape of Water*, the monster is positioned as an 'intertext'. However, much of the film fails to follow through on the radical potentiality of the fissure created if Elisa herself were to be read as intertext, occupying a position that opens up an investigation of what constitutes the categories of woman, disabled, desirable, and even, ultimately, human.

Elisa, however, is not the only female figure of interest in the film. The 'monster' of the film's narration, able-bodied, sadistic Col. Strickland has a wife who occupies a role that plays as a foil to Elisa. Beautiful, blonde, and 'pin-up perfect', she is portrayed always in cartoon-like bright colours, indicating her constructed femininity. When she expresses her desire for Strickland, he

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<sup>6</sup> Through Craft's analysis of *Dracula*, Hollinger expands that horror narratives often undertake a metaphorical dramatization of the return of the repressed, an expression of the anxiety of the divided self which has constructed a reality defined through binary oppositions such as inside vs. outside, human vs. alien, masculine vs. feminine. For further detail on the same, see Craft, Christopher. "'Kiss Me With Those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*", *Representations*, 8 (Fall 1984), pp. 107-33.

is both drawn to her and repulsed by her, telling her to be silent so she can stand in for the true object of his desire- the mute Elisa.

Within the horror and fantasy genre, but particularly in the former, Roche notes that “the male Family seems to assert its masculinity of which violence is a central characteristic, by trapping and reifying the feminine” (2014: 84). In light of this argument, the characterization of Strickland’s family becomes clearer. Within the strategies of visual representation adopted in the film, the Strickland home is filled with sickeningly sweet, warm colours. In this, the film’s representational strategy performs an inversion. In comparison to the greens and blues of the other settings in the film, cool colours soothing to the eye and evocative of an underwater setting, the warmth of the Strickland home seems simpering, a false veneer masking a rot at its heart, while the verdant moss and waving seaweed come to be visually pleasing. The warmth of the home resides ultimately in the body of Mrs. Strickland, and the film necessitates that she be read as a figure whose threatening sexuality has been safely confined within the household. Both Elisa and Mrs. Strickland are subject to sexual violence inflicted upon their bodies by Strickland, but the latter’s silencing happens subtly as she is set into the mould of the picture- book 1950s housewife. Both women on opposite ends of the film’s spectrum stand for the same indication: that women and their bodies, in certain framings, and particularly in public spaces, are always transgressive (Russo in Coykendall, 2000: 341).

Placing *The Shape of Water* in conversation with another film-text which depicts a differently abled, ‘extraordinarily bodied’ woman as an agent of sexual desire makes the antecedents of the film clearer. In Brian de Palma’s *Sisters* (1973), a horror narrative focuses on Danielle, a French-Canadian model, who is one of two conjoined twins. The film plays with the spectator’s expectations, the opening confronting the viewer with an elaborate, protracted, yet ironic display of the male gaze, the obscenely voyeuristic leer (Coykendall, 2000: 333). Placing the bond between the two sisters at the centre of the narrative, the film mirrors this bond in the grudging alliance created between Danielle and the woman placed in opposition to her, Grace Collier. Throughout, the film hints towards an autoeroticism for the women involved, a need for a bond that excludes men, creating the space of an ‘other’ jouissance the men are unable to access. In a supposed conversation Danielle has with Dominique, her twin, after she has a sexual interaction with her lover Philip, Dominique claims he “separated” them, leaving unclear whether this ‘he’ refers to her lover, or Emil, the doctor who separated the twins because of his

overwhelming desire for Danielle. In a violent action repeated twice in the film, Danielle/Dominique stabs both Philip and Emil in the groin. The film also opens up, through its exploration of the “morbid fascination” every man seems to harbor for the twins- who are shown in films within the film, even captured voyeuristically on videotape- the idea of the *unheimliche*, or the uncanny, which carries within itself its opposite, or *heimliche*, the ordinary or homely<sup>7</sup>.

In an echo of the previously mentioned construction of dis/ability, as well as queer and normative sexuality, the film openly declares within the documentary videotape, in the voice of the predatory doctor- who bears more than a passing resemblance to images of Freud himself- that Danielle is “so sweet, so responsive, so normal...only...because of her sister”, who is violent and aggressive; the one sustains and conjures into being the other. The threatening image of Dominique, who is an active agent and resists the sexual advances of Emil, continues to reside in the more docile Danielle: as Emil says, he cannot have a ‘normal’ relationship with Danielle because “Every time I made love to you, Dominique came back”. Danielle’s refusal to be a passive object for desire, therefore, is precisely what marks her as threatening, and blocks her from what the documentary- which de Palma clearly presents as ironic- calls an “achievement” of normalcy for conjoined twins; marriage, home, children, and a husband. Because she desires, she becomes the monstrous Dominique, forever remaining a ‘conjoined’ twin even after separation. It is nearly impossible while viewing the film to miss the implications of sexual and gender violence that spill over from the images of a twin ‘cut’ from another in order to mould the body of the woman as desirable- this remains, like in Strickland’s home in *The Shape of Water*, as a horrifyingly large wound on the body of Danielle, who is otherwise presented as feminine and charmingly ‘foreign’.

3. What Genre Allows: Horror, Science Fiction, Fantasy and the Fairytale in *The Shape of Water*  
 Placing *The Shape of Water* in conversation with other texts, filmic or otherwise, necessitates delving into its trans-generic nature as occupying the categories of horror, science fiction, fantasy, and the fairytale. What is it that unites these genres, and why is it that their non-mainstream nature allows for a representation of disabled women or queer sexualities onscreen? In Robin Wood’s structural reading of the horror genre, the narrative is premised upon a binary

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note here that the theme of the double recurs in a number of Brian de Palma’s films. In *Sisters*, it gains particular importance through the director’s self-conscious references to Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*(1958), arguably a film exploring the fatal dangers of obsession and the protagonist’s inability to grapple with the disruption in his desire caused by the double.

opposition of the normal and the monstrous. Feminist readings of the genre, however, permit a more nuanced, open reading. In the realm of psychoanalytical readings, horror has been related to Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, or that "which does not respect borders, positions, rules, that which disturbs identity, system, order" (Grant, 2010: 4). In Grant, Linda Williams notes that melodrama, porn and horror constitute 'body genres' due to their intimate relation to the body and the affective nature of how these genres function and are received by spectators (Grant, 2010: 4). According to Williams, these low status genres of the "spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion", aiming to elicit a visceral viewing response, challenged theories of gendered spectatorship as either active or passive, sadist or masochistic (Koivunen: 100).

While this paper will return to address the question of spectatorship in a further section, this disruptive tendency of 'body genres' is indicated in literary texts that precede many of these filmic narratives: the work of H.P. Lovecraft, whose ruminations on race, disability, and gender provide fertile ground for the investigation of these ideas. As Thacker notes, through Lovecraft one can note that 'horror is a non-philosophical attempt to think about the world-without-us philosophically' (Sederholm and Weinstock, 2016: 6). By privileging a world without human beings, or positing that such a world existed, Lovecraft's cosmicism deflates human pretensions to mastery and creates the space for a profound anti-anthropocentrism. Such a tendency is also visible in Grant's reading of the horror genre specifically in Tod Browning's film *Freaks* (1932)<sup>8</sup>, which depicted the so-called 'freaks' as more humane than the able-bodied, anticipating the reinterpretation of the monstrous that would characterize many horror films from the 1960s onwards (Grant, 2010: 7). In relation to the sexually active woman occupying the position of a monstrous figure within the narrative threatening its coherence, it is apparent why what Creed terms as the "monstrous-feminine" finds its home in horror movies. This gendering need not be conservative, and it is my argument that *The Shape of Water* indicates a radical potentiality for the body that is othered as female, disabled, and sexually active to be read as empowering.

The participation of the film in the science fiction genre- even though it enacts a complex 'going back in time' as opposed to the usual projection into the future necessitated by the genre brings this potentiality closer. Lars Schmeink argues through Csicsery-Ronay that as our

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<sup>8</sup> The film has also attracted positive criticism for its rare (even to this date) cast of characters, wherein the 'freaks' were portrayed by people who worked as sideshow performers and were disabled actors as well.

contemporary world undergoes daily transformations via the development of technoscience, science fiction has come to be seen as an essential mode of imagining the horizons of possibility (Schmeink, 2016: 19). Csicsery-Ronay uses the term ‘science fictionality’ to refer to not only the genre of aesthetic entertainment, but the pervasion of science fiction into our contemporary experience of the world; a crossing between aesthetic, imaginary conceptions and historical, material reality, concerning itself with the blurring of borders. In this characteristic, it bears, as Schmeink indicates, a close relationship with colonial or imperialist implications (Schmeink, 2016: 30): World Fairs such as the Great Exhibition of 1851 are essentially science-fictional spaces of the uncanny modern, a collapsing of space-time that is the necessary corollary of the colonial event. Science fiction, Hollinger argues, also has the additional function of a “domestication of the fantastic”, which *keeps the outsider on the outside* (Hollinger, 1989: 145).

This blurring of boundaries leads us to the other textual implications of *The Shape of Water*, namely, its engagement with myths and fairytales<sup>9</sup>. Like myths, fairytales are characterized by their repetitive motifs, reliance on archetypes, and most importantly, by their lack of a point of origin or a source text. Due to this quality of fairytales, they lend themselves to multiple revisions and versions, allowing the text to take on polyphonic qualities, and inviting the reader to tease out the subtext(s). With their dubious origin, fairytales perform the function of desecration, making impure, bringing into the text an excess that often cannot be contained within it.

It is this characteristic of being both inside and outside, a narrative constructed at its own limit, that allows fairytales to lend themselves to becoming ‘practical fantasy’. This allows for an unraveling of the process by which meanings get written on bodies. Such an unraveling is of specific interest with regard to feminist narratives and their engagement with the cultural and historical constructions of gendered, ethnic, racial, or disabled bodies. In a 1991 article on Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Marina Warner points out, moreover, the “genuine attempt of the fairy tale, sometimes, to face up to the complicated character of the female erotic impulse.” In her reading of the various inter-texts of the eponymous tale the film is based on, she

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<sup>9</sup> In an interview with Steffi Cao, Guillermo del Toro indicates the reason for his choice to place the story in America during the Cold War, saying “it is the last fairy tale time in America- a time in which America kind of dreams itself into what we conceive as the modern America.” He calls *The Shape of Water* later in the same interview “a fairy tale for troubled times.” For the full interview, see Cao, Steffi, “Marginalized identity in ‘The Shape of Water’: Q&A with Guillermo del Toro”, *The Michigan Daily*, November 27, 2017, <https://www.michigandaily.com/michigan-in-color/qa-guillermo-del-toro-marginalized-identity-shape-water/>, Accessed 25 April, 2022.

also emphasizes cinema's close relation to the fairy-tale: "Cinema, like fairy-tale illustration, *has to display the Beast* (the word monster, interestingly derives from the Latin monstrare, to show)" (emphasis mine) (Warner, 1991). *The Shape of Water* thus participates in this interweaving in its implicit and explicit references to fairytale structures and the female erotic impulse.

Elisa in *The Shape of Water* wears a bright red coat both after she has been sexually intimate with the creature for the first time, and later when she sinks into the water with him, indicating her sexual activity and agency. The choice of colour is not coincidental; the red of Red Riding Hood's cloak carries associations of menstruation, blood, and sexuality, and the agency of the woman in claiming this inscription of nature.

It is fruitful to note here that women or young girls in fairytales by virtue of their liminal status often occupy the place of the Derridean understanding of foreigner, stranger, and abroad as coming together in the word 'l'etranger' (Dufourmantelle, 2000: 3). In Derrida's reading of Plato, the stranger questions the authority of the logos, demonstrating its inherent contradictions. Elisa's figure is thus marked, again, with 'foreignness', allying her to the creature found by Strickland in the "muck" of a "South American river", an indigenous god who carries into the film implications of ethnocide and cultural genocide.

The creature from the depths also bears resemblance to accounts of aquatic people or mer-people<sup>10</sup>. Berger notes that mermaids (female) emerged as a clear emblem of carnal temptation by the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Hayward, 2017: 9). Hayward connects the emergence of the mermaid figure in the 1600s-1800s to the colonization of parts of Africa, and North and South America by a number of European powers. However, while interweavings and syncretic pairings with other similar semi-human entities have taken place, it is Hayward's argument that the durability of the myth is premised on the female nature of the creature.

The mermaid therefore stands for what Hayward points out as a fascination with her otherness that leads either to a voyeuristic objectification of the passive female figure and the attendant characterization of the active or desiring female as threatening to the patriarchal order. Mermaids also stand for a 'dysphoric' identification of their own bodies whereby they are

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<sup>10</sup> Within the field of cinema, Kristen Lopez notes that *The Shape of Water* takes off from yet another generic antecedent: *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), where an amphibious 'Gill-Man' falls in love with the beautiful white woman Kay. For further discussion of this trope, see Lopez, Kristen, "A Brief History of Disability in Horror: From FREAKS to THE SHAPE OF WATER", *Fangoria*, March 26, 2021, <https://www.fangoria.com/original/a-brief-history-of-disability-in-horror/>, Accessed 28 April, 2022.

represented as understanding themselves to be human, and suffering when they realise they are not, or ‘less than’. Repeatedly, the mermaid is linked to non-normative bodies, even to queerness, with the phallic implications of the long, muscular tail, and her threatening nature that draws men to their deaths. Her body intensifies the contradictions of the woman as phallus-highly sexualized but completely unattainable by virtue of being a (necessary) fantasy (Hayward, 2017: 15) for the functioning of the impossible sexual relationship or sexual difference. Luce Irigaray, interestingly, reads the mermaid as a stage or a delay in woman’s access to the divine, or, rather, to *the imagination and consequent embrace of a divine entity that embodies all that is female and that can allow women to establish their own* (Hayward, 2017: 16) (emphasis mine).

What does this indicate about Elisa’s position in the film? Her affinity to water is frequently indicated in the film, and her hair in these sequences is mermaid-like, swirling and seductive in the water. One critic even reads this as her being perhaps “fish-person” herself (Tassi, 2018), a reading which should not be dismissed out of hand in light of the above observations. Could we read her embrace of the sexually ambiguous fish creature- which she has to assert to her friend, has a hidden phallus- as an embrace of divinity that allows her to establish her own subjectivity?

Further, this connection of Elisa to mermaids opens up a means to study the film’s indulgence in fantasy, not just in the generic, but also in the psychoanalytic sense. As Bainbridge writes through Judith Mayne, fantasy makes clear the movement of a subject between a range of positions, such that sex/gender boundaries become “resolutely unfixed” (Bainbridge, 2008: 79).

The potential of fantasy, therefore, is in this unmooring of gender and sexual boundaries. The spectator is invited into thinking difference through formations and structures that can slide across and explore the slippages of sexual difference. This creates the space for the thinking of femininity through Irigaray’s conceptions of ‘masquerade’ and ‘mimicry’. Within the latter, the woman deliberately assumes the feminine style and posture assigned to her within patriarchal discourse in order to uncover the mechanisms by which it exploits her. Even if we cannot argue that Elisa occupies this radical position, her assuming of a position of disabled, desiring woman opens up a space of mimicry. Positing both these identities, as well as her identity as a racial Other, Elisa’s character creates a fissure that positions subjectivity as in process, in flux, always *becoming*.

This receives additional complexity with the spectator's understanding that Elisa is played by Sally Hawkins, an able-bodied actor. She is, then, what Fjellman's analysis of Disney World presents as a 'fake fake' the nondisabled actor who performs disability with the audience's knowledge that it is a performance (Samuels, 2014: 69). As Samuels notes perspicaciously, the hauntingly present absence of real-real disability persists in all such depictions. Their radical potential is always limited, and "portrayals of ambiguous identification are only tolerable if contained", as they are by the sequence in *The Shape of Water* where Elisa sings and dances with the creature, letting the audience know comfortably that the actor, unlike the character, is able-bodied.<sup>11</sup>

Other texts in visual media have disturbed this idea much further, even within the mainstream. The big-budget television serial *American Horror Story* in its fourth season titled *Freak Show* purposely employed actors with differently abled bodies, such as the performance artist and actor Mat Fraser, Jyoti Amge, and transwoman Erika Erwin. Interestingly, the show also has able-bodied Sara Paulson play the roles of Bette and Dot, conjoined twins who carry echoes of de Palma's *Sisters*. As one of the few able-bodied actors on the show, Paulson plays a character who repeatedly dreams of being "separate and whole", having "a chance at happiness" away from her sister. The casting of actors such as Mat Fraser, on the other hand, was lauded. As Mat Fraser says in an interview, he is happy to be a radically different person on stage, entertaining with his radical difference (AHSPL). He proudly notes: "I'm a freak, and I'm an actor, and I'm a freak actor playing a freak actor, and it's awesome". He emphasizes in his interview that he hopes this role would help him be cast in other, dissimilar roles not focusing exclusively on this difference.

Who is being represented on screen as disabled, therefore, becomes a matter for contention, and Hawkins's portrayal of a disabled person on screen has to be read in this light, whereby the undertone of 'mimicry' in her performance as actor is paradoxically both empowering and limiting.

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<sup>11</sup> Numerous critics have written about the tendency within Hollywood referred to as 'cripping up', whereby a non-disabled actor plays disabled characters. Not only does this limit opportunities for actors who are disabled, it also leads to a lack of respectful and empathetic stories about disabled people. Authors like Natalie Duerr point out the need for filmmaking practices to involve more disabled people as not just actors, but crew members as well. For a detailed discussion on the institutional challenges faced by disabled actors in formal training due to the very nature of actor training methods aimed at abled people, see Carrie Sandahl, "The Tyranny of Neutral: Disability and Actor Training", where she explains how the appropriate actor's body for any character, even a character that is literally disabled or symbolically struggling, is not only the abled body, but also the extraordinarily able body (2005: 262).

#### 4. What Does Representation Mean? Moving Towards an Epistemological Shift

*The Shape of Water* opens with a shot that is undeniably Lovecraftian in its evocation of a green and blue tinted grotto, densely vegetated and deep in the depths of the sea. Yet the structure, overgrown with moss, already evokes the uncanny sense of a fairytale, as we see a decidedly modern corridor with doors, a telephone, and an electric light- unmistakable markers of anthropocentric modernity. The entire building, with its floating above-land accoutrements of chairs, tables, and lights appears as a shipwreck, an inversion at the very beginning of the film. The narrative continues in aural form this visual inversion as the narrator speaks of a “tale of love and loss, and the monster that tried to destroy it all”, referring, of course, to Strickland.

This undeniable link of the narrative to modernity indicates the material consequences that come with representational practices that manifest themselves in cultural products. With regard to disabled bodies, it is crucial to remember the connections to modern identificatory practices. Through Foucault, Samuels argues that the linking of body, text, and state has important ramifications for the body read as non-normative, since it is connected to the fixing of normative, standardized human bodies within discursive formations. Samuels argues that fantasies of identification evolve from imagined or staged relationships in cultural products in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to their 21<sup>st</sup> century realization as a highly institutionalized regulatory structure (2014: 9). In comparison to the 19<sup>th</sup> century concern regarding the consolidation of the modern nation-state, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized by a similar instability of identity. 19<sup>th</sup> century practices of the ‘scientific’ identification of people of colour in order to naturalize racial difference and thus place it outside the realm of human control is echoed in the timeline of *The Shape of Water* in Strickland’s desire to vivisect the creature. Disability here thus becomes disruptive to this drive towards eugenics, confounding as it does notions of stabilized identity.

Mitchell and Snyder note that disabled subjectivities create new forms of embodied knowledge and collective consciousness (2015). These are ‘queer’ or deviant identities, representing discordant functionalities and outlaw sexualities. The film as an instance, though it holds up these possibilities, ultimately fails this potentiality, upholding the heterosexuality of the romance that develops at its centre.

Even though the creature is sexually ambiguous, a clear line can be drawn from the film to neoliberal politics of ‘inclusion’ that are imbricated in biopolitical forms of exclusion. As Sara Ahmed argues, the promise of diversity within neoliberal capitalism is a problem inasmuch as it

is a sign of inclusion that makes signs of exclusion disappear. Certain limited forms of inclusion only reify the inherent value of existing heteronormative social relations. The need to regulate flows in late capitalism extends to the need to regulate the flow of desire as well, and this is nowhere more apparent than in cinema. The figure of the villain in the film here is not the only one culpable- he is an overtly villainized character in a fairytale structure, the Big Bad Wolf of the state against which Elisa's ultimately failed rebellion can be staged. How do we read the figure of del Toro as working within the structures of one of the largest money-making industries of global capitalism? It is here that one must locate the re-imposition of structures of heteronormativity, which are not necessarily part of fantasy's narrative tendencies.

The setting of the film in the 1950s thus becomes a problem. Mitchell and Snyder elaborate the manner in which the changing representational approach towards disabled people entails that a prior cultural moment's practices of institutionalization, prohibition, and stigmatization are resolved by allowing them to lapse into the distance of a bygone era (2015). Dr. Anne-Marie Callus cautions the spectator in an interview addressing *The Shape of Water* that the setting of the film in the 1950s allows "the film-maker to bring in overt examples of ableism, sexism, racism, classism and homophobia. There is the danger of 21st century cinemagoers smugly patting themselves on the back, thinking what a long way we have come from those times – and we have – but we must also remember that these prejudices are often still there, albeit more covertly (and sometimes not so covertly)" (Kurt Borg, 2018). There is a need, therefore, to investigate in more detail the intersections between different types of prejudice that people are subjected to, and the material consequences of these. As she points out, even within the film, subtitling is only used for Elisa's signing and the Russian dialogue, already assuming an audience that can hear and understand spoken English.

Anxieties regarding embodied social identities, as Samuels points out, need to be read in this light. With respect to the construction of the nation-state, Welke's reading of how disability is understood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with immigration, as a "tide" that could swamp the nation (Samuels, 2014: 2) gains relevance. The use of the metaphor and its closeness to eugenics and ideas of the dilution of race and able-bodiedness indicates still further the intertwining of these conceptions. The scientific, often medical framework claimed by these identifications move into a legitimation that creates discursive formations influencing law, policy, and representation. They continue, Samuels argues, to persist in the cultural realm and provoke

resistance and dis-identification from subjects attempting to escape the fantasy's totalizing imposition of identity. It is here that the hard kernel of the film lies- the question of endogamy.

Race, gender, and disability, are all perceived as closed categories. The rupture that their intersection creates in the film narrative poses a problem, and it is necessary to use this to create a field of inquiry regarding larger questions of representational practices that surround non-normative bodies. The intertexts of Lovecraftian nightmare and horror emerge now with greater clarity, gesturing towards the 'secret' those texts carry- the horrifying sexuality of the desiring woman in Lovecraft's fiction is connected to the horror of miscegenation and cultural decline (Mieville in Simmons, 2013: 4). The monstrous feminine in Lovecraftian fiction, significantly, produce offspring who are spawned from intermixing with fish people. This link is strikingly brought up in the film narrative and dialogue, particularly bringing together discourses of race, gender and disability, when Strickland tells Eliza's black co-worker Zelda that God looks "like humans, like me, even you...A little more like me, I guess."<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps a productive reading of the film as an instance would therefore be to brush it against its grain, employing what Munoz notes as disidentification, or the rethinking of representation in a cultural text to expose its exclusionary machinations, thus accounting for and including minority identities and identifications (Samuels, 2014: 149).

How, then, to 'disidentify'? Fantasies of identification are predicated, importantly, on an epistemology of visibility. Language becomes the means by which fantasy attempts to close this gap even as language also functions to signify the multiplicity of cultural responses to its existence. In this context, I would like to bring up one of the most quoted and deeply criticized dialogues from the film where Elisa addresses her desire and her disability:

What am I? I move my mouth like him. I make no sound, like him. What does that make me? All that I am, all that I've ever been, brought me here, to him." "When he looks at me, the way he looks at me, he does not know that I lack, or how I am incomplete. He sees me for what I am, as I am. He's happy to see me, every time, every day.

Instead of reading this as simply a matter of Elisa expressing what critics<sup>13</sup> have understood to be an ableist understanding of disability as lack, I would like to brush the text

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<sup>12</sup> The implication Strickland makes is that God is white, male, and presumably able-bodied, as he is.

<sup>13</sup> Elsa Sjunesson-Henry, the deafblind speculative fiction writer, editor and disability activist passionately writes of how the film makes her feel 'less human'; that this dialogue, the most heart-wrenching one to directly address

against its grain in order to gesture towards a new epistemology and eventually, a change in language. Dillon notes that Cary Wolfe observes how questions of the relationship between humans, animals, and the problem of ethics have turned decisively on the problem of cognition and, even more specifically in the modern and postmodern period, on the capacity for language (Dillon, 2011: 134). The lack of language seems to indicate the lack of subjectivity, and thus discards the need for an ethical relationship. This is precisely what occurs in *The Shape of Water*.

What science fiction creates the possibility for is an interrogation of the relationship between the human and nonhuman. I would posit that the most productive reading of the film would be to position Elisa within this positive potentiality, creating the space for Laura U. Marks and Vivian Sobchack's theorization of such texts to promote a mutual permeability and a mutual creation of self and other (Koivunen: 105). By understanding the barrier between human and animal not as one of possession of language, but one created by language, the communication between Elisa and the creature in the film receives new light. Elisa thus becomes transformed, as she is in the end when she sinks into the water with her new 'gills', becoming-animal or non-human even in the bodily sense. The bodily nature of the film's genre thus comes to the fore, creating, in Marks' terms "a sense experience in cinema not to seek a primordial state of sensory innocence, but to find culture *within* the body" (Koivunen: 105). Ultimately then, viewing and reading become embodied, affective practices, gesturing not towards a dismissal of questions of representation, but an epistemological field wherein these theoretical understandings can engage in a productive dialogue engendering 'new' language.

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**About the author:** Madhubanti De is a researcher at the Tuli Research Centre for India Studies, New Delhi, India. A Masters graduate from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, she has previously worked as an assistant editor at Cinemaazi, a digital encyclopedia of Indian cinema. Her research interests include gender studies, protest and social movements, and cinematic, theatrical, and performance arts. She has presented papers on the politics of sexuality and performance, as well as the intersection of history, performativity, and media at various national conferences. Her paper "Two Bodies of the Birangana: The Politics of Representation and Women in Public Memory" has been published in the anthology *Gender: Constructions, Connotations and Representations*, edited by Sudeshna Chakravorty. Her article titled "Merchant Ivory's India: Colonial Legacies and Expatriate Desires", co-authored with

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Elisa's disability, seems to imply that the Fish-Man/God desires Elisa only because he does not know how to interpret Elisa as 'lacking'. For the full article, see Sjunesson-Henry, Elsa, "[I Belong Where the People Are: Disability and The Shape of Water](https://www.tor.com/2018/01/16/i-belong-where-the-people-are-disability-and-the-shape-of-water/)", *Tor.com*, January 16, 2018, <https://www.tor.com/2018/01/16/i-belong-where-the-people-are-disability-and-the-shape-of-water/>, Accessed 27 April, 2022.

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