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Talking about the shape of water: Three women dip their toes in

Alison Wilde, Gill Crawshaw and Alison Sheldon.

Abstract

This article is about a film called 'The Shape of Water' by Guillermo del Toro, which was released in 2017 and won the Best Picture award at the 2018 Oscars. The three authors of this article, all friends, had each enjoyed *The Shape of Water*, so went for a second viewing together. Our enjoyment had been somewhat at odds with criticisms of the film, mostly made by other members of the disabled people's community/disabled academics. After seeing the film again, we found it to be a ground-breaking portrayal of a disabled woman. This article is a summary of the discussion which ensued.

Our discussion of *The Shape of Water* is a current issue because we found ourselves disagreeing with, and questioning, a number of complaints about the representation of disability and impairment within the film. At a time when the film industry is making noises about inclusion it is important that we know what we are asking for, and avoid demands which may be counterproductive to the cultural recognition of disabled people. This film is still being shown in cinemas in the UK and elsewhere.

Keywords: Disabled women, cinema, impairment-matching, human, pleasure, subjectivity

For your guidance: *The main characters discussed are Elisa and Amphibian Man (romantic leads), Richard Strickland (head of Occam Aerospace Research Centre in Baltimore, Elisa's workplace), Zelda (Elisa's co-worker and friend), and Giles (Elisa's friend and neighbour).*

The Shape of Water is the best, and most beautiful film I've ever seen about a disabled woman. I was surprised then to read critiques of the film by disabled people who feel very differently. Alison and Gill (also fans) decided to join me to watch the film for a second time. This article is based on the discussion we had afterwards – an unstructured romp through some of the key issues that the film raised for each of us. We will focus on agency, sexuality and fertility – often highlighted as key themes for disabled women – before considering the film's treatment of eugenics, impairment and cure, and what it really means to be human. Finally, the thorny issue of casting will be briefly touched on.

The main reason we love this film is because it depicts a disabled woman who has agency and whose actions change her life and those of the people closest to her. We all agreed that Elisa Esposito (Sally Hawkins) confounds preconceptions and shows leadership and determination. This is a strong woman who knows what she wants and what is right. Very early on in the film we witness her sexual desire, and its links to the world of water, including brief masturbatory moments in the bath. This part of her routine is timed to correspond with the boiling of eggs for her break at work, and with it, the film's recurrent themes of sexuality and fertility are made inseparable. We see many more references to eggs throughout the story. This perhaps signifies

fertile ground for the relationship she finds with the humanoid 'Amphibian-Man' (played by Doug Jones) who is imprisoned in the government research facility where she works as a cleaner. It may also hint at the 'rebirth' that Elisa and Amphibian-Man find when released into the ocean at the film's close.

Amphibian-Man was stolen from South America where he was considered a river god by the human inhabitants. His North American captors consider him a monster, an 'affront', and a valuable source of knowledge in the Cold War. He is held in a section of the building labelled 'T4' – undeniably a reference to the Nazi programme Aktion T4. Like those in the tests and mass murders of Aktion T4, Amphibian-Man is designated solely as an 'asset' for experimentation and eventual extermination. He is a 'useless eater', a life deemed unworthy of life. The violence of the scientific, technological and political regime at T4 is embodied in the figure of Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon). Strickland is quite clearly the real monster of the story – a predatory, misogynist, racist who is brutal to all around him, subjecting Amphibian-Man to torture and planning his vivisection. In this tale, gods, humans and monsters are judged not by appearances but by their actions. When Elisa's friend Giles (Richard Jenkins) complains that Amphibian-Man is not even human, Elisa replies 'if we do nothing, neither are we..'.'

Elisa is powerfully drawn to Amphibian-Man, even though her (and our) first sight of him is limited to his webbed hand banging against the tank in which he arrives. Secretly, in defiance of Strickland and the authorities, Elisa then enters T4 and coaxes Amphibian-Man to the surface of the pool by leaving an egg within his reach, winning his trust despite his initial fear and hostility, and cementing the twin themes of sexuality and fertility. Clearly, the way to an amphibian's heart is through his stomach. Later, Giles explains the root of the

word “tantalise”, taken from the Greek myth of Tantalus who was forced to stand in a pool of water yet doomed to a life where both food and drink were always just beyond his reach. Elisa may be tantalised and mesmerised by her glimpse of Amphibian-Man, but she gains control to prevent the object of her desire being snatched from her.

While Elisa Esposito’s humanity is never in question, after our second viewing, we were left wondering if she really *was* completely human. Esposito is an Italian surname thought to derive from the term for ‘placed outside’ or ‘exposed’. Historically it was often given to abandoned children. This works on both literal and metaphorical levels. As an infant, Elisa was found in the river where she had been ‘placed outside’. As an adult with a communication impairment, whose best friends have also experienced racism (Zelda, played by Octavia Spencer) and homophobia (Giles) she found herself ‘placed outside’ mainstream society. Despite some suggestive scarring on Elisa’s neck, we are not told why she cannot, or does not, communicate verbally. We all found ourselves thinking about this, then questioned why it should matter. Few of us appreciate being quizzed about the causes and manifestations of our impairments. Arguably, the decision to withhold such details in the film averts the medical gaze of the viewer, allowing us to focus on the disablement Elisa faces and the way she lives her life.

It might also allow us to reflect on the way that what is and is not a significant impairment is largely determined by context. Is ‘mutism’ Elisa’s most significant impairment or is it her inability to breathe under-water? We are shown three scars on her neck, which opens us up to ideas that her natural home was the water she was found in. The opening credits’ dream sequence, showing her contentedly floating in her home which appears to be at the

bottom of a river, suggest this, along with the almost exclusively bluey-green aquatic palette of the film. Her somewhat melancholic demeanour and designation as outsider underlines imagery which suggests that her human life is one where she is literally 'a fish out of water'. Amphibian-Man's godlike status is demonstrated when he both cures Giles of his baldness and heals a wound on his arm. He makes no attempt to cure Eliza of her mutism, but as they sink into the water in the final scene of the film he touches her scars, which open to reveal the gills she needs for her rebirth in the ocean. As in so many tales of sickness and impairment, she is finally cured.

Given the ambiguity around Elisa's impairment, the dream sequence where she dances and, at first haltingly, then longingly, sings "You'll Never Know" might seem entirely appropriate, especially if we consider the fluidity of impairments (in this case, the possibility of *elective* or *selective* mutism). She enters into this (black and white) daydream when she is experiencing extreme pain from the throes of a seemingly impossible love, and the lack of capacity to express it. I imagine most of us have been there. This sequence has been highlighted as one of the more problematic aspects of the film though, and we didn't all find it equally appropriate. Arguably, for example, it is little different from the much-critiqued dream-sequence in US series *Glee* where Artie (a wheelchair user) is inexplicably able to dance without his mobility aid (Sheppard, 2011).

The most serious criticism of the film has perhaps been that of the portrayal of disabled women as less worthy of love – thus Elisa can only find love with another 'outsider'. She argues in one scene that Amphibian-Man 'doesn't know what I lack. Or how I am incomplete. He just sees me for what I am'. Whilst this reference to her 'less than wholeness' has been interpreted by

some as a problematic statement in a world where portrayals of disabled women as the object of non-disabled people's desire are scant, the issue is not so clear cut. Elisa refuses Strickland's advances, for example, and the fantasy genre of the film adds further complexity. Disabled writer Kim Sauder suggests we don't want to see films which 'romanticise our otherness', but ignoring the social and cultural causes of 'othering' would present alternative difficulties. Elisa's statement about incompleteness can also be seen as an angry criticism of disablism, as a desire for recognition. Rather than demeaning them both, her choice of love for a being defined entirely by his difference, adds to the beauty of the story and sends a strong message about the validity of disabled people's relationships.

One thing all critics seem to agree on is the need to see more disabled actors in films – especially as protagonists. Sally Hawkins has two impairments, but there have been criticisms of her casting on the basis of her poor skills in ASL (Willison, 2018), the need for impairment-matching (Edgar, 2018), and her lack of a 'disabled identity' (Wanshel, 2018). Hawkins's use of ASL (American Sign Language) may have been 'abysmal' (Novic, 2018), but knowing something of Elisa's background, it seems unlikely that she would have become a highly proficient signer. The call for impairment-matching (i.e.: where disabled people are only cast as people with the same impairment) could potentially lead to further marginalisation of disabled actors in an industry dominated by non-disabled people. The important issue here is surely one of discrimination and barriers – things that Hawkins will very probably have experienced as an actor with impairments.

The discomfort about any reluctance or lack of political commitment to claim a disabled identity is perhaps indicative of perceptions that actors should have

experiences of disablement, an impairment which matches the character's, and a specific disabled identity to perform disability authentically. We might be reminded here of the adversarial discussions between Drake, Branfield and Duckett, in *Disability and Society* from 1997-1999, in respect of non-disabled people's involvement, and less valid forms of knowledge in the disabled people's movement and Disability Studies.

Whilst not without its flaws, this is a thought-provoking and strangely-beautiful film that offers us a new kind of disabled heroine. More than any other film with disabled women as leading characters (and there are very few), Elisa's character is defined by her confidence in her sexuality, her interdependent relationships with her friends and colleagues, and her strong subjectivity as an agent of change. This is not just about one disabled woman though. Perhaps the most powerful contribution of this extraordinary film comes in its recognition of the validity of disabled people's lives. Against the ever-present backdrop of eugenics, *The Shape of Water* takes us to the heart of what it means to be human. As the film opens, we are promised a 'tale of love and loss – and the monster who tried to destroy it all'. Here, the sometimes-cartoonish monster is a privileged, white, heterosexual, non-disabled man who is debased by his actions and beliefs. No tears are shed when his 'unworthy' life is ended. Those who are 'placed outside' mainstream society are the higher forms of being here – the 'life *worthy* of life'.

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