# The Sounds Beneath: Dominant Discourses, Silent Voices and Cultural Echoes in *The Shape of Water*

Lucia OPREANU
Ovidius University of Constanţa

**Abstract:** *The paper aims to explore the ways in which the dominant discourse and the more elusive voices of largely silent protagonists mingle and compete in two distinct yet complementary takes on the same story, Guillermo del Toro's 2017 romantic fantasy and Daniel Kraus's 2018 novelization. In addition to contrasting the ambitions driving Richard Strickland, the quintessential white western male, with the mysterious powers animating the narrative's quietest yet most eloquent protagonists (Elisa Esposito and the Amphibian Man / Deus Brânquia), the analysis will focus on an eclectic cast of ostensibly vocal but culturally silenced characters ranging from the failed artist / closeted homosexual to the idealistic scientist / disillusioned Soviet spy, the apparently shallow and materialistic yet insightful and enterprising housewife and the outspoken cleaner, undaunted by the dual challenges of race and gender. Whilst pointing out the various desires, frustrations and obstacles alternately furthering and thwarting each individual's pursuit of happiness, the paper will also endeavor to highlight not only the concrete details of the historical background against which the plot unfolds but also the wider cultural ripples occasioned by Elisa's dreams and actions, in particular the fairy tale echoes blending in with the prosaic landscape of early 1960s America and the myriad of references to literary texts and visual culture pervading cinematic narrative and prose rendition alike.*

**Keywords:** *Guillermo del Toro, intertextuality, Daniel Kraus, marginalization, otherness, plagiarism, silencing*

Since the long-forgotten days of silent film, cinematic productions have relied by definition on increasingly skillful fusions of sound and image, making Guillermo del Toro's tale of rather unconventional star-crossed lovers – a mute cleaner and a mysterious humanoid amphibian – the more compelling given the interdependence of resonance and visibility, their centrality as narrative tropes and the unique strategies used to convey them on screen. Featuring two protagonists who lack the ability to vocalize their thoughts and feelings but can "speak volumes solely through facial expressions and physical gestures" (McIntyre 17), as well as an eclectic cast of side characters whose voices are blurred or suppressed by the often cumulative barriers of race, sexuality, gender, nationality and class, *The Shape of Water* widens and redefines the boundaries of communication and acceptance just as it overcomes the conventional limitations of genre and cultural context. By focusing in almost equal measure on the controversial and multiple-award winning 2017 production and Daniel Kraus's 2018 novelization, the relatively obscure companion piece that not only adds yet another movie tie-in to del Toro's vast range of multi-media projects but provides unexpected insights into the complex inner lives of apparently flat

BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)

characters, the paper aims to further highlight the stunted perceptions accompanying our interactions with flesh-and-blood individuals and fictional constructs alike.

**"I want you in silence."**

Set in 1962 Baltimore, in the autumn of the Rice Stadium moon speech and the Cuban Missile Crisis, at the height of the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement, and advertised by its working subtitle as "A Fairy Tale for Troubled Times", del Toro's harmonious combination of fantasy, romance, spy thriller, science fiction, horror and social commentary not only matches the hybridity of its most elusive protagonist but also establishes a "firm analogy between the social unrest splintering mid-century America" (Harwick) and the variegated anxieties of contemporary life. By mediating the audience's encounter with both familiar social landscapes and an essentially alien creature through Elisa's unprejudiced gaze, del Toro refines a long-standing obsession with "innocent monsters" (Muir 116) that ultimately confront viewers with their own inner darkness and unfounded contempt of difference, hopefully enabling them to acknowledge both the "common oppression of the Other" (Spera) and the multifaceted dimensions of understanding. Indeed, del Toro's "moral critique of American high modernism" is transparent enough that the identity of "the monster who tried to destroy it all" (del Toro, *Shape*) probably becomes clear even to the least observant of viewers within seconds of Colonel Strickland's precipitate arrival at Occam and is repeatedly reinforced as his increasingly deranged one-man crusade distils the "elemental standoff of Straight White Man […] against a surging world" (Lodge) of difference. Oozing "stale white, male, modernist, Christian stereotypes" (Brown) almost as conspicuously as his necrotic fingers leak blood and puss all over his technicolor dream house, Richard Strickland represents "the supposed pinnacle of Western civilization" (Brown), yet his beautiful and submissive wife, lively children, shiny new Cadillac and bright career prospects fail to assuage his myopic obsession with power, prestige and money.

An intimidating champion of the "Loose Lips Sink Ships" wartime mantra kept alive by the numerous propaganda posters covering Occam's walls and more comfortable with an electric cattle prod than with standard interrogation techniques, Strickland spends most of his time perusing the "four-by-four grid of black-and-white monitors" in the windowless security-camera room he has commandeered as an office and goes to considerable lengths to suppress the equally irritating voices of family members – "Shh- Silence. Don't talk. I want you in silence" (del Toro and Taylor 32) – and garrulous colleagues: "You never shut up. Silence. I just want silence" (del Toro and Taylor 105). He has no tolerance or empathy for the Amphibian Man's pained squeals,

> There you are again. Making that god-awful sound. Is that you crying? Is that what it is? You hurting? Huh? Or maybe you're angry? […] I can't tell – Are



BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)

> you begging? 'Cause to me it's just the worst fucking noise I've ever heard. (del Toro and Taylor 40)

and develops an almost pathological fascination with Elisa's muteness: "I don't mind the scars. Don't mind that you can't speak, either. […] When you come right down to it – I like it. A lot" (del Toro and Taylor 59). It could be in fact argued that, much like the powers that be incarnated in General Hoyt and Leo Mihalkov, he mainly aims to suppress the discourse and potential for progress of the Other, even in the absence of a valid paradigm to instate in its stead: "We don't need to learn. We need Americans not to learn. They don't learn, we win" (del Toro and Taylor 56).

The novelization does not only elaborate on Strickland's initially surprising but perfectly logical infatuation with a lowly janitor, but also points to another similarity with the creature he has captured in their equal aversion to light and loud noises: "here's a woman built as if to those specifications. A woman who works in the dark of night. A woman who can't make a peep" (del Toro and Kraus 90); "That's how all women should be. In fact, Elisa strikes him as the natural evolution of the female species: clean, colorful, silent" (del Toro and Kraus 100); "Elisa Esposito must be the only point of silence left in the world" (del Toro and Kraus 148); "Elisa is everything he needs. Quiet. Controllable" (del Toro and Kraus 191). Quite ironically, the prose narrative adds further dimensions to his extramarital yearnings by also expanding Elaine's story beyond its domestic linearity and providing the shallow on-screen housewife with ambitions and initiatives that she is almost afraid to acknowledge: "It sounds like her voice. It feels like her voice, too; her lips feel the plosive pop. But how can such an insubordinate sound come from a woman blinded by Spray 'N Steam vapor, weighed down by a beehive hairdo, deafened by the repetitive thwack of a headboard against a wall?" (del Toro and Kraus 186).

The perilous quest in the Amazon detailed in *Primordium*, the first section of the novel, fuels Strickland's megalomaniac tendencies and encourages him to use language to exert better control over his environment – "What was one of God's first displays of power? To name things. The Jungle-god can name things, too. They become what he wants them to become. Green becomes teal. Deus Brânquia becomes the asset" (del Toro and Kraus 175) – but also requires soul-shattering acts of violence and triggers uncomfortable recollections of questionable war efforts: "The surviving monkeys scream in sorrow, and the sound pins into his skull. […] The screams, Strickland realizes, are just like those of the villagers in Korea" (del Toro and Kraus 27). Strickland's musings feature paradoxical references to the intrinsic censorship of his profession, simultaneously perceived in terms of unbearable noise and deafening silence:

> His memories of Hoyt, all the orders, all the compliments, all the slippery inducements, have been scrubbed of voice. Not mute, not like Elisa, but rather obscured, the same way the redacted words of Hoyt's Deus Brânquia



BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)

> brief had been obscured by black blocks. They sound like long, hard shrieking and look like redactions: **** *** **** ******. (del Toro and Kraus 158)

> Then it was a whisper; now it is a shriek. What he'd done was an atrocity, a war crime that would be on the front page of every paper in the world if it ever got out, and it would fuse him to Hoyt until one of them was dead. Alone in his Occam office, all these years later, Strickland finally understands. The earsplitting wails of Hoyt's redactions—how had he missed the connection? They are the screams of the monkeys, one and the same. All his life, primal voices have pushed him to accept the mantle for which he's been groomed. […] He should have listened to Hoyt all along. The monkeys—don't be scared by their orders. Follow them. (del Toro and Kraus 238)

The insights provided by the novel into key moments of Strickland's past career and the detailed internal monologue accompanying his every textual appearance reveal deep-seated traumas and a chronic insecurity lurking beneath the veneer of arrogant bravado, likely to prompt readers familiar with the film to reassess his status as "effectively hate-able" and "completely predictable, one-dimensional" villain "that merits no sympathy whatsoever" (Brown). The temptation to fully empathize is however held in check by a number of epiphanies, ranging from recognition of the fact that his feelings for his perfect family are entirely proprietorial and entail no desire to establish any kind of human connection – "The kids don't make a sound, either. Neither does Lainie. They're mute. Finally mute. Just the way he wants them" (del Toro and Kraus 270) – to the realization that the pact of silence binding him to General Hoyt boils down to "the worst of army rumors come true, a massacre of Korean innocents" that he helped hush up by disposing of all those that might have lived to tell the tale:

> not all of those dispatched inside of this mine were dead. That was bad for Hoyt. Bad for America. If survivors crawled out and told their story, the US would have a real mess on its hands, wouldn't it? […] Hoyt held a finger to his lips, then waved it around in the rain. It was just the two of them out here. Not too wise to draw attention. Hoyt drew from his belt a black-bladed Ka-Bar knife. He held it out to Strickland and winked. (del Toro and Kraus 237)

It is quite difficult to summon compassion for a man haunted by the cries of his defenseless victims but unmoved by the indigenous screams swallowed by the Amazonian jungle (del Toro and Kraus 14) and countless other displays of grief, and whose ostensible need for Elisa's "soothing silence" (del Toro and Kraus 172) is belied both by his disturbing innuendos – "When you say you're mute... Are you entirely silent? Or do you squawk a little? Some mutes squawk. Not pretty, but –



BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)

[…] Bet I can make you squawk a little" (del Toro and Taylor 59) – and his response to her vehement attempts to convey her opinion of him: "You know, Elisa? For a mute, you talk too much" (del Toro and Taylor 88). An equally appalling reminder of the systemic hypocrisy Strickland encapsulates emerges from his casual dismissal of racial discrimination as a self-inflicted and easy to overcome predicament:

> I think Negroes have a place. I do. At work, in schools, all the same rights as whites. But you people need to work on your vocabulary. You hear yourself? You keep repeating the same words. I fought right next to a Negro in Korea who ended up court-martialed for something he didn't do, because when the judge wanted his story he couldn't say anything but *yes, sir* and *no, sir*. (del Toro and Kraus 68)

**"My real voice."**

Of all the characters who witness the aftermath of Strickland's mutilation, Elisa appears to be the most perturbed, interpreting his plight, as she is wont to do, through the prism of her own impairment: "She uses her own fingers to interact with the world. It's not ridiculous, she thinks, to be frightened by a man at risk of losing his own fingers. She imagines the equivalent in a speaking person and it's horrific" (del Toro and Kraus 92). Strickland's predatory stare and Hoffstetler's awestruck regard ensure that Elisa does not live "her whole life in a blind spot, forgotten by the world" (del Toro and Kraus 139), gliding "unseen, like a fish underwater" (del Toro and Kraus 29), yet the Amphibian Man's intense and guileless scrutiny is the only male gaze that she seems to value or even acknowledge: "The way he looks at me. He doesn't know what I lack... Or how I am incomplete. He just sees me for what I am. As I am. And he is happy to see me, every time. Every day. And now I can either save him now or let him die. Never see his eyes, see me again. I will not let that go..." (del Toro and Taylor 48). Arguably, Elisa's response also owes a lot to the unexpected vulnerability of "the first man-thing she's known who is more powerless than herself" (del Toro and Kraus 97), her recognition of their underlying sameness – "I move my mouth – like him – and I make no sound – like him. What does that make me?" (del Toro and Taylor 48) – and the consequent determination to establish the kind of connection invariably missing from her lackluster romantic experiences:

> Men meet a woman who's mute, they take advantage of her. Never once on a date did a man ever try to communicate, not really. They just grabbed, and took, as if she, voiceless as an animal, *was* an animal. (del Toro and Kraus 12)
>
> She knows that she's been the thing in the water before. She's been the voiceless one from whom men have taken without ever asking what she wanted. She can be kinder than that. She can balance the scales of life. She



BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)

> can do what no man ever tries to do with her: communicate. (del Toro and Kraus 93)

The prose narrative reveals the true implications of the endearing sign language routine developed during Elisa's laboratory visits – "She is desperate that he understand. Unless he does, this creature who seems to have materialized straight from her dreams can't fully exist inside her reality. The egg, the signs. Egg, signs, egg, signs" (del Toro and Kraus 97) – and confirms that the Amphibian Man's wordlessness is more than amply compensated for by his unique response to music:

> The grooves in his scaled skin are glowing. She recalls a fragment of a news article regarding bioluminescence, a chemical light emitted by certain fish, but she'd imagined it like lightning bugs, soft bulbs in a distant night, not this dulcet simmer that seems to boil from the creature's center and steep the entire pool from ink black to a radiant summer-sky blue. He is hearing the music, yes, but he's also feeling it, reflecting it, and from that reflection Elisa can hear and feel the music as she never has before. Glenn Miller has colors, shapes, textures—how has she never noticed? (del Toro and Kraus 106)

Probably due in part to her enhanced perceptiveness, Elisa's own subsequent chromesthesia has a simple explanation that incidentally also helps define some of the film's hypnotic and seductive appeal: "Colors and music have very few sensory similarities in common […] but both share aspects of emotion" (Johnson Atwater 102).

An apparently solitary figure, whose very surname advertises her marginal status – meaning, as it does, "'placed outside' or 'exposed'" and being, "in Italian tradition, given to orphans" (McIntyre 17) – Elisa has a greater capacity for empathy than any other character and manages to establish more meaningful relationships and engage in more authentic communication than those granted the privilege of working vocal cords, whose sometimes inadvertent recourse to pretense and duplicity only augments their ultimate alienation (Harwick). Notwithstanding its unembellished depiction of human nature, the narrative rousingly and "none-too-subtly champions marginalised minorities and outsiders," embodying its criticism of traditional hierarchies of power and conservative masculine authority in particular in a "rogue's gallery of people who have been disenfranchised or sidelined from mainstream society in early 1960s America, many of whom might find themselves similarly on the fringes" (Lodge) almost six decades later:

> Zelda is black and fat. Yolanda is Mexican and homely. Antonio is a cross-eyed Dominican. Duane is of mixed race and has no teeth. Lucille is albino. Elisa is mute. To Fleming, they are all the same: unfit for other work and therefore easy to trust. It humiliates Elisa that he might be right. She wishes



BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)

> she could talk so she might stand on the locker-room bench and stir her coworkers with a speech about how they need to look out for one another. But that's not how Occam is set up. As far as she can tell, it's not how America is set up, either. (del Toro and Kraus 25)

The two individuals closest to Elisa, the most loquacious characters but also the only human inhabitants of her world whose efforts to learn sign language reveal a desire to give her a voice, have a long experience of the silent treatment from the very people that would owe them positive reinforcement. Zelda's incessant quest to ensure her husband's comfort is met with a wall of blank ingratitude until Brewster finally opens his mouth after years of being "as silent as a grave" (del Toro and Taylor 8) only to betray her. Likewise, the night of Giles' arrest and public exposure puts an end to both his advertising career and his relationship with the one person that should provide unconditional support:

> During the night he spent in jail, he'd thought of one thing: how the police blotter had always been his father's favourite section of the paper. Giles hoped the old man's eyesight, like his own, had worsened to the point that he couldn't read the blotter's small type, and then, when Giles never heard from his father again, knew that it hadn't. (del Toro and Kraus 64)

Given their personal history of disappointment and her own dreamy whimsicality, indicative of a life spent largely "in a world of her own devising" (del Toro and Kraus 78), it is hardly surprising that Zelda and Giles doubt Elisa's attunement to their circumstances. Much in the same way in which Strickland could never "guess how it might feel for a black woman to be cornered by a white man with a cattle prod" (del Toro and Kraus 77), Elisa is deemed "incapable of appreciating how deep run the fault lines of America's Red Scare" and recognizing her friends' vulnerability: "Undesirables of all sorts risk their lives and livelihoods on a daily basis, and a homosexual painter? Why, that's as undesirable as they come!" (del Toro and Kraus 169). Giles's epiphany of Elisa's true worth and his own dignity finally occurs the moment his would-be Dixie Doug paramour finally shares "his real voice," sadly accented not by the "exotic Canadian lilt" (del Toro and Kraus 51) of a middle-aged artist's fantasies but by the harsh inflections of sexual and racial bigotry: "He has the privilege […] of being able to hide his minority status, but if he had any pride at all, he wouldn't be making furtive touches across a diner counter. He'd be standing alongside those who are unafraid to get their skulls cracked open by batons. […] 'Don't talk to them like that,' he says" (del Toro and Kraus 291).

While the superficially sympathetic 'Pie Guy' chooses to camouflage his true identity behind a name tag reading 'Brad' and a fake Southern accent as a pure marketing ploy, Dimitri Hoffstetler's forgettable American name and alien idiom conceal not the stereotypical persona of a Russian spy but reservoirs of tolerance and



BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)

kindness that rival even Elisa's. Acutely aware that the "most intelligent of creatures […] often make the fewest sounds" (del Toro and Kraus 45), the "benign biologist" (del Toro and Kraus 69) turned reluctant secret agent worries about his subject's emotional wellbeing even before evidence that the alleged "mutant fish upon which acts should be performed" is in fact a "being with whom thoughts, feelings, and impressions should be shared" (del Toro and Kraus 132) presents itself:

> The bird arias and frog dirges come from a single source, off to the right. They are recordings […] Some Occam scientist has designed what Giles might call a mise-en-scène, an atmosphere inside which unfolds the currently screening fantasy. Her guess is Bob Hoffstetler. If anyone at this facility has the empathy required for this artistic endeavor, it's him. (del Toro and Kraus 93)

More isolated than any of the other creatures caught in this web of intrigue – "He has no loved ones. Not in this land. Even the Devonian, a being of another world, has him beat in that regard" (del Toro and Kraus 188) – Doctor Hoffstetler nevertheless shows little resentment in this respect and continues to harbor a tentative faith in the possibility of establishing authentic connections across all manner of borders: "You cannot understand me. I know this. I am used to it. My real voice, my beautiful Russian—no one here can understand it. In that way are we similar? Perhaps if I speak with enough feeling you will understand?" (del Toro and Kraus 188).

**"The rhythm of waves, the murmur of the sea."**

However intricate the interplay of sound and silence provided by the relative vocal potential of the film's diverse protagonists, it is almost no match for the complexity of textual, visual and musical echoes pervading its every frame, a fusion of deliberate – and, more likely than not, also involuntary – nods to a wide range of cultural products:

> There are reverent homages to James Whale's *Frankenstein* and Steven Spielberg's *ET*, and maybe even Ron Howard's *Splash*. [...] it has a brilliant pastiche of a golden age song-and-dance routine that surely owes something to Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein*, but it's hard to tell if the resemblance is conscious, subconscious or accidental. (Bradshaw)

Notwithstanding the fact that a deeply "intertextualist discourse" (McDonald and Clark 107) steeped in references to literature, art and cinema has long been acknowledged as a trademark of del Toro's filmmaking (Vargas 183), the most vehement responses following the release of *The Shape of Water* entailed indignant accusations of plagiarism according to which both the general plot and distinct



BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)

cinematic details were shamelessly pilfered from such works as Paul Zindel's 1969 play *Let Me Hear You Whisper*, Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie*, *Delicatessen* and *The City of Lost Children*, Marc S. Nollkaemper's 2015 short film *The Space Between Us* and Gennadii Kazanskii and Vladimir Chebotarev's 1961 *Chelovek-amfibiia* (Bird 81), an adaptation of Aleksandr Beliaev's homonymous 1928 novel. A detailed discussion of the first three instances cited above, already dissected to the point of exhaustion by film critics and opinionated cinephiles, is beyond the scope of this paper; however, it might be worth observing that, irrespective of the ultimate disparity between the storylines of *The Shape of Water* and *The Amphibian Man* and del Toro's questionable familiarity with the latter, the absence of any reference to Dr Salvator's attempts to make the entire human race amphibian "by means of Lamarckian or Darwinian intervention […] thus opening the oceans to colonization" (Maguire 277) somewhat dispels the realism of Kraus's novel. Released in the same year *The Shape of Water* is set in and accompanied by a spectacular soundtrack composed by Andrei Petrov that the whole of the USSR was to hum for years to come (Vitaliev), *Chelovek-amfibiia* rapidly won both Soviet and international acclaim; it therefore seems highly implausible that a KGB agent who goes through the rigmarole of smuggling Minsk vodka by diplomatic valise and only bothers to read Huxley's *Brave New World* "because Stravinsky speaks so highly of his work" would make no mention of it whilst elaborating on the output of an English novelist: "The path from Occam's fish to this future dystopia is a long and tiring one. […] Let me tell you what Wells's Dr. Moreau said. 'The study of nature makes a man at last as remorseless as nature'" (del Toro and Kraus 135).

Going back to the considerable efforts made by some viewers to determine the level of originality of del Toro's narrative thread and strategies by investigating their filiation, a likely unfamiliarity with Roland Barthes might account for their failure to appreciate a product that perfectly reflects the definition of text as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash […] a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (146). It is however quite surprising that none of the film's detractors appear to be aware of the indebtedness of del Toro's ostensible sources of inspiration to other texts, or at least relate to Jarmusch's considerably more mainstream and accessibly phrased defense of intertextual practices:

> Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light and shadows. Select only things to steal from that speak directly to your soul. If you do this, your work (and theft) will be authentic. Authenticity is invaluable; originality is nonexistent. And don't bother concealing your thievery—celebrate it if you



BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)

> feel like it. In any case, always remember what Jean-Luc Godard said: "It's not where you take things from—it's where you take them to."

In del Toro's case, the outcome of this particular creative journey, traceable back to a childhood memory of "seeing the Gill-man swimming underneath Julie Adams, and falling in love with […] him falling in love with her" (Del Toro, "Shame and Perversity"), is an unexpected but stylistically coherent mélange: "part love story, part monster movie, part heist-thriller, part film noir. Think Terry Gilliam meets the 1954 classic monster-horror flick *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (with a bit of French arthouse thrown in for good measure) and you won't be far off" (Gompertz).

Far from engaging in covert appropriation, the film insists on its own cinephilia, being partly set in two flats positioned over a "magnificent but sadly almost empty movie theatre" (Bradshaw) and inhabited by film buffs whose very dreams are modeled on Golden Age dance routines and who often comment on the choreographic elements they replicate: "Oh – watch that – Bojangles – the stair dance. […] Very hard to do. Cagney did it – different – but beautiful – we should watch that one day..." (del Toro and Taylor 4). The décor is replete with understated nods to film history, from the window arch directly inspired by one of the interiors in the 1948 *The Red Shoes* (Miller) to the ingenious placement of Elisa's shoes on racks designed to hold film-reel cases, poignant tributes to "the fetishes of filmmaker and protagonist" (Miller) alike. The same intertextual eclecticism and attention to detail can be noted in the flickering colors emanating through the gaps in Elisa's floorboards and emulating "the way light shines through or reflects off water", the dripping ceiling, the hand-printed, Japanese-influenced wallpaper featuring a fish-scale-like pattern replicated from the late 1800s, the woodcuts of fish featured in the apartment trim (Miller) and the outline of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, probably the most familiar image of Eastern art, embedded in the peeling paint of a water stained wall. Routinely "incorporated into print advertisements and television commercials because the creators […] know that virtually all members of their audience will recognize and appreciate the allusion they are making" (King 2-3), Hokusai's gigantic wave contrasts "the great power of nature and the insignificant power of humans" (Finley 26), possibly foreshadowing the Amphibian Man's eventual victory over his captors.

The repeated and detailed disquisitions on the story of Samson that Strickland delivers in the course of his cringe-inducing interactions with Zelda D. (for Delilah) Brewster provide some of the most overt instances of intertextuality, yet Henry Koster's 1960 *The Story of Ruth*, played to an almost empty auditorium throughout Elisa's gradual awakening, engages with del Toro's narrative at more than one level, in a syncretic manner reminiscent of the intricate fusion of Catholicism and monster tales (Del Toro, "Beauty and Monsters") of his earlier productions. As the novelization clarifies, the storm in the real world that facilitates the Amphibian Man's return to his natural environment "doubles with the storm from *The Story of*



BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)

*Ruth*, the end of the biblical drought" (del Toro and Kraus 276); in an even more subtle structural parallel, the destruction of the gigantic statue of Chemosh, the God of the Moabites, echoes Strickland's godlike aspirations and demise: "It is why Deus Brânquia had to be captured. It is why the Jungle-god must destroy the Gill-god. No new deity fully ascends until the old deity is slain" (del Toro and Kraus 238).

The double coordinates of humanity and divinity also define Elisa's cinema-church equation – "hadn't she worshipped here as a girl? It was here she'd found the raw materials to build a beautiful fantasy life" (del Toro and Kraus 263) – and pervade the words of Hoffstetler's favorite philosopher, the scientist and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The lines "*We are one, after all, you and I. Together we suffer, together exist, and forever will recreate each other*" (del Toro and Kraus 293) might be less culturally specific than the discarded verses of Anna Akhmatova's "I'm not one of those who left their land" that the dying Russian recites in the film's original script (del Toro and Taylor 108) but are imbued with a greater sense of peace. The natural culmination of this accumulation of references is not one of the numerous love songs aiding and mapping Elisa's romantic overtures, but an elusive text finally identified by determined researchers as an adaptation of Priya Hemenway's translation of a poem by Abu al-Majd Majdud ibn Adam published in *The Book of Everything: Journey of the Heart's Desire: Hakim Sanai's Walled Garden of Truth* (Armenti): "But when I think of her, of Elisa, the only thing that comes to mind is a poem. Whispered by someone in love, hundreds of years ago... 'Unable to perceive the shape of You, I find You all around me. Your presence fills my eyes with Your love, It humbles my heart, For You are everywhere'" (del Toro, *Shape*). Much in the same way in which Ruth's promise to Naomi has been reiterated in countless marriage vows, the epilogue of del Toro's fable of tolerance and diversity repurposes a religious text by resorting to the words of a Persian mystic to deliver a message of unconditional devotion.

**"The princess without voice…"**

While the various copyright infringement allegations mentioned above have encouraged viewers to identify further potential borrowings, ranging from reasonable analogies with the sea-dwelling Deep Ones in H. P. Lovecraft's 1931 novella *The Shadow over Innsmouth* and Abraham Sapien, the character of Mike Mignola's comic book series and Del Toro's own 2004 *Hellboy*, to tongue-in-cheek correlations with Simon Wincer's 1993 *Free Willy* or Robert Rodriguez' 2005 *The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lava Girl in 3-D*, it is understandably fairy tale parallels that dominate such endeavors. Although Dr. Hoffstetler feels the Devonian has emerged from the pages of Afanasyev's tales "of magical beasts, strange monsters" (del Toro and Kraus 188) and del Toro's earlier productions rely on a new mythology drawing from the "Dionysian, chthonic aspects of myth and folklore" (Collins 176), *The Shape of Water* resorts from beginning to end to considerably more classical tropes and formulae:



BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)

> If I spoke about it – If I did – what would I tell you, I wonder? Would I tell you about the time...? It happened a long time ago it seems - in the last days of a fair Prince's reign... Or would I tell you about the place? A small city near the coast but far from everything else... Or, I don't know, would I tell you about her? The princess without voice... Or perhaps I would just warn you about the truth of these facts and the tale of love and loss… […]
> If I told you about her – What would I say? That they lived happily ever after? I believe they did... That they were in love – that they remained in love? I'm sure that's true... (del Toro, *Shape*)

As far as specific narrative sources are concerned, del Toro's dissatisfaction with "the idea of normalcy" (Lattanzio) promoted by the transformation at the end of "Beauty and the Beast" prompted a rewriting "where both get to be beautiful and neither has to be beastly" (Bradshaw), taking the concepts of acceptance and authenticity one step further than Angela Carter's "The Tiger's Bride" and the *Shrek* franchise. In fact, even within Elisa's *Top Hat* inspired daydream, the female protagonist has the beautiful singing voice she so desperately yearns for but the Amphibian Man still looks like himself rather than a handsome prince. Incidentally, while the classical tale could conceivably "represent love and compassion as antidotes for the bestial impulses within all humans" (Steiger 33) – an interpretation likely to appeal to viewers deeply disturbed by the film's apparent endorsement of zoophilia – stories of humans wedded to animals are popular in folklore across the world, one such example being the South American variant of the demon lover motif referenced in the novelization:

> Many of the indigenous believe the pink river dolphin is an encantado, a shape-shifter. On nights like this, he transforms himself into a man of irresistible good looks and walks to the nearest village. You can tell him by the hat he wears to hide his blowhole. In this disguise, he seduces the village's most beautiful women and leads them back to his home beneath the river. […] I think it is a hopeful story. Is not some underwater paradise preferable to a life of poverty and incest and violence? (del Toro and Kraus 18)

In many cultures, in fact, it is the union "between animal and human that produces the tribe or the clan that perpetuates the legend" (Steiger 32).

Given the aquatic background and the female protagonist's muteness and mysterious scars, Hans Christian Andersen's "allegory of a good woman's mutilated power" (Auerbach 8) – or at least its more familiar and uplifting Disney version – represents another inevitable point of reference, with the Amphibian Man potentially embodying the reverse of Auerbach's definition of the mermaid as "nonhumanity in human form" (94). Unsurprisingly, the dichotomy between "Ariel, the muted



BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)

beauty" and "the Sea Witch, the Woman with voice […] the Lying Woman, cold and deadly" based on the infallible patriarchal logic that the woman "who breaches silence is the woman […] who is lying" (Taslitz 21) is a perfect match for Strickland's paradigm of feminine virtue: "Lainie is talking too much, and Strickland knows that's the truest tell of any liar. He thinks of Elisa […] She'd never lie to him. She hasn't the power, or inclination" (del Toro and Kraus 172). Elisa Esposito's first name and defining attribute also evoke the vow of silence made by the protagonist of Andersen's 1938 "The Wild Swans", forced to accept a bargain that "condemns her to isolation, even while she is surrounded by people" (Frankel 21), much in the same way in which "Ariel must silence herself to get her man" (Taslitz 21).

The cast of silent, virtuous fairy tale maids "who never complain of their vicious treatment" (Frankel 22) provides yet another intertextual alter ego in Cinderella, whose relegation to lowly chores and dreams of a better future are a perfect match for Elisa's menial job, hopeless infatuation with footwear and apparent faith in deceptive advertising slogans: "In a pair of shoes like this, why, you'll conquer the world" (del Toro and Kraus 11). The otherworldly lamé slippers "encrusted with glittering silver" in the window of Julia's Fine Shoes fuel generic ambitions – "That she could go places. That she could be something. That all was within the realm of the possible" (del Toro and Kraus 24) – yet Elisa's imagination conjures up beautiful yet definitely non-human creatures rather than princesses: "They look like hooves in the best way: of unicorns, of nymphs, of sylphs" (del Toro and Kraus 24). In the course of Elisa's affair with one such being, the shoes in question are perceived as flippers, "more fantastic than any he has ogled on her bedroom wall, the only thing she has that is as bright and beautiful as him" (del Toro and Kraus 275). It is therefore hardly surprising that once she has been recognized as a worthy mate by her underwater prince Elisa is unfazed by the loss of her most precious accessories: "Julia's beautiful silver shoes tumble past her like exotic fish. She no longer needs them" (del Toro and Kraus 320). The cinematic equivalent of this scene, featuring a single shoe floating away from the embracing pair, the iconic image immortalized on the film's poster, further emphasizes the Cinderella connection and the unexpected turn often taken by modern happy endings.

At the beginning of the narrative, the illicit heels Elisa wears while mopping Occam's floors represent her "only insurgency" (del Toro and Kraus 15); the color of the on-screen pair – the undesirable red hue ousted by the more fashionable and less politically loaded shades of green – compounds Elisa's rebellion whilst also enriching the film's intertextual background with yet another cultural palimpsest, the 1948 BG Production revolving around "the demon lover syndrome" (Kavaler-Adler 50) based, like scores of other texts, on Andersen's homonymous tale. It is precisely her defiance of rules and conventions that singles Elisa out from both her Baltimore entourage and her fairy tale avatars; vulnerable and unable to seek aid, the silenced females in myth echo the numerous women condemned to illiteracy or "confined to cleaning and childbearing" (Frankel 21) in today's world and del Toro's fictional



**BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)**

universe alike. *The Shape of Water* shares the technical and thematic focus on silence of both classical fairy tales and fiction authored by Latin American women, such as Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, and Rosario Ferré's *Papeles de Pandora*, yet stands out neither through an emphasis on disciplined self-improvement nor through a poetics of combative silence (Weldt-Basson 226) but rather through an unapologetic celebration of otherness and imperfection, a timelessly contemporary story and a brand of magical realism that is at once alien and familiar.

## Works Cited

Armenti, Peter. "Who wrote the poem at the end of 'The Shape of Water'?" *From the Catbird Seat*. *The Library of Congress Blogs*. 9 Mar. 2018. <https://blogs.loc.gov/catbird/2018/03/who-wrote-the-poem-at-the-end-of-the-shape-of-water/> 1 Sept. 2019.

Auerbach, Nina. *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Barthes, Roland. *Image – Music – Text*. Glasgow: Collins, 1977.

Bird, Robert. "Lenfilm: The Birth and Death of an Institutional Aesthetic." *A Companion to Russian Cinema*. Ed. Birgit Beumers. Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2016. 66-91.

Bradshaw, Peter. "*The Shape of Water* review – an operatic plunge into Guillermo del Toro's immersive cinema." *The Guardian*. 15 Feb. 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/feb/15/the-shape-of-water-review-guillermo-del-toro> 1 July 2019.

Brown, Jason M. "*The Shape of Water* as Anthropocene Fairytale." *Patheos*. 26 Feb. 2018. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/holyscapes/2018/02/shape-water-anthropocene-fairytale/> 1 July 2019.

Collins, Jack. "The Birth of Fantasy: A Nietzschaen Reading of *Pan's Labyrinth*." *The Supernatural Cinema of Guillermo del Toro: Critical Essays*. Ed. John W. Morehead. Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. 163-181.

Del Toro, Guillermo (dir.). *The Shape of Water*. Double Dare You, Fox Searchlight Pictures and TSG Entertainment, 2017.

Del Toro, Guillermo. Interview by Christina Radish. "Guillermo del Toro on 'The Shape of Water', the Beauty of Monsters, and Connecting with 'Lady Bird.'" *Collider*. 12 Feb. 2018. <https://collider.com/guillermo-del-toro-the-shape-of-water-interview/> 1 July 2019.

Del Toro, Guillermo. Interview by Ryan Lambie. "Guillermo del Toro interview: *The Shape of Water*, shame and perversity." *Den of Geek*. 13 Feb. 2018. <https://www.denofgeek.com/uk/movies/guillermo-del-



BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)

toro/55247/guillermo-del-toro-interview-the-shape-of-water-shame-and-perversity> 1 July 2019.

Del Toro, Guillermo and Daniel Kraus. *The Shape of Water*. New York: Feiwel and Friends, 2018.

Del Toro, Guillermo and Vanessa Taylor. *The Shape of Water*. Film script. Los Angeles: Willow and Oak, 2016.

Finley, Carol. *Art of Japan: Wood-block Color Prints*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 1998.

Frankel, Valerie Estelle. *From Girl to Goddess: The Heroine's Journey through Myth and Legend*. Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company, 2010.

Gompertz, Will. "Review: Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water*." *BBC News*. 17 Feb. 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-42954191> 1 July 2019.

Harwick, Michael. "Out of Love for the Other: The Shape of Water." *Uncertain Regards*. 15 Feb. 2018. <https://uncertainregards.com/2018/02/15/out-of-love-for-the-other-the-shape-of-water/> 1 Aug. 2019.

Jarmusch, Jim. "Jim Jarmusch's Golden Rules." *MovieMaker*. 22 Jan. 2004. <https://www.moviemaker.com/archives/series/things_learned/jim-jarmusch-5-golden-rules-of-moviemaking/> 1 Aug. 2019.

Johnson Atwater, Carolyn. "Chromesthesia." *The Five Senses and Beyond: The Encyclopedia of Perception*. Ed. Jennifer L. Hellier. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2017. 101-102.

Kavaler-Adler, Susan. *The Creative Mystique: From Red Shoes Frenzy to Love and Creativity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996.

King, James. *Beyond the Great Wave: The Japanese Landscape Print, 1727-1960*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2010.

Lattanzio, Ryan. "Guillermo del Toro on 'The Shape of Water' as an Elegy to Lost Love: 'I Wanted to Make a Love Song.'" *IndieWire*. 19 Oct. 2019. <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/10/guillermo-del-toro-podcast-shape-of-water-1202183186/> 25 Oct. 2019.

Lodge, Guy. "Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* is a much-needed ode to the 'other.'" *The Guardian*. 30 Nov. 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/nov/30/guillermo-del-toro-the-shape-of-water-is-a-much-needed-ode-to-the-other> 1 July 2019.

Maguire, Muireann. "Darwin's Reception in Twentieth-Century Russian Prose and Science Fiction." *The Literary and Cultural Reception of Charles Darwin in Europe*. Vol. 3. Eds. Thomas F. Glick and Elinor Shaffer. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. 268-287.

McDonald, Keith and Roger Clark. *Guillermo del Toro: Film as Alchemic Art*. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2015.

McIntyre, Gina. *Guillermo del Toro's* The Shape of Water*: Creating a Fairy Tale for Troubled Times*. San Rafael: Insight Editions, 2017.



**BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)**

Miller, Julie. "The Delightful Design Details in Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water*." 1 Dec. 2017. *Vanity Fair*. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/12/the-shape-of-water-production-design> 1 July 2019.

Muir, John Kenneth. "Henry's Kids: Othered Children and Karloff's *Frankenstein Monster*." *The Supernatural Cinema of Guillermo del Toro: Critical Essays*. Ed. John W. Morehead. Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. 112-129.

Spera, Siobhan. "A Guide to Magical Realism in Film." *Film School Rejects*. 7 July 2018. <https://filmschoolrejects.com/a-guide-to-magical-realism-in-film/> 1 Aug. 2019.

Steiger, Brad. *The Werewolf Book: The Encyclopedia of Shape-Shifting Beings*. Canton: Visible Ink Press, 2012.

Taslitz, Andrew E. *Rape and the Culture of the Courtroom*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1999.

Vargas, Juan Carlos. "Between Fantasy and Reality: The Child's Vision and Fairy Tales in Guillermo del Toro's Hispanic Trilogy." *The Transnational Fantasies of Guillermo del Toro*. Eds. Ann Davies, Deborah Shaw and Dolores Tierney. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 183-197.

Vitaliev, Vitali. "View from Vitalia: Of 'Terra', Toro, Del Toro and the power of coincidence." *Engineering and Technology.* 19 Mar. 2018 <https://eandt.theiet.org/content/articles/2018/03/view-from-vitalia-terra-toro-del-toro-and-the-power-of-concidence/> 1 July 2019.

Weldt-Basson, Helene Carol. *Subversive Silences: Nonverbal Expression and Implicit Narrative Strategies in the Works of Latin American Women Writers*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009.



**BDD-A31689 © 2019 Ovidius University Press**
**Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:44:56 UTC)**