



A Cyborgean Plunge into Guillermo del Toro's Oscar Winning Movie :- The Shape of Water

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For my paper I have taken up a cinematographic representation of cyborg in the Hollywood movie *The Shape of Water*. It tells the story of Elisa Esposito, who, while working as a janitor at a top-secret U.S. government facility in the 1950s, befriends a fantastical fish-man creature who once was "worshiped as a god" in the Amazon before being captured by the American government. Set in 1962 there is not only an atmosphere of Cold War paranoia, but also the all encompassing feeling of social restriction and conservatism typical of mid twentieth century American culture.

Guillermo Del Toro (a Mexican director) has portrayed the characters, and unfolded the events in such a way that they give us a peep into the reality through fantasy. The tool that is used for such a narrative is, magic realism. Magic realism or marvelous realism is a style of fiction that paints a realistic view of the modern world while also adding magical elements.

While magical realism is an on-the-rise device in film, it actually finds its roots in Latin American literature. One of the key major players in its popularization is Gabriel Garcia Marquez with his novel "100 Years of Solitude," which was an instant success. Other authors that have contributed greatly to its success as a genre in literature are Jorge Luis Borges and Isabel Allende, the latter of which wrote the instant best-seller "The House of Spirits." These are only some of the key developers of this storytelling tool in literature. (Spera)

The device started appearing most significantly around the late 1980s and early 1990s in film, the tradition still tracing back to its Latin American roots with films such as Alfonso Arau's *Like Water for Chocolate*, based on the novel by Laura Esquivel. It was Mexico's official entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the 65th Academy Awards and became the highest-grossing Spanish language film in the United States at the time.

Other Latin American filmmakers have continued to incorporate this device in film, one of the most prominent being writer-director **Guillermo Del Toro**. His 2006 film *Pan's Labyrinth* is exemplary of this. The film takes place in Spain five years after the Spanish Civil War, and the young protagonist Ofelia (Ivana Baquero) and her terminally ill mother move in with her stepfather, a cruel captain. Forced to grow up in a world of torture and brutality, Ofelia discovers a labyrinth where she meets a faun who delegates three necessary tasks to be completed. The fantastic elements serve as a parallel to the harsh realist setting she lives in. In the labyrinth's representation of nature and Ofelia's coming-of-age, these magical elements are used to further the audience's understanding of the story's themes of morality and consequences. (Spera)

More recently Guillermo Del Toro has created another Oscar winning movie namely *The Shape of Water*. This movie is deeply indebted in magic and fantasy blended with reality. The amphibian man is shown to have

magical healing powers with which he not just restores old Gile's (Eliza's friend) hair, but also brings a dead Eliza back to life.

The aim of my paper is to give a new understanding of identity for the characters in the movie. This new understanding will be the microcosmic caricature analysis when looked through the lens of magic realism. And this new understanding of identity is that of a "cyborg identity".

Cyborg- A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social relations, our most important political construction, and a world changing fiction. Donna Haraway, in her essay A Cyborg Manifesto, signals an understanding of the cyborg through three crucial boundary breakdowns that make the political- fictional analysis possible:-

- 1- The boundary between human and animal
- 2- The boundary between human/ animal and machine
- 3- The boundary between physical and non- physical

To elaborate on her point she gives justifiable explanation as to how these breakdowns are legit. On the first boundary breakdown, she says that "by the late 20th century in United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached. The last beachheads of uniqueness have been polluted if not turned into amusement parks—language, tool use, social behavior, mental events, nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal. And many people no longer feel the need for such a separation; indeed, many branches of feminist culture affirm the pleasure of connection of human and other living creatures. Movements for animal rights are not irrational denials of human uniqueness; they are a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture. Biology and evolutionary theory over the last two centuries have simultaneously produced modern organisms as objects of knowledge and reduced the line between humans and animals to a faint trace re-etched in ideological struggle or professional disputes between life and social science. Within this framework, teaching modern Christian creationism should be fought as a form of child abuse."

The second leaky distinction is between animal-human (organism) and machine. Pre-cybernetic machines could be haunted; there was always the specter of the ghost in the machine. This dualism structured the dialogue between materialism and idealism that was settled by a dialectical progeny, called spirit or history, according to taste. But basically machines were not self-moving, self-designing, and autonomous. They could not achieve man's dream, only mock it. They were not man, an author himself, but only a caricature of that masculinist reproductive dream. To think they were otherwise was paranoid. Now we are not so sure. Late 20th-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert. (Haraway)

This identity would thus be a solution to resolve contradictions between an organic individual and a robot. A robot signifies the fictive elements of a woman's experience, and organic would mean the factual elements of a woman's experience. Just like in the movie (The Shape of Water,) we see the female protagonist Eliza Esposito is shown to be naturally drawn to water. She lives a routinized life in her realistic looking shabby apartment. But the fictiveness is added to this factual setting when she consummates her love with the mystical fish creature in water, in that same shabby apartment.

The third distinction is a subset of the second: The boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us. Pop physics books on the consequences of quantum theory and the indeterminacy principle are a kind of popular scientific equivalent to Harlequin romances as a marker of radical change in American white heterosexuality: They get it wrong, but they are on the right subject. Modern machines are quintessentially microelectronic devices: They are everywhere and they are invisible. Modern machinery is an

irreverent upstart god, mocking the Father's ubiquity and spirituality. The silicon chip is a surface for writing; it is etched in molecular scales disturbed only by atomic noise, the ultimate interference for nuclear scores. Writing, power, and technology are old partners in Western stories of the origin of civilization, but miniaturization has changed our experience of mechanism. Miniaturization has turned out to be about power; small is not so much beautiful as pre-eminently dangerous, as in cruise missiles. Contrast the TV sets of the 1950s or the news cameras of the 1970s with the TV wrist bands or hand-sized video cameras now advertised. Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum, and these machines are eminently portable, mobile—a matter of immense human pain in Detroit and Singapore. People are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque. Cyborgs are ether, quintessence. (Haraway)

Haraway primarily produced the manifesto as a feminist decree to fulfill an ironic dream of a common language for both men and women, and move beyond the traditional structures of gender based dichotomies. So Haraway's cyborg calls for a non-essentialized, genderless understanding of identity.

The understanding of a cyborg is the understanding of challenging the “givens” or the essentialist elements of the world. It demolishes those pillars of society that give the society its meaning. The pulverization of meanings is extended to the point of the subversion of ‘teleology’ as ‘star wars’, as Haraway mentions in her essay. This understanding collocates with the movie ‘The Shape of Water’ where the American colonel named Richard Strickland calls the fish-man an “affront” to humanity: “You may think that thing looks human — stands on two legs — but we’re created in the Lord’s image. And you don’t think that’s what the Lord looks like, do you?” Strickland speaks as if he has a lucid understanding of the creator of human beings. But, towards the end of the movie we see that when the fish-man resurrects from his brief moment of death, Strickland is stupefied at his Godly ability and he acknowledges him by saying “You really are God”; thereby contravening his prior proficiency regarding ‘God’.

This way the cyborg image nullifies the naiveté of the myth of origin. Although she herself ponders over the idea whether this image can fulfill the needs of the present times since most American socialists and feminists see deepened dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in the social practices etc. The analytic resources developed by progressives have insisted on the necessary domination of techniques and recalled us to an imagined organic body to integrate our differences.

Donna Haraway has tried to address this issue by creating an understanding of self image, wherein each individual shall be pulled out of the imperative to be recognized as either part of the “self” or the “other”. This scheme has been taken up under the rubric of ‘breaking the binary’. “The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity.”(Haraway).

In the movie (The Shape of Water) we see that most of the film's main characters are the people who have been disenfranchised or sidelined from mainstream society in early 1960s America. The lead of the movie is a mute woman Eliza Esposito who is a cleaner at the lab. Her best friends are a closeted gay man Giles and an African- American co- worker Zelda. The mainstream American society at that time casted a downward glance at the homosexuals and the blacks. Citing examples from the movie itself we see that when Zelda admits to colonel Strickland that she has no idea what God might look like, Strickland tells her that the Almighty looks like them... or perhaps more like *him* than her(since he is white and she is black). While Zelda has to deal with the intersectional identity of being black and also a woman, Giles has to deal with being a gay man who is also getting on in years (Perrin). He is asked to leave a pie shop for his homosexual identity.

But Guillermo Del Toro has narrated the story like an ‘anecdote’ to the audience. The so called “others” of the society have taken up the task of retelling their versions of the story. For eg. “Ideally” the monster (amphibian man) should have been defeated by the white master Richard Strickland; and the ones supporting him (the mute woman, the gay friend and the black co-worker) should have been captured and punished for performing a capital offence. But in contrast to the dominant version, Guillermo provides a subversive version where the white master is actually the real monster in the story; and the rest are nice people. This is what cyborg

writing is about i.e. the power to survive by seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as “other”. And also to tell stories that subvert the myths of origin of the western culture.

Cyborg politics is a struggle for language. It’s a struggle against perfect communication and against one code. “Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs” (Haraway). The script of *The Shape of Water* is written in such a way that it defies the dogma of phallogocentrism. Elisa in the movie is a mute woman. It is mentioned that she was found by river, when she was a baby, with wounds on her neck which destroyed her voice box permanently. But she is perfectly able to communicate with her friends and her lover through sign language. Not just her, but also the fish-man is able to communicate with her through his screech and gestures. Although his screech is considered as a hideous noise by Strickland, the cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machines.

This fusion is against the nature of western identity of nature and culture. For eg. Elisa communicates in many ways that have nothing to do with ASL, and the film puts a sharp focus on those forms as well to highlight the complexity of communication. Elisa first bonds with the Asset by bringing him eggs, sharing a meal and therefore making it clear that she means to nourish him and be kind. She communicates by sharing music with him and with others. She and Giles have a fondness for musicals, and they dance together, mimicking their favorite stars and artists. When Elisa wishes that she could better indicate her affection for the Asset, she imagines that they are performing in one of those musical numbers in a black and white film. Art is a form of communication that Elisa understands quite well, and she employs it in her interactions with the people that she cares about most. Sex is also a form of communication, one that Elisa eventually reaches in furthering her relationship with her beau. In the absence of speech, Elisa has so many other methods of connecting and communicating, and this fluency enables her to connect with someone who will love her as she wants to be loved.

This all leads to the Asset himself, and how his ability to communicate is what sets him apart from the Gill-man he was based on. Guillermo Del Toro has admitted that *The Shape of Water* was largely inspired by his love for *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, a film he watched as a boy where he found himself in love with both the Creature and Kay Lawrence, the woman the Creature falls for. Del Toro apparently believed fervently that they should have ended up together, and wanted to create that happy ending for them both. But unlike the original film, which sees a monster simply taking what it wants when it sees Kay in the water; the Asset makes the choice to communicate first. He learns to sign what Elisa teaches him, he listens to the music she plays for him, he responds to her kindness with his own. He is not entitled like the villains around him, but he is also not thoughtless like his predecessor. He wants to be with Elisa because she wants to be with him. (Perrin)

Haraway mentions another important aspect of cyborgs, in her essay, about a high tech culture. She believes that high tech culture challenges the dualisms of mind/body, reality/illusion, maker/made etc., in intriguing ways.

It is not clear who makes and who is made in the relation between humans and machines... Our consequence is that our sense of connection to our tools is heightened... The trance state experienced by many computer users has become a staple of science-fiction films... In a fiction where no character is simply human, human status is highly problematic... Monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations. The Centaurs and Amazons of ancient Greece established the limits of the centered polis of the Greek male human by their disruption of marriage and boundary pollutions of the warrior with animality and woman. Unseparated twins and hermaphrodites were the confused human material in early modern France who grounded discourse on the natural and supernatural, medical and legal, portents and diseases—all crucial to establishing modern identity.³⁰ The evolutionary and behavioral sciences of monkeys and apes have marked the multiple boundaries of late 20th-century industrial identities. Cyborg monsters in feminist science fiction define quite different political possibilities and limits from those proposed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman. (Haraway) The movie, *The Shape of Water*, has been classified as a ‘Science-fiction fantasy’. The story is set in Baltimore in 1962, and opens inside a top secret government laboratory. There, a half-fish/half-human creature (Doug Jones) is being kept under wraps in a giant vat of gelatinous, green soup by Colonel Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon). Strickland discovered the primordial monster in the Amazon and

brought it to his lab to study. Strickland mistreats the creature because he lost two fingers when he was capturing it. Marine biologist Dr. Hoffstetler (Michael Stuhlbarg) has been ordered to study its unusual lungs. (Kam Williams)

The creature could, apparently, alternate between two separate breathing organisms through the process called “oxygen osmosis and dioxide exchange”. It had a thick joined cartilage that separated the primary and secondary lungs, which made the X-Rays inconclusive. The creature could also very strangely heal human wounds eg, it heals Giles’ wound and restores hair on his bald head. And when it does that, its body lights up at several spots just like when a machine starts blinking light when it is turned on. This kind of phenomenon has been attributed to the creature to create special effects on screen. But the idea that is put behind such a depiction can be profoundly scrutinized in order to yoke it with a cyborg understanding. It is difficult to distinguish whether it’s a human, animal or a robot/machine.

Assuming this kind of understanding of an organism is taking the cyborg imagery too seriously. The way in which the love story of Eliza and the amphibian-man is normalized, makes us question the animal/human and machine/robot duality. There seems to be no need to animate the machine. It is as if the machines are us, and we are the machines.

This kind of cyborg imagery thus helps in expressing two crucial arguments:-

- 1) Detotalizing the totalitarian assumption of the world.
- 2) Taking responsibility for science and technology based communication in our periodic lives.

But as I mentioned earlier, Haraway produced The Cyborg Manifesto radically as a feminist dictum. She primarily wanted women to gain out of the understanding of a cyborg self.

Up till now (once upon a time), female embodiment seemed to be given, organic, necessary; and female embodiment seemed to mean skill in mothering and its metaphoric extensions. Only by being out of place could we take intense pleasure in machines, and then with excuses that this was organic activity after all, appropriate to females. Cyborgs might consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment. Gender might not be global identity after all, even if it has profound historical breadth and depth. (Haraway)

The female lead in the movie has very aptly, through her speech (where she makes Giles translate her sign language) portrayed a vivid description of how she and the amphibian-man are actually very homogenous.

“What am I?

I move my mouth, like him.

I make no sound, like him.

What does that make me?”

I would like to conclude my paper by suggesting that an understanding of the self as cyborg shall definitely lead to our breaking of the stereotypical myths of origin and image formation. It shall be a progressive and political belief to step out of the gender, racial, caste, class etc. based discriminations.

Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia. (Haraway)

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