

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:

Revisiting "The Shape of Water": Liberal Escapism and the Fantasy of Working-Class Empathy

author:

Jagoda Tyczyńska

source:

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 42 (2025)

URL:

<https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/42-science-fiction-images-otherness/revisiting-the-shape-of-water>

publisher:

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

affiliation:

SWPS University

University of Warsaw

keywords:

working class; fantasy; the Other; empathy; stereotypes; Trump

abstract:

This article examines Guillermo del Toro's "The Shape of Water" as a cinematic response to the political climate of Donald Trump's first presidency, particularly in its portrayal of working-class empathy and interclass solidarity. By analyzing key scenes and genre conventions, I argue that the film offers a liberal fantasy of reconciliation between the working class and the Other that substitutes the reality of class antagonism for the sake of emotional uplift. "The Shape of Water" reconfigures the monster film trope to offer a moral lesson about tolerance that overlooks the complexities of class and race. In doing so, it reinforces Hollywood's tradition of symbolic resolution, catering to liberal sensibilities while avoiding engagement with the deeper reasons behind political division. Seen from the perspective of Trump's second term, the film reveals the limitations of symbolic empathy in addressing enduring social and economic inequalities.

Jagoda Tyczyńska - PhD student at the University of Warsaw. Her research project focuses on the depictions of interracial and cross-ethnic body swapping in Western science fiction alongside their effects on the discourse and politics of race. Her article "Silent Narratives and Post-Recession Anxieties in Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone* (2010)" features in the 2023 issue of the Polish Journal for American Studies.

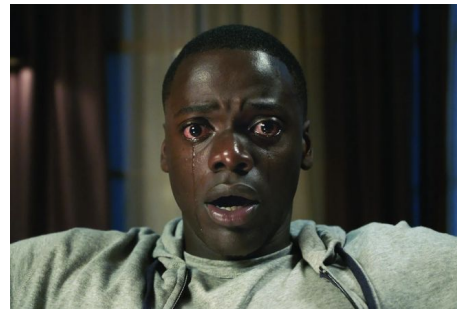
Revisiting "The Shape of Water": Liberal Escapism and the Fantasy of Working-Class Empathy

While American cinema has long explored political themes through the well-established genres of political thriller, spy film, and even certain forms of action movies such as the *Mission: Impossible* franchise, equally compelling political interventions appear in speculative cinema. Despite its engagement in constructing fantastic visions of alternative and future worlds, this genre's primary interest lies in magnifying ideologies of the here and now rather than making political predictions. Further, owing to its loosened relationship to realism, speculative cinema enables this magnification through a by-proxy representation of social and political life's aspects using symbol and allegory. Although hard science fiction or speculation grounded in recognizably real-world settings may more easily evoke associations with delivering politically resonant plots, more stylized or dreamlike visions are by no means politically inert. Phantasmatic works such as Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017) offer such ideologically suggestive imagery that invites political reflection on the plot as much as the style of its delivery.

By examining the choice of cinematic genre alongside three key scenes from *The Shape of Water*, I explore how the film constructs a liberal fantasy of working-class empathy that displaces political antagonism with emotional uplift. At face value, the film acts as a fantasy of working-class tolerance by responding to working-class voters' support of Donald Trump during the 2016 elections. However, seen from the perspective of Trump's second term, the film reads not only as insufficient in its vision of working-class empathy but also as politically evasive. For this purpose, I revisit *The Shape of Water* to interrogate both the film's original cultural moments and the emotional sensibility

and aesthetic values of the political era in which it appeared. Rather than engaging in the real contradictions that erupted in 2016—and reemerged in 2024—such as the alignment of segments of the working class with oligarchic power structures and the deepening divide between cultural liberalism and economic precarity, the film participates in a long cinematic tradition of consoling viewers through narrative, offering a dream of solidarity without the discomfort of political struggle. Even as it centers marginalized characters, the film depoliticizes class conflict by subsuming it into fairy tale structures and American aesthetic mythmaking to offer a pedagogy of reconciliation born out of false political assumptions.

Authors perceive the first Trump presidency as defined by a streak of socially conscious productions with films such as *Get Out* (2017), *The Post* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), and *Joker* (2019), which would tap into racial and economic inequalities as well as the distrust



Get Out dir. Jordan Peele, 2017.

of institutions underlying American everyday life.¹ However, while these motifs do engage with more interesting forms of social commentary, it is equally important to consider the films that failed to do so but were hailed as a success at the time of their release. Although films during Trump's first term often engaged with pressing social issues, the broader media landscape increasingly relied on reductive portrayals of the working class, framing political polarization through the lens of class-driven populism and deepening cultural anxieties that would resurface even more starkly during his return to power. For this reason, it is pertinent to investigate the Hollywood response to Trump's first term in order to recognize the various failures of show business to respond to political realities in a way that would faithfully diagnose the sociopolitical

climate without imposing wishful projections typical of Hollywood's dream factory.

Often framed as a surge in class-based polarization, Trump's first term led the media to double down on the image of the working-class electorate as populist, xenophobic, and intolerant. This narrative, centered on the white working-class voter, was not only racialized but also statistically misleading: exit polls from 2016 showed that lower income voters largely supported Hillary Clinton.² Yet despite its inaccuracy, this image helped crystalize a style of populist politics that prioritized emotional response over economic reality. By 2024, that populist appeal had not only endured but deepened. Marked by a revival of nationalist sentiment under the duress of tangible economic instability, Trump's post-pandemic political comeback emphasized the continuity of political sentiments that first propelled him to power. This lasting political formation demonstrates that show business—not just political analysts—must reckon with the role it has played in sustaining false imagery of the working class, particularly in the light of the enduring grievances that are shaping American populism.

The necessity to confront uncomfortable political realities invites a closer look at the construction and reception of narratives, both political and cultural. Just as campaign messages gain traction through strategic sequencing and framing, cinematic meaning too emerges through the arrangement of images—a concept famously theorized by Sergei Eisenstein in his writing on montage. Pertaining to working-class rhetoric, early Soviet cinema portrayed history through the collective experience of the masses, using montage not merely as a stylistic device but as a means of political expression.³ Through proper framing, the films could communicate class solidarity simply by capturing the various distances between bodies, thus invigorating the cinematic notion of "the masses." Owing to their revolutionary tone, even stories of

individual action could still capture the realities of the collective. However, when facing with the task of depicting an American working-class electorate shortly after the 2016 election, questions arise as to how this demographic should be depicted on the big screen: with fidelity to the socioeconomic conditions which have shaped it, or indulging in an uncomplicated image that impacted election results.

Presently, the idea of class uniting into an effective political mass remains largely absent from mainstream Hollywood productions. Despite the industry's growing reliance on international talent, co-productions, and global markets, this shift is not necessarily



Sorry to Bother You, dir. Boots Riley, 2018.

translated into more radical representations of collective class struggle seen in global cinematic traditions. Rather, micro-narratives of solidarity and resilience, such as those depicted in *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), *Nomadland* (2020), and finally *Shape of Water*, serve to fill this absence by dramatizing fleeting, interpersonal alliances in place of sustained movements. The case of the "Three Amigos" is instructive here. Contemporary Mexican directors Guillermo del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón, and Alejandro González Iñárritu, who now operate within the circuits of Hollywood, have brought with them the aesthetic and narrative traditions shaped by Mexican history which has resulted in ambitious, artistic commentaries on identity and suffering in the US. These have resulted in ambitious, artistic commentaries on identity and suffering in the US. Films such as *Gravity* (2013), *Birdman* (2014), and *The Revenant* (2015) offer third-perspective, untoward interpretations of American preoccupations with exceptionalism—expressed in the frontier, the myth of former glory, and the "final" frontier—to reveal the

ugliness of an individual's path to survival.

Even del Toro's more commercial earlier works such as *Blade II* (2002) or *Hellboy* (2004) revive the familiar Cold War trope of containing foreign, invasive species in the US with the help of the morally gray urban cowboy-turned-superhero. In their own way, these stories frame and conceptualize the loneliness of the characters who unknowingly participate in the mythmaking mechanisms of American success. Nonetheless, the directors' ambitious takes on national mythology have not translated into open deconstructions of these myths. In fact, we could argue that the focus on the psychological dimensions of these characters' struggles rather than the political dimension of their distress allows the directors to avoid speaking against a glorified fantasy of American resilience by supplanting it with the sanitized idea of human resilience. Based on the Mexican trio's directorial choices, transnational cinematic sensibilities seem to offer Hollywood a cross-pollination of audiovisual artistry in equal measures as they undergo a cross-contamination with the industry's abstinence from open criticism.

By the time *The Shape of Water* premiered, del Toro was not only well-established within the Hollywood entertainment complex, but also engaging, perhaps unconsciously, with American cinematic mythology: the redemptive power of empathy, the triumph of individual feeling over institutional violence, and the belief that moral goodness transcends class or ideology. Written and directed by del Toro, the romantic fantasy drama utilizes this mythology as it tells the love story of Elisa—a mute night-time cleaner—and an Amphibian Man tested and tortured at the military research facility where she works. Set amid the 1960s Cold War race, the film enjoyed



The Shape of Water, dir. Guillermo del Toro, 2017.

box-office and critical success, grossing a total of \$195.2 million worldwide and winning four of its thirteen nominations at the 90th Academy Awards, including Best Picture. As described by del Toro, the film intended to serve as a celebration of otherness and empathy, particularly in response to heightened sociopolitical tensions during Trump's first presidency.⁴ In an interview for NPR, the director claimed:

[t]he movie is about connecting with 'the other,' ... the idea of empathy, the idea of how we do need each other to survive. And that's why the original title of the screenplay when I wrote it was *A Fairy Tale for Troubled Times*, because I think that this is a movie that is incredibly pertinent and almost like an antidote to a lot of the cynicism and disconnect that we experience day to day.⁵

Del Toro's implied understanding of the root of political polarization consequently informed the story's portrayal of the working class. Perceived as a tension between conservative and progressive views instead of a manifestation of deep systemic issues, *The Shape of Water* attempts to educate blue-collar workers on empathy through the selfless acts of marginalized characters within a discriminatory setting of 1960s America. The setting makes use of the period's visual aesthetics while indicating parallelisms between the present political moment and the storyline under the guise of a temporal distancing. The similarities ring clear: the period boasted a booming economy in which many Americans looked toward a hopeful future of innovation and drive for greatness in the race against the U.S.S.R.; at the same time, colorful advertisements worked to distract from an everyday life laced with racial tensions and double standards of sexual politics. Nevertheless, this unspoken similarity fails to elicit a reaction in audiences beyond a mere recognition that the sociopolitical realities do appear alike. The film does not seem to depict mass politics in a meaningful way but instead pivots toward a deeply personalized fantasy. What it

does is offer a domesticated form of solidarity, one that aligns more closely with American liberal mythmaking than with structural critique.

To achieve this mythmaking, the story presents itself as a reworked piece of midcentury monster horror, a genre which heavily fed into American political fears of the time. Born in the interstices of science fiction and fantasy, the humanoid monster figures as a liminal character completely defying societal norms yet still subjected to their standards in order to play out scenarios of nationalist pedagogy. Originally established as a vector of the colonial and racial imaginary, the monster supplants a spectrum of identities deviating from the accepted idea of a national hero. Rather than a subject of actual scientific curiosity, it appears as the target of annihilation whose death will undoubtedly restore the "correct" way of life.

The Shape of Water continues to operate as this vector. However, this time the fantasy, or hidden ideology, manifests itself through both the character of the Amphibian Man and the portrayal of the American working class itself. The monster appears to act

more as a mirror for the condition of this demographic than as a symbolic enemy. In a reversal of roles, it is the working class that seems to undergo assessment through the eyes of the Other. Furthermore, in a typical del Toro fashion, the film parts with the convention of the 1950s and 1960s horror through a reassignment of the characters' roles. By challenging the praxis, the (female) side character becomes the main protagonist, the White man becomes the monster, and the monster becomes the hero. In the end, the working-class representative and the Other save each other from institutional violence. Though refreshing, the reconstructed plot unnecessarily



The Shape of Water, dir. Guillermo del Toro, 2017.

targets the "White Savior" trope when it could have explored the dynamics of the characters' solidarity against abusive state power. As Matthew W. Hughey has shown, the trope tends to reproduce hierarchical moral binaries even in its subversions as it conflates (the white) race with righteousness to reconcile "an ideal or 'hegemonic whiteness' as the answer to injustice."⁶ In this case, rather than dismantling the "White Savior" narrative, the film only inverts it, offering a new moral binary in which goodness is also inscribed into race.

In effect, the film opts for a low-risk strategy by symbolically deconstructing older forms of American speculation for the sake of a neat narrative arc of conflict and resolution. One could argue that elevating the trope's reform to the rank of a crusade attracts attention to where we need none. In doing so, the film excuses itself from engaging with the unresolved, tangible issues of contemporary society such as economic precarity and systemic inequality which are far more complicated in the racial dimension. As a final result, *The Shape of Water* settles on a self-congratulatory symbolic reversal that may cater to liberal audiences without provoking meaningful discomfort. From the onset, the on-screen reputation of the working class depends on their ability to conform to a specific scenario of social allegiance with little to no regard of the conditions which impede such allegiances in real life. Upon closer inspection, the plot's key turning points are no less reductionist. Moving toward the film's presumed pedagogy, to further explore the production's superficial understanding of working-class empathy, one must consider the means by which such a brand of empathy appears in three essential scenes: the Amphibian Man's rescue mission; the penultimate confrontation with the film's antagonist, Strickland; and Elisa and the Amphibian Man's love scenes.

The Amphibian Man's rescue team consists of Elisa; her aging gay neighbor, Giles; her Black coworker, Zelda; and Dmitri, a Soviet double agent working at the research facility. After the

first two sketch out a plan to intercept the creature before its vivisection, the latter two join the mission upon learning about it on site. This alliance across race, gender, disability, sexuality, and nationality emerges as noble, deeply humane, and almost effortlessly coordinated. Jennifer Stellar's study on low-income individuals and compassion serves to legitimize this idea that the group would join forces in elevating another's suffering. She claims that there may be a "culture of compassion and cooperation among lower-class individuals that may be born out of threats to their well-being."⁷ Moreover, due to a deepened understanding of institutionalized violence against helpless individuals and their different expressions of "otherness," the team appears to exercise what Edward Chamberlain coined as "collaborative otherness." The atypicality of the rescue team stemming from Elisa's mutism, Giles's homosexuality, Zelda's blackness, and Dmitri's un-Americanness makes them unlikely heroes of a 1960s Hollywood story. Therefore, what Chamberlain argues is that outsiders may come together to form alliances through their experiences of un-belonging in society, and in the long-term their cooperation is what might bring positive change.⁸ With respect to the characters' low-income status, it could be argued that the parallel expression of "collaborative otherness" may be "altruistic communities," described by Daniel Lim in his study on the influence of suffering on communities where he concluded that adversities encouraged pro-sociality.⁹ All of these real-world factors validate the thought that such coalitions might exist while the spontaneous nature of the Amphibian Man's rescue further romanticizes the social potential of working-class cooperation.

Nevertheless, this scene is a liberal fantasy of working-class empathy in its purest form. It assembles a coalition of the marginalized working covertly against the military-industrial complex. It assembles a coalition of the marginalized working covertly against the military-industrial complex. Historically, one of the primary reasons behind coalition failure and the political weakness of the American working class has been the propagation of White supremacist rhetoric. Michael Goldfield asserts that aside from undermining inner-class solidarity in times of upheaval, this narration "provid[ed] an alternative white male nonclass worldview" that would unite White workers with their employers even if this acted against the former's interest.¹⁰ Understandably, the rescue scene works to counter the notion of hegemony and how the ruling elites may maintain greater control over a divided working class.¹¹ At the same time, as a symbol of working-class empathy and agency, it depoliticizes class conflict by framing it as a moral struggle between "good people" and monstrous power—although the latter is White and armed—rather than structural antagonisms. The political solidarity that emerges from a rebellion against institutional power becomes overshadowed by the quest to preserve the Other in an act of uber-empathy.



The Shape of Water, dir. Guillermo del Toro, 2017.

Bearing in mind another rule about audience reception from the Soviet cinema playbook, it is essential to consider whom this scene targets. In order for cinematic propaganda to be effective, it "require[s] a particular kind of spectator ... with the right sort of pre-existing class consciousness."¹² Returning to the American "nonclass worldview," it is interesting to see how the idea of class consciousness plays out in terms of citizens' self-identification. According to a Gallup poll, as of 2024 a surprising 54% of Americans self-identify as "middle-class."¹³ Nevertheless,

this number reads as less surprising when considering the fact that the United States is among the societies in which the middle-class is understood less as an income range and more as "a state of mind."¹⁴ Lawrence R. Samuel observes that the middle class functions in popular consciousness as an epitome of Americanness, meaning that "vast inequalities in income or wealth threaten our idea of what it means to be an American, as they violate our mythology of the 'Everyman,' which is central to our national identity."¹⁵ This logic serves to explain why so many citizens would choose to belong to a "lower" middle-class denoting relative success than to admit to the realness of financial struggle. Such an attitude could possibly reveal how disruptive a faithful depiction of the working class could be. Consequently, the cinematic "everyman" who upholds the mythos of the American Dream may act against different establishments so long as he does not negatively impact audience self-identification.

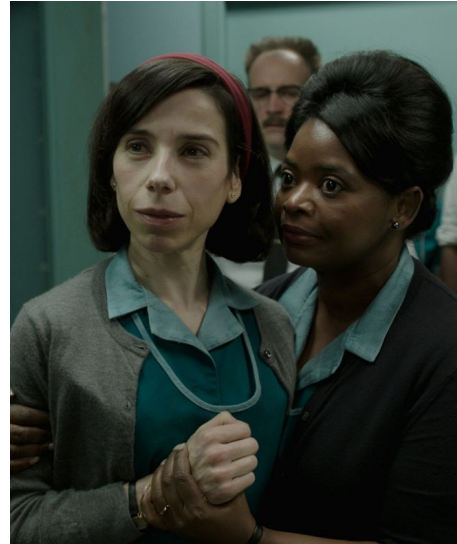
For this reason, the rescue mission escapes into safer territory—it does not provoke working-class audiences into any political action beyond a heightened tolerance toward non-normative identities. For liberal audiences, it acts as what Lauren Berlant describes as a "double bind": "a binding to fantasies that block the satisfactions they offer, and a binding to the promise of optimism as such that the fantasies have come to represent."¹⁶ This particular fantasy binds the audience to its optimistic speculative world in which conservative, low-income communities embrace the Other to oppose the personal vendettas of men in power. This fantasy of solidarity feels good but may ultimately obscure the need for actual political engagement. Moreover, cinema effectively outsources emotional and cognitive experiences, and this may further stifle the need for action. In what Slavoj Žižek calls the "interpassive subject," engaging in events and spectacles through external objects or figures preserves the illusion of participation, perhaps even

control, while remaining essentially passive.¹⁷ Witnessing such emotionally satisfying scenes of "resistance" in *The Shape of Water* may just as well displace the need for real political action.

Ultimately, the film's identity politics drives away interclass solidarity: race, disability, and sexuality are hyper-visible, while class struggle remains silent, though it is nonetheless noticeable. Walter Benn Michaels explores the tension between these two political optics in *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*, where he discusses how championing diversity over economic inequality may be the central moral and political failure of liberalism.¹⁸ He concludes that celebrating difference and identity as progressive is politically empty since it has become a mainstream position in university, corporate, and government spaces. Furthermore, not only does it divert attention from economic equality, but it can also enable neoliberal capitalism to thrive on easily catered identity politics. Arguably, by engaging in "empathy politics," *The Shape of Water* mirrors centrist liberal appeals during the Trump–Clinton election campaigns, where a focus on diversity replaced economic appeals to the working-class voters. Analysts believe this contributed to intolerant attitudes among the working-class electorate, where "[p]erhaps more so than with markers of other identities involving race, gender, disability, and sexuality, society expects working-class individuals to shed those markers in order to achieve status and wealth."¹⁹ As a result, one of the reasons behind their intolerance could be that those whom common opinion considers "outsiders" receive more freedom to express themselves while working on a higher social status

With due focus, we notice that the film communicates working-class environment mostly in an aestheticized fashion. The homes of blue-collar workers enjoy a cozy feel and warm color tones in contrast to the sterile yellow cabinets of a superficially modern suburbia. In terms of vocations, Zelda and Elisa are night-time cleaners, but they primarily move around tidy office spaces or mop-wide, well-lit hallways; the most daunting part of the job is cleaning the men's toilet, but Zelda downplays this with a joke about men's aim. On the one hand, the film manages to capture the chasm between janitorial work and military research in a way that presents the former merely as "invisible" labor. On the other hand, this framing resonates with the labor dynamics which were only brought to the media forefront during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, *Shape of Water* does not directly engage the realities of the invisibility of essential workers since their labor functions more as an aesthetic context rather than political content. By romanticizing the working-class setting, the film renders labor both visible and sentimental, yet ultimately depoliticized. Working-class labor serves merely as a narrative tool to place the diverse characters at the right place and time for the Amphibian Man's rescue, hence redeeming blue-collar voters' political reputation of intolerant, racist xenophobes.

The following scene which explores the conditions of working-class empathy across racial lines takes place toward the film's climax. Close to releasing the Amphibian Man into the sea with the coming of the autumn tide, Elisa receives a warning call from Zelda about how Strickland—the film's antagonist, Fishman's tormentor, and supervisor at the facility—knows she is



The Shape of Water, dir. Guillermo del Toro, 2017.

hiding the creature and is on his way to reclaim him. Strickland arrived at Zelda's home looking for information on the creature's whereabouts. Though Zelda kept secrecy despite his threats, her husband Brewster betrayed Elisa's involvement in the capture. This moment breaks the fantasy of working-class unity and shows how fear, power, and racialized intimidation fracture potential solidarities. The scene possibly complicates the idealized fantasy the film builds elsewhere, but it does not dwell here; it does not build a political analysis of why Brewster acts the way he does. Instead, it moves quickly past the betrayal to restore Zelda's heroism, making his action narratively instrumental rather than ideologically explored.

If the whole scene could be read through a by-proxy understanding of tension between political bodies, then Strickland becomes a stand-in for governmentality dictating the conditions of tolerance and visibility of marginalized identities, while Brewster reacts to his threats from the position of "the body individual, the body social, and the body politic."²⁰ In an analysis of Michel Foucault's definition of governmentality, Wendy Brown explores the argument that systemic forces that shape individual behavior may do so without direct coercion. It helps to explain how a seemingly isolated personal act, like Brewster's refusal to push back, is actually a product of social discipline reinforced through workplaces, racial hierarchies, gender roles, and historical fear. Brewster's fearful confession reflects how the "body individual" has internalized racial hierarchy and surveillance. His betrayal is not merely an act of cowardice, but an embodied response shaped by the cumulative effects of living under White supremacy and class subordination. Through exposure to the punitive consequences of civic dissent seen on the news, he has quite possibly learned that conceding to "the law" is safer than solidarity. Brewster defends his decision by stating that Elisa "broke the law," demonstrating a concern for the system which has similarly ensured his own

precariousness. Zelda ridicules this explanation by pointing out that he is quiet about most issues but chose to endanger Elisa by revealing her involvement in the rescue.

Since the institutional tolerance of Brewster's own "difference"—Black, lower-class status—is always conditional, he cannot perform an identical act of defiance as Giles does. Giles, too, objects to the Amphibian Man's rescue by stating that "it's breaking the law; it's probably breaking the law just thinking about it." In both men's cases, "the law" serves to cover up moral conflict, but as it turns out, the White artist has the privilege to move from hesitation to action without structural consequences. Brewster, by contrast, remains paralyzed—not necessarily by a lack of empathy, but rather by a racialized awareness that even minor transgressions could threaten his and his wife's safety. Where Giles's dissent could appear as quirky or romantic, Brewster's would mark him as dangerous. Therefore, the capacity to act morally proves unequally distributed, governed both by individual conscience and by the body politic's differential regulation of defiance and punishment. What is more, matching Foucault's definition of governmentality as a form of dispersed power,²¹ Brewster's actions evidence how "the state" does not need to apply direct pressure because people start to govern themselves in line with dominant norms and laws. By emphasizing Elisa's disobedience of the law, he finally reveals the fragmentation of the working class's social body, which cannot act as a unified class subject. In Brewster's case, to stand up to a white authority figure would be to violate the unspoken conditions by which he himself is tolerated, while the ensuing punishment for disobedience would not transform him into a martyr or hero within either his family or working-class community.

Considering that Brewster's empathy remains bound by the forces that have already led to his disenfranchisement as Black man in 1960s America, it becomes unclear why the film would choose to exalt the figure of the Soviet double agent at his expense. In a prior scene, a wounded and dying Dmitri only vaguely reveals the Amphibian Man's location despite Strickland's torture. By contrasting the two figures forced to disclose who stands behind the Fishman's extraction, the film exposes its favoritism of left-leaning ideologies through the figure of the Soviet double agent martyred when forced to answer under duress. In the del Toro fashion, rather than represent Americans' fear of invasion, the film sacrifices the Soviet agent for his role in the monster's survival. Coming from a Communist state, he can serve as a working-class sympathizer parallel to being a white-collar professional, possibly enacting an idealized vision of cross-class cooperation for American audiences. Dmitri exercises an empathy that is out of Brewster's reach, and the latter must instead exercise a conservative restraint. As a result, the film may more easily appeal to a liberal, post-Cold War audience that might favor a vision of universal, international humanity in place of a humanity dwindling under the conditions of economic precarity. The film successfully executes another politically evasive maneuver by delivering a martyr who stands outside the complexities of America's racial and class struggles. By presenting the Soviet agent as a martyr for an abstract cause, the film sidesteps questions of racial injustice and the systems that oppress both the Black and non-normative characters.

This evasion becomes even more legible when examined through W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "psychological wage," which he describes as the symbolic compensation White workers



The Shape of Water, dir. Guillermo del Toro, 2017.

received for their economic exploitation in the form of a sense of superiority over Black workers.²² Though originally conceptualized in terms of labor and social standing, this wage seemingly evolves on-screen into something else, perhaps as a remnant of the dismantled White Savior trope. That is, White characters like Giles and Dmitri receive the capacity for "grace under pressure" and visible heroism as opposed to Brewster, whose actions amount to mere cowardice. Importantly, such virtues of heroism and sacrifice are precisely the kinds of notions that Trump employed during his 2016 campaign to denote the working class. In a qualitative content analysis of seventy-three of Trump's speeches, including his acceptance speech right after his election, Lamont et al. present the five ways in which he appealed to working-class voters, including the way he stressed the role of working-class men as protectors of women and LGBTQ people. Women, mentioned 155 times, were framed positively as motherly and competent, yet in need of protecting from foreign "evil" forces.²³ Though LGBTQ people were mentioned only 33 times, they were similarly cast as vulnerable, especially to refugees and Muslims. Considering the split in the film's conditions for heroic White masculinity and Black masculinity, it seems that the image of working-class courage remains White-coded even when it is not central to the narrative.

Finally, bridging the previous two scenes of fulfilling a liberal fantasy of working-class empathy while sidestepping the issues of inner-class solidarity, the love scene between Elisa and the Amphibian Man pushes the narrative out of the sphere of political disenfranchisement and into the area of personal transcendence. As Elisa floods her bathroom to share a quasi-magical space with the creature, the scene communicates a mythical transcendence of working-class suffering through love and magic, while the enormity of the romantic union effectively overshadows Elisa's material conditions. The scene sits as an ultimate fantasy sequence in the film, bringing together

a very tolerant, if not queered, union: human/nonhuman, disabled/nonverbal, and feminine/possibly gender-fluid. We could argue that the Amphibian Man figures here as a composite body of the Other—not so much a character as a vessel for a symbolic “rescue” of various marginalized identities by working-class representatives, who in turn act as vessels for liberal empathy. We can interpret the Fishman as queer due to an anatomic trick; racialized and fetishized as exotic, coming from the Amazon; nonverbal, paralleling Elisa’s muteness; and an immigrant, since his body remains undocumented and literally caged. The couple’s love simultaneously upends the impossibility of interracial couples typical in the midcentury monster horror just as it delivers a catharsis that hinders the visibility of class struggle. Once again, the monster genre simplifies the formula for depicting characters, having them stand as archetypes, not representatives of identities. More importantly, their union does not suggest a political coalition as much as it presents escapism as a solution to working-class struggle.

In view of the production’s romanticization of spaces, colors, and textures, it would appear that the film achieves this escapism through the employment of magic realism and the musical—two genres identified as politically ambiguous and utopian respectively. In his article “Magic Realism in Film,” Fredric Jameson examines the ways in which films operating within the hazy aesthetics of magic realism, and further complicated by their “political or mystificatory value,” offer “possible alternatives to the narrative logic of contemporary postmodernism.”²⁴ In his concluding thoughts, he suggests that the intense relationships between color schemes and bodies on-screen serve to break down the understanding of the plots in a manner that would heighten the selective reception of historical and political events from which the narratives emerged. The “strategic omission of ... certain ideological perspectives” coupled with a “sensory proximity to the bodies and solids of the same history” effectively

obscures political clarity.²⁵ Therefore, the intensity of the visuals acts to close off issues extending beyond the scenes at hand. Once Elisa's gloomy apartment is flooded into beauty and the green tiles in her bathroom tint the water of her intimate union with the Fishman, it seems as though the "magic" of the scene pertained solely to her personal escape from political reality. Inside the romantic bubble, Elisa escapes from loneliness, lack of agency or recognition, and from omission, oppression, and violence.

What is more, the film's aquatic sequences punctuate the idea that she does not belong to the working class. In the opening scene, we see a sleeping Elisa floating in her deluged apartment while Giles attempts to narrate her story, calling her "a princess without voice." He communicates a type of failed potential, but one pertaining to her social status, not to her disability. This is evident when she avoids standing in line to punch in to work, much to the other employees' dismay. The film often shows Elisa standing apart from the cleaning crew, as if to visually reinforce that she does not belong with them. Where she does belong is inside a fairytale bubble of her and the Amphibian Man's creation. To press this point home, at a later point in the film Elisa imagines herself a star in her own musical, as if to mirror the images she frequently watched with Giles. In his analysis of the centrality of "escape" and "wish-fulfilment" in musicals, Richard Dyer theorizes that "entertainment presents what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized [through a] concentration on representational signs ... –stars are nicer than we are, characters more straightforward than people we know, situations more soluble than those we encounter."²⁶

Additionally, entertainment's omission of social issues pertaining to class, race, and sex implies "wants that capitalism itself promises to meet. Thus abundance becomes consumerism, energy and intensity, personal freedom and individualism, and transparency freedom of speech At our worse sense of it,

entertainment provides alternatives to capitalism which will be provided by capitalism."²⁷ Considering the fact that musicals are the greatest expression of vocalism on the screen, Elisa's dream of being heard expresses her deep desire for a simplification of her problems that would eventually allow her space for empowerment. However, the solution to her voicelessness, economic precarity, and sexual loneliness is not systemic change but erotic fantasy. Furthermore, we can extend the interpretation of her fantasy to include a normalization of her life within the logic of the system that would displace her economically. When confronted with images of endless possibility, her immediate instinct is not to directly oppose her working conditions, but to escape into a world of emotional compensation.

We can read *The Shape of Water* either as a mere fantasy or as a pedagogical attempt to reconcile the working class with marginalized groups through the classic use of the story's moral. By disrupting the monster's archetypical annihilation, the plot reconfigures the symbolic restoration of the "correct" way of life to present the monster's survival as an introduction to a "better" way of life. However, in its attempt to rehabilitate the colonial imaginary of the monster film, the feature's display of a successful interracial love story exposes the genre's rootedness in stereotypical portrayals by substituting one notorious image for another. The implied reading of the working class as an outwardly hostile demographic acts as the new enabler of the monster film's pedagogy. Yet, as several studies suggest, empathy among working-class communities is not absent, but shaped by the material realities of hardship and scarcity. While *The Shape of Water* imagines empathy as an apolitical virtue, it does little to acknowledge the uneven conditions of empathy across race and class lines.

Seen from the vantage point of Trump's second term, the film's political evasiveness takes on a heightened relevance. In the

years since the film's release, the rupture in American politics has calcified into a more enduring authoritarian turn. Executive power has become more centralized, democratic institutions increasingly hollowed out, and political discourse more openly hostile to pluralism and dissent. Within this shifting landscape, the film's refusal to engage with structural antagonism appears less as a creative choice than as a deeper political tendency to avoid confronting uncomfortable truths. As a work of speculative fiction, it exemplifies the genre's ability to magnify contemporary ideologies through allegoric means even though it magnifies the wrong optic. What *The Shape of Water* magnifies is not the violence of state power or class tensions. However, it does not fail to engage the political as the liberal fantasy reveals how ideologies are emotionally and culturally consumed and illuminates the structure of political feeling itself. In retrospect, the film has become an artefact of liberalism's desires and anxieties at a moment of intensifying political crisis. What is gained in looking back is not just a more critical reading of the film's evasions, but an insight into how popular media respond to democratic decline. In this sense, *The Shape of Water* offers less a resistance to polarization than a portrait of liberalism retreating into aestheticized empathy.

- 1 Daniel Arkin, "The Movies That Defined the Trump Era," NBC News, January 9, 2021.
- 2 "How Groups Voted in 2016," Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, accessed September 12, 2025.
- 3 Sergei Eisenstein and Jay Leyda, *Film Form. Essays in Film Theory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Trade & Reference Publishers, 2014), 16.
- 4 Scott Huver, "Guillermo del Toro: The Shape of Water Shows 'The Beauty of the Other,'" Vulture, November 19, 2017.
- 5 Victoria Whitley-Berry, "Guillermo del Toro Says 'Shape of Water' Is an Antidote for Today's Cynicism," Movie Interviews, NPR, December 1, 2017.
- 6 Matthew W. Hughey, *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption*, Temple

- University Press (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2014), 161.
- 7 Jennifer E. Stellar et al., "Class and Compassion: Socioeconomic Factors Predict Responses to Suffering.," *Emotion* 12, no. 3 (2012): 456.
 - 8 Edward Chamberlain, "Rethinking the Monstrous: Gender, Otherness, and Space in the Cinematic Storytelling of Arrival and *The Shape of Water*," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21, no. 7 (2019).
 - 9 Daniel Lim, "The Influence of Suffering, Social Class, and Social Power on Prosociality: An Empirical Review," in *Empathy - An Evidence-Based Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Intech Open, 2017).
 - 10 Michael Goldfield, *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New Press, 1997), 30.
 - 11 Lorenzo Fusaro, Jason Xidias, et al., *The Prison Notebooks*, The Macat Library (Routledge, 2017), 12.
 - 12 Michael Russell, "Soviet Montage Cinema as Propaganda and Political Rhetoric" (PhD dissertation, The University of Edinburgh, 2009).
 - 13 Megan Brennan, "Steady 54% of Americans Identify as Middle Class," Gallup, May 23, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/645281/steady-americans-identify-middle-class.aspx>.
 - 14 Lawrence R. Samuel, "Why Most Americans Believe They Are Middle Class," *Psychology Today*, February 8, 2024, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychology-yesterday/202402/why-most-americans-believe-they-are-middle-class>.
 - 15 Samuel, "Why Most Americans."
 - 16 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 51.
 - 17 Slavoj Žižek, "The Interpassive Subject," paper presented at Traverses, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1998, <https://divinecuration.github.io/assets/pdf/zizek-interpassive.pdf>, 7-8.
 - 18 Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (Metropolitan Books Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 67.
 - 19 William Thelin, "How the American Working Class Views the 'Working Class,'" *Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2019).
 - 20 Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*

(Princeton University Press, 2008), 81.

- 21 Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, 81.
- 22 David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Haymarket Series (Verso, 2007), 12.
- 23 Michèle Lamont et al., "Trump's Electoral Speeches and His Appeal to the American White Working Class: Trump's Electoral Speeches," *The British Journal of Sociology* 68 (November 2017): 153–80.
- 24 Fredric Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (1986): 302.
- 25 Jameson, "On Magic Realism," 323.
- 26 Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (Routledge, 2005), 20.
- 27 Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 27.

Bibliography

Arkin, Daniel. "The Movies That Defined the Trump Era." NBC News, January 9, 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/movies/movies-defined-trump-era-n1252888>.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2011.

Brenan, Megan. "Steady 54% of Americans Identify as Middle Class." Gallup, May 23, 2024. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/645281/steady-americans-identify-middle-class.aspx>.

Brown, Wendy. *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire*. 3rd printing, and 1st paperback printing. Princeton University Press, 2008.

Chamberlain, Edward. "Rethinking the Monstrous: Gender, Otherness, and Space in the Cinematic Storytelling of *Arrival* and *The Shape of Water*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21, no. 7 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3666>.

Dyer, Richard. *Only Entertainment*. Routledge, 2005. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203993941>.

Eisenstein, Sergei, and Jay Leyda. *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Trade & Reference Publishers, 2014.

Fusaro, Lorenzo, Jason Xidias, and Adam Fabry. *The Prison Notebooks*. The Macat Library. Routledge, 2017.

Goldfield, Michael. *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics*. New Press, 1997.

Hughey, Matthew W. *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption*. Temple University Press. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2014.

Huver, Scott. "Guillermo Del Toro: *The Shape of Water* Shows 'The Beauty of the Other.'" *Vulture*

, November 19, 2017.

Jameson, Fredric. "On Magic Realism in Film." *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 2 (1986): 301–25.

Lamont, Michèle, Bo Yun Park, and Elena Ayala-Hurtado. "Trump's Electoral Speeches and His Appeal to the American White Working Class: Trump's Electoral Speeches." *The British Journal of Sociology* 68 (November 2017): 153–80.

Lim, Daniel. "The Influence of Suffering, Social Class, and Social Power on Prosociality: An Empirical Review." In *Empathy - An Evidence-Based Interdisciplinary Perspective*. Intech Open, 2017.

Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*. Metropolitan Books Henry Holt and Company, 2006.

Roediger, David R. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. Haymarket Series. Verso, 2007.

Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. "How Groups Voted in 2016." Accessed September 12, 2025. <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/how-groups-voted-2016>.

Russell, Michael. "Soviet Montage Cinema as Propaganda and Political Rhetoric." PhD dissertation, The University of Edinburgh, 2009.

Samuel, Lawrence R. "Why Most Americans Believe They Are Middle Class." *Psychology Today*, February 8, 2024. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychology-yesterday/202402/why-most-americans-believe-they-are-middle-class>.

Stellar, Jennifer E., Vida M. Manzo, Michael W. Kraus, and Dacher Keltner. "Class and Compassion: Socioeconomic Factors Predict Responses to Suffering." *Emotion* 12, no. 3 (2012): 449–59. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026508>.

Thelin, William. "How the American Working Class Views the 'Working Class.'" *Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.3390/h8010053>

Whitley-Berry, Victoria. "Guillermo Del Toro Says 'Shape Of Water' Is An Antidote For Today's Cynicism." Movie Interviews. NPR, December 1, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/01/567265511/guillermo-del-toro-says-shape-of-water-is-an-antidote-for-today-s-cynicism>.

Žižek, Slavoj. "The Interpassive Subject." Paper presented at Traverses, Centre Georges Pompidou. 1998. <https://divinecuration.github.io/assets/pdf/zizek-interpassive.pdf>.