

Abstract

Fluid Bodies and Controlled Water:

A Hydro-Critical Reading of *The Shape of Water*

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This project undertakes a hydrocritical analysis of *The Shape of Water* (2017), directed by Guillermo del Toro, examining how water operates as a relational and political force rather than a passive backdrop. Employing the theoretical framework of hydrofeminism by Astrida Neimanis and hydrosocial cycle by Jamie Budds and Jessica Linton, this study explores how the film represents water as a medium through which power is exercised, bodies are regulated, and resistance subtly emerges. This study analyses how control over water sustains authority while relational engagement with water enables survival, care and alternative forms of belonging.

**FLUID BODIES AND CONTROLLED WATER: A HYDRO-CRITICAL
READING OF *THE SHAPE OF WATER***



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and Literature*

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project titled “Fluid Bodies and Controlled Waters: A Hydro-Critical Reading of *The Shape of Water*” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Jisha John, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled “Fluid Bodies and Controlled Water:
A Hydro-Critical Reading of *The Shape of Water*” by Lekshmy.K.A, is a record of
bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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Introduction

Hydrocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach that examines water as a critical element shaping social, political and relational spheres of life. It treats water not merely as a symbolic or natural backdrop but as a discursively productive force. As a critical framework, it enables an analysis of how water participates in power relations and embodied experience. This project aims to undertake a hydrocritical analysis of Guillermo del Toro's 2017 film, *The Shape of Water*. It examines how water functions not merely as a symbol but as a formative condition that shapes bodies, relationships and power structures within the film.

The Shape of Water is a period romance film, starring Sally Hawkins, Michael Shannon, Richard Jenkins, Doug Jones, Michael Stuhlbarg and Octavia Spencer. Set in Cold War America, the movie tells the story of Elisa, a mute cleaning woman who falls in love with an amphibian creature held captive in a government laboratory. The government views the creature as an asset to be exploited for Cold War supremacy, as they subject it to brutal torture. In contrast, Elisa establishes a bond with this creature as their relationship unfolds through shared immersion and vulnerability. When she learns that the government has decided to vivisect him, she plots a daring operation to save him. Towards the climax, Elisa attempts to free him into the canal, where she is shot and left to sink. It is with this final immersion that her scars transform into gills on her neck, suggesting a bodily alignment with water beyond human conditions. By tracing how water mediates intimacy and containment, this study reads *The Shape of Water* as a cinematic text that actively shapes gendered experience and institutionalised power.

Hydrocriticism provides the central analytic framework for this study. As an interdisciplinary approach it aims to analyse water as an entity that shapes history, identity and social relations. It understands water as an active agent participating in the creation of human systems of power and meaning rather than approaching it as a passive natural resource. It challenges the anthropocentric notions of understanding water for its utility and tends to claim its temporal depth and spatial vastness. In gender narratology water is understood as an active agent that governs the bodily experiences. In this sense, hydrocriticism allows the film to be not read as a fantasy romance but as a lens to how water governs the lived experiences across personal and political registers.

The Shape of Water is especially suited to such a reading because water operates at every level of its narrative and visual structure. Elisa's routine immersion in her bathtub, the confinement of the Amphibian Man in the tank and the cinematic flood are sequences that tie the film's ethical and emotional logic. Water becomes a site of care at Elisa's domestic space and it also becomes a tool of power and confinement in the laboratory. Ultimately it functions as a medium that ruptures the same confinement. These shifting configurations allow the movie to analyse how bodies are disciplined and sustained through water. The film's focus on connection and communication through silence and water, beyond systems and language, makes it a compelling text to work with.

This thesis employs a qualitative textual analysis of the film. It draws on the hydrocritical thought, combining the hydrofeminist and hydrosocial cycle theory. The hydrosocial cycle foregrounds the ways in which water is embedded within the institutional and political power structures. The hydrofeminist theory emphasizes relationality, care and empowerment. Together these theories help to analyse how water

in this film operates through a double logic, first as a medium of care and intimacy and second as a tool of authority and violence.

The thesis is structured into three chapters. Chapter one, “Thinking Through Water” introduces the theoretical framework of this project. It provides a detailed explanation of the two core concepts applied in this work, the Hydrosocial cycle by Jessica Budds and Jaime Linton and the Hydrofeminist theory by Astrida Nemainis. It delves deeply into the theories and clarifies how these theories function as complementary lenses for understanding water as both political and lived conditions. Chapter two and three function as application chapters. Chapter two “Controlled Water and Institutional Power”, analyses *The Shape of Water* through the framework of Hydrosocial Cycle. It elaborates on how water operates within social systems to channelise institutional power. Chapter three “Bodies that Breathe Water”, is the hydrofeminist exploration of the film. It analyses Elisa's daily immersion, her muteness and her relationship with the Amphibian Man.

This project argues that *The Shape of Water* treats water as a formative force that shapes bodies and identities. It is more than just a background element that actively organises the lived experience. By paying attention to how water is treated, this study highlights how del Toro uses fluidity to question identities and hierarchies. In the end the film attempts to imagine dominance and freedom through a unique entity like water.

This study also places *The Shape of Water* within wider discussions in environmental humanities and film studies that move beyond human-centred ways of reading texts. By focusing on water as a shaping presence in the film, the project explores how ideas of agency, embodiment and ethics are expressed through ecological elements. The film's emphasis on fluidity unsettles fixed categories of gender, ability and species, allowing space for alternative forms of connection. Water thus becomes a

medium through which marginalised characters experience belonging outside dominant political structures.

The project also demonstrates the usefulness of hydrocriticism as a method for analysing cinema. While water is often treated as a visual or symbolic element in film, this study shows how it can organise narrative meaning and power relations. Through a hydrocritical reading, *The Shape of Water* reveals how care and violence coexist within institutional spaces. By attending to water as both sustaining and disruptive, the thesis offers a grounded reading of how cinema can engage with ecological concerns alongside questions of power and resistance.

Chapter 1

Thinking Through Water

Hydrocriticism is an academic approach in humanities that analyses texts and cultures through the lens of water. Water is treated not as a mere natural resource but as an active agent which shapes bodies, identities and power. The movements of water through various bodies and institutions are closely read to understand how this entity contributes in shaping intimacy, authority etc. Water, according to this study, challenges the human plans for control and reimagines the idea of dominance. It is also understood as a cultural force that affects history. Scholars argue that water can disrupt the deeply rooted systems of power thereby revealing the limitations of human control. In films, particularly, hydrocriticism forms a visual narrative that uses watery spaces to portray how it silently shapes the lived experiences. Water acts as more than just a decorative background here. In cinema it sometimes structures emotion and even narrative logic. Hence water is not always just a setting but a force that helps us understand power, resistance and relationality.

“The hydrosocial cycle: Defining and mobilising a relational-dialectical approach” is an article written by Jessica Budds and Jamie Linton that was published in the journal, *Geoforum* in 2014 aiming to theorize the relationship between water and society. Budds and Linton define Hydrosocial cycle as “a socio-natural process by which water and society make and remake each other over space and time.” (170) This theory frames water as a socio-natural entity that co-constitutes the society with relational power. Water for the longest time was conceptualised hydrologically, i.e water was understood through a scientific lens

in processes like evaporation, transpiration, condensation, precipitation etc.

Hydrosocial cycle is built on the concept of hydrological cycle but argues that beyond the scientific and engineering processes water upholds layers of social, political and economic meaning. While hydrological cycle remain as a central anchor in natural sciences it separates water from its social context. This social context becomes the focal point of hydrosocial cycle.

The society acts upon water in diverse ways. It builds dams, canals, reservoirs etc to control and move water. It analyses and measures water scale with ground water tables, rainfall etc. The government intervenes by setting laws and regulations to regulate its use. In turn water acts upon the society as well. Floods, droughts, groundwater depletion etc can cause destruction of livelihood and disrupt the flow of daily life. This creates a mutual co-relation between water and society, which becomes the central argument of the theory. “This implies a shift from regarding water as the object of social processes, to a nature that is both shaped by, and shapes, social relations, structures and subjectivities.” (Budds and Linton 171)

Budds and Linton draw attention to a central idea that water influences power relations in society. “We start from the premise that water internalizes social relations and politics, as opposed to being merely the object of politics.” (Budds and Linton 170). Water is not merely a component consisting of two hydrogen molecules and one oxygen molecule but a medium through which social and political power is exercised. However hydrological cycle considers water as an apolitical and a natural phenomenon. It is posited materially and does not incorporate politics, as it resists representation, and therefore it also hides the inequalities of water. Decisions about who has access to water, whose knowledge

systems matter and how water is represented and managed are all influenced by power. Meanwhile water itself produces new configurations of power, enabling the power of technocrats or governments in some cases, while undermining that power and creating conflicts between communities or states in others. Therefore, power is embedded in hydrosocial change.

The politics of water become even more pronounced in times of conflict, inequity, and notions of sovereignty. Budds and Linton claim that decisions on large-scale infrastructure such as dams and reservoirs have served to strengthen the authority of the state and the technocrats, while disempowering local communities. Similarly, water privatization processes illustrate the exercising of dominion that leads to the exclusion of the marginalised and impoverished communities. Simultaneously, water illustrates and aggravates social inequalities in many rural areas. Women have the added burden of water collection, thereby weaving inequitable gendered divisions of labor into the fabric of everyday life. On a larger scale, shortages of water and prolonged dry periods, or even wrangling over rivers, can exacerbate tensions between regions or even states. This illustrates how conflict over water becomes, in turn, conflict over territory, dominion, and justice. “We argue that unravelling this historical and geographical process of making and remaking offers analytical insights into the social construction and production of water, the ways by which it is made known, and the power relations that are embedded in hydrosocial change.” (Budds and Linton 170). The hydrosocial cycle thus illustrates how water is central to the exercise and contestation of power.

In essence, the hydrosocial cycle by Budds and Linton highlights how water is never a purely material element, but rather a social, political and

contested one. By showing how water is intertwined with power, Budds and Linton provides a valuable approach to analyzing conflicts over access, authority, and meaning. Although this approach illustrates how water both shapes and is shaped by political frameworks, it does not adequately capture the lived and embodied realities of water, especially in terms of questions of gender, identity and subjectivity. Astrida Neimanis' hydrofeminist theory becomes complementary in this regard, providing a framework that deepens the discourse by placing water within feminist, corporeal and ecological politics.

The theory posits water literally and metaphorically as an entity that constitutes and governs social and cultural identities. The core idea of the theory suggests "We are all bodies of water. What we do to water, we do to everybody, including ourselves." (Neimanis 96). Neimanis exemplifies both water and humans or all species as invariably connected to each other. It challenges traditional, rigid boundaries like self/other, male/female etc and provokes a reconsideration of relationships and care in a feminist and ecological lens.

Logically, water is the major component that constitutes a human body as well as nature. More than sixty percent of human body matter is constituted by water. Similarly more than seventy five percent of Earth is covered in water. This emphasises that water flows through all life, humans, animals, plants, rivers, oceans etc. Hence any harm inflicted on nature could reverb back on humans. Neimanis argues that human embodiment is fundamentally aquatic. She quotes Marx to highlight his concept of Hypersea. It articulates the evolutionary cycle where species emerge from marine existence and circles back to it after death. When we drink a glass of water, we don't merely ingest liquid but intake the entire ecological histories from microorganisms to infrastructure. "To drink a

glass of water is to ingest the ghosts of bodies that haunt the water.”(Neimanis 97). This elucidates the interdependent and interconnected nature of humans and environment.

Neimanis builds on this notion within feminist discourse by associating hydrofeminism with the work of unsettling deep binaries and creating more fluid subjectivities. Neimanis describes hydrofeminism as “figuring subjectivity as distributed, dislocated, and processual” (Neimanis 96) and therefore engages with the constitutive outside of the autonomous and bounded unit. Within this framework, water operates both as a metaphor and a literal force that demands relationality, how bodies, environments, and histories are always already entangled. Hydrofeminism, then, participates in feminist projects that aim to destabilize nature/culture, male/female, and self/other, and offer in exchange a model of embodiment that is porous and collective. At the same time, Neimanis emphasizes that hydrofeminism is not just a theoretical position. It is also an ethic, one that stresses care, interconnection, and responsibility in relation to both human and nonhuman bodies of water.

Among other aspects, Neimanis focused on the need to resist the lure of abstraction from time, place, and relation emphasizing the quagmires of more-than-human entanglements. She suggests reframing what we understand to be opposition from a hardened, segmented posture to a more fluid and relational concept. Under this reconfigured understanding what she refers to as “resistance” is able to be achieved through negotiation and within membranes and ecotones. These are fluid transitions such as coastlines or estuaries, never borders, but always intersections of possibility, change, and creative emergence. Beyond that, her “hydrocommons” concept highlights resistance as communal, the kind that

opposes commodification through collective relational care: “water as relational, not commodified” (Neimanis 98). This understanding defines resistance as interdependent, fluidized, responsive, and responsible to and of the human and more-than-human bodies entangled.

In summary, Neimanis’s hydrofeminism reconceptualizes embodiment, subjectivity, and resistance through water, foregrounding an ethic of care and accountability across human and more-than-human relations. By unsettling rigid binaries, Neimanis reframes resistance as fluid, relational, and responsive, situating feminism within broader ecological and ethical contexts. The two theories introduced in this chapter, Budds and Linton’s hydrosocial cycle, and Neimanis’ hydrofeminism offer different but connected ways to examine relationality, power, and agency. Hydrofeminism and the hydrosocial cycle function like two sides of a coin: hydrofeminism explores embodied, fluid connections between bodies and water, while the hydrosocial cycle reveals how societal structures and power trap and reshape those flows. In *The Shape of Water*, they converge, positioning water as a transformative force that disrupts both personal boundaries and systemic control.

Chapter 2

Controlled Water and Institutional Power.

Water in *The Shape of Water* does not often circulate freely across all spaces. It is depicted as two sides of a coin wherein Elisa's bathtub embodies care and the government laboratory forces power. This chapter examines how water operates in such institutional spaces, revealing how power is exercised through water. By tracing the movements of water in the government laboratory the film exposes the use of water in disciplining bodies. Domination is justified through the usage of water here.

The government laboratory is the primary site where water is treated as an instrument to exercise institutional power. It is an engineered space that is sealed and surveillanced unlike a domestic space that is nurtured in care and freedom. So water no longer is allowed to flow freely. Its fluidity is restrained as it is strongly concealed between the four walls of a glass tank. It is treated as a mere experimental apparatus. The Amphibian Man is contained in this water and his survival depends on how it's managed. He becomes an object of study rather than a living being. The tank is repeatedly portrayed as a spectacle, often a site of fear and violence. This spatial arrangement makes water inseparable from surveillance and authority.

The Amphibian Man is closely studied by the scientists like a machine in the laboratory. His body, breath and movements are examined and measured as if he is a piece of measurable data. His unique aquatic existence is neglected and ignored. The relational qualities this aquatic creature possesses are equated to values worth an experimentation. Water in this space is treated as an element that facilitates the

maximization of knowledge and power. Utility of this creature is prioritized by the institution which causes a disregard to the creature's sensitivity and intelligence. Water becomes the primary medium that allows this authoritarian torture on the being. Water truly ensures the biological survival of the Amphibian Man. However, it simultaneously constrains his autonomy and freedom. Colonel Strickland tries to control him through repeated torture in water. He is subjected to electric shocks, prodding and even for a submersion into the water. This mirrors how water being his natural habitat that sustains his existence is turned against him. This suggests the idea that control over water is control over life.

A significant detail that intensifies the Amphibian Man's struggle for survival is the addition of a chemical powder in the tank to sustain his life. Although he is immersed in water, it is highly restrictive and artificial that he requires chemical supplementation to survive in it. It also highlights how his life is no longer autonomous but rather institutionally managed. His ability to breathe and remain alive is made dependent on the substance administered by the authorities. Water hence shifts to become a regulated medium rather than a natural environment. Inadvertently, the usage of the powder to prolong the Amphibian Man's life is not in an ethical sense. It is based on a utilitarian interest in the creature for further scientific study.

When the Amphibian Man was transferred to Elisa's bathtub this powder had to be used again to sustain his life. Elisa's bathtub is the representation of warmth and relationality. Yet she had to use the same chemical substance as the authorities to sustain the creature's life. However, the difference between the intentions of Elisa and the scientists draws a stark parallel in the case. The powder enters her bath as an act of care not containment. She is forced to use the powder so that she could adapt her domestic environment according to his biological needs. In such a case the substance

that restrained the creature becomes the substance that enables co-existence. This highlights the difference between relational water and administered water. Ultimately it suggests that administered water carries the imprints of power even when it enters intimate spaces like Elisa's bath.

The question of access to water and its uneven distribution within power structures is invoked with Elisa's relationship with the laboratory water. As a cleaning woman, she moves through the lab ensuring her labour keeps the place clean for the scientific study. She is involved in the draining of water, cleaning of floors and tanks but never allowed access to the same water. The administration of laboratory water is solely managed by people of high ranks like Colonel Strickland and other scientists. They control its temperature, chemical composition and usage. Elisa remains at the margins of the system. The maximum access she is allowed is the management of the remains of administered water. This highlights the fact that water is not always a neutral entity, it shapes hierarchies. The contrast with Elisa's domestic space further clarifies this hierarchy. At home, she controls the temperature, measurements and the duration of her immersions. Water responds to her body with warmth and care. It makes her feel empowered under no surveillance, exercising complete autonomy. On the other hand, the laboratory places her at the margins of power. Hence it is understood that water is structured in the world not to sustain a free life but to maintain order and surveillance.

Resistance against hydrosocial systems is a key feature depicted through the film. Elisa's secret daily visits to the laboratory at specified hours to interact with the Amphibian Man marks the beginning of this hydrosocial resistance. She introduces practices that do not belong to institutional logic. She feeds the Amphibian Man boiled eggs, plays music and dances around to his amusement, communicates to him in her sign language and encourages him to communicate with her. Through her active efforts

the Amphibian Man connects with her empathy and shares a meaningful bond with her. This ethical relationship that unfolds between them lies totally outside of the institutional logic. Ideally the laboratory tank and its contained water functions under the agenda of observation and experimentation. The introduction of relationality to such a space shackles the sole purpose of the system. Although the system is not dismantled, Elisa's actions strain it. Hence resistance is induced subtly but impactfully. This intensifies when the scientist decides to assist Elisa in the escape of the Amphibian Man. The creature is transported in dry conditions, leaving behind the laboratory's contained waters. The escape plan is not merely about freeing the creation but about reclaiming water from institutional ownership.

Colonel Strickland is the human embodiment of hydrosocial authority in the film. He assumes the right to manage the creature's life by the ability to control its environment through the power that his job privileges him. He exercises this power not only through torture and violence but also through the regulation of water. Although the initial levels of violence against the creature was to pacify it for the experimentation, the mode of violence immediately shifts as the creature retaliates. It injures the Colonel and he loses a finger from his left hand. This infuriates him and in turn injures his pride. It results in his usage of electric shocks against the Amphibian Man. This shift highlights how institutional power reacts when challenged. When water systems fail or resist the authority responds by intensifying regulation and violence.

General Hoyt's character reveals how authority operates through hierarchy rather than ethics. He decides to kill the Amphibian Man under the Cold War urgency. Although the scientist tries to persuade him, he neglects it. His remark, "Count these starts with me son. There are five of them. It means I can do whatever the hell I want" (*The Shape of Water* 45:30-45:32) suggests that power doesn't need justification beyond

rank. The decision to dissect or kill the Amphibian Man isn't driven by a scientific necessity but his sovereign entitlement. The creature is immediately reduced to a State apparatus that can be altered according to their ambition. Water here ceases to be a living condition and rather becomes a source of military extraction.

In the second half of the movie, Strickland's hypertension marks the hydrosocial anxiety of authorities when things go beyond their control. The escape of the Amphibian Man wounded the authoritarian prejudices in him. In pursuit of finding the creature he pervades into the domestic space of Zelda, the cleaner. Although it was an attempt to restore the situation, he forgets boundaries to an extent that he threatens her husband and physically abuses him. This mirrors the overreach of institutional power when its sense of control is threatened. The escape of the Amphibian Man highlights the failure of an entire system that considered water and bodies as their governing entities.

Strickland's decaying finger can be read as a striking symbol of failure in artificial control. His finger was lost in the attack of the Amphibian Man. But with modern advancements in medical technology, he stitches that lost finger back into his arms. It reveals his ideal expectation for a biological restoration and metaphorically a forced restoration of control over the Amphibian Man. However the wound doesn't heal and rather rots day by day. This mirrors how institutional power attempts to restore order mechanically but terribly fails. The Amphibian Man's first attack marked the very first challenge to Strickland's dominance. The succeeding series of incidents culminating in the rotting of his stitched finger points out the internal decay of power. In a hydrosocial context, the finger represents Strickland's failure in adapting to an environment he cannot control. When forced beyond its limit even controlled water fails and that mirrors his finger's condition. Initially, he tried to still maintain the

control by intensifying his torture and electroshocuting the Amphibian Man. However, it doesn't last long as soon he escapes into the warm waters of Elisa's bath. This in turn reflects in his fingers as they get completely infected mirroring the complete loss of control. Therefore, the infection becomes a bodily echo of water slipping beyond institutional containment.

Strickland tears off his rotting finger towards the climax of the film. This marks his desperate attempt to conceal his vulnerability. He refuses to confront the situation and follow a healing path because his authoritarian prejudices don't let him do so. He resorts to self-mutilation. This draws a distinct parallel between his behaviour towards the creature and water. When his job was put at stake as General Hoyt declared it's either his job or the recovery of the asset, Strickland panics to save his position as well as pride. He desperately decides to destroy the creature without considering to re-think the scenario. Ultimately, his rotting finger stands in sharp contrast to Elisa's gills from scars. His body resisted recovery through forced restoration when her body adapted through relational water. Hence, the film posits a binary of two bodies modelled on power, a body that collapsed in control and another that survived in power.

Finally, the climax of the movie portrays the death of Colonel Strickland near the canal, which mirrors the collapse of hydrosocial authority. Water was the one element he tried to dominate and used to exercise control and power. But ultimately, his body rendered powerless within the same element he tried to dominate. Although he tried to shoot Elisa and the Amphibian Man, his attempts were in vain. The Amphibian Man, being the soul of water held the power to resurrect and heal. Strickland failed before the power of relational water. Understood in such a lens, the canal scene is the rupture of hydrosocial power. It demonstrates how control over water only sustains

power within carefully conditioned systems. Once water exceeds those conditions, the authority fails.

Chapter 3

Bodies That Breathe Water

Water in *The Shape of Water* is depicted as a bodily condition beyond its resourceful characteristics. The film opens within a domestic interior where Elisa is seen suspended in water as her body is fully and freely immersed in it. This image establishes the very idea that water is a primary element that organises her living environment. It isn't a mere background through which her life unfolds but an active medium that shapes her lived experience. The film thus begins by creating a gentle and soft image of water that is unforced in its movements. It metaphorically behaves like the air that she breathes, vital for survival yet experienced as freedom. Therefore, the film commits to understand water as a bodily experience from the very opening scene of immersion.

Elisa's daily routine reinforces this intimacy. Each day she awakes to a slow morning ritual of filling the bathtub and relaxing in it, letting the water take its own time to rise and cover her body. She doesn't rush this process at any time. The moment of suspension is a spiritual form of experience that calms her senses and gets her prepared for a day in the material world. It grounds her as it provides her a safe space where she can exist without interruption and scrutiny. It suggests that immersion is not a luxury but a necessity. These scenes are portrayed as quiet and unremarkable, yet signifying the gravity of the ritual. The consistency of her repeated mornings in the bathtub becomes foundational in shaping her sense of self.

Elisa's muteness resonates invariably in the aquatic space of her bathtub. She remains on the margins of a loud society that is shaped by its verbal articulation and

commands. But water provides a different sphere as it doesn't demand speech nor signify her lack unlike the society.

Instead, it responds to her silence through touch, temperature and breath. Water is a medium that operates beyond languages. For Elisa, self-expression in a world of speech is a difficult process, but water makes it natural and easy for her. It doesn't penalise her silence rather mirrors her mode of being. Thus, her routine immersion in water is symbolic of living in a non-problematic habitat that provides a sense of safety and understanding.

In the bathtub, Elisa is seen touching herself every morning, a significant part of her morning rituals. This act of her masturbating is portrayed as something unremarkable. The warmth of water encloses her body in safety and privacy. It promises her the feeling of being seen raw, unjudged. The usual taboo that circumscribes around feminine desires and pleasure is dismantled here. Water, in its safety builds a world for her to explore her sensual desires without being monitored. This challenges the dominant patriarchal notions that a woman's domestic interior is acutely significant. Elisa's bathroom is a small space. Water makes the space a site of empowerment. She has the agency and power to navigate all the activities in that space, from the temperature of water to how her body should move in it. This draws a contrasting parallel to her rigidly structured workplace and the laboratory. Therefore, water allows her domestic interior to exceed the conventional limitations.

Water is the medium that connects Elisa with the Amphibian Man. On their first encounter, the Amphibian Man is seen caged in a tank, suspended in water. Every member of the laboratory approached him with a sense of authority and fear. However Elisa is driven by curiosity seeing a creature that mirrors her inner world. She connects

with him tentatively and cautiously by sharing boiled eggs and playing melodious music near his tank. Here, water operates as a connective presence. Although the laboratory tank poses a wall of separation, the inner fluid world creates a possibility of connection. The living environment inside the tank resonates with Elisa. She closely reads the movements of the Amphibian Man in the tank as he moves and breathes in it. She identifies it highly similar to her own body in the bath. Hence their interactions unfold slowly as the Amphibian Man responds to her attempts to communicate through signs.

The relationality of their kinship in a hydrofeminist narrative is accentuated when Elisa decides to bring the creature to her apartment and convert her bath into an aquatic environment. She risks exposure and damage by flooding her apartment. This decision foregrounds water as an ethical medium. This act is driven by care unlike the scientists who confined the creature in a limited aquatic space such as a tank. Water in her bath sustains both their bodies as they build mutual trust and connection through the medium. It eventually unfolds into an intimate union of two vulnerable beings without surveillance or restraint. Their marginalised positions are aligned in this sphere. They exist outside the dominant social sphere as she is mute and he is non-human in nature. The barrier of language systems estranges them from the world. However, water becomes a common element that binds them together. It doesn't demand verbal articulation nor force them to perform intelligibly. Their differences aren't erased but acknowledged and held with hierarchy in water.

The climactic sequence of the film solidifies the idea that water is a living condition. When Elisa is shot and her body sinks into the canal, the scene mirrors many immersions that shaped her daily life. However, here the immersion wasn't chosen or ritualistic. It was the result of the brutality that was imposed by society. The wounds that

were inflicted upon her marked the culmination of a world that often failed to accommodate her. Despite the fact that the world failed to hold her differences, she still emerged empowered through water. It once again acts as a medium through which she revives, as her wounds overtly transform into gills. This doesn't introduce a sudden transformation. It is portrayed as a bodily orientation that always existed. Water instead of acting as a site of danger, functions as a medium through which her body responds with familiarity. Her bodily orientation irrevocably alters to fit in immediately.

The emergence of gills also fundamentally redefines the idea of injury and survival. The scars on Elisa's neck represents the brutality of a world that is unable to hold her differences. Water intervenes to help her survive and adapt into its own sphere which can sustain her unique life. The film doesn't portray her scars as healed or faded but rather as opened. Elisa's scars opened into gills to adapt to a new pathway for breath. A natural process like breathing previously required effort, time and control in her material life. The transformation into gills posits the idea of survival as adaptation rather than recovery. Water doesn't restore her into her prior state of living. It provides her a new form of continuation for life without the conventional expectations of a material world.

The boundary between human and aquatic life is also dissolved in the climax of the film. Elisa neither abandons her human life nor assimilates into an Amphibian Man's life. The film rather conveys her change of environment as an affinity towards water that always, partially, existed in her. Even while restrained by terrestrial expectations she always aligned in part with water through her daily immersions. Hence the gills don't grant her access to a completely new world. It affirms her adaptation to an old world that she always aligned with. Water thus functions as a space where difference isn't corrected but sustained. Therefore, Elisa's final submersion completes the film's exploration of lived water. It

affirms that her survival doesn't depend on mastering her environment but on being received by it.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* through a hydrocritical framework, portraying water not merely as an aesthetic background but as an active agent that shapes power, relationality and social hierarchies. Through a hydrocritical reading, the study demonstrates how water operates as an active presence that structures institutional control, shapes embodied experience, and enables alternative modes of relation. Water in the film is not merely present; it actively organizes the conditions under which bodies are confined, cared for, or allowed to survive.

Viewed through this lens, the film reveals how modern power functions less through overt violence and more through the regulation of life-sustaining elements. Water becomes a space where authority is exercised and normalised. The laboratory tank exemplifies this logic by transforming a fluid environment into a controlled apparatus that renders life dependent on surveillance and compliance. At the same time, the film exposes the fragility of such systems. Water resists absolute containment, and its movement across spaces repeatedly unsettles the boundaries imposed upon it.

Elisa's relationship with water offers a different understanding of resistance. Rather than opposing power through force or domination, the film imagines resistance as relational, embodied, and fluid. Her growing alignment with water enables forms of care and connection that lie outside institutional logic. It culminates in a transformation that unsettles fixed ideas of the human. In this way, water functions not only as the medium through which power operates but also as the condition through which alternative ways of being become possible.

By foregrounding water's material role, this dissertation contributes to hydrocritical discussions by showing how cinema can make visible the politics embedded in elemental forces. *The Shape of Water* demonstrates that environments are never neutral; they actively participate in shaping social hierarchies, ethical relations, and possibilities for resistance. Reading the film through water thus allows for a deeper understanding of how power is both exercised and quietly undone through the management of life itself.

At a time increasingly defined by ecological instability and unequal access to resources, this study suggests that hydrocritical approaches offer valuable ways of rethinking cultural texts. As this dissertation has shown, water is not simply something characters move through or depend upon, but something that actively shapes how power, care, and survival are imagined.

By extending its focus beyond individual characters and scenes, this dissertation highlights how water functions as a broader condition that shapes social and ethical relations within the film. Water moves across institutional, domestic, and public spaces, carrying with it the logics of control and care. In doing so, the film reveals how power operates through everyday material arrangements rather than through force alone. The management of water becomes inseparable from the management of bodies, showing how access to life sustaining resources is unevenly distributed and deeply political.

Situating this reading within a wider contemporary context, the study suggests that hydrocritical approaches offer meaningful ways to rethink cultural texts at a time marked by ecological uncertainty and unequal access to resources. By attending closely to water's material presence, this dissertation demonstrates how cinema can render visible the subtle operations of power embedded in elemental forces. To think through

water, then, is also to reconsider the conditions under which life is governed, and transformed.

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