

## **Guillermo Del Toro's The Shape of Water as The Movie and The Book**

By

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### **Abstract**

Guillermo del Toro is known not only as one of the most famous directors of our time, but also, he is an author of several literary works. In 2018, immediately after the premiere of the film “The Shape of Water”, which made him an Oscar winner, a novel of the same name written in collaboration with Daniel Kraus appeared. “The Shape of Water” represents a novelization, but the film, as compared with the book, tells the story in different ways. We can see the difference between the representation of some characters. They are deeper and more complicated in the book. Also, we analyze methods, which the writers used to transfer the language of cinema in the text of the novel. Among the motifs realized both in the film and the novel we distinguish the motif of water. We focus on the forms of water, which are symbolic for the narrative.

**Keywords:** novelization, Guillermo Del Toro, cinema, literature, The Shape of Water.

### **1. Introduction**

Guillermo Del Toro is one of the most famous directors and screenwriters of the present. In Russia his works have been a matter of some academic concern, especially in the context of

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mythopoeitics (Badil', 2017; Udalova, 2018), but mostly they attract reviewers' attention (Zel'venskii, 2017; Dolgin, 2018).

The top of Del Toro's creativity is the movie of 2017 *The Shape of Water* for which he got 2 Oscar awards. Critics expressed different opinions on this film. Some of them saw in it "an unknown and unprecedented hybrid of science fiction, magic fairy tale, political movie, a retro of the thriller, spy movie, melodrama, musical, comedy, a horror" (Dolin, 2018), and others criticized it for the choice of the cast. In particular, the greatest number of complaints concerned Sallie Hawkins who played the mute main character. She was accused of being unnatural, and some critics suggested that it would have been better to invite a mute actress (Novis, 2018). The ending of the movie also underwent some criticism. According to some critics, it conveys the message that people with disabilities can be happy only with those similar to them, to some extent marginal: "The most serious criticism of the film has perhaps been that of the portrayal of disabled women as less worthy of love – thus Elisa can only find love with another outsider" (Wilde et al., 2018; Getahun et al., 2022; Ghanney & Nuobalee, 2021).

Guillermo Del Toro was accused of plagiarism, in particular for the use of the play of the American writer Paul Zindel. Stories about the hybrid relations of mythological water beings and usual mortals (mermaids taking away people to the underwater world or coming to water surface) are quite widespread in different cultures. And here it is necessary to remember the famous Soviet movie *Amphibian Person*, a screen version of A.R. Belyaev's novel, which appeared on the screen in 1962. Besides, Del Toro turned to widespread mythological and folklore images, especially Mexican images, reinterpreted them and created new ones. The image of the Devonian certainly was inspired by the hero of the movie *Creation from the Black Lagoon* of 1954 (Kit, 2017). This influence is evident in the names of the characters, Gill-man (in *Creation from a black lagoon*) and Gill-God (one of the names of the Devonian in *The Shape of Water*). Besides, in the movie "Hellboy" of 2004 there is a character called Abraham Sapien who is also an amphibian and is externally similar to the Devonian. Certainly, movies by Guillermo Del Toro are very popular and recognizable around the world, however very few people know that he is also a writer. Together with his coauthors Daniel Krauss and Chuck Hogan he wrote the novel *Trollhunters* and the cycle of novels *Strain* and then on their basis he shot films. The novel *The Shape of Water* stands out among these works as it is a novelization. Though work on literary and cinema versions of the same plot was going on simultaneously, the book was published a month later after the premiere of the film, in February 2018.

## **2. Methods**

Today, in the era of increasing media interaction, the novelization genre is not only gaining popularity and plays a significant role in film promotion, but also turns into an independent full-fledged work (for example, as was the case with Neil Gaiman's novel *Neverwhere*). However, the question of such works' quality is still acute. As N. Maslenkova notes: "Many critics openly accuse literary adaptations of films of very low quality. However, frankly speaking, not all cinematic novels are cheap, low-quality fakes. The question is different: how is the translation of a text from one sign system to another, translation from the language of one type of art into the language of another made?" (Maslenkova, 2012). The

variety of arts suggests different types of analysis (Shevchenko et al., 2020; Shamina et al., 2019; Afanasev et al., 2017), the situation when the film came first is very special, though today almost every potential American blockbuster has its own literary version and the Oscar-winning film by the famous director G. Del Toro the Shape of Water is not an exception.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

In spite of the fact that the movie plot is the cornerstone of the novel *The Shape of Water*, it should be noted that they are absolutely different: “Phenomenally fascinating and causing a resonance work of art ... between the movie and the novel – surprising interrelation which for certain will cause a passionate discussion about similarities and distinctions of these two equally talented works” (Seaman, 2018). Therefore, to perceive G. Del Toro and D. Kraus’s novel as a usual transposition of a movie on paper would be wrong. Though the authors adhere to the main screen subject line about the unusual love between the mute cleaner Elisa and an amphibious being, in the book some images and plot elements are reconsidered. Naturally, because of limitation of timing in the cinema version many characters are not revealed up to the end.

In the book each character is worked out quite in detail, and the reader gets more information of the personage’s biography and inner world. For this purpose, the authors often render the character’s interior speech: “And the janitors will wipe it away. But they’ll remember it. Remember him. Disgusting, disgusting” (Toro & Kraus, 2018).

Thus, the reader not only observes the behavior of the character, Strickland, but also knows what he feels at this moment. In general, a lot of attention is paid to Strickland’s image in the novel, he is one of the personages who are most elaborated in terms of determinism. The work begins with the description of its expedition to Amazonia. If on the screen this character quite fits into the traditional model of the villain hero, in the book he is not so unambiguous. In the novel, Strickland’s cruelty is rendered more brightly and explained. He starves an Egyptian vulture during the expedition, subjects to corporal punishments of the Devonian, gives wounds to the wife. Such cruelty becomes a consequence of the fact that the hero throughout the work is in the condition of division: on the one hand, he strives to lead usual life, while he needs to obey the orders of the general Hoyt, on the other. Thus, Strickland hunts Gill-God (so he calls the Devonian), moves to Baltimore and kills children in Korea. General Hoyt becomes for him an embodiment of force requiring unquestioning obedience: “He steers the ship into a grotto as tightly curled as a conch, and a curtain of insects parts, and the being rises, except it’s not Deus Brânquia, it’s General Hoyt, naked and pink and shining like rubber, holding out the same Ka-Bar knife he’d held out to him in Korea and making the same grim bargain.” (Toro & Kraus, 2018). As a result, he becomes a victim of his split, as the constant search for a compromise leads him to collapse, he loses his family, work, respect for General Hoyt, so death for him in some way becomes a release: “He is happy. His eye sockets fill with rain. Water is all he can see. It is the end. But he laughs as he dies. Because it is also the beginning” (Toro & Kraus, 2018).

The minor characters, Elisa’s neighbor Giles, are also reconsidered in the novel. On the screen, Giles looks more like a frightened, inert person. Even when Elisa asks him to help with the abduction of the Devonian, he does not immediately agree. In the book, Giles is a more

active character capable of rebellion. His farewell speech in “Dixie Doug” is rendered so:

“It is a crass, craven, vulgar, piggish attempt to falsify, package, and sell the unsellable magic of one person sitting across a table from another person. A person who *matters*. You cannot franchise the alchemy of greasy food and human affection. Perhaps you have never experienced it. Well, I have. There is a person who matters to me. And she, I assure you, is far too intelligent to be caught in here” (Toro & Kraus, 2018).

In the book, Giles himself gives him a rebuff. It might seem a slight change, but even it makes Giles braver in the eyes of the reader than in the eyes of the viewer.

The greatest transformation in the novel can be traced in the character of Strickland’s wife Lainie. Her line in the film is presented only by two small episodes in which she appears before the eyes of the audience in the image of a typical wife of the 60s of America, almost the heroine of “Stepford’s Wives” by A. Levin. In the book, she no longer belongs to the category of peripheral characters: she goes all the way from the image of an ideal wife to an independent woman who escapes with her children from a tyrant husband. It can be assumed that such development of Lainie’s line, on the one hand, may be a tribute to the feminism issue that has been relevant in recent years, and on the other hand, Lainie fits well into the group of “others” who are opposed to a healthy white male-traditional sexual orientation. Zelda is the black heroine in the novel, Elisa is a dumb girl, Giles is of non-traditional sexual orientation, Bob is Russian and Lainie is a housewife who has felt “the special, secret vitality she’d felt during those seventeen months on her own” (Toro & Kraus, 2018). The union of these heroes occurs through the motive of cleaning or brushing. So, Elisa and Zelda work as cleaners, Bob (or Dmitry) Mihalkov explains his task: “Sweep up after the Americans like a good maid and hand over to us your dustpan of dirt.” (Toro & Kraus, 2018). Giles tries on the role of the driver of a laundry machine. Lainie also practically cleaned her entire life. In addition, these characters form a kind of chain as all of them intersect with one another: Bob helps Zelda and Elisa, Lainie and Giles get to know each other at work, etc. Thus, we see that in the book Lainie is radically different from the screen image. She confronts the society by challenging the correctness of the traditional family model and finds the strength to escape.

Of course, one of the central characters in the book and in the film is the Devonian. He does not have one specific name; each hero calls him in his own way. Strickland in South America calls him the Gill-God, and in Occam he is called the asset, Bob calls him the Devonian, Elisa calls it The creature or simply uses the pronoun “he”. The text itself contains the concept of Deus Brânquia. In the film, the character's appearance is presented in detail: one can see his gills, webbed hands, muscles, eyes. Such a study is a kind of a calling card of Del Toro. In the book, there is no complete description of the Devonian, the authors convey how other characters perceive it.

When Elisa watches him, she has the following impression: “It is the God-image Strickland referenced: It moves like a man. Why, then, does Elisa feel that it is every animal that ever existed?” (Toro & Kraus, 2018). The Devonian godlikeness in the book is demonstrated brighter. He is shown as a truly supernatural being, and his appearance reveals his potential to everyone who encounters him.

If we talk about this final scene, the important point is that the action takes place in the rain. This is due not only to the plot (thanks to the rain, the Devonian can be released into the sea) but in general the director's love for water. In almost any film by del Toro important scenes occur in the rain or in the water. Despite the fact that in the film there are a lot of such scenes, the space of the novel is more "filled" with water, and it is more conceptual. Both in the film and in the book one can distinguish three incarnations of water: rain, tears and blood. Each of them is ambivalent in its own way. Thus, the rain for the heroes, in particular for Elisa, on the one hand, becomes a symbol of the beloved's salvation from death; on the other hand, she realizes that she will be forced to part with him, and this causes her pain. In contrast to the common stereotype, in the novel, tears are more characteristic of men. Both Strickland, Hoffstetler, and Giles cry periodically: "Two small tears, one from each eye, rolled down his smooth cheeks" (Shevchenko et al., 2020)). Male tears are mentioned in the novel much more often (26 times throughout the novel), whereas the combination of female characters and tears is less common (13 times), and most of them are related to the fact that the female personages are trying to suppress or hide their tears: "Tammy's bag, too, is bursting, but she doesn't leak a tear" (Toro & Kraus, 2018).

Tears periodically merge with other liquids (rain or pool water) thus creating some kind of connection like communicating vessels. Blood also becomes an integral part of the water space of the novel. It is a symbol of life.

There is an opposition of dry / wet in the novel. So, at the beginning of the novel it is emphasized that "Baltimore hasn't had rain in forever" (Toro & Kraus, 2018). As it was already mentioned above, the climax of the scene takes place in the rain: "Baltimore, land of dirt and concrete, is now of water, pouring not only from sky but also from everything else. Rain torrents from roof gutters, dumps from trees, cascades from railings, whirlpools behind passing cars" (Toro & Kraus, 2018). All the positive characters (the Devonian, Elisa, Zelda, Bob, Giles) are associated with water and / or love water and Strickland prefers dryness.

In the film, the contrast is built through color. So, Elisa's gray clothes after reunion with the Devonian are replaced by red. The Devonian himself is blue which also underlines his connection with water. Again, blue and red are del Toro's favorite colors. In the film "The Shape of Water", these colors are contrasted with green. This color becomes a symbol of strength, the coming future, but a false one, which replaces real values.

In our opinion, the main problem the authors of the book have encountered is connected with the transfer of Elisa's gestures in the text. The need to remind constantly the reader that the words of the heroine are signs, the impossibility of describing the movements of her fingers in sufficient detail and accurately create a hindrance to the reader's understanding of the heroine, although the authors skillfully get out of the situation. They use various kinds of metaphors to convey the specificity of this process: "She's signing, bludgeon-hard and whip-fast, a tone he's never seen her take, certain repeated symbols engraving themselves onto the air like Fourth of July sparklers" (Toro & Kraus, 2018). But in the process of reading, it is impossible to realize fully how much the main character differs from the rest and feels excluded from the society. In the film, the director deliberately did not insert subtitles to translate her gestures, which allows the viewer in some sense to experience direct communication with a dumb person. The authors of the book also tried to preserve this effect by rejecting the simple

textual transmission of these signs.

## 4. Summary

A comparative analysis of the film *The Shape of Water* and its novelization reveals G. del Toro and D. Kraus's strategies conditioned by the specificity of the two media. In particular, epic extensiveness, characteristic of the novel genre, made it possible for the two authors to elaborate the film characters more profoundly and foreground topical sociocultural issues.

## 5. Conclusions

Thus, the film and the novel *The Shape of Water* render completely different stories which are united only by the main points of the plot. The creators of the novel do not only show the inner world and the life story of each character in detail, but also give a separate storyline of the episodic on-screen character, Lainie.

In addition, the emphasis on water in the book is also presented brighter. Water becomes part of the space of the novel, it connects the characters, flows from one form to another. If the contrast on the screen is transmitted through the color opposition, then in the book the emphasis is on the dry / wet opposition. In the process of reading, one does not feel Elisa's isolation and loneliness, while her dumbness is much more vividly portrayed on the screen.

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