

Dialectic of Myth and Enlightenment: Rethinking Scientific Progress and Humanity through *The Shape of Water*

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ABSTRACT

Since the Scientific Revolution, the clash between myths, science, and humanity has been a recurring theme found in literary works. In the midst of today's rapid, massive, and disruptive technological development, Guillermo del Toro and Daniel Kraus collaboratively present a historical fantasy novel, *The Shape of Water*, which features the issues of scientific progress and humanity in a romance between a mute lower-class woman Elisa Esposito and a mystical amphibian creature from South America, Deus Brânquia. The novel portrays Deus Brânquia as an experimental asset of the American government to be studied for the Cold War military advancement. This study aims to analyze the representation of destructive science in the novel and examine the demythologization of Deus Brânquia as a depiction of Enlightenment's impact on the modern worldview. Using critical theory on the dialectic of myth and enlightenment proposed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, this study finds that *The Shape of Water* articulates a cynical notion to Enlightenment's legacy as it portrays how the progress of modern science can lead to horrific domination upon the marginalized human and nonhuman creature.

Keywords: *demythologization, enlightenment, humanity, myths, scientific progress.*

INTRODUCTION

Scientific Revolution signified a dramatic turn in Western civilization's history from the Age of Faith (which is the Church) to the Age of Reason, also known as the Age of Enlightenment. The spectrums of science that emerged in that era had transformed all aspects of human life, including art and literature. Classic examples of scientific impulses in the field of English literature can be seen in the famous canonized works such as Thomas Moore's *Utopia* (1516) and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), which later are considered as the prototype of science fiction. However, the

intersectional issues between scientific development, religion, and humanity, seem to be a timeless and recurrent discussion in the field of literary studies. The representations of the rapid growth of science and technology in literature and the trend of secularism, as well as the arising awareness on pluralism, environmental and post-human ethics, have required people to revisit their conceptualization of humanity. This article discusses Guillermo del Toro and Daniel Kraus' novel, *The Shape of Water* (2018), which captures how science that works under the labels of rationality, progress, and advancement, stands in opposition to humanity that, in the novel, is

characterized with the supernatural, mythical, and intuitive – stranded away from the realm of reasons and logics. Using Horkheimer and Adorno's critical theory of enlightenment, this article attempts to reveal the dialectic of myths and enlightenment represented in the novel, which leads to a big reflective question of whether science and technology will be able to bring people closer to humanity and perpetuate it.

The novel *The Shape of Water* was first published in 2018, several months following the remarkable success of the film version (of the same title), which received awards and nominations in several prestigious awards such as the *90th Academy Awards*, *75th Golden Globe Awards*, and *71st British Academy Film Awards*. In collaboration with the author Daniel Kraus, the director Guillermo del Toro retells his film in a completely different medium: a novel with evocative illustrations. Not less notable than the film version, this novel has received positive reviews from readers on the internet. German Lussier writes on *Gizmodo* that the book is no mere adaptation of what audiences see on the screen since it presents the same story in a different way (2017). Articulating a similar opinion, a review on *Medium* points out how the novel, compared to the film, has another method in developing the characterizations, especially in terms of “naturally capturing people's individual thoughts in the moment” (Reading Between the Wines, 2018). It somehow proves that written works frequently demonstrate their strength in exploring the characters' minds and emotions, explaining the details of the events, without invading the readers' imagination and engagement to the story.

Set in the 1960s, the novel tells a mystical romantic story between a mute woman named Elisa Esposito and a mythical amphibian creature from South America, Deus Brânquia. Elisa works as a janitor at Baltimore's Occam Aerospace Research Center, where she then secretly communicates and falls in love with the monster-like creature who is actually a very confidential American military asset studied for Cold War advancement. Immersed in the feeling of being understood by each other in a literally silent relationship, Elisa and Deus Brânquia forge a strong emotional bond that keeps them both inseparable. However, violent mistreatments to Deus Brânquia in the laboratory gives Elisa a deep

emotional wound. Her incredible empathy for the beloved creature sparks an insane idea in her mind – a rescue mission for Deus Brânquia – which, in other words, is equivalent to a suicide mission. Successfully convincing two of her best friends to lend their hands in executing her dangerous plan, Elisa manages to carry Deus Brânquia out of the laboratory. At the same time, she risks her own life and the lives of her friends.

The central underlying issue that arises later in the novel is the unbalanced battle between the state apparatus, in this case, the secret agents of the United States of America and Russia, against a small group of marginalized people who rely on nothing but a strong determination of friendship and solidarity. The other two people involved in the mission impossible – Zelda and Giles – have no better life than Elisa. Zelda, Elisa's workmate at Occam, is an African American woman whose life is threatened by domestic abuse from her husband. Giles, Elisa's neighbor at the apartment, is an old gay artist who lives in bankruptcy and loneliness. Apart from the complexities of their respective lives, when the three of them conspire to free Deus Brânquia, they put all that they have against the immense power of the state, which in this case operates on behalf of scientific advancement.

Ideally, science and technology aim to improve the quality of humankind. Science and technology should serve human beings to achieve the highest understanding of themselves and everything in the universe. However, it has a lot to do with power. Knowledge is always governed by power as well as technology becomes a means of sustaining power. In other words, a powerful state is the one that is able to control the pace of development of science and technology. Worse still, industrialization makes all countries accelerate in advancing science and technology because they are prominent variables of becoming a superpower. This battle in science and technology is critically presented in *The Shape of Water*. It does not only show the underground activities of the American and Russian secret agents in a fierce race to create the latest weapon technology innovation during the Cold War in the 1960s, but also the inconsolable dark parts that some may not want to see.

In the novel *The Shape of Water*, the research-based Cold War weapons development carried out by scientists at Occam Laboratory becomes the state's justification for violating indigenous people's established knowledge in South America. Today in actual life, modern people tend to celebrate scientific knowledge more than anything else, which results in invalidating other truths that reason and logic cannot grasp. The spirit of advancement rationalizes Dan Brânquia's surgery and extraction. Mythological knowledge that Deus Brânquia is the guardian of the Amazon rivers, which local residents perceive as a sacred being, becomes meaningless in the eyes of scientific progress.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been no scholarly article that discusses Del Toro's and Daniel Kraus' novel *The Shape of Water* (2018). However, since this novel is a written work adapted from a celebrated film with the same title, in this section, all of the relevant previous studies are closely related to film analyses.

Elizabeth Jane Garrels' article entitled "Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017): Trump Era Update of Cold War Creature from the *Black Lagoon* (1954) and Civil War Reckoning *El Laberinto del Fauno* (2006)" (2019) is a comparative film analysis which focuses on the symbolic presence of the amphibian creature dragged from the Amazon as a representation of the immigrants' situation in the United States of America under Trump's presidential era. Garrel believes that the creation of *The Shape of Water* is much influenced by the other two movies, *Black Lagoon* and *El Laberinto del Fauno*, in terms of the characterization and theme of the story.

Alberta Natasia Adji's article entitled "Falling for the Amphibian Man: Fantasy, Otherness, and Auteurism in del Toro's *The Shape of Water*" (2019) is a film analysis that examines the theme of otherness presented in the selected movie. Adji points out that del Toro's background as a Mexican director strengthens the degree of the otherness in his film. Using the auteur theory and the fantasy film principles, Adji's study finds that the fantasy

film, in this case, *The Shape of Water*, serves as a counter-narrative against bigoted slurs' pervasive issues, immigration bans, and racism in the United States during Trump's administration.

An article "Psychological Condition of Richard Strickland in *The Shape of Water*" (2018), written collaboratively by Alberta Natasia Adji and Azis Bilbargoya, looks into the antagonist's characterization of Richard Strickland. Using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, Adji and Bilbargoya find three distinctive features in Richard Strickland's psyche, i.e., hate, disgust, and fear. Those psychological features drive Strickland into destructive, murderous behaviors. The paper also mentions a set of core issues, i.e., fear of intimacy, low self-esteem, and unstable sense of self, that crucially determine Strickland's psychological condition throughout the story.

Another article entitled "Talking about *The Shape of Water*: Three Women Dip Their Toes In" (2018), written by Alison Wilde, Gill Crawshaw, and Alison Sheldon, shows dissatisfaction with the way Elisa Esposito as a disabled woman is portrayed in the movie. Apart from the various positive reviews and responses addressed to this film regarding its cinematography and storytelling, one most serious criticism might be on the depiction of a disabled woman as less worthy of love. It can be seen from how the romantic story develops between Elisa and another "outsider" in the society – the nonhuman monster-like creature.

Unlike the articles mentioned previously, which all examine the audio-visual version of *The Shape of Water*, this current paper examines the film's novel adaptation. Previous studies focused more on contextualizing del Toro's work with the socio-political conditions in the U.S. in the age of Trump and concentrating on the characterizations of the characters. The current study, however, situates the literary work in a broader moral compass. This study focuses on the demythologization of the mythical amphibian creature for the sake of scientific progress. The study covers the dialectic of myths and enlightenment concerning humanity, which actually becomes a central theme in the novel.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The age of Enlightenment that occurred in the 18th century has significantly changed the intellectual and philosophical trajectory of Western Civilization. German philosopher Immanuel Kant, in his essay entitled *What Is Enlightenment?* (1784), states that the Enlightenment marked the transformation of humans leaving their self-imposed immaturity, which was a condition in which people did not dare to use their own reasons without any other guidance. Kant emphasizes that the main point of Enlightenment was people's emergence from the immaturity in religious matters because the rulers in the past did not favor the utilization of mind and creativity especially in arts and sciences. According to Kant, immaturity in religion was the most harmful and dishonorable since it gave church councils and rulers opportunities to impose their thoughts and reasons ostensibly for the public's amelioration. In fact, providing the freedom to the public to use and express their reasons through arts and sciences could actually lead to a better and fair constitution. And therefore, *sapere aude*, which means *dare to know*, became the motto of Enlightenment.

In his lecture entitled *Why the Enlightenment Still Matters Today* (2012), Professor Justin Champion highlights that the settlement of modern states which exclude religious ambitions or obligations is a legacy of Enlightenment. However, this arrangement confronts two problems, "the commitment of individuals to religious worldviews, and the demands of freethinkers to challenge those beliefs" (Champion, 2012). The implementation of the *laïcité* law in France which gains controversies today, and the United States of America's separation between Church and State, are the actual embodiments of Enlightenment ideas. One thing that must be underlined is that Enlightenment does not by definition deny the beliefs in God, as noted by an American Enlightenment thinker, Thomas Jefferson.

Jefferson believed in the possibility of innate human moral virtue, which if combined with rational education and reflection on the philanthropy of Christ, could achieve something he called 'true religion'. Belief

should be autonomous and rational: contrary to the clerical claims, comprehension must precede assent – individuals must understand what they believed, bowing the knee to tradition or the authority of another's reason was improper. Freedom from organised religion was the foundation of a free republic. (Champion, 2012)

The idea of embracing a belief while still prioritizing individual freedom and reason initiated by Jefferson shows the humanistic and egalitarian spirit of Enlightenment, which ultimately was about liberating people from irrational shackles.

However, in a book entitled *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which was first published in 1947, Frankfurt School thinkers Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno criticize the notion of positioning reason higher and more accountable than myths. Myths are in the domain of supernatural and mystical, containing irrational elements that cannot be proven empirically. As a matter of fact, the mystery inherent in myths, religions, or unjust authority creates fear as well as a sense of obedience that systemically deteriorates the critical reasoning ability on an individual basis. This fear of an unknown being or a dogmatic consequence, for instance, was something that Enlightenment wished to eradicate because individuals should be in control of their own lives and free of fears. The ideal means capable of dispelling myths, according to Enlightenment thinkers, was scientific knowledge.

Nevertheless, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, Enlightenment's program was "the disenchantment of the world", which in the end did not completely aspire to humanize humans and help them to gain contentment and free them from fears. Scientific knowledge is only a new means of domination resulting from humans' intellectual capacity of reasoning. Unfortunately, enlightenment performs the functions and tasks of the myths that it initially wishes to eliminate.

Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization, of enlightenment, which equates the living with the nonliving as myth had equated the nonliving with the living.

Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is nothing other than a form of universal taboo. Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the "outside" is the real source of fear. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 11)

That is to say, myths and enlightenments are essentially similar in their natures, and it is the essence of what is called the dialectic of myth and enlightenment. Myths are already enlightenment, and enlightenment eventually regresses itself to become myths.

METHODS

This study employs a library research method to gather the data. This method involves collecting and cataloging data from books or e-books, textbooks, journal articles, and reliable websites. The primary data are the excerpts from Guillermo del Toro's and Daniel Kraus' novel *The Shape of Water* (2018). Besides, this research sorts out relevant information about the publication of the novel, previous studies on the selected work, the historical and philosophical background of Enlightenment, theoretical references about the dialectic of myths and enlightenment, and today's issues on scientific progress and humanity.

This research applies critical theory proposed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno on the dialectic of myths and enlightenment to analyze the data. According to Rapaport, the application of a critical approach is "a systematic example of interpretation in which a coherent body of thought (i.e., a theory) is mapped onto the literary work in order to explain its meaning" (2011, p. 7). The analysis process involves an intensive reading of the novel and an in-depth study of the selected critical theory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demythologization of Deus Brânquia

The novel *The Shape of Water* (2018) begins with a top-secret assignment from General Hoyt to his subordinate, Richard Strickland. The mission is to capture Deus Brânquia, the jungle god from the Amazon, and haul it to America for the purpose of weapon advancement research. In his quest to find Deus Brânquia, Strickland has to explore the challenging terrain of the Amazon and learn local myths ascribed to forest wildlife. Yet, this American man believes in nothing other than reality – concrete things that truly exist. For instance, while crossing the Amazon river in the dark of night, a local guide shows Strickland the appearance of a pink river dolphin called an Encantado. Local people believe that Encantado is a shape-shifter. It is said that when someone makes eye contact with an Encantado, that person will get a curse with a terrible nightmare able to drive one to the insanity. Strickland's immediate reaction to the mythical story is to kill the creature.

Strickland unholsters the Beretta and takes aim where he estimates the dolphin will emerge. Fanciful fables don't deserve to live. Harsh reality, that's what Hoyt seeks and what Strickland must find if he hopes to get out of here alive [...] Strickland waits. He wants to look it in the eyes. He'll be the one to deliver nightmares. He'll be the one to drive the jungle insane. (Torro & Kraus, 2018, p. 12)

A similar reaction can be drawn from Strickland's attitude toward Deus Brânquia. Strickland has listened to compelling stories about how sacred and powerful Deus Brânquia is after months down the river seeking for the amphibian man. However, he rejects to believe those supernatural narratives and remains firm in his stance that Deus Brânquia is an ordinary living organism, "some sort of fish-man that swims and eats and breathes" (Torro & Kraus, 2018, p. 17). The more Strickland is exposed to the Amazons' indigenous myths, the more he wants to prove that those are mere nonsense. Unfortunately, the only way that Strickland has in mind to prove his reason is by conquering and even killing those so-called magical creatures.

From Horkheimer and Adorno's perspective, what Strickland does in dealing with the indigenous

beliefs can be seen as an obvious example of demythologization. It is a conscious effort to exempt mythical elements attached to a subject or text. Demythologization as a legacy of Enlightenment's program can also explain the impulsive response that arises in Strickland when he encounters mystical stories of Encantado and Deus Brânquia. He refuses to believe them because he does not want to fall into unreasonable fear. Strickland's way of thinking is much influenced by a mechanistic way of thinking, which characterizes the majority of modern industrialized people.

When Deus Brânquia is eventually violently captured, there are two opposing reactions shown by Strickland and the local crew of Amazons.

The índios bravos drop to their knees, beg forgiveness, and cut their own throats with their machetes. The savage, uncontrolled beauty of the creature – Strickland shatters, too. He loses bladder, bowels, stomach. Bible verses from Lainie's pastor drone from a forgotten, squeaky-clean purgatory. The thing that hath been is that which shall be. There is no new thing under the sun. This century is a blink. Everyone is dead. Only the Gill-god and the Jungle-god live. (Torro & Kraus, 2018, p. 26)

Filled with fear and regret for what they do to the sacred god of Amazon, the local crew beg for forgiveness from the god and end up committing suicide. Meanwhile, Strickland seems to be relishing his moment of glory for being able to capture the creature that he names Gill-god. He even calls himself a Jungle-god – Gill-god's formidable opponent. Strickland's attitude shows how he intentionally asserts the triumphant of reason over myths.

However, the biblical verses from the previous quotation can actually support the proposition regarding the cycle of demythologization, which serves as the core principle in the dialectic of myth and enlightenment: things repeat, and there is nothing essentially new in the world. For example, Abrahamic religions such as Christian demythologized the traditional faiths of animism – putting aside the belief in spiritual essence in objects/subjects and the multiplicity of gods, and

replacing it with the belief of holy trinity. The truth is that myths vary and are not powerfully equal to each other. The dominant myths can erode other myths. When Enlightenment came, it demythologized all myths, including religious beliefs. It encouraged people to believe in reason and knowledge rather than faith in supernatural things/beings that could not be proven scientifically. The cycle did not stop there. Knowledge would sooner or later relapse into myths.

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, “just as myths already entail enlightenment, with every step enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology” (2002, p. 8). Although Enlightenment thinkers widely understood them as a set of dogmatic obscurity, myths also undergo a process of enlightenment in themselves until they are subjected to the annihilating criticism that reduces them to the status of only belief or animistic magic. Enlightenment received all its subject matters from myths, and therefore, it could not completely escape the myths. A scientific theory would be considered irrelevant if there was a new, more legitimate theory to show scientific truth. Enlightenment and myths share common law of action and reaction that both of them rely entirely on evidence to make them credible.

The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, which enlightenment upholds against mythical imagination, is that of myth itself. The arid wisdom which acknowledges nothing new under the sun, because all the pieces in the meaningless game have been played out, all the great thoughts have been thought, all possible discoveries can be construed in advance, and human beings are defined by self-preservation through adaptation – this barren wisdom merely reproduces the fantastic doctrine it rejects: the sanction of fate which, through retribution, incessantly reinstates what always was. Whatever might be different is made the same. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 8)

The novel constructs a tragic yet aesthetic storytelling to encapsulate this dialectic of myths and enlightenment. Scientific progress in the 20th

century is a projection of the Enlightenment's ideas. As Horkheimer and Adorno convey, knowledge similar to myth is constantly contested to one another. When Deus Brânquia arrives at Occam Aerospace Research Center, his divine attributes are no longer valid. His value is completely reduced to a specimen for scientific study. There is no such god of the Amazon in the laboratory, leaving only scientific interests above all else. At this point, knowledge too, can be misused by authorities repeating what previous rulers did with myths.

The Paradox of Reason and Knowledge

Enlightenment encouraged individuals to nurture reason in order to empower humans upon themselves so that they did not live under the control of collective doctrine, which they might not fully comprehend. The legacy of Enlightenment's thoughts for the betterment of mankind is undeniable. Enlightenment identified the tendency and evidence of abuse of power conducted by the authorities – the ones responsible for the (re)production and distribution of myths. Without question, they were detrimental to the societies. Therefore, by moving toward the development of knowledge that reached out to each individual, Enlightenment wanted to enable humans to have more freedom of thought: to think and ask questions critically about things that did not make sense to them. Enlightenment brought more definite methods and measurement tools to determine the truth – which previously was merely authoritarian dogma to become a set of scientific tests. With its main instruments, i.e., reason and knowledge, Enlightenment focused on stimulating individual rationality rather than the previous ideas of conformity. It is why Enlightenment is also famous as the Age of Reason.

However, Enlightenment thinkers' fundamental assumption that reason and knowledge would liberate people should always be reexamined.

Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters. Just as it serves all the purposes of the bourgeois economy both in factories and on the battlefield, it is at the disposal of entrepreneurs regardless of their origins. Kings control technology no

more directly than do merchants: it is as democratic as the economic system with which it evolved. Technology is the essence of this knowledge. It aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labor of others, capital. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 2)

The important premise from the above quotation is that knowledge is power. Neither does knowledge automatically free people from fear, enable them to reveal their true identity, nor escape them from authorities' control. It turns out that the problem is not with the myths or the knowledge. In the above quotation, Horkheimer and Adorno mention that it is the “worldly masters” responsible for all the world's sociopolitical chaos. They could be the kings/rulers or bourgeois, or to put it in today's context, they can be leaders or the ones who own capital. For them, scientific progress and myths are only instruments to sustain power. It explains why even though science and technology develop rapidly, the quality of life for the majority of people is not leading to a better direction.

In the novel, this irony is reflected through Strickland's thoughts about himself and the tasks he accomplishes. Although Strickland is the main antagonist in the story, he operates exhaustively under General Hoyt's absolute orders. Strickland is a brave soldier who is afraid of nothing – not even the earthly or heavenly god – but General Hoyt. His decisions throughout the story are based on calculation and logical consideration. Yet, he still lives powerlessly in a structured repressive system. Strickland and Hoyt share dark history in past assignments, and that makes Strickland has to devote himself to the powerful heartless general, even if it means against his own will. One time he thinks about how he captures Deus Brânquia, it is loud in his mind, “Gill-god, Jungle-god [Strickland]. They could be the same. They could be free” (Torro & Kraus, 2018, p. 27).

Nevertheless, the layers of power presented in the novel are quite complex. For marginalized people like Elisa and Zelda, the ghost in their daily life is an abusive boss like Strickland. For Strickland, the only thing that worried him was General Hoyt's outrage. As for General Hoyt, the state's political

interests might dictate everything he has to do. Power relations between characters in the novel prove that the development of science and technology in modern society does not help people get out of their fears and be themselves. The authorities continue to monopolize everything and continuously put them as the objects of exploitation or means of production.

Another progressive aspiration of Enlightenment was to celebrate individuals' thoughts, create autonomy, and release people from social/cultural uniformity or religious conformity. Unfortunately, even in modern society, this is still an unfulfilled dream. The underlying presumption is that people with reason and knowledge will be able to express themselves boldly instead of being mindless followers. However, *The Shape of Water* provides an interesting contradictory illustration for rethinking the earlier Enlightenment assumption mentioned above.

The second chapter of the novel, entitled *Uneducated Women*, introduces the protagonist characters who all belong to the lower class of society – the most oppressed group of any oppressed groups. This chapter provides contextual background to the daily lives of Elisa Esposito, a poor mute orphan woman; Zelda, a poor African American woman who lives together with her toxic husband; and Giles, a lonely and broke old gay painter. As indicated by the chapter's title, their lives have little exposure to formal education, where most people exercise their reason and interact with scientific experiments. However, together they do noble deeds risking everything they have for the sake of friendship and love. They save the god of the Amazon from the surgery performed by scientists at Occam Laboratory. Driven by irrationality and without a precise calculation, Elisa and her friends show a courageous and righteous attitude to express what they believe to be true even though it means fighting against the world.

On the other hand, the man of reason, Strickland, never has the nerve to challenge the orders and doctrines that General Hoyt has proclaimed. In the story, he feels the urge to continually self-indoctrinate himself to keep his obedience to the General and the state even though

he is fully aware that what he has done is an atrocity – a war crime against humanity.

All his life, primal voices have pushed him to accept the mantle for which he's been groomed. It is why Deus Brânquia had to be captured. It is why the Jungle-god [Strickland] must destroy the Gill-god. No new deity fully ascends until the old deity is slain. He should have listened to Hoyt all along. The monkeys – don't be scared by their orders. Follow them. (Torro & Kraus, 2018, p. 231)

The quotation shows how the lure of power can blind Strickland's reason. Deus Brânquia is merely seen as only an asset from which an extraordinary knowledge will be obtained. The search for new knowledge and all the scientific inquiry to acquire it does not aim to preserve humanity but win the Cold War. It seeks to assert the unlimited power of the state. Also, it signifies the annihilation of the weaker myth of Deus Brânquia by the new dominant myth of reason. The attempt to generate a scientific invention seems to justify the sacrifice of another myth.

Will Scientific Progress Help Save Humanity?

In their critique of Enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno accentuate that Enlightenment is in its nature totalitarian (2002, p. 4). They observe that the corrosive rationality embedded in Enlightenment reduces the multiplicity of forms to a single common denominator, the subject. It substitutes beliefs with knowledge – putting its pride on scientific progress as the answer to all mysteries so that humans control the world. Wood (1997) explains that Enlightenment ideas were the initial inspiration of modernity.

The project of modernity, according to these accounts, had its origins in the Enlightenment, though it came to fruition in the nineteenth century. The so-called Enlightenment project is supposed to represent rationalism, technocentrism, the standardization of knowledge and production, a belief in linear progress and in universal, absolute truths. (p. 541)

However, this embryo of modernity seems to ignore the possibility that knowledge will

eventually function as myths because knowledge belongs to those in power. Knowledge simply empowers another form of domination. This is in line with what Wood writes in his article, “the lineage of capitalism passes naturally from the earliest merchant through the medieval burgher to the Enlightenment bourgeois and finally to the industrial capitalist” (1997, p. 542). People in power and capital owners continue to transform themselves following the spirit of the age. Enlightenment's good intention to nurture reason has indeed resulted in various scientific progress, which at the same time also supports and facilitates domination with more sophisticated instruments. This, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, explains “why humanity instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism” (2002, p. xiv).

The Shape of Water (2018) portrays this failure of scientific development to rely on humanity through a metaphorical ending of the story. The blind ambition to develop knowledge solely to increase or expand power eventually leads to dust and ashes. The story shows that even though he has been shot many times by Strickland, Deus Brânquia seems to be alive and likely to continue his life in the supernatural underwater realm with Elisa Esposito, who also plunges herself into the seawater. The end of the story delivers the message of myth's triumph over knowledge. It also indicates an allusion to the world that is hostile to its diverse inhabitants with all their expressions. As Deus Brânquia and Elisa disappear in the water, readers can hear their thoughts, “we swim into the distance into the end into the beginning and we welcome the birds we welcome the insects we welcome the for-legs we welcome the two-legs we welcome you come with us” (Torro & Kraus, 2018, p. 314).

CONCLUSION

The reading of *The Shape of Water* (2018) through Horkheimer's and Adorno's critical perspective results in several findings. First, the demythologization process of Deus Brânquia depicted in the novel can be an example of how the dialectic of myth and enlightenment works. The assumptions attached to myths, reason, and

knowledge, as well as the transformation cycle of knowledge into myths, can be illustrated coherently from the intrinsic elements of the novel. Second, this story is able to bring out the irony about how scientific progress in modern society serves as a means of domination, neglecting individual expression and oppressing the weak. Lastly, although Horkheimer and Adorno's critique mainly targets Enlightenment programs, the current study proves that their theory is still very relevant for a critical investigation on Enlightenment's legacy in modern society. Their writing, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, suggests constant checks and balances on the entanglement of knowledge, technology, and power, in order to move toward real humanity.

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