

# Love as Water: Environmental Ethics in *Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water*

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## Abstract

Analyzing two films, *Ponyo* by Hayao Miyazaki and *The Shape of Water* by Guillermo del Toro, this paper studies the portrayal of humanity's complex relationship with water that refuses to present itself as static, simple, and reducible. Attending to water as a dynamic entity, it investigates the dynamics of value and agency of water in its manifested ally, rebel, and love. Engaging in the discussion of reciprocity as a way forward to a world of harmony, the paper argues how water as an equalizer can inform humans to shun their anthropocentric hubris and can help recognize the shared materiality between the human and the non-human world. Drawing on references from the recent scholarship on elemental ecocriticism, material ecocriticism, and environmental ethics, the eco-aesthetics of the films will be studied to evoke an ethical position about water's fluidity and omnipresence that demand our respect and our recognition of the agency of the non-human world.

**Keywords:** water, ecocinema, elemental ecocriticism, material ecocriticism, anthropocentrism

## Introduction

Japanese anime *Ponyo* and Hollywood blockbuster *The Shape of Water* have one thing in common in their unfolding of the unusual tales of love: the crucial presence of water. Both the films, in their respective water-dominated plots, unfold humanity's common materiality with the outside world, yoking a nexus between the land and the sea, the human and the non-human, and the known and the unknown. The fluidity and eeriness of water provide such a material condition in the films that the human protagonists are made to accept their own fluid nature that has always been inside them. The collapse of the boundary between the human and the non-human world is aesthetically achieved through the oneiric presence of water, powerfully presented by the creative visions of Hayao Miyazaki and Guillermo del Toro. The portrayal of water as a connector, transgressor, and mirror serves one crucial purpose by reminding us of the common materiality of the human and the rest of nature. In the process, the films induce a strong environmental ethics, warning us against the human hubris that leads to violence, chaos, and segregation between humans and the non-human world. Studying the films as two visual texts inundated with powerful eco-aesthetics can enthuse humans to think beyond the narrow limit of anthropocentrism and speciesism. Hence, this paper is a study of two tales of love nurtured in water, exploring its materiality, dynamism, and lively presence in connection with humans' complex dynamics with the non-human world.



Water portrayed in *Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water* acts as a repository of non-anthropocentric memory and desire. Water, as if holding up a mirror, reminds us of our evolutionary existence and fluid status of being, connecting us to the non-human world in a non-anthropocentric way. In the process, what these two visual texts attribute to water is an agency that can act, stimulate, create dream, and, in Jeffrey Cohen and Lowell Duckert's words, "make love and war" (16). Drawing references on the concept of elemental ecocriticism proposed by Cohen and Duckert, this paper investigates the dynamics of metamorphic water, considering water not only a life-forming entity that exists outside of the human/nonhuman animals' reality but also as an immersing fluidity that has the power to collapse the binary between the human and non-human world. It also draws on the concept of vibrant materialism in an attempt to recognize the agency of the non-human world as manifested in its response to human-caused environmental violence. To achieve that end, directors Hayao Miyazaki and Guillermo del Toro create a surreal, submerged world through vivid and colorful aesthetics. This powerful water-aesthetics, aided by creative imagination and technological support, can, eventually, invoke a spectator, transforming him/her as a more ecologically attuned sensing subject.

Prominent critic Paula Willoquet-Maricondi speaks highly of ecocinema's crucial role, avowing its value to arouse personal and political action among viewers. Her concept of a "paradigm shift" truly has an agency in subverting our traditional anthropocentric value system (45). She claims that the ecocinema is gifted in making a paradigm shift, pushing viewers "from a narrow anthropocentric worldview to an earth-centered, or ecocentric, view" (46). The shift might not be as swift and discernible as she asserts it to be, but what can be argued is that this shift is an entry point for a process of cognition, which can be achieved in the course of time through an exposure to ecocentric films. Adrian Ivakhiv's concept of ecocinema's power of "transporting" viewers in ways that other mediums possibly cannot is not at all far from Willoquet-Maricondi's idea of "paradigm shift." Drawing on the magnificent, kinetic as well as kinesthetic qualities of films, he suggests that they are efficient in elevating viewers' appreciation for the things and activities portrayed. Rather than being overtly critical of advanced visual technology, he intends to argue in favor of technology that can productively and communicatively mediate between viewers and the world, "a world which extends beyond what is immediately perceivable" (20). Thus, ecocinema's potential power of negotiating between the human and the non-human world can create a contact zone between the two apparently distinct worlds we have, unfortunately conceptualized through a watertight nature/culture dichotomy, especially since the Industrial Revolution. As the paper unfolds, we will see how *Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water* use the water narratives to mirror the human-animal in us, problematizing the boundary between the human and non-human world, and, in the process, develop a sense of common materiality, care, and love.

### ***Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water*: Violence against Nature**

*Ponyo* is a Ghibli Production that immensely contributed to bring Japanese anime into the world stage. Upon its release in 2008 in Japan, and in 2009 in Southeast Asia and America, it went on to become a box office hit, earning both a loyal fan base and several prestigious

awards home and abroad. *Ponyo* is a fantasy tale of a goldfish named Brunhilde, later named as Ponyo, who falls in love with Sosuke, a human boy. The primary plot revolves around Ponyo and Sosuke's efforts to be together against her father Fujimoto's will. The vengeance of Fujimoto, resulting from human violence towards the environment, makes him decide to bring back the age of the ocean. As the plot unfolds, we see the love growing stronger, accepted by both Sosuke's mother, Lisa, and Ponyo's mother, Gran Mamare, the sea goddess. As the water overpowers the land, the existing harmony of the earth collapses. The fascinating images achieved by the breathtakingly hand-painted sketches create a surreal prehistoric world dominated by water that intensifies the climax of the anime, testing the bond of love between a human and a non-human. In the process, Ponyo attests to an indictment on humanity's irresponsible and selfish treatment of the natural environment, and the disasters that must inevitably arise in return.

*The Shape of Water*, released in 2017, is also a unique love story between a mute cleaning woman, Elisa, who works at a high-security government laboratory, and an Amazonian fish-man, captured and kept in the same laboratory. Set in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1962, the film gives voice to figures from a range of identity categories in terms of gender, sexuality, race, class, and disability. However, the iconic presence of the amphibian creature, which has gills like a fish but can stand like a human and has two breathing systems, makes it a symbol of an extreme other. The story primarily revolves around the utmost violence to which it is subjected by Colonel Richard Strickland who captured it from the Amazon River for further research and the selfless love it receives from Elisa. What follows is Elisa's successful attempt to free the fish-out-of-water from the confinement with the aid of her friend Giles, an artist, and her co-worker, Zelda, that eventually infuriates Strickland and his superior. Through a suspenseful climax, Elisa and the sea-creature are united underwater which figuratively promises a new hope, a new form of co-existence. The storytelling, cinematography, sincere performances of the actors, seamless background music, and finally the creative vision of del Toro not only made the film a massive success but also earned it immense critical appreciation. Like Hollywood blockbusters such as *The Day after Tomorrow* and *Avatar*, this several-awards-winning film, that won the Academy Award for the best motion picture, might not be touted as an environmental film by ecocinema critics. However, a close reading of this stunning visual text promises a sincere divulging of humanity's cruel treatment of the non-human world, and confirms the agency of the non-human other. Like *Ponyo*, the subtext of *The Shape of Water* strongly renounces human hubris and celebrates love, diversity, and reciprocity.

Both *Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water* address the discourse of violence against nature that is subtly embedded in the narration of the story. *Ponyo* starts with beautiful images of the underwater world in which we see diverse and beautiful fish, coral, and plants. This fantastic, deep ocean world of *Ponyo* is soon replaced by the surface water where images of tins, bottles, cans project the pollution caused by humans. We are shown how marine animals suffer by commercial fishing trawlers that catch all sorts of fish, big and small, along with countless junk in the process. The two contrasting images – one with pristine water nurturing the diversity of marine species and the other with polluted water struggling

with garbage – sets the backdrop of the anime in which water will take its own course in the form of a tsunami as the story unfolds. The film's next scene is crucial not only in developing the love story between Ponyo and Sosuke but also demonstrating the unkind behavior of humans toward the sea. Ponyo escapes her father's den, ends up being caught in a fishing net and, then, stuck in a floating glass jar. With this symbolic human violence on nature, Miyazaki manages to establish the cause of Fujimoto's wrath for humanity. Because of humanity's selfish act and cruelty towards the environment, he wants to end the era of abominable humans. His loathing for humanity is evident when he warns Ponyo against the humans: "What you know about human? They spoil the sea. They treat your home like their empty black souls" (29:35-29:45). Fujimoto is shown to refine vast quantities of the water life through an elixir to restore the original state of the ocean that is contaminated by humans. The massive tsunami that finally hits the earth is presented as a direct consequence of humanity's slow violence on the environment.

The violence towards the non-human world is portrayed more penetratingly in *The Shape of Water* as it happens to an anthropomorphized character who is capable of screaming and bleeding. The unnamed sea-creature is chained and kept in an artificial water tank in the laboratory of OCCAM, an Aerospace Research Center. Strickland treats it brutally since it is just a horrible beast to him, nothing but "an affront" (28:25). His white supremacist view of the world makes it nothing but a lurking thing in the tank who does not live up to his standard of beauty, worthiness, and ability. Seeing it bleeding terribly, when the doctor asks for help, he replies: "It's an animal. Just keep it tame" (42:05-42:08). He repeatedly wounds it by shocking it with an electric cattle prod. The horrifying image of the creature screaming and bleeding helplessly while tethered is one of the moving moments of the film. Human beings' selfish explorative attitude towards the non-human world comes across strongly in many scenes. One of the exemplary scenes could be when the doctor begs for the life of the intelligent creature to which the General, Strickland's superior, replies: "I can do whatever the hell I want .... It is my damn decision" (43:55-44:05). If the so-called Amazonian amphibious creature encapsulates the otherness of the non-human world, the cruelty towards it showcases the extreme violence of humans that they have been inflicting slowly, but steadily.

### ***Ponyo and The Shape of Water: The Agency of Nature***

*Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water* are, however, anything but straightforward depictions of nature at humans' disposal. Overlooking the agency of the non-human world portrayed powerfully in the films would be feeding our human hubris. If the films depict violence against nature on the surface, at the core they showcase how nature responds to human actions with more power and agency. In this regard, we can turn towards the Gaia hypotheses, proposed by James Lovelock, which has been a revolutionary concept in fighting against human beings' egoistic, anthropocentric standpoint. The Gaia theory suggests that the whole planet functions as a self-correcting single being in which all living organisms interact with surrounding inorganic organisms to build a synergistic, complex system. Lovelock's latest book *The Revenge of Gaia* proposes a vision of a vindictive Gaia punishing strong-willed humans, which is unfortunately a present reality. In the age of

the Anthropocene, humans can no longer overlook the concept of the revenge of Gaia or, the *thing-power* as proposed by Jane Bennett. Bennett, in her discussion of “vibrant materialism,” subverts the anthropocentric dichotomy between life and matter, beings and things, and organic and inorganic. Coining the concept of *thing-power*, she intends to foreground “the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite human things” in our understanding of the world filled with non-human things (viii). Bennett’s idea of *thing-power*, which is adept in initiating and producing “effects dramatic and subtle,” reinforces what the non-human world does to its surroundings in *Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water* (6). The retaliation of water and the non-human creature is manifested in the films in their embrace of fury and in their denial to regenerate, reinforcing Lovelock’s belief that for each of our actions, there will be only consequences.

The payback of the ocean is made evident in *Ponyo* for a greater length of time; more than thirty minutes of the last half of the film has been dedicated to the revengeful tsunami. The scenes from 41:00 to 43:00 are particularly mention-worthy in their spectacular portrayals of giant waves that makes the ocean look like mad. The water level has risen so high that everything sinks under its mighty presence. The helpless sailors on the sea realize that the world is out of balance since the sea level is rising. The moon is so close that its “gravity is forcing the ocean to rise” (1:00:20-1:00:30). Fujimoto is made the voice of the angry ocean who declares a war on humanity. Eric Reinders considers Fujimoto as a crucial character who is not only motivated by anger at his daughter’s disobedience of the ocean’s law but also by the desire to seek revenge on the humans who have damaged his world. He argues: “This is the voice of anger at the destruction we humans have done to the world. This is the voice which says that it would not be so bad if humans were wiped away” (156). Reinders’s argument reinforces the idea that the ocean is not a dead organism; it has its own mechanism to answer back. Thus, the retaliation of water, as portrayed by Miyazaki, can be interpreted as its wrath on humanity which, in the process, confirms water’s role as an active agent.

The vengeance of the non-human world towards humans resonates subtly throughout *The Shape of Water* whenever Strickland’s two torn fingers, bleeding and stinking, appear on the screen. After ripping off the creature from its natural abode, he subjects it to extreme cruelty and torture. In one of the encounters, while Strickland was brutally hurting the sea-creature with electric shock, it (I deliberately use a gender-neutral pronoun for the sea-creature to avoid both anthropomorphism and gender essentialism) retaliates by chopping off his two fingers. Del Toro decided not to show the violence explicitly. What is shown, rather, is the pool of blood covering the floor on which Elisa finds two mutilated fingers while cleaning the bloody mess. Though Strickland manages to fix his cut fingers through an elaborate surgery, his fingers start rotting, spreading a foul smell and bleeding occasionally. The damage is done for life by the non-human creature who evidently defeats Strickland’s hubris, both species and technological, about which he always boasts. The expressions in its eyes, the gesture of the body, and the furious sound this shackled creature produces, while experimented on or tortured by humans, gives us a glimpse of its hatred and rage. It is the so-called Amazonian River god, once free and hurt by Elisa’s apparent death,

who finally takes away Strickland's life in an act of final revenge. Strickland's epiphanic realization before breathing his last can be comprehended as humanity's ultimate awe of the inexplicable power of nature: "Fuck! You are a god!" (1:55:20-1:55:25).

### ***Ponyo and The Shape of Water: Fluidity and Dynamism of Water***

Nature's retaliation against human actions is a strong reminder of not only human ephemerality and vulnerability but also nature's agency and dynamism, and its mechanism to adapt and survive. By showcasing water's overpowering, fluid, and dynamic nature, both *Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water* maintain a crucial environmental ethical position. What these two visual texts imply is the uncanny dynamism and supremacy of water that is beyond human cognizance, which we constantly require both inside and around us. Cohen and Duckert's rhetorical question underline this idea, subverting our long-held understanding of elemental matters that surround us: "How did we forget that matter is a precarious system and dynamic entity, not a reservoir of tractable commodities?" (5). The centrality of water and the powerful portrayal of the non-humans in the form of a fish girl and a sea-creature in the films, subsequently, document the power and vitality of the non-human world that demands our recognition of its inherent value and agency.

*Ponyo* documents the consequence of the treatment of the ocean by humans as a resource. Fujimoto's hatred for humans results from the latter's selfish exploitation of nature. The ocean's overpowering response to human evil through submerging everything reminds us of its supreme agency. This hyperreal world with fish swimming on the street and marine organisms floating around the trees indicate water's elemental nature of fluidity and transformation. This agency of water is made obvious in the storytelling by giving it as much importance as any of the characters. Considering the ocean as "a living presence," Miyazaki informs in his discussion of the art of *Ponyo*: "the sea is animated not as a backdrop to the story, but as one of its principal characters" (11). In a close reading of the film, Dani Cavallaro confirms how the film foregrounds the concept of the ocean as a living presence throughout its progression. Referring to Miyazaki's craft of distorting the normal space and shapes, he discusses how the film uses effective techniques "to foreground the ocean's prominence," which are inspired by the "spellbinding physics of water itself" (89). The centrality of water is maintained in the love story by making it the active agent that brings the two lovers together. Sosuke meets Ponyo first floating on the sea, and she returns to him once again, after freeing herself from Fujimoto, riding on the sea waves. Finally, their love proves to be true only when they are submerged in water. There is no denying that water dominates almost every scene of the anime. It is the sea-goddess, also known as the goddess of mercy, Gran Mamare, depicted as possessing the supreme agency, who eventually restores the balance of the earth. Thus, what the film does is to portray water with power and dynamism that convincingly demands our respect and recognition of its unique elementality.

*The Shape of Water* sets off in a dreamy underwater space with the camera gradually taking us through a corridor where a chandelier is hanging from a ceiling and fish are swimming around it. We witness a surreal vision of sleeping Elisa floating above the sofa in her studio

apartment where everything floats in the water. The oneiric space with Elisa floating in it seems to be a dream of desire that she is pulled towards. Film critic Matt Thrift finds a connection between water and fantasy in the early setting of the film. In his review, he discusses how the film is “awash with Freudian imagery symbolising female sexuality and (re-)birth,” which portrays Elisa as possessing her own sexual agency (par. 8). Lonely, ignored, and marginalized Elisa seems to be born again to start afresh, falling in love with the sea-creature. The plot of the movie seems to soak in a water-driven tale of transgressive love. Elisa first saw the sea-man inside water kept in a machine, and their mutual love and respect develop beside the water tank. Later, the unusual lovemaking scene happens underwater in a fantastic way when Elisa fills the bathroom with water. Even the plan she makes to release it into the ocean has also something to do with water. She informs about the time to execute the plan to her neighbor and friend, Giles, saying: “Soon. When the rain fills the canal that flows to the sea” (1:18:00). Thus, water functions as a crucial agent in bringing these two lovers together and finally reuniting them. It is only when the sea-creature jumps into the water with the apparently dead Elisa and brings her back to life by kissing her, do they come together.

These water narratives remind us of the crucial presence of water everywhere – both outside and inside our body. The role of water as an actant that has the power to bring life to entities is suggestive of the planet’s crucial life force – water. The centrality of water in the narratives makes one thing clear: water is active, full of agency, and possesses certain elementality that is unique, yet shared. Ecocriticism’s recent inclination towards elementality of matter is indeed substantial in the sense that it makes humans recognize the commonality of materiality of all biotic and abiotic organisms. Elemental ecocriticism focuses on all the four key elements – earth, air, fire, and water – and their “promiscuous combinations,” that operates within “a humanly knowable scale while extending an irresistible invitation to inhuman realms” (Cohen and Duckert 7). Attending to the vital elementality of matter is crucial in the age of the Anthropocene not only to acknowledge the complex materiality and dynamism of matter but also the non-human materiality inside us. Cohen and Duckert in their discussion of elementality of matter bring forth some thought-provoking principles of elements. Referring to the centrality of fundamental elements like water, they argue that we are never out of our element. Drawing on Galenic humoralism, they continue that earth (black bile), fire (yellow bile), water (phlegm), and air (blood) are not outside of us, not “out there,” but are “the shared ecomateriality that is both us and world” (13). Both the films attend to the elementality of things with certain centrality and conviction which, eventually, discloses that we are always exposed to the elements. Without acknowledging the dynamic agency of the non-human world, human knowledge would be subjective, boastful sermons since our understanding of ourselves and the world around us is, as suggested by Cohen and Duckert, “matter-mediated” (11). Thus, the powerful narratives of both the films demonstrate the agency and materiality of the non-human world which humans refuse to acknowledge either due to ignorance or excessive pride. The feeling of wonder that the films generate through a cinematic eco-aesthetic helps create an ecocentric space in our psyche, inviting us to recognize all natural forms as sentient and animate.

### ***Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water*: Love as Water**

Both *Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water* can be read as attempts to bridge the separation between the human and non-human world through evoking a sense of love, respect, and acceptance. Like water, love is portrayed as fluid and transgressive which has the capability of making humans reflective. In the process, love as water functions as a mirror to remind the characters not only their fluid identity but also their human hubris. Letting go of his human sense of superiority, Sosuke accepts the fish girl and befriends her. Though Miyazaki creates almost a utopian world in which Sosuke's mother also accepts her without questioning Ponyo's identity, there are few like the old lady, Tokisan, at the Old Center who warn him against the strange affection. Yet, Sosuke must not leave her and must prove his love for her. Sosuke's love stands for a hope in the posthumanist tradition and a power in humanity's responsible action in that tradition. Sosuke's acceptance is a symbolic demonstration of a world of humility in which humans no longer are obsessed with what is human only. Before he proves his true love for Ponyo, Gran Mamare declares to Fujimoto: "If Sosuke's love is true, Ponyo will be permanently transformed, and the balance of the nature will be restored" (1:05:30). But, if his love fails, she will turn into sea-foam. The sea goddess enquires of him: "Could you love her if she moved between two worlds?" (1:31:40). Sosuke seems determined to accept her as she truly is. Unaware of the fact that Ponyo will transform into a human girl if his love is true, he says he "love[s] all the Ponyos" (1:31:30). His utterance – "I love her. It's a big responsibility" – is the anime's ethical position that demonstrates human acceptance of the non-human world with love and care as a responsible being.

If the powerful water overpowers the land, and the magical Ponyo overwhelms Sosuke, both the land and Sosuke, in return, allow themselves to be immersed in the formers' elements. Their union blurs the boundary between the land and the sea, between humans and non-humans, reminding us of the prejudiced anthropocentric human knowledge of definition and classification. To deflate the concept of hierarchy and separateness, Miyazaki emphasizes the continuity of all life forms and their mutual interconnectedness. In his discussion of *Ponyo*, Cavallaro argues how the smooth transition of Ponyo from a fish to a human challenges our understanding of the world. He states:

The classification of diverse creatures allows humans to bask in the temporary illusion that nature can be explained and mapped out by science – until, that is, they begin to perceive nature's otherness, and decide to tighten the screws on this baffling universe by devising ways not merely organizing it, but also of mastering it. (108)

Miyazaki's world of *Ponyo* creates a counter discourse to this metanarrative, as suggested by Cavallaro, by depicting a world in which "the present and the prehistoric past coalesce in an uninterrupted flow of life" (75). Cavallaro considers that Ponyo successfully refutes the notion of humanity's separateness from nature, by creating a counter-aesthetics of human exploitation of its resources as though they were disposable commodities. He argues, "Miyazaki emphasizes the importance of embracing the Other as pivotal to the definition of



one's own being. This entails a loving and respectful acceptance of the Other's fundamental difference" (103). Thus, nature does not serve in the film as a source of humanity's comfort and gratification, rather as a form of self-discovery. Debunking the human construction of the hierarchy and the water-tight boundary between humans and non-humans, *Ponyo* certainly problematizes our customary understanding of the non-human world, and makes a strong case for advocating environmental ethics.

While in *Ponyo*, Ponyo, the non-human, leaves her water world and turns into a human, in *The Shape of Water*, it is Elisa, the human, who leaves her world and turns into a half-human, half-non-human water creature. However, the question is not who has sacrificed her essence, if there is any truly, as both the films celebrate the transformative, fluid nature of love and being, denying the fixity of things or identities. Like *Ponyo*, *The Shape of Water* collapses the frontiers of the two worlds – the world of humans and of non-humans, the world of the land and of the sea. By bringing the two apparently disjointed worlds together, what the film achieves is a unique status that destabilizes our understanding of ourselves and the Others. The love that develops between Elisa and the sea-creature is disturbingly unique as it is an intra-species affair that initiates on earth and is nurtured in water. Both of them speak a language of love and care, and respond and reciprocate through their senses. This transgressive love, that defies human understanding of gender, race, class, language, and species, is a celebration of the diversity of all life forms who are beautiful, beneficial, and relevant in their own unique ways. Elisa expresses her feeling to her neighbor friend, Giles, in sign language: "When he looks at me, the way he looks at me, he doesn't know what I lack, or how I am incomplete. He sees me for what I am as I am" (46:35-47:00). Thus, their mutual love and respect spring from their unprejudiced acceptance of who they are.

However, Strickland fails to appreciate the unique value of the sea-creature, judging it only in terms of its use value. He drags the "filthy thing" from the Amazon River so that he can vivisect it to learn more about it. His cruel comment to it, while enquired by the doctor about its future, reveals human exploitation of the non-human world as a source of knowledge and resource: "this thing dies, you learn, I live" (1:00:40-1:00:45). As the plot progresses, we witness how his sense of hierarchy as evident in his utterance "we are created in God's image" is downplayed by the mighty presence of the creature (29:05-29:10). In an interview with Fox 5, Del Toro describes the creature not as an animal, rather as "an elemental god from a river that represents the ancient holy past for another culture" (2:48-2:58). Interestingly, he introduces the human as an ugly creature who tortures, and studies, and prods, failing to see the creature as a divine and beautiful thing. He deliberately creates foil characters to Strickland to appreciate the sea-creature for its unique value. The doctor finds it "an intricate, beautiful thing" (1:00:29-1:00:32) while Giles gazes at him first and says: "He's so beautiful!" (1:06:36-1:06:38). Their acceptance of the creature as a unique being makes them help Elisa to release it into the ocean. It is finally through Elisa that the film pays tribute to love that has the power to make humans accepting and selfless. Risking her life in releasing it into the water, Elisa, like Sosuke, takes responsibility for what she loves. She confesses to Giles: "He is happy to see me. Every time every day. Now

I can either save him or let him die. Never see his eyes see me again. I will not let that go” (47:05-47:25). However, the film does not glorify the humans’ role as a savior of the planet. Though ironically it is the non-human which brings the human back to life finally, what *The Shape of Water* celebrates is acceptance, mutual respect, and shared love.

Like *Ponyo*, *The Shape of Water* debunks humanist understanding of evolution, ecology, and technological coordinates. Developing fish-like gills on Elisa’s neck is a fictional treatment of evolution that reminds us of our shared heritage with creatures of the water. The final kiss in underwater in the last scene is truly symbolic of the union between the common materiality of human and non-human world. The film ends with the lovers floating, embracing each other, while one of Elisa’s shoes falls off. This image seems significant in its power to demonstrate the human’s letting go of their technological pride. However, with still one shoe on, Elisa does not lose her human identity completely; rather she embraces the non-human world with her human materiality. Her transformation, both material and perceptual, questions our taken-for-granted modes of human experience. An understanding of Elisa as a non-binary subject can have profound ethical impacts on our relations to the non-human world that allows us to appreciate her choice and recognize her materiality. Along the same lines, Cohen and Duckert suggest that humans let go of their human-ness and rather embrace their common materiality that they share with the non-human world. They lucidly state: “The less human the collective, the more humane it may become” (4). By “less human” they do not mean *The World Without Us*, but “a disanthropocentric reenvisioning of the complicated biomes and cosmopolities within which we dwell” (5). Their argument envisions a renewed understanding of elemental activity and human-non-human collaborations that can propel care, respect, and justice.

### ***Ponyo and The Shape of Water: Water Aesthetics***

In their symbolical embracing of the others, both *Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water* create powerful water aesthetics. By forcing us to go to the unknown, see the unseen, and feel the unfelt, the films collapse the long-drawn distance that the human psyche has developed for the externality of nature. Both Miyazaki and Del Toro use the effective storytelling technique of mixing the mundane with the fantastical to create powerful aesthetics with the aid of creative audio-visual technology. Cubitt, in his seminal book *Ecomedia*, argues that scientific and entertainment media rely on technologies to communicate between the green world and the human. He frequently uses the word *techne* “to designate not just machinery but such techniques as language and gesture that mediate between the green world and the human” (4). Both the directors use *techne* to its fullest potential to create a fantastic world that refuses to divide up the frame between the human and the non-human in ways that overlooks their essential interdependence and common materiality. To provide agency to the non-human world, they deliberately use the trope of magic realism – chiefly a Latin American narrative technique that includes fantastic elements into a seemingly realistic narrative and animism. The concept of animism is particularly more significant in *Ponyo* in which we witness the whole planet alive. Apart from portraying the ocean as a dynamic, living thing, personified as Gran Mamare, and making its waves, its actions seem alive, animate, the film gives unexplainable power to Ponyo who can transform between two

worlds and has a magic touch to transform things. Her unexplainable power to transform a toy boat into a real one is indicative of nature's mysterious power which is beyond human understanding. Miyazaki himself admitted the pervasive atmosphere of animism in most of his films: "I do like animism. I can understand the idea of ascribing character to stones or wind. But I didn't want to laud it as a religion" (333). Praising the animism practiced in Miyazaki's anime, Cubitt discusses how they are potentially shocking because "they break the North American codes of neoteny, and allow the doe-eyed heroes and heroines to face and perpetrate adult and animal cruelty and violence" (32). By collapsing these two worlds in a playful manner, Miyazaki's anime poses a challenge to the human-centered philosophy that has consistently tried to define each term (animal, human) in terms of the other. Cubitt argues that the aesthetics of anime is more about possession: "possession of the animal by the human, certainly, but also of the human by the animal, and of both by other agencies" (32). Therefore, the animism in Miyazaki's anime breaks the human/animal binary by its portrayal of a complex dynamics between the human and the non-human who are constantly possessed by each other.

These complex dynamics of agencies are equally on display in *The Shape of Water*. Being a fluid-genre itself, *The Shape of Water* as a representation of "New Hollywood" cinema does an excellent job in making us aware of the new ways of imagining the relationship between humans and the non-human world. To evoke that imagination, del Toro uses the trope of magic realism in the film, portraying water as desirable as love. Apart from making it a dynamic actant, the sea-creature has been given the status of a semi God. Strickland informs us how the natives in the Amazon worshipped it like a god, tossing offerings to water (41:45-42:00). It is vested with a magical power that human knowledge cannot fathom. We witness how his healing touch gives the bald-headed Giles his hair back and brings Elisa back to life. The influence of del Toro's Mexican heritage is evident in creating a real-world setting permeated with a sense of enchantment. He beautifully blends the storytelling tradition and magic realism of Latin America in unfolding the enchanting tale of Elisa. Rachel Hatzipanagos acknowledges the centrality of the director's Mexican heritage in appreciating the film's vision and message. She believes that in the tradition of Latin American authors, del Toro uses magical realism, which she finds evident "in the mixture of the mundane with the fantastical," to convey a coded and subversive criticism (par. 4). Del Toro's Oscar acceptance speech can be a testimony to this fact in which he recognizes the functionality of the magic realist tradition. In defense of the power of such a marvelous realist tradition, he assures: "everyone that is dreaming of a parable, of using a genre fantasy to tell the stories about the things that are real in the world today, you can do it" (2:40-2:50). Del Toro seems to push us to our extreme limit through creative imagination in an attempt to acknowledge the agency of the non-human world and recognize the many life forms that co-exist with their uniqueness along with humans. In this regard, we can turn towards May Ingawani's discussion on animism that, she believes, makes the permeability of human and non-human worlds possible and perceivable. "As a structure of perception and framework of experience," she argues, "the relevance of animism to the theme of cinema beyond the human lies in its conception of the self as porous with respect to a multiplicity

of life forms” (91). As her discussion suggests, a shift of subjectivities from human to non-human subjects using techniques like animism or magic realism can make us aware of our narrow speciesism, exposing our prejudiced beliefs in human supremacy and agency.

In the process of collapsing boundaries between the human and non-human world, water has been used as a complex metaphor for love and desire. This desire finally overflows boundaries of gender, race, era, species, and dream, navigating through a complex dynamic of human-non-human-water interconnections. Both *Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water* begin and end with elaborate images of a world that is submerged in water. Considering water as a prominent figure in environmental imagination, Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino argue how water signifies, symbolizes, and evokes images, emotions, and reveries, including our fluidic existence in the womb. They discuss elements such as water as “generative, always becoming, always in flux, going through inevitable stages of metamorphosis” (310). The liquid, oneiric dimension is a reminiscence of the films’ perception of the sea below as analogous to our subconscious, that interacts with the conscious through desires and dreams. Dragging us into our subconscious, these films seem to remind us of our existence in the amniotic fluid of wombs. This prelapsarian state is a limbo between life and lifelessness in the sense that the formation of life in the mother’s womb is a complex matter-oriented metamorphosis. Along the same lines, British author John Fowles refers to the sea as our evolutionary amniotic fluid, the element in which we were “once enwombed, from which our own antediluvian line rose into light and air” (282). While his argument situates the centrality of water in the evolution of the planet, we are also made aware that human materiality and the outside material world are elementally woven together. All three scholars hold the position that materiality of water, far from being a separate reality located outside human bodies, is within them no less than they are inside it. By foregrounding water as a mirror of that vision, both the films tend to question the human sense of hierarchy, separation, and hubris through a watery oneiric-aesthetic framework.

By using the technique of defamiliarization, directors Miyazaki and del Toro problematize our anthropocentric understanding of the known world. Cavallaro rightly argues how powerful Miyazaki’s message of debunking humans’ separateness from nature in his emphasis on the continuity of all life forms. He maintains that Miyazaki achieves it through a fantastic structure of defamiliarization by creating an unknown world of powerful waves and tsunami. The unexpected world of hand-painted aquatic effects makes it a more shocking visual experience that forces us to ponder what is beneath the surface. Cavallaro argues: “As eerie as the spellbinding bubbles punctuating the action, *Ponyo*’s world carries the uncanny truthfulness of images perceived in dreams” (75). The uncanny truth of the uninterrupted flow of life looks perceptible while we are forced to immerse in the fantastic water world. In the final scene of *The Shape of Water*, Elisa soaks in water, accepts her fluidity, embraces her desire, and, finally, accepts the love she feels, and thereby, her true self. Water has been made synonymous with love; it is water that makes Elisa discover who she really is.

In a candid interview, del Toro admits that the film is not only about love but also a

celebration of the things that hold us together rather than separate us. He maintains: “To me, it was important to make it about a thing that is stronger than anything, which is water or love. The strongest element is water, because it is malleable. And it has no shape. And love is the same. Love takes the shape it needs to take. No matter what the shape is, you fall in love madly. I do believe it” (qtd. in Applebaum). Presenting water as a bond of love, it seems to celebrate the power of elementality that is everywhere in many forms, in many colors, and in many shapes. In the process, the magical water narrative of the films substantiates Cohen and Duckert’s claim that “the binding of the elements is love” (20). Elisa’s love for the sea-creature and Sosuke’s love for Ponyo support the idea that earth, air, fire, water, love, strife, spaces, and all forms of hybridities with which “we are coextensive” can create a sense of obligation in us (Cohen and Duckert 20). Both the human characters Sosuke and Elisa recognize that obligation through a process of trials and embrace the love as well as the water which is inside them as much as they are a part of it. In addition to that, what these two tales of water equally demonstrate is the heavy cost of the human failure to understand the planet filled with elements that are bound by love, yet pulled apart by strife.

### Conclusion

*Ponyo* and *The Shape of Water*, therefore, convey a deep sense of respect for the non-human world, and no less deep a realization of the damage inflicted upon it by humans. These two visual texts affectively present two tales of love that truly stand for acceptance, diversity, and care for the non-human world. They seem to remind us of our common materiality with the rest of nature, collapsing the binaries such as human versus non-human, us versus others, land versus sea, and so on. The pervasiveness of water in the films proves to be the real actant in moving actions forward. Thus, providing water an agency, which can equally create and destroy both love and life, the films understate the superiority of humans and spiritedly challenge human hubris. Debunking the idea of what is human, they indulge in a watery world in which every construction, every identity, every being is in a flux. In the process, the films, with their creative energy and powerful vision, transport us to a promising world where things are valued and appreciated for their contribution to the diversity of ecosystems through their unique value and beauty. To conclude this paper, I borrow the closing voice-over narration of *The Shape of Water*, a dedication to the inexplicable love of Elisa, that can be interpreted as a human recognition of an omnipresent, overpowering existence of water, and of the planet, in general, of which we are just a part but which we do not possess: “Unable to perceive the shape of you, I find you all around me. Your presence fills my eyes with your love. It humbles my heart, for you are everywhere” (1:58:02-1:58:20).

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