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## Reimagining the Deep: Aquatic Archetypes, Hybrid Identities, and Oceanic Ethics in Contemporary Cinema and Beyond

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**Abstract:** For millennia, the ocean has functioned as a vast repository for the human unconscious, manifesting in maritime mythologies that oscillate between awe and terror. This study investigates the contemporary evolution of these narratives through the interdisciplinary lens of the “Blue Humanities”. This framework shifts critical attention from land-centric perspectives to the ocean as an active cultural and historical agent. By analyzing films like *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Luca* (2021), and *The Shape of Water* (2017), this study explores how modern cinema transforms traditional aquatic archetypes, such as sirens and sea monsters, into symbols of hybrid identity, liminality, and social belonging. The study also employs a qualitative close-reading methodology to demonstrate that these films subvert historical tropes; rather than representing external dangers to be conquered, aquatic hybrids now embody the “inter-corporeal” nature of water, blurring boundaries between human and non-human realms. Furthermore, it also connects these fictional representations to real-life maritime legacies, including indigenous seafaring cultures and modern marine conservation efforts. It argues that Ariel’s collection of artifacts and the biological exploitation of the “Amphibian Man” mirror contemporary anxieties regarding marine debris and the ethical implications of the Anthropocene. Ultimately, this study concludes that maritime mythology is shifting from a “fear of the deep” to a “fear for the deep,” advocating for a “fluid ecology” in environmental ethics that recognizes the ocean as a shared, lived-in space essential to human identity.

**Keywords:** *Blue Humanities, Maritime Mythology, Aquatic Archetypes, Hybridity, Oceanic Ethics*

For thousands of years, human beings have been fascinated by the oceans, a vast and largely unexplored realm. Maritime mythology and folklore have long been deeply intertwined with human society, from ancient myths featuring benevolent gods and sea serpents to contemporary narratives about underwater societies and half-human, half-animal creatures. The initiation of this renewed interest occurred through the interdisciplinary field of “Blue Humanities”, which seeks to articulate the complexity of human connection to the ocean in its various cultural, historical, environmental, and social facets. This study investigates how contemporary films are remaking and retelling traditional sea stories, including Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* (2023), Pixar’s *Luca* (2021), and Guillermo del Toro’s *The Shape of Water* (2017). Additionally, by documenting and articulating the deep yet largely unrecognized interrelations between lived experience and creative expression, this research will explore how these fictional representations may be conveyed or enacted in relation to prevailing circumstances surrounding marine conservation, indigenous maritime cultures, and the ethics of human relationships and contracts with oceanic environments.

Films operate not only as popular entertainment but also as meaningful cultural texts that reflect and construct our communal oceanic imaginary. This paper pursues the Blue Humanities theoretical framework to theorize the cultural work in these narratives. As Steve Mentz argues, “To think with the ocean is to acknowledge that we live on a planet where most of the surface is water, not land” (22). By adopting this lens, the interdisciplinary field of Blue Humanities shifts attention away from land-centric views of history and culture towards the ocean as a meaningful, active force - a historical agent, cultural archive, and a connective spatiality. It also highlights the need to perceive the ocean as an animate being, intricately interconnected with human stories and fates. In this view, the sea is no longer a mere setting; rather, as Hester Blum suggests, “the sea is a site of knowledge production in its own right” (151). Consequently, the ocean is framed not merely as a resource extraction apparatus or as an empty picture frame. This perspective opens a novel approach to scrutinizing the cultural impact of popular films and renders fascinating possibilities to consider the following: how contemporary narratives are mapped onto the public imagination of the ocean and its inhabitants, how these narratives provide reflections of social aspirations and anxieties surrounding the marine environment, and how these narratives engage, reinterpret, and reimagine traditional maritime folklorist mythologies.

This study analyzes three contemporary films: Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* (2023), Pixar’s *Luca*, and Guillermo del Toro’s *The Shape of Water*. These films have unique portrayals of aquatic life and themes of identity and otherness. *The Little Mermaid* (2023) emphasizes the beauty and sensitivity of the water while revisiting Ariel’s desire to enter the human world. It explores rebellion against authority and personal sacrifice for love, which, from feminist perspectives, can be read as an allegory

of women's roles in a patriarchal society or as a story of empowerment. Through the eyes of marine monsters who have the ability to change into humans on land, Pixar's *Luca* (2021) examines themes of hybridity, belonging, and identity. The movie looks at Italian culture, friendship, immigration allegories, and self-acceptance. In a similar vein, the romance between a mute lady and an aquatic creature in Guillermo del Toro's film *The Shape of Water* (2017) challenges anthropocentrism and raises moral concerns over the treatment of non-human existence. This critical analysis engages with historical circumstances such as xenophobia and the Cold War while highlighting the themes of love, otherness, and political allegory in both films. The research will investigate the intersection of these films with marine mythology, using real-life examples to anchor the fictional narratives without delving into specific scientific or cultural debates.

Maritime folklore acts as a reflection for coastal communities relating to values, beliefs, and experience, with respect to the ocean. The lore provides stories of resilience that face the ocean's challenges, reliance on usable oceanic resources, and respect in understanding and developing maritime disciplines are central to the human-aquatic relationship (Mentz 57). This cultural option establishes and builds community connections, solidarity, and shared identities, created through being a community member of their maritime lifestyle. Blue Humanities scholars such as Dan Brayton, Steve Mentz, and Hester Blum do so to shift the dominant practice of employing watery metaphors to instead understand oceans as a material and social phenomenon, with studies that ground themselves in the vantage point of people's lives that are related to and are defined by the oceans. According to Mentz, this shift requires a move away from "terrestrial bias," treating the sea not as a void or a mere symbol, but as a "vibrant, changing environment" that shapes human culture (12). Blue Humanities scholars draw from many disciplines. Using oceanography, marine biology, maritime history, and ecology, scholars in the Blue Humanities propose that we rethink our relationship with the ocean. As Hester Blum argues, the sea provides a "profoundly different ontological state" that challenges how we view history and literature (151). Blue Humanities is transdisciplinary by nature, but is made to be inclusive across a broad spectrum of fields, including literature, cultural studies, the social sciences, and natural sciences. Dan Bryton emphasizes that this "ecocritical approach" is essential to understanding the ocean as a physical space impacted by human history (5). This encourages a holistic understanding of how the ocean impacts human life and vice versa. Whether it is through history, literary theory, or performance art, Blue Humanities necessitates the demonstrable capability to think critically about our responses to the ocean. Climate change and representation of latent climate change will demand that the field of Blue Humanities continue to grow in unprecedented significance for understanding the world's oceans that occupy our full existence, meaning, and their relation to human life.

Even though maritime mythology and folklore have long been a part of human culture, and Blue Humanities is gaining scholarly attention, there is a lack of thorough academic research that particularly examines how popular films of today both reference and transform these stories, and how these cinematic reimagining either parallel or deviate from actual interactions with the ocean. This gap is significant because, as John Mack observes, the ‘maritime imagination’ is not a relic of the past but a constantly evolving narrative tool used to navigate modern anxieties (24). This study aims to address the gap by systematically examining the interplay between fictional portrayals of the deep and the complex realities of human ocean relationships. The main objectives of the study are to analyze the key maritime mythological and folkloric archetypes present in *The Little Mermaid*, *Luca*, and *The Shape of Water*, to look at how these films reinterpret traditional stories for modern audiences, and to compare the fictional plots to real-life situations involving marine conservation, indigenous maritime cultures, and human interactions with water. This study analyzes the mermaid archetype, sea monsters, and amphibious creatures in film while exploring their representation of coastal communities and marine life through the lens of Blue Humanities. It underscores the intersection of art and cultural/environmental perspectives on the ocean, aiming to enhance ocean literacy and awareness of marine issues. By reinterpreting traditional myths for contemporary audiences, the research highlights the connections between fiction and reality, using real-life cases globally to illustrate key concepts without delving into specific scientific or cultural issues.

For thousands of years, people have been fascinated by ocean mythology, which combines wonder and terrifying mystery. Jacques Cousteau once remarked, “The sea, once it casts its spell, holds one in its net of wonder forever” (42). Ghost ships like the *Mary Celeste*, which was discovered entirely intact but abandoned in 1872, and the *Flying Dutchman*, a ship destined to sail forever as a warning against hubris, are well-known maritime stories. These tales demonstrate how ancient cultures saw the water as a realm of majesty, danger, and divine influence. Some maritime literature suggests that “the sea has never been friendly to man. At most it has been the accomplice of human restlessness” (Conrad 72). Plato first wrote about the legend of the submerged city of Atlantis in 350 BC. Poseidon and Neptune, who ruled over waves and earthquakes, were the sea's rulers in Greek and Roman mythology. In contrast, the Kraken, a gigantic octopus or squid-like monster that could drag entire ships to the ocean depths, was one of the fearsome sea animals found in Norse mythology. The Greek goddess Ceto, who embodied sea dangers and gave birth to a variety of creatures, including the gorgons and the sea monster Scylla, is one example of how these stories frequently personified the perils of the water. Because of the sea’s dual nature as both harmful and life-giving, folklore frequently makes distinctions between different half-human aquatic creatures.

Mermaids are typically described as kind representations of the beauty of the ocean, and they can be found in many different cultures, from Australian aboriginal merfolk to Japanese kappa and Chinese stories about female fishermen. On the other hand, sirens, who were first portrayed in Greek myth as bird-women before taking on fish-tailed shapes, were cunning beings who used mesmerizing music to entice sailors to their demise (Holford- Stevens 18). Water has profound spiritual importance in many religions and philosophies, even beyond monsters. Water is seen in Hindu Vedic literature as Apah, a purifying nature and the “first abode” of the everlasting being, which is frequently connected to Sakti, the feminine essence. The biblical tale of Noah’s Ark, which is similar to earlier Sumerian stories in which characters like Ziusudra are spared from a massive flood by a warning from the subterranean god Enki, is one example of how flood myths are universal. The Scottish Kelpie, the Irish Selkie, and the Japanese Ningyo are just a few of the shape-shifting ghosts found in aquatic legend that represent the trickery of water.

The ocean is a large storehouse of knowledge; all directed to the psychic unconscious. It is full of mysteries and depths, reflecting the depth of human complexity, as Carl Jung tells us that the sea is the “favorite symbol for the unconscious, the mother of all that lives” (185). Much like the ocean teems with both life we can see and life we cannot see, so too is our own unconscious filled with potential, hidden truths waiting to be born into consciousness. The universal language of myth and folktale helps us to traverse this metaphorical ocean, finding archetypal stories and characters that resonate with our own inner struggles and desires (Campbell 55). These stories are like lamps pointing the way into ourselves and help us to individuate by recognizing and integrating the many aspects of ourselves. Traditionally structured as one will always find, we dip into these old stories to journey through our own self-reflection and transformation, much like the tides ebb and flow within us to deepen our essence of personhood, authentic self, and potential self.

The three films are analyzed to explore the evolving cinematic representation of the ocean and its inhabitants. In *The Little Mermaid* (2023), the mermaid archetype is shifted from a traditional warning of danger to a symbol of “liminality” and “bridge-building”. Ariel’s quest is motivated by an “intellectual migration” and a desperate yearning for knowledge rather than merely romantic longing, in contrast to historical sirens that entice sailors to their deaths. As a biological-cultural hybrid with the ability to bridge the gap between the undersea and surface worlds, her collection of human artifacts serves as an “anthropological treat,” signifying her agency. When she sings “Part of Your World”, the lyrics and Halle Bailey’s performance emphasize a desperate need for knowledge and agency over romantic longing (*The Little Mermaid* 00:17:00). Such a move transposes the mermaid paradigm from one of danger to one of intellectual migration. The “deal with the devil” motif, in which the hero gives up their “true self” to undergo metamorphosis, is exemplified by Ariel’s agreement with Ursula, the sea

witch. When Ursula takes Ariel’s voice, the visual representation is a glowing, ethereal thread, a literal manifestation of her life force (00:42:15). She is forced to communicate through empathy and observation as a result of losing her voice, which represents a loss of identity and strengthens her bond with Prince Eric. By utilizing the ship’s wreckage to vanquish Ursula herself, Ariel subverts the “damsel in distress” cliché in this version, emerging as a protector of both worlds and a representation of natural balance. The movie tackles topics of discrimination and ecological devastation through the struggle between King Triton and the “surface world.” Ariel and Eric are shown as “kindred spirits” and misfits who prioritize cross-cultural interaction above isolationism, whereas Triton sees humans as a monolithic threat that damages coral reefs. The ocean is portrayed as a victim of “environmental injustice” in this environmental subtext, which promotes a biocentric way of life and shared accountability for combating plastic waste and climate change.

Sea monsters are portrayed in Pixar’s *Luca* as shape-shifting beings whose metamorphosis is a biological “evolutionary adaptation” brought on by dryness. Luca’s gills close and turn into ears, and his tail contracts and is incorporated into his spinal column. This is depicted more physically and a bit awkwardly in the transformation, rather than a transformation involving “magic costume” qualities. When Luca and Alberto compete in the Portorosso Cup race, there is rain. They have to compete with umbrellas because one raindrop would expose their “hybrid” state (partially scaled, partially human) to the pursuers in the town (*Luca* 01:14:53). As Luca is hiding under the table at Giulia’s home, a leakage comes from above, which splashes on his arm. The blue scale appears on it. This compels Luca to hide his arm (00:42:42). This is a visible metaphor for the scared feeling that comes with a secret identity. The Vespa scooter represents Luca’s freedom to pursue the life he desires, and his trip to the countryside is an investigation of self-identification that extends beyond his “assigned” identity (00:32:45). When the townspeople put down their harpoons after getting to know the boys as individuals, Luca underlines that genuine acceptance comes from people, not labels (01:18:33). The movie questions the “absolute opposition” of land and sea, arguing that human identity and the aquatic environment might be intricately intertwined. The film challenges the traditional “discovery” narrative in which land is the only place of safety by humanizing the experience of being at sea through Luca's family's “multispecies approach.”

Guillermo del Toro’s *The Shape of Water* critiques the “dry” logic of Western modernity that seeks to exploit the “wet” mystery of the ocean. Elisa and the creature have a “hydro-social” relationship that is based on water rather than words. The “aquatic intimacy” that the characters, who are both social misfits, share contrasts with the “sterile and airless” scientific method of the Cold War era. In the end, *The Shape of Water* is the “shape of love,” taking on the form of anything it comes into contact with despite having no form of its own. This serves as a metaphor for an empathy that ignores

all physical, social, and species-based boundaries. The film portrays two models of engagement with the “Other.” Strickland is the carrier of the other “dry” world of institutions. He views the creature as an “asset” or “thing” to analyze. He communicates with it using a cattle prod, or electricity/fire, which is, by definition, detrimental to the water creature. Elisa communicates using eggs, music, and hand gestures. A Blue Humanities approach to coexistence. Elisa does not “study” him but “be” with him. The monster is the ultimate “Other,” as he embodies the unfathomable vastness of the ocean, a realm that, historically, humans have feared or sought to conquer. When Elisa is shown to possess gills, it implies that “humanity” is not merely a parched, terrestrial condition. When she reverts to water, it symbolizes her completion of a cycle that returns her to the origin of life itself, with her essence being as ‘liquid’ as water. By juxtaposing the rigid and exploitative nature of Cold War science with the fluidity and boundary-breaking properties of water, the movie comments on how Western modernity often seeks to dominate what it cannot comprehend.

In the Blue Humanities, the ocean is mostly framed as a “frontier” that humanity tries to overcome. The film comments on that through the character Richard Strickland and by the government facility. For the scientists, however, the “Amphibian Man” is just an asset or “thing” to be poked, prodded, and finally vivisected. They perceive his nature as aquatic as a biological enigma to be solved for military advantage due to the Space Race, a perspective that mirrors what Steve Mentz describes as the human drive to “map and manage the boundless fluidities of the ocean” (114). The scientific exploitation in the scene is acted through an electrical cattle prod, which was used to subdue and discipline” the creature (*The Shape of Water* 00:40:19). This expresses a colonial mind wherein the natural world, represented in the form of the Amazonian “God”, has been reduced to a laboratory subject. The film depicts how science, when bereft of human feeling, becomes fascist. The “scientific” approach is sterile and airless, with concrete labs and metal tanks, which starkly contrasts with water’s vibrant, life-giving nature. As the scientists try to take control of the water, the protagonists, all of whom are societal “outcasts”, embrace its fluidity.

Additionally, the movies serve as lenses through which to see our connection to the water. It contends that restoring the damaged connection between land and sea is necessary for marine conservation, rather than only “fixing water.” It also emphasizes how these stories bridge the gap between audience amusement and critical ecological conversations about human interference and the preservation of aquatic ecosystems by going beyond cinematic fantasy. The transition from seeing the ocean as a resource to be exploited to realizing it as a fragile, sentient ecosystem is a major theme. The “human stuff” that Ariel gathers in *The Little Mermaid* is reinterpreted as marine garbage that endangers biodiversity in the real world, such as microplastics and “ghost net.” Also, it implies that our historical “curiosity phase” has given way to an era of industrial effect, where noise produced by

humans, such as sonar and shipping lanes, interferes with vital communication for fish breeding and whale migration. The “sea monster” as a metaphor for misinterpreted biodiversity and shallow coastal habitats are the main topics of Luca’s investigation. The ongoing fight for sustainable small-scale fisheries and the creation of Marine Protected Areas is reflected in the dispute between the municipality of Portorosso and the marine life. The movie advocates for a “no-take” area where species can flourish and proliferate while promoting a “blue” cultural identity and highlighting how vital the health of the sea is to the legacy of coastal towns.

The study also explores the idea of “wet ontologies” and “Blue Humanities,” which question human dominance by seeing water as a unifying factor rather than a barrier. This viewpoint aims to give bodies of water, like the Whanganui River in New Zealand, legal personhood. The exploitation of the ocean “Other” is criticized in Guillermo del Toro’s *The Shape of Water*, which presents the imprisoned protagonist as a displaced deity with agency rather than a commodity or specimen. It is argued that indigenous maritime knowledge is an essential counterbalance to Western “terracentric” prejudices. This also demonstrates how different cultures see marine life as relatives or ancestors rather than as resources. Examples include the Bajau “sea nomads” of Southeast Asia, whose bodies have genetically adapted to a life spent mostly underwater, and the Haida people’s respect for orcas. These indigenous viewpoints give a “cultural archive” that views the sea as a main home and a living thing, providing a paradigm for long-term “human-ocean” collaborations.

The “real-life mermaids,” professional freedivers, artists, and activists like Cristina Zenato and Hannah Fraser—who employ the mermaid archetype to raise awareness of the ocean—are presented. These people physically and spiritually immerse themselves in the maritime environment, bridging the gap between land and water. They exhibit a profound kinship and empathy that undermines the fear-driven narratives frequently found in mainstream media by performing with huge predators like sharks and manta rays without protective gear. In the end, our involvement in the ocean needs to change from conquering to conservation. Our influence is evident in both the deep-sea mining ambitions reflected in *The Shape of Water* and the “Anthropocene” garbage left behind in Ariel’s grotto. The important thing is to see the ocean as a shared home rather than as a “Blue Frontier” to be conquered. To recognize our interconnectedness with the water, true intervention necessitates a blend of cinematic narrative and the ageless knowledge of indigenous maritime civilizations.

In modern storytelling, the “Blue” space has become a medium for expressing ecological guilt and climate-related anxieties, marking a transition from oral folklore to a visual cinematic language that connects a global audience to the deep sea. The study highlights a significant psychological shift in how sea creatures are portrayed in films like *The Little Mermaid*, *Luca*, and *The Shape of Water*.

Rather than being seen as terrifying outsiders or “monsters” to be conquered, these creatures now symbolize personal identity, vulnerability, and the quest for social belonging. These creatures are no longer viewed as frightening outsiders or “monsters” to be subdued; instead, they represent fragility, individuality, and the need for social acceptance. Once a mythical curse, the mermaid’s tail is reinterpreted as a different way of life, implying that “monstrosity” is only a surface-level term for the “hidden self” that yearns for community. This study makes important contributions to three main academic areas. In film studies, it advances Eco-cinema by arguing that the ocean is not just a backdrop for human stories; it is an active character.

The films promote “Ocean Literacy”. They do more than entertain; they teach viewers about the ocean’s physics, fragility, and vastness. This builds a sensory connection that traditional documentaries often miss. The visual effects are not merely technology; they serve as a medium for environmental empathy. They show how digital representations of water allow viewers to “feel” the weight and pressure of the deep, turning them into temporary inhabitants of the blue space. The study has identified a crucial survival mechanism for ancient stories: they don’t disappear; they change. In the past, the “merman” or “monster” marked the boundary of the human world. Now, these hybrids symbolize the merging of boundaries. The study also addresses current concerns like climate change and social inclusion. The sea monster is no longer a hunter. It is often the hunted or a refuge, as seen in *Luca*, which reflects our fears of losing habitats. The “hybrid” is a fitting metaphor for “intersectional identity”. This term, as defined by Kimberle Crenshaw, describes someone who exists between two worlds and must manage the tension of belonging to neither or both (145). This research strengthens the connection between the humanities and environmental science. It argues that science alone cannot protect the oceans; we need the humanities to offer emotional support. Marine Biology provides us with data such as rising temperatures and acidification. The Blue Humanities give us meaning. By focusing on maritime mythology, the study honors the “Blue” identities of indigenous sea-faring cultures. It shifts away from the Western perspective that views the ocean as a blank space on a map (Mentz 63). Instead, it sees it as a rich place with ancestral history and mythology, and the study honors the “Blue” identities of indigenous sea-faring cultures. It shifts away from the Western perspective that views the ocean as a blank space on a map (Mentz 63). Instead, it sees it as a rich place with an ancestral history.

“By reimagining the deep, we ultimately reimagine ourselves.” This statement captures the essence of the Oceanic Turn. It suggests that our land-focused way of thinking has led to the current ecological crisis. To survive in the coming century, we must adopt a fluid mindset; one that values interconnectedness over boundaries and empathy over mastery. The Mythic Depths are no longer just

places where monsters hide; they are where our future survival begins. Understanding the stories we bury in the blue is the first step toward a more sustainable, amphibious human identity.

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