

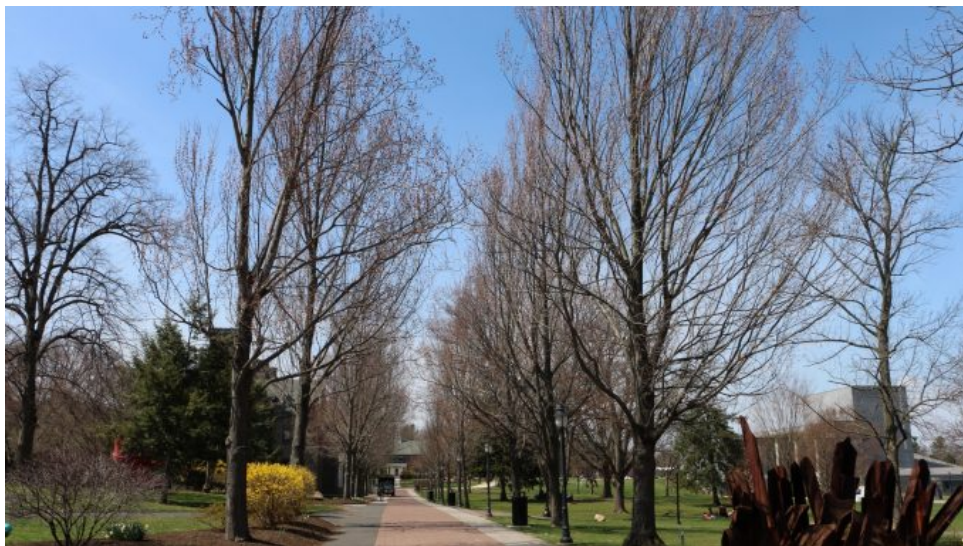
# THE GRIZZLY

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## The failure of representation in "The Shape of Water"

🕒 March 19, 2018 👤 Valerie Osborne 📁 Opinions 💬 0



Photograph courtesy of Grizzly Staff

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It seems increasingly the case that Hollywood loves talking about itself. Specifically, it praises films which reference Hollywood's best and most romantic images. In 2015, after "Birdman" took the prize, Ethan Gates made the claim that "[T]he past few years of Best Picture winners suggest a pattern of rewarding films that directly engage with Hollywood, the

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business of entertainment and the very act of movie-making." The problem with Hollywood's self-romanticization, is that their own account of history leaves behind the worst aspects of the industry without ever actually addressing them.

So when "Moonlight" took home the Oscar for Best Picture at the 2017 Academy Awards, seemingly snatching the award straight from the hands of the deeply romantic and typically Hollywood "La La Land," there was a sense of hope. Progressive film-lovers saw a sign that the Motion Picture Academy may have finally figured out what the rest of the world thought a "Best Picture" should look like.

After a year like 2016, full of racist and otherwise reactionary messages in the media overall, "Moonlight" was a welcome example of storytelling featuring historically marginalized people up against real human struggles. Most importantly, it was a film in which a black director helped represent characters familiar to him that weren't as familiar to Hollywood. Not only that, it was a technical and visual marvel.

In comparison, the 2018 Best Picture Award feels . . . wrong.

Truthfully, "The Shape of Water" is a visually gorgeous film. Guillermo del Toro continually proves his mastery of presenting vivid color to create dark and imposing settings. The production design was thoughtful and the makeup effects were effective. In terms of overall production, the film is a masterpiece.

It tells the story of a woman named Elisa Esposito who comes to love an amphibious creature (that the government calls "the asset") while working as a member of a cleaning staff in a secret government facility outside Baltimore. This love is based on their shared inability to communicate vocally with others. Upon learning that the creature is to be killed for scientific research, Esposito enlists her friend and neighbor, Giles, as well as her fellow cleaning worker, Zelda Delilah Fuller, to help break him out.

A story of a mute woman, a gay man, and a black woman janitor teaming up against the US government to save a tortured, mysterious creature certainly sounds like fertile ground for something new and innovative. So why does it feel wrong?



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The Ursinus Grizzly is the student newspaper of Ursinus College in Collegeville, PA. Meetings every Monday at 6 in Ritter!

Despite the obvious potential, del Toro fails to fairly represent characters unlike himself. He manages to represent Giles well, but Elisa and Zelda are both characters poorly developed to the point of carelessness.

While Elisa’s character is not entirely defined by her disability, the audience is asked to accept the film’s assertion that her inability to talk identifies her with something that is not human.

Del Toro’s film also appropriates American Sign Language for his own storytelling by casting an actress who is able to hear and speak without issue. David Boles, an author and member of the deaf community, charges that “Guillermo del Toro usurps the mechanics of ASL to serve his purpose of storytelling, and that false acquisition, and employment, of American Sign Language as a tool in ‘The Shape of Water,’ is both sorrowful and outrageous.”

The character of Zelda exemplifies the worst of the problematic cinematic behavior. “The Shape of Water,” in its attempt to hearken back to Hollywood tradition, pushes an offensive role upon Octavia Spencer and uses harmful stereotypes to serve its narrative. The role Spencer has to play is that of the Mammy. The Mammy character—an archetype, a caricature—presents a racist idea of black womanhood: of one who is permanently content and always helpful to the other characters, specifically white characters. Most importantly, the Mammy is typically given no story of her own; she only exists in relation to the white protagonists.

It is hard to tell if del Toro was actively trying to avoid the application of such a harmful trope when the film enters Zelda’s house at the end, but then within the house the story makes use of another trope, that of the “deadbeat black patriarch.” Before this, Spencer risks her life and steady career to help a heartbroken white woman find love.

It is definitely silly to care so deeply about what a fraternity of Hollywood financial beneficiaries thinks about the films of 2018. I know that I’ll look back at “Lady Bird” and “Get Out” as films that mean something more broadly. But it’s also silly not to think it matters at all. I certainly hope that in 50 years even the Motion Picture Academy will seek honesty and equity in its favorite movies.

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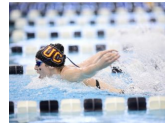


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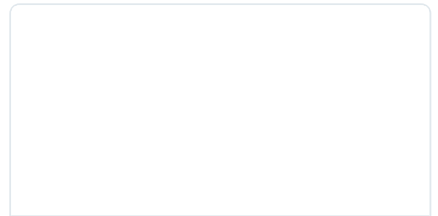


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