

Today, Mediático proudly celebrates its fourth birthday! As our readership tops 50,000, we, its editors, would like to say a big THANK YOU to our amazing co-authors, our editorial board and readers for four wonderful years of posts and feedback. We raise a glass to you ☐ and toast the next four (or more) glorious years of news and research and views on Latin American, Latinx and Iberian media.

We present today a special birthday post from one of our co-editors, Dolores Tierney on Guillermo del Toro's The Shape of Water. Tierney is Senior Lecturer in Film at Sussex University and has just finished a book on Latin America's transnational auteurs (including del Toro). She is currently on leave in Washington DC.

Del Toro's acceptance speech at the 75th Golden Globes

The Shape of Water

By Dolores Tierney

"Hello déjà vu! It's you again!" After last week's thirteen Oscar nominations for *The Shape of Water*, for the fourth time in five years, a Mexican director looks a likely shoe-in for the Oscar for Best Director. If del Toro wins Best Director he will be the third Mexican (and Latin American) to have done so ever; Alfonso Cuarón won it in 2014 for *Gravity*, Alejandro González Iñárritu won it in 2015 and 2016 for *Birdman* and *The Revenant*. As in the previous few years with Iñárritu, I've been pondering what so many Oscar nominations -and success in other awards (Golden Globes, Venice, Critics Choice) means for the auteurist summation I have made of del Toro's work [previously](#) (in an [anthology](#) co-edited with Deborah Shaw and Ann Davies) and in my forthcoming book [New Transnationalisms in Contemporary Latin American Cinemas](#). I've also been pondering where *The Shape of Water* fits into the US film industry and imaginary.

The Shape of Water is set in 1963 in Baltimore in a government Aerospace Research Centre. Elisa (Sally Hawkins) and her friend Zelda (Octavia Spencer) are cleaners at the facility. Giles (Richard Jenkins), an unemployed copywriter is Elisa's next door neighbour. Elisa who cannot speak develops an affinity with the "asset," an amphibious man brought to the facility in the hope it can give the US the edge in the Space Race with the Soviet Union. At the same time, she staves off the advances of the predatory Strickland (Michael Shannon) the agent who caught the "asset" and who takes pleasure in beating and torturing him. When the military authorities decide to terminate the asset, Elisa decides to try to save him.

In 2016 Iñárritu's Best Director award for *The Revenant*, a story about a father's struggle to avenge the murder of his mixed-raced son, was well placed to compensate for the much-criticized lack of diversity in the Academy's award nominations, called out by the Twitter hashtag #OscarsSoWhite.[1] In 2018 and in the wake of the #MeToo movement highlighting endemic sexual abuse and harassment in the film industry, and the Academy's much reported [progress towards diversifying its own membership](#), del Toro's adult fairy tale, with its strong female lead, supporting African American and gay characters (Hawkins, Spencer and Jenkins are all nominated for acting awards) and emphasis on diversity and inclusivity may again be the film on which the Academy chooses to bestow not just its most prestigious Oscar but many others besides. In short, and as London film critic [Nicholas Barber](#) points out, the film is likely to win big because it speaks to contemporary US concerns.



But although *The Shape of Water* might tick some of the current boxes on the Academy's diversity and inclusivity to-do list, there are other constituencies for whom the lack of Oscar nominations signals much broader [underrepresentation, misrepresentation and racism](#). Soon after the announcement of the 2018 nominations a new hashtag trended on Twitter, [#LatinosLeftOut](#). Whilst this year's record nominations for women and African Americans in front of and behind the camera spoke to an Academy that is both more diverse and more open to diversity, the National Hispanic Media Coalition has protested the lack of nominations for Latinx actors like Salma Hayek for her remarkable performance in *Beatriz at Dinner* (Miguel Arteta) and the lack of representation of Latino faces on and off screen in the industry more generally. According to NHMC's president and CEO [Alex Nogales](#). "[O]n- and off-screen and in the narratives Hollywood's movies tell, Latinos remain the most underrepresented minority in the industry. Enough is enough. It's time to end the whitewashing and put Latinos in front of and behind the camera."

With respect to [#LatinosLeftOut](#) in this year's nominations *The Shape of Water* is the exception. Indeed del Toro's Mexicanness is, in his own words, how he understands and how others often interpret the tension between the "[darkness and terror](#)" in his films and his own "joyful and loving" self. Whilst not casting Latino actors, *The Shape of Water's* still makes an issue of exploring how Latinness functions in the US imaginary. *The Shape of Water* inserts a Latino and Latin American presence into its history of the politics of Cold War and Civil Rights America of the 1960s, and also into the current moment. Most notably, the amphibian man (played by Doug Jones) is firmly characterized as a Latin(o) American: "dragged" by Strickland, from the Amazon to the US so that he can be studied, and analyzed by US military scientists.^[2] Another Latina also in evidence in the film is the 1940s Brazilian bombshell [Carmen Miranda](#). It has been suggested that the snippets of musicals we see on Giles' television are his means of escaping or avoiding the violent realities of contemporary America. Indeed, at one point, he deliberately switches from footage of a civil rights protest where African American students are being menaced by white police to a channel showing a Betty Grable movie. However, the clip of Miranda from *That Night in Rio*

(Irving Cummings 1941), that features on his television later in the film and her singing (one of her numbers “Chica Chica Boom Chic”) that carries over into the scene of Strickland buying his green Cadillac also function in the film less as an escape and more as important signposts to the strategic importance of Latin America for the United States. Prior to the 1960s, as part of the Good Neighbour policy, Latin America figured in the US imaginary as an exotic, friendly, bountiful and musical backdrop to its own fantasies, adventures and most importantly its sense of self.[3] Miranda starred in a series of Good Neighbour-inflected musicals- *Down Argentina Way* (Irving Cummings, 1940), *Weekend In Havana* (Walter Lang, 1941), *The Gang’s All Here* (Busby Berkeley, 1943) and *That Night in Rio*. For US audiences Latin performers like Miranda (Xavier Cugat and others) functioned as acceptable “others” providing comic/racial foils to the all-American wartime blondes like Grable or Alice Faye (who notably also appears in other musical clips shown on Giles’ television during the film) but were also safely marginalized to comic or purely musical roles (Lopez 1993).

By the 1960s, and, as the film shows, at the height of the Cold War, with left leaning or fully declared Socialist governments emerging across the region, Latin America’s strategic importance is heightened as it emerges as a threat. As Elisa waits for the bus to work, televisions in a store show aerial images which clearly reference the Cuban missile crisis (October 1962). But unlike many 1950s Cold War era science fiction films (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Don Siegel 1956), *The Shape of Water* doesn’t figure its Latin American, the amphibious man, as a threat. Nor is he a cypher for the dangers of communism. If anything, the film figures the toxic masculinity of Strickland with his rotting severed fingers as the real monster. And in a film that plays out as the director’s loving investment in the interests of those “othered” (or made monstrous) in the eyes of the mainstream, the amphibious man is notably **voiced by none other than del Toro himself**.

If del Toro wins the Oscar for Best Director next month, he’ll be a Mexican director knocking down the barriers of the historically white and Anglo-centric US film industry.

Ironically, he'll be holding a statue [likely modelled on the body of another Mexican director before him, Emilio Fernández](#), who posed for Cedric Gibbons in 1928 when he was working in Hollywood as an extra.

Epilogue: Of course, there is much more to be said about *The Shape of Water* with respect to its racial imaginary. I haven't even touched upon how the film treats the similar marginalization in musicals and society of African Americans -we briefly see Bill "Bojangles" Robinson as comic/racial foil to Shirley Temple, and in another instance we see an African American couple turned away from the pie shop by its owner. I've also not touched on *The Shape of Water's* connection to the rest of del Toro's oeuvre, nor its Latin American fantasy and science fiction film antecedents. I leave all this and more to a future post by myself and the wonderful Deborah Shaw, co-editor with me (and Ann Davies) on [The Transnational Fantasies of Guillermo del Toro](#) and author of [The Three Amigos: The Transnational Filmmaking of Guillermo del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón and Alejandro González Iñárritu](#)

Works Cited:

Lopez, Ana M (1993) "Are All Latins from Manhattan? Hollywood, Ethnography, and Cultural Colonialism" in John King, Manuel Alvarado and Lopez (eds) *Mediating Two Worlds: Cultural Encounters in the Americas* BFI Publishing: London, 67-80.

[1] Indeed, in Iñárritu's Best Director acceptance speech he firmly tied the intentions of his film to issues of diversity and specifically to the struggle for Civil Rights undertaken by all minorities paraphrasing the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. "So what a great opportunity to our generation, to really liberate ourselves from all prejudice and this tribal thinking and make sure for once and forever that the color of the skin become as irrelevant as the length of our hair."

[2] Elisa has a Latino last name. Espósito was the name once given to abandoned children

across Spain and Latin America. She was found however in the US (and “in water”) which together with the opening dream sequence, explains potentially why she has an affinity for the amphibian man and *spoiler alert* the eventual ending of the film.

[3] This policy emerged during the 1930s as a means of fostering ‘good relations’ between North and South America and in particular of ensuring a market for US products. In the wartime era when fighting severely restricted US trade and cinema distribution in Europe, and there were fears of fascist infiltration in Latin America, the economic and ideological importance of ‘good neighbourism’ was redoubled.

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