

THE LURE: Little Mermaids That Bite

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Abstract:

This paper introduces *The Lure* (2015) as a notable contribution to the mermaid film catalog, as well as a powerful feminist adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's classic tale, *The Little Mermaid* (1837). First, I will review central themes that connect key mermaid films, paying attention to the romantic and horror movie genres that conventionally showcase mermaid narratives; next, we will consider how *The Lure* takes the horror mermaid genre a step further by depicting the two sisters as vampire/cannibal mermaids; and, finally I will propose that the film's retelling of Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*—and especially its shocking ending—draws attention to the gendered experience of human migration and ultimately serves as a call to sisterhood. At this critical juncture in our historical struggle to realize gender equality, and as the #MeToo movement continues gaining momentum in broader media and social discourse, *The Lure* presents a compelling take on the consequences of denying women their voice—and the cost of failing to recognize the power of sisterhood.

Keywords

Gender, Sisterhood, Migration, *The Little Mermaid*, #MeToo

Mermaids in Film

Mermaids have mesmerized audiences of the silver screen for over a hundred years, appearing in films as wide ranging as *Mr Peabody and the Mermaid* (1948), *Peter Pan* (1953), *Splash* (1984), *Hook* (1991), and *Killer Mermaid* (2014). They have appeared in various animated and live-version adaptations of Hans Christian Andersen's classic short story, *The*

Little Mermaid; as sidekicks and love interests in the teen comedy *Aquamarine* (2006) and the family comedy *Fishtales* (2007); and have also featured in numerous X-rated films and porn parodies around the world (see Hayward, 2017: 91-109). Although a quick scan of the mermaid catalog suggests that mermaids are popular fare for family films—and a staple element in many Disney movies—they also feature quite regularly in horror genres. So, while, on the one hand, sirens and mermaids can be represented in family-friendly romantic comedies as youthful, beautiful, 'wannabe humans'—as seen with Ariel in the animated film *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and Madison from *Splash*; on the other hand, they can also be portrayed as animalistic, blood-thirsty creatures, as seen with the nameless mermaids featured in Nicholas Humphries' horror short *The Little Mermaid* (2011) and in Milan Todorovic's *Killer Mermaid* (aka *Nymph*, aka *Mamula*, 2014).

I propose that two central themes emerge from mermaid movies: 1) the male desire for/fear of female sexuality, and 2) women's struggle to reconcile their true, multifaceted nature with the longing for/social pressure to pursue (hetero)normative romance. We can see an example of the first theme, for instance, in *Splash*, where the protagonist, Allen Bauer (Tom Hanks), is immediately drawn to the mysterious Madison (Daryl Hannah), a beautiful woman whom he believes recently saved him from drowning, and who then appears in New York City to be with him for "six fun-filled days when the moon is full" (*Splash*, 1984). Initially unable to speak—reminiscent of Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*—Madison still easily manages to convey her desire for Allen, and they subsequently retire to his apartment to consummate their relationship. Over the course of the six days, Allen falls in love with Madison—despite, or perhaps

because of, her odd ‘foreign’ ways—and desperately tries to convince her to marry him. Unsure that he can handle the ‘real’ her, she declines his proposal, and we observe her struggle in choosing between the far-away home she loves and the man with whom she has fallen in love. At the point when Madison is finally prepared to unveil her true self to Allen, she gets sprayed with water by a fanatical marine biologist (Eugene Levy), intent on divulging her secret, and is unwittingly revealed as a mermaid on a downtown sidewalk. Fully exposed and vulnerable, Madison begs Allen for help, but he draws away in fear and/or shock. Although the film eventually presents a happy ending for the couple—and the audience—it is sobering to see how horrorstruck the hero is when encountered with the full power of Madison’s (mermaid) body. In contrast to the longing he felt for the body she had adopted to please him, her natural body and its functions, at least initially, evoke in him only feelings of repulsion and anger, as if her own ‘true’ body is an offense.

The second theme proposed is principal to all adaptations of *The Little Mermaid*, as nearly all the mermaids have to reconcile themselves with having sacrificed their voices for human legs (and human princes), but it seems especially central in many modern remakes. In the recent low-budget independent film, *Little Mermaid* (2016), directors Roxie Blum and Matt Martin present a modern-day, adult adaptation of Andersen’s short story, in which a mermaid (Rosie Mac) must make her way in contemporary society while all those around her inevitably let her down. Initially appearing out of nowhere, naked, in a pool at a private party, the nameless heroine is pulled from the waters by a partygoer who drapes his coat around her and tries to learn her backstory. Mute, she is led to the host, who is, evidently, her ‘prince charming.’ Turning out to be anything but, the object of her affection—Everett—coaxes her to stay, takes her to bed, and then dumps her at a restaurant over breakfast the next morning. Over the course of the film, she is befriended by a waitress (who offers her a place to stay after witnessing the mermaid’s abandonment); meets a new love, Jax (Matt Martin); and finds a sense of belonging and support at a strip club where she takes

a job as a dancer. While Jax suggests he can support her and that she need not keep dancing, our heroine refuses the offer, seemingly enjoying the autonomy and the sisterhood of the club. Unfortunately, after a visit from the Sea Witch (Amber Borzotra), a deal is struck to transfer the original ‘love pact’ from Everett to Jax (presumably the **true** love for whom she traded her voice), after which, first, Jax goes blind; second, her waitress friend turns jealous over Jax’s lost affections; and, third, her dancer friend beds Jax as revenge for our heroine’s rising success at the strip club. Returning to wreak more havoc, the Sea Witch offers the mermaid a knife—for which her sisters traded their lovely hair for our heroine’s freedom—that she will need to use to kill Jax, in order for the pact to be broken. However, upon returning home to his apartment, she cannot go through with it, and rather than killing her true love, the mermaid opts to kill herself by jumping off the balcony. In an effort to infuse agency, perhaps, in her final act, the filmmakers provide flashbacks of the mermaid’s happy times with friends and loved ones, and use a voiceover which draws from the original ending of Andersen’s story (which concludes with the little mermaid becoming a ‘daughter of the air’ and working towards the acquisition of a soul and subsequent place in heaven through three hundred years of good deeds), stating that:

“... I became one of the daughters of the air, doing good deeds and earning a soul. In three hundred years, I shall rise like this into heaven, ***not because of a man, but because of me.***” (bold italics my own, from ‘*Little Mermaid*,’ 2016)

The Lure (2015)

In *The Lure* (*Córki Dancingu*, in its original Polish), first-time director Agnieszka Smoczyńska presents another modern-day adaptation of Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*, where we follow the exploits of two mermaid sisters who, interrupted in their migratory journey to the United States, are lured to land by the sound of a rock band, practicing on the shore of Warsaw’s Vistula River. Although the mermaids’ homeland is left unstated, we can assume they come from a neighbouring Baltic country which, like Poland, has waterways connecting to the Baltic

Sea. In a film review for *Variety* magazine, Guy Lodge (2016) introduces the plot as follows:

“Teenage sisters Silver (Marta Mazurek) and Golden (Michalina Olszanska) yearn for a new life on American soil, but obligingly surface in Warsaw when unwittingly summoned by the human song of Mietek (Jakub Gierszal), the handsome young bass player of a low-rent nightclub band. “Help us come ashore ... we won’t eat you, dear,” they sing back at him, a little too menacingly for comfort. Sprouting human legs once they hit dry land, the girls follow him back to his workplace, where the sleazebag proprietor (Zygmunt Malanowicz) hires them as strippers and backing singers to the band’s brassy interpretations of dance-floor standards.”



Figure 1 – the Vistula River waterway discussed in article

As with *Little Mermaid*, interestingly, the film locates the mermaids in a cabaret/strip club, and the sisters become overnight sensations due to both their hypnotic singing and their alluring mermaid show. Unlike standard mermaid movie conventions, Golden and Silver are hired to actually show their true nature—they are advertised as mermaids, thus mermaids they shall be. Another unique aspect to the film—at least for the first half of the movie—is that the sisters have their voices, and their singing (and exotic dancing) is what keeps them employed. However, upon falling in love with Mietek, Silver falls prey to the conventional mermaid narrative and arranges to undergo ‘bottom surgery,’ to remove her tail and get permanently human legs, so that they can consummate their sexual relationship. Golden is wary of this plan, and reminds her sister that mermaids are said to lose their voices if they sacrifice their tails for legs, but Silver dismisses her sister’s concern and

claims it to be just another old wives’ tale. Sadly, however, the superstition proves to be true, and in a graphic scene reminiscent of a botched back alley abortion, we watch as Silver goes under the knife:

“Like Andersen’s mermaid, Silver is convinced her “prince” could can [sic] only love her if she sacrifices a major part of herself—her voice and tail—to conform to conventional beauty standards. In *The Lure*, this isn’t achieved with a bit of sparkling magic, but instead a grisly operation where Silver’s tail is dramatically sliced off. And as it’s severed so is her voice, mid-tremulous song.” (Puchko, 2017)

This focus on gore and uncontained bodies is persistent throughout the film and is exhibited in scenes where the mermaids are shown feeding on their human prey, and in their self-presentation as ‘creatures.’ As Smoczyńska explains about the intended effect of the mermaid tail, “you can see it’s stinky. It’s full of mucous. It tells us that the mermaid is half woman and half monster” (Puchko, 2017). So, while *The Lure* does follow some of the romantic, family-friendly mermaid genre conventions, it also borrows from darker, more animalistic mermaid portrayals from the horror genre, where mermaids have—and use—real fangs (*The Little Mermaid*, 2011), and some are covered in boils and lacerations (*Manhōru no naka no Ningyo*, translated from Japanese into English as, *Mermaid in a Manhole*, 1988). In another interview with Smoczyńska, Michael Gingold delved into the inspiration behind the design and presentation of the mermaids:

“...the look of the mermaids is not from Disney; we took inspiration from the paintings of the 15th century. I asked a Polish artist named Aleksandra Waliszewska to paint a mermaid for us, and she came up with these creatures with long, ugly fish tails, covered with slime, so you can see that she is half beautiful girl and half a creature. Another important element for us was that when they are human beings, they don’t have genitals, so they don’t have a sex. The goal of our mermaid is to achieve that sex, to be a girl. Silver wants to consummate her love with her boyfriend, and it’s

like when you are a girl, before you become mature, you want to have sex with a boy because you want to become a woman. So we wanted to create a mermaid as a metaphor for a girl growing up.” (Gingold, 2017)

These genre-mixing aspects of *The Lure*, along with its originality in casting two mermaid sisters instead of just the customary one, allow for a more complex, playful, and nefarious retelling of the classic Andersen tale. However, not only do these mermaids indulge in their hunger for romantic and sexual love, they also act on their primal desire for consuming flesh.

Vampire/cannibal mermaids

As with sirens, mermaids are frequently associated with luring good men into bad situations, due to their inescapable beauty and their mesmerizing songs. In *The Lure*, the director cleverly chooses to cast the mermaid sisters as a singing (and stripping) duo, drawing upon myths of the dangerous siren songs that lead sailors to their deaths (see Lao, 1998), while also setting up a scenario where Golden and Silver are reliant on each other to keep their jobs—after all, a duo is no good without two voices on hand. Thus, when Silver loses her voice during her ‘bottom surgery’—a thinly veiled reference to gender reassignment surgery, the surgical procedure undertaken by transgender people to modify genitalia to match their gender identity, and a process often compared to the little mermaid’s transformation to human woman—she is not only putting herself in harm’s way, but is placing Golden’s future at risk, as well.

In addition to their hypnotic singing voices, the mermaids are shown to have a vampire-like ability to mesmerize with their eyes, too. This is unconventional for mermaid films, but it works very well for Golden and Silver’s purposes. In fact, the allusion to vampires recurs throughout the film, especially palpable in a scene where Golden takes a female lover, and rather than killing and eating her—her typical *modus operandi*—she only bites her neck and drinks her blood. This scene is notable as Golden

is entirely in touch with her primal nature, and only spares this one partner, suggesting that she may be more inclined to let women live. While Silver does her best to integrate into human society, she too participates in a cannibalistic feeding frenzy, and shows no real remorse in doing so.

New twist to the traditional ending

The ending of *The Lure* is what sets this film apart from all other adaptations of *The Little Mermaid*, as well as all other movies in the mermaid film catalog. While the storyline initially seems to follow the classic Andersen conclusion—though Silver is told she must kill **and eat** her true love in order to live—the final moments of the film deliver a cataclysmic, breathtaking conclusion. As noted earlier, the brilliance of this film is in showcasing **two** mermaids rather than just one, as this allows for two distinct responses to the ultimatum faced by seemingly every mermaid: **kill the one you love to live or die and give him life**.

The film concludes with the wedding party for Mietek and his new bride, set on a boat, presumably, on the Vistula river. Heartbroken and mute, Silver watches forlornly as her ‘true love’ forsakes her for another, and Golden encourages her to kill and eat him and be done with it. As Silver boards the boat and prepares to kill Mietek, she reverts to her animalistic self and her fangs emerge in preparation for the kill. Alas, once she sets eyes on him, her human self kicks back in, and she is unable to go through with it. The two embrace, and as they slow dance on the ship’s deck, turning in slow circles, Silver abruptly fades to sea foam, leaving her former love mystified and covered in lather. Golden, enraged by this turn of events, storms the boat, and overwrought with sorrow and anger, leaps on Mietek and tears his throat out with her own fangs. As Mietek collapses, dying, Golden retreats to the water, sobbing, and sets off alone.

The Lure and Women’s Agency and/in Human Migration

Mermaid films offer a great deal to work with in considering issues of gender and human migration.

They address the struggle of adapting to new environments, the danger inherent in the migration process itself, and the limited options available to newcomers who may be lacking the language skills and work experience that would allow them to adapt more readily to their new homes. For female migrants, the opportunities may be even more dire, leaving them few options for paid labor outside of sex work. In both *Little Mermaid* and *The Lure*, the mermaids are immediately ushered into strip club dancing gigs, and recruited for their youthful, lithe bodies; work that sees the club owners cashing in on their sex appeal. While the girls do not seem to object to the work, at least not in the beginning, the audience quickly sees how heartless the business is when the dancers turn on each other in *Little Mermaid*, and when Golden and Silver object to not receiving any money from the owner or band in *The Lure*. Indeed, the club environment underscores the expendable nature of sex work and unmasks the inhumanity of the humans who exploit the mermaids and see them (mermaids/migrants) as being worth 'less than' themselves. As Rubina Ramji (2016: 2) notes in her article on *The Lure*,

"Although the mermaids try to fit into human culture, Golden cannot resist her true nature and devours a human being. Silver, on the other hand, falls in love with a human and even sacrifices her "animal" self, her fish tail, in order to fulfill his desires. But in the end she is spurned by her love because he is unable to see her as anything other than a fish. In fact, all the humans they encounter treat them as animals. The mermaids are willing to try their best to live amongst the humans, but it is the humans that end up showing their true animal natures. Although humans have a choice to treat others with kindness, *The Lure* reminds us that humans are in fact the most beastly of all the world's animals. Humans are the most truly evil creatures because we use other creatures for our own satisfactions and desires. We see creatures that are different from us as being beneath us."

In one particularly harrowing scene, after Golden and Silver express discontent with their dreary lives,

the band members try to dispose of them by throwing them off a bridge. It's with great satisfaction that the audience watches the mermaid sisters reappear at the nightclub the next day, unfazed. The band apologizes, and—after Golden bites off one member's thumb—the sisters return to their work.

The Lure's Call to Sisterhood

The Lure's adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* is most noteworthy for its call to sisterhood. In fact, Andersen's tale can be read as an empowering feminist story, as the little mermaid's sisters trade in their beautiful hair to the Sea Witch in order to get a knife to their sister, who, upon killing the prince, could return to her mermaid form and return to their family under the sea. However, most adaptations skim over the sacrifice the sisters make, and neglect to explore the depth of their loyalty to the little mermaid. In *The Lure*, however, Smoczynska places two mermaid sisters up front and center, and in doing so, the remaining sister, Golden, is able to avenge Silver's death after Silver sacrifices herself for Mietek. In the current climate of the **#MeToo** movement, as women in all walks of life, in all corners of the world, are raising their voices and demanding real change, this revamped ending rings true. Unflinching, *The Lure* demands us to update classics that no longer fit within our changing world. Offering advice to teens who, like the mermaids, want to either fit in or go their own way, Smocznska states:

“FR: What would you say to teens who like Silver want to fit in? Or like Golden, who seem hellbent on following their own path come what may?

AS: To girls like Silver I would say: never cut your tail

To girls like Golden: keep on doing what you're doing, do things your own way and stick to it."

(Raybaud, 2017)

In *The Lure*, we see a film with two sisters who rely on each other—for companionship and for

work—and they support each other through good times and bad. When Silver loses her voice, the club owner tells Golden to sing with someone else, but she refuses—she will not betray their bond. This refusal to leave her sister voiceless speaks volumes at this particular moment in history, as innumerable women, empowered by the *#MeToo* movement, come forward to report past and present incidents of sexual harassment, violence, and rape. And like Golden and Silver, who resurfaced at work after everyone believed they'd been permanently silenced, society is only just beginning to see the depth and breadth of women's resilience—and, this time, if they are not heard and respected, the sisterhood may well opt to take claim of more than just a thumb.

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