3) The Shape of Water (2017):

In James Whale's 1935 film "The Bride of Frankenstein," the monster ([Boris Karloff (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/boris-karloff)) says mournfully, "Alone: bad. Friend: good!" That's what Guillermo del Toro's latest film "The Shape of Water" is all about, the loneliness of those born before their time, born different. "The Shape of Water" doesn't cohere into the fairy tale promised by the dreamy opening. It makes its points with a jackhammer, wielding symbols in blaring neon. The mood of swooning romanticism is silly or moving, depending on your perspective. (I found it to be both.) The film starts in a wavering green underwater world, with a woman floating in what looks like a drowned Atlantis. The image is otherworldly, magical, and Alexandre Desplat's score is wistful and bittersweet. [Richard Jenkins (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/richard-jenkins) narrates, asking helplessly, "If I spoke about it, what would I tell you" about what happened to the "princess without a voice"?

The "princess without a voice" turns out to be the mute Elisa ([Sally Hawkins (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/sally-hawkins)), who mops floors in the cavernous underground tunnels of a Baltimore-based corporation (the word OCCAM—as in razor?—in towering letters over the entrance). Working alongside Elisa is Zelda ([Octavia Spencer (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/octavia-spencer)), who provides constant running commentary through the day, responding to Elisa's sign language with a torrent of words. The year is 1962, the background is the space race and the Cold War. The head honcho at the company is a sadist racist named Strickland ([Michael Shannon (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/michael-shannon)), who swaggers around carrying a cattle prod (which he calls an "Alabama howdee-do"). Whatever is done at the corporation is top secret, and everyone is paranoid about the Russians, especially once "The Asset" arrives in a portable tank. The Asset is the Amphibian Man ([Doug Jones (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/doug-jones)), discovered in the Amazon, once worshiped as a god and now contained in a tank, enduring occasional torture via Strickland's howdee-do. The scientist Hoffstetler ([Michael Stuhlbarg (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/michael-stuhlbarg)) pleads for mercy on the creature's behalf. The Amphibian Man should be studied, not destroyed.

Meanwhile, Elisa is drawn to the "monster," and begins a secret campaign to gain his trust. She offers him hard-boiled eggs. She plays him Benny Goodman records. She teaches him sign language. The courtship sequence is the most successful in the film, calling to mind the stunning first half of "[The Black Stallion (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-black-stallion-1979)" when the shipwrecked boy attempts to tame the wild horse, or the early sequences of "E.T." when the child and the alien start to communicate. Monster movie references abound throughout "Shape of Water": "King Kong," "Creature from the Black Lagoon," "[Starman (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/starman-1984" \t "_blank)," and—most of all—Jean Cocteau's "Beauty and the Beast," with one scene in particular an explicit homage.

Production designer [Paul D. Austerberry (Links to an external site.)](https://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/paul-d-austerberry) has a field day, creating multiple atmospherically rich worlds, so real you can smell the dank rot in those basement corridors.