



Today the Pond, Tomorrow the World: A Look at Frogs as Divine Portent through an Ecological Lens

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“Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth.”
—Albert Schweitzer

“I am pessimistic about the human race because it is too ingenious for its own good. Our approach to nature is to beat it into submission. We would stand a better chance of survival if we accommodated ourselves to this planet and viewed it appreciatively instead of skeptically and dictatorially.”
—E. B. White

Abstract: This paper examines the 1972 horror movie *Frogs* as a contemporary tale of eco-monsters reflecting the ecological concerns of the early 1970's. The monsters of this film turn out not to be the monstrous creatures of the wild that repeatedly attack humans, but rather the humans who threaten nature in the first place. Religious imagery reinforces the suggestion that the wildlife is sacred.

[1] Although it appears at first glance to be nothing more than a badly written horror flick, *Frogs* (1972) tells a tale of ecological havoc conveying overtones of judgment by God. After the Crockett family tries to silence the croaking of an island's frogs with poison, the wildlife strategically attacks all of the island's human inhabitants. Ecological landmarks such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and efforts by the Nixon Administration (1968-74) to pass ecological reforms places the plotline of *Frogs* in dialogue with the broader societal concerns of the early 1970s. The frogs and other species on this fictional island remind American viewers of the potential threat of tampering with nature's fine balance, and while “nature's revenge” in the film is at times

laughable, director George McCowan's message is clear. In *Frogs*, the use of Christian imagery conveys the idea that the island's wildlife enacts a divine warning against human interference with nature, putting a contemporary twist on the classic ecomonster paradigm of post-World War II America and Japan. That is, *Frogs*' context in the late 1960s and early 1970s is a testament to the growing ecological concerns of these decades; while the wildlife acts as monstrous by communicating this message, it must defend itself from the humans, the true monsters on the island.

***Frogs* the Film**

[2] *Frogs* takes place in the Florida Keys and chronicles the annual Fourth of July/Crockett birthday celebration at the mansion of Jason Crockett (Ray Milland). Pickett Smith (Sam Elliot) is a freelance photographer with a passion for ecological issues whose canoe is toppled after two of Crockett's grandchildren, Clint (Adam Roarke) and Karen (Joan Van Ark), almost hit him with their speedboat. As a consolation for ruining Smith's photography equipment, the Crocketts invite him to join the festivities. Smith meets the whole family gathered at the mansion and soon learns that the family has decided to "take care" of the island's overpopulation of noisy, obnoxious frogs by poisoning them.

[3] Even though he urges Crockett to reconsider, Smith cannot convince the elderly, handicapped millionaire to relent in his pursuit of killing the amphibians. Smith claims that the frogs are overpopulated this season and that they will naturally correct their numbers by next year, but the Crocketts are unwilling to consider this as a final solution.

Crockett sends Smith to scope out the island's wildlife population and look for the hired man who has failed to return. While doing this, Smith sees several dead frogs, snakes and birds, as well as a can of poison and white residue. He finally discovers Grover, Crockett's missing hired hand, lying dead, face-down in a puddle and covered by snakes and frogs. His face has been bitten and it is apparent to Smith that Grover was attacked by the wildlife he was trying to kill.

[4] Smith returns to the Crockett estate where he informs Crockett of Grover's death, yet Crockett decides not to tell the rest of the family lest it disrupt the planned festivities. He instead takes the stance that "man is master of the world," (*Frogs*) justifying his attempts to poison the island's animals and scoffing at Smith's idea that the wildlife is taking revenge upon the human inhabitants. But one by one, the Crockett family members are strategically eliminated by the island wildlife. One grandson, Kenneth, is asphyxiated in the greenhouse after lizards knock over jars of poison, Michael is bitten by tarantulas and covered with spider webs and Spanish moss, and Crockett's daughter, Iris, is bitten by a rattlesnake and leeches. Stuart, Crockett's son-in-law, is killed and eaten by an alligator, grandson Clint is struck by a snake as he's swimming, and Clint's wife, Jenny, is attacked by an alligator snapping turtle and covered in crabs. Bella, Kenneth's girlfriend, and Crockett's servants, Charles and Maybelle, escape the island, but it is uncertain whether or not they flee the mal-intent of the creatures unharmed. Smith, Karen, Jenny, and Clint's two children are threatened but all escape the island safe from harm. They discover when they reach the mainland that the island is not the only area affected by the wrath of nature—the dock is deserted and when a lady picks up the four

off the side of the road, she comments that they are the first people that she's seen on the road in three hours.

[5] In the final scene, Crockett remains in the mansion, too stubborn to abandon his birthday celebration plans and right to rule over nature. The frogs break into his study and surround him; Crockett falls out of his wheelchair and onto the floor, and frogs take his place in the chair. In his panic, the elderly man hears the calls of all the stuffed animal heads mounted on his study walls. The movie ends with the croaking noise of the frogs and a view of the mansion as all the lights go out. The frogs have won, and the film's ending leaves viewers unsure of the rest of humanity's fate.

[6] Typical of the horror film genre, *Frogs* focuses on "our curiosity about both the metaphysical and the psychological unknown while, at the same time, casting an unsettling light on the shadow elements both of the human condition and of the cosmos" (Stone 6). In other words, *Frogs* scares us because it breaches the normal boundaries of human-animal relationships characterized by man's domination over nature - exposing our tendencies to lord over creation, an establishment for which we can not claim responsibility. As a direct result of this inconsiderate behavior, the wildlife in *Frogs* begins to attack humanity, generating horror for both the characters and the audience alike.

[7] While *Frogs* is not an explicitly religious film, filmmakers employ Christian symbolism throughout the movie's plot progression. Two separate scenes towards the beginning of the movie contain angel statues on the Crockett property. In the first of

these scenes, Smith, Karen, and Clint are walking back from the dock towards the mansion and pass through the gaps between three angel statues. Frogs are waiting by the dock when Smith, Karen and Clint return from the lake and hop towards the three before and after they pass through the angels. After they pass through them, the camera focuses on the rays of light filtering in through the trees and music plays in the background, signaling that the three have entered into a foreign realm; the shots of frogs interspersed throughout the scene makes this realm appear to belong to the frogs. As the three young adults approach Crockett and the rest of the family gathered on the mansion grounds, they pass by a large reflecting pool studded by angels at each corner. A scene later, we again come to this pool, but instead of the camera gaze fixing on an angel statue, it focuses on a frog statue. This association of frogs with the divine angel statues elevates frogs to a holy status, a classification that I will discuss later.

Frogs as “Monsters”

[8] Director George McCowan intentionally depicts the frogs as the ringleaders of nature’s assault on humanity. Each scene shows several shots of frogs hopping toward the Crockett family members, the mansion, or simply croaking ominously. The camera also zooms in on the frogs, making them appear bigger than they really are and giving them a more monstrous appearance. Several characters mention the frogs’ large size throughout the movie. After Smith, Karen, and the two children are picked up by a woman and her son, the son shows them a frog that he caught and asks, “They were all over the place at camp—ever seen a *monster* as big as this before?” Frogs surround several of the family members after they have died, and the film’s credits conclude with a

cartoon frog hopping across the screen with a human hand hanging from its mouth, stopping to “face” the audience, and swallowing the hand. In nature, frogs have a tendency for cannibalism and are observed with frog body parts hanging from their mouths; by transposing a human hand into this image, the frog becomes an unnatural threat to humanity.

[9] Even though the frogs are responsible for several deaths, the violence in the film all stems from Crockett’s desire to exterminate the frogs from the island so that they cease to disturb him and his family members. Crockett’s character continuously refuses to change his opinion that man has authority over nature, even after the island’s wildlife begins killing his family members. As a human audience, we identify with the humans in the movie and do not naturally empathize with the threatened wildlife, perhaps because we too have participated in “pest” extermination. Instead, we view nature’s attack on the Crockett family and surrounding people as an attack on *ourselves*; the movie’s final scene, lacking conflict resolution, leaves the door open for nature to continue its assault. However, if we look at the scenario of *Frogs*, as well as our own situation on Earth, we see that *we* are the invaders. We are the ones attacking nature by consuming natural resources, conquering the land for our own purposes, displacing wildlife, and destroying their natural habitats. When humanity tries to usurp natural order, we become “out of place.” We are the true monsters.

[10] The frogs and other wildlife in *Frogs* fulfill Rudolph Otto’s definition of the monstrous expressed in *The Idea of the Holy*, namely, a *mysterium tremendum* or “a

radically other mystery that brings on a stupefying combination of fascination and terror, wonder and dread” (Beal 7). Right away, the differences in species and our identity as humans separate the Crocketts into the “normative” category and animals as “other.” Usually, frogs and the other animals featured do not attack humans and definitely do not strategically target individuals, further delineating the creatures in *Frogs* as different. Finally, the frogs’ association with divine messengers through the intermingling of angel and frog statues completely elevates them to a divine standing. This association suggests that the conflict and chaos between nature and humanity is divinely mandated and inevitable due to the fine balance of life that humans continuously disrespect.

[11] Since antiquity, stories of chaos gods have permeated religious myths and legends. Chaos gods are an extension of Otto’s *mysterium tremendum* as

paradoxical representations of *radical otherness appearing within the order of things*, the otherworldly within the worldly, the primordial within the ordial. They lurk on the thresholds of the known, at the edges of the cosmological map, revealing deep insecurities within a cosmos that trembles in the balance between order and chaos. Indeed, by personifying chaos in the form of a chaos god...cosmic insecurity is rooted within divinity itself. (Beal 150)

The goddess Tiamat in the ancient Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish* exemplifies the chaos god. Tiamat and Apsu are the primordial waters that exist before the earth and the heavens, and they create their progeny by “mixing their waters” together (Beal 16). Their progeny, however, cause problems - especially for Tiamat. Before Apsu can kill them, they kill their father; eventually, son Marduk kills mother Tiamat and creates the heavens and the earth from her diced corpse. In doing so, he creates order out of chaos and must maintain this divine order lest Tiamat reemerge to wreak havoc once again

(Beal 18). It is assumed, then, that any minor upset can throw off the balance within the cosmos and awaken the chaos god from its slumber.

[12] Despite our countless attempts to master nature, it remains out of our control.

Bryan Stone writes that:

The twentieth century witnessed advance after advance in our ability to understand and control nature, to harness and direct it. And yet for all that, nature remains unpredictable—a place of transcendence and mystery that can, with no advance notice, dwarf our intellects and punish our arrogance. (Stone 8)

Starting after World War II and the development of the atomic bomb, ecohorror arose as a prevalent subset of the horror genre as a direct result of our attempts to tamper with creation and essentially “play God.” Ecomonsters, then, become modern day chaos gods, roused by man’s attempt to usurp cosmic control, as well as portents for the divine, reminding humanity of its place subordinate to divinity. A classic example of an ecomonster is Godzilla, who is aroused by atomic explosions and creates chaos for everything and everyone in its path. The primitive people recognize Godzilla as an ancient monster and understand the impending situation before rational scientists do, and it takes a cross-over figure to convince the modern skeptics of what is truly happening (Beal 163). This classic paradigm fits most if not all subsequent ecohorror plots, including *Frogs*.

[13] Like Godzilla, the frogs and other species on the island are aroused by man’s interference with nature, this time in the form of pesticides and poisons meant to kill the noisy frogs. Once these chaos gods are awakened, there is no mercy for those who have

tampered with the cosmic order of the environment. Essentially, “nature functions in horror film as the turf of the gods, and terror is the human penalty for having trespassed on that turf by having become either so complacent or so obsessed that we fail to give it proper respect” (Stone 11). These modern ecological chaos gods represent the divine mandate to fall back into our place within the cosmos. Especially within *Frogs*, the various ecomonsters are reprimanding the Crocketts primarily, but also all of humanity for assuming too much power (Beal 161). Humans must pay for their transgressions against nature, and the race must be cleansed for its iniquities.

[14] Timothy Beal notes that “in tandem with the moral urgency and apocalyptic fear of a new age of ecology, [ecomonsters] stand for the deep anxieties about the effect of modern science and technology on complex ecological systems that we do not fully understand” (Beal 161). Thus, in order to truly understand the horror in *Frogs*, we must first understand the “deep anxieties” of the late 1960s and early 70s America, and only after that can we perceive *Frogs* in the context of its original viewers.

Frogs and the American Social Climate

[15] The late 1960s and early 70s brought about an increased awareness of ecological issues in American culture. In early human development, insect and other pest control was not a concern to humans because we were only hunters and gathers, having no need to monitor crops and no clue about disease (van den Bosch 20). But once people started growing crops as a primary source of food and income, things changed. We developed agriculture and learned about disease transmission (van den Bosch 20). The rise of

industrialization caused the standard of living in countries such as America to increase dramatically - allowing for new technology in the areas of pest and insect control (van den Bosch 20). Insect control had remained a hit-or-miss operation until the discovery of dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane (DDT) and its insecticide capabilities—“it killed with rapid and deadly efficiency, was broadly toxic and long-lasting, and it was cheap” (van den Bosch 20). The pesticide industry escalated with the production of the “miracle” killer DDT, and any ideas that Americans and entomologists once held about nature self-correcting its overpopulated species were forgotten. Suddenly, pest control could not be separated from chemical pest management; however, “in ignoring the ecological nature of pest control and in attempting to dominate insects with a simplistic chemical control strategy, we played directly into the strength of those formidable adversaries” (van den Bosch 21). We underestimated the true powers of nature, and instead of killing the insects as we intended, we created a stronger breed of pests with resistance to DDT, forcing us to turn to more toxic chemicals. It is also important to note that DDT caused birth defects in mammals, including humans, and birds as the chemical passed up through the food chain.

[16] The overuse of chemical pesticides inspired Rachel Carson’s book, *Silent Spring* (1962), which was the catalyst for the ecological movement of the 1960s and 70s. In this book, she discusses how the environment has reached a balance through eons of fine-tuning development, how good and bad elements gradually stabilize so that they may coexist with one another and still support life, and how the crucial piece to this puzzle is time (Carson 6). However, industrialized cultures do not abide by the same time frames

as the universe; we must have quick solutions instead of following nature's patterns by letting chemicals and species evolve over generations. Carson, writing relatively soon after World War II and the threat of the Cold War, hypothesizes that, "along with the possibility of the extinction of mankind by nuclear war, the central problem of our age has therefore become the contamination of man's total environment with such substances of incredible potential for harm..." (Carson 8). These substances, the direct results of humanity's attempts to dominate nature, threaten our own existence, creating a bitter cycle of destruction. After *Silent Spring's* publication, the nation opened its eyes to the bitter reality of its actions, as well as the actions of people all over the world, and the consequences of these transgressions against nature.

[17] President Richard Nixon made efforts towards conservation as a direct result of the nation's outcry for ecological reform, declaring the 1970s the "decade of the environment" and claiming that "restoring nature to its natural state is a cause beyond party and beyond factions" (Sussman 6). To this end, Nixon's environmental policies encompassed a wide range of areas including air and water quality, the expansion of open space, and increasing national parks (Sussman 6). Perhaps the most influential and lasting environmental reform passed during his administration when Nixon created the National Environmental Policy Act which demanded "'impact statements' to be filed for any developmental interest that might intrude on the environment" (Sussman 6). Along with several minor acts that Nixon passed concerning pesticides, oil spills, clean air, and a variety of other ecological concerns, he also initiated three new government agencies—the Environmental Protection Agency, the Environmental Quality Council, and the

Citizens' Advisory Committee on the Environment—all of which have played major roles in subsequent administrations. Nixon continued with these reforms throughout his reelection campaign and second term, but they were eventually cut short and overlooked due to the Watergate scandal and Nixon's sudden resignation from the Presidency.

Synthesis

[18] In *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson paints a scary picture for America's future based on our nation's past actions. She writes, and several other ecologists agree, that unless we take serious measures towards rectifying the environmental damage and contamination that we have caused, that we will ultimately destroy ourselves (Carson 1-3). She also notes that nature has a tendency to strike back against its opposing forces, such as DDT, by becoming stronger through adapted resistance and reproducing in greater numbers (Carson 246). Both of these themes appear in *Frogs*, as well as a third overarching theme that has only been alluded to thus far.

[19] The Gaia theory, first published by James Lovelock in 1979, claims that "the entire world comprises one organism" - implying that all of its different components must work together just as body parts function as a whole (Goldsmith 29). A separate theory by Pierre Dansereau, the Law of Tolerance, states that "a species is confined, ecologically and geographically, by the extremes of environmental adversities that it can withstand," hinting that our modifications of the environment have gone beyond the tolerances of several species, signaled by the decrease and/or extinction of several species' populations after increased interaction with humans (Detwyler 4-5). From the vantage point of the

Law of Tolerance and Gaia theory, as well as the fears of Carson and other ecologists regarding the use of toxic chemicals, it is clear that humanity has functioned not as if it were a part of this greater whole but as if it were superior to it. *Frogs* perfectly addresses this fear through the medium of horror film, dramatizing these concerns and allowing audiences to consciously face them.

Conclusion

[20] While on the surface *Frogs* appears to be nothing more than a badly written movie, several layers of significance and relevance emerge upon deeper inspection. Through the association of the frogs with the angel statues, the frogs function as divine messengers, a literal *monstrum*, warning us about the dangers of tampering with nature. They fulfill the same function as ancient chaos gods, aroused after interference with the divinely mandated order of the cosmos. This warning is typical of the ecological horror film genre, which became popular in the post-World War II period when humankind's position in creation was being challenged by our newfound atomic capabilities. The genre remains popular today as we continue to struggle with the boundaries between reverence for life and our abilities to impact living systems. To its original audience, *Frogs* reflected the growing ecological reforms taking place in our country, as well as the societal pressures to adjust to these new standards. The frogs and other wildlife, while representing this divine reprimand, serve to reveal the true monsters of this film - the human inhabitants of the island.

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