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# A Natural History of *The Dark Crystal*: The Conceptual Design of Brian Froud

*Catriona McAra*

Three decades have passed since Jim Henson and Frank Oz's cult fantasy film *The Dark Crystal* was first released in 1982 after over five years of production. Reflecting on the film, the conceptual designer Brian Froud recently likened the production to an archaeological excavation:

[A]s I drew and designed, I seemed to discover creatures and places from a civilization that had been long lost. It was more like archaeology than art, yet art it was [...] There had to be a feeling of a layered, half-forgotten history [...] There was flora and fauna diverse and exotic, all permeated with symbol and metaphor to give a depth of meaning to the myth-like story. When we finished the film we knew that we had only seen a fragment of this other world... [2011].

The film is indeed set in an otherworldly, fairy tale terrain called Thra which moves between desert wastelands and bucolic landscapes, loaded with traces of history and mythology. The story follows the trials and tribulations of its protagonist, Jen the Gelfling, a small, handsome, elfin orphan raised by the Mystics or urRu, a race of gentle wizards who are now dying. Jen is tasked with returning the Shard to the Crystal, in order to restore balance to the universe, and embarks on his journey. Along the way he meets a series of friends and foes: a winged female Gelfling companion called Kira, her dog-like pet, Fizzgig, a magical astronomer called Aughra, the child-like race of Pod People, and the shifty-looking Chamberlain, an ostracized member of the evil Skeksis who have spread a reign of terror. The quest narrative is fairly straightforward and the characterization is often stock, but what is most striking about this 89-minute feature is the imaginative investment and level of

craft and detail devoted to the background and landscaping of this magical world. Such research-based design arguably enabled the realistic creation of this fantastical domain, and the boundaries between two worlds are blurred as we begin to investigate the intersection between the inner workings of *The Dark Crystal* and the production world of Jim Henson.

### *Landscaping the World of the Dark Crystal*

The conceptual roots of *The Dark Crystal* can be found in the volcanic, prehistoric scenery which was used for Henson's "Land of Gorch," an experimental slot on *Saturday Night Live* which ran from October 1975 until April 1976 (Harris 28; Jones 34–5). Though this feature folded after 15 episodes due to an unworkable script, the "Land of Gorch" interestingly transplanted the puppets within their own fantastic sphere. As with *The Muppet Show*, the puppeteers did not appear on camera, and the only humans who ever interacted with the inhabitants of Gorch were guests with such contact taking place off set in the liminal world of the studio offices. The "Land of Gorch" is represented as a distant and far-removed place with its own culture, traditions, and idiosyncrasies — much like *The World of the Dark Crystal* would become. The idea of a feature-length, self-sustaining puppetry world devoid of human presence began to grow in Henson's mind. He was adamant that the characters in his new fantasy project should sit somewhere between his earlier puppets and Muppets franchise as "creatures" (Horsting and Stein 53). Key details from the "Land of Gorch" that helped provoke a more realistic vision, such as the innovative use of taxidermist eyes, were conceptually preserved for this future project, in its early stages simply referred to as *The Crystal*. According to one of two insightful articles on the making of *The Dark Crystal* by Alan Jones, Henson was also influenced by Leonard B. Lubin's nonsense illustrations of crocodiles for a 1975 edition of Lewis Carroll's poetry (35). One can easily see how Henson would have been drawn to Carrollian representations of the fantastic which have endured the test of time, no doubt due to their sensitive appreciation of a child's understanding of the world. Around this time Henson's licensor Jerry Juhl discovered *The Land of Froud* (1977) at a book fair in San Francisco (Zimmerman 34) which would prove to be a very significant moment in the making of *The Dark Crystal*. Henson soon met with the picture book's author, the English illustrator and fantasy artist Brian Froud, who would help the nascent project grow to fruition.

Jim Henson's Creature Shop in London was established in the build up to this film, although preproduction mainly took place in New York followed

by filming in EMI Elstree Studios outside of London. Much of the film's resulting production materials and artwork are now housed in the Jim Henson Company Archive, maintained by Karen Falk in Long Island City but currently inaccessible to the public.<sup>1</sup> This essay will, therefore, draw on the more publicly available book illustrations and conceptual designs of Froud which can be found in the accompanying guidebook, *The World of the Dark Crystal* (1983), as well as the documentary film of the same title (first aired on January 9, 1983, and later included on the digitally re-mastered version of *The Dark Crystal* in 2005) and the behind-the-scenes book, *The Making of the Dark Crystal* by Christopher Finch (1983). Reference to the related science fiction fanzine ephemera of the era (including *Cinefantastique*, *Fantastic Films*, *Starburst*, and *Starlog*) facilitates a more complete representation of this "natural history." In the accompanying documentary, Henson reveals that the overall color-wash (a light flex with color tint) was conjured by cinematographer Oswald Morris in response to the conceptual designs of Froud which were inspired by the English countryside and dramatic landscapes of Froud's home in Dartmoor, Devon. The film's highly tactile aesthetic and materiality were arguably enhanced by pre-CGI technologies and vintage effects, including glass-matte painting for the backdrops by Michael Pangrazio and Chris Evans at ILM (Industrial Light and Magic, San Francisco), and miniature models for some of the more monumental, architectural aspects. Harry Lange was tasked with translating Froud's designs into practical life-size sets where every object had to be researched, constructed, and artificially aged (Jones 46–48). Henson further explains the lengths to which his production company went in order to achieve a believable world, including the collection of flora and fauna samples, worthy of a naturalist or explorer. As with Froud, Henson's description is worth quoting at length:

There is a wonderful texture and depth to this world [...] in creating the world we had to [...] create all of that depth from the beginning, and so we went into a great deal more work than we probably needed to in order to have thought out the history [...] We had to work out all kinds of the background behind things, behind the visuals, we knew the landscape, we had maps of the landscape [...], the color schemes of all these different areas and the different kinds of animals and plants that lived there. Very little of this ends up on the finished film but we have to know it in order to believe this whole world, to get the entire thing working as a reality. Then, even if we only show a small portion of it as part of this film, we are dealing with something that has substance [*WDC*].

What emerges from such "depth" and "background" is a film of epic proportions, offering a layered archaeology of materiality to excavate and detailed cartographies to survey. A thousand years are said to have passed since the legendary Cracking of the Crystal as evidenced by the weathered

Gelfling art and ruins, the Murals of Commemoration, the Wall of Destiny, scrolls, and engravings or “words that stay,” which are catalogued and deciphered in *The World of the Dark Crystal* (9, 24, 118). This lavishly illustrated companion book augments the expanse of histories, mythologies, typologies, and symbols, the surfaces of which can only be skimmed over in the film. It fills in the gaps and emphasizes the meticulous role that Froud’s conceptual design played in effectively imag(in)ing the world which *The Dark Crystal* is set in for Henson. Following Juhl’s discovery of *The Land of Froud*, Henson claims that he first saw three or four illustrations by Froud in Dark Larkin’s edited collection *Once Upon a Time* (1976) (Horsting and Stein 52; Jones 35). One can think about this collaboration in terms of Froud visualizing Henson’s ideas, and Froud’s designs, in turn, translated into three-dimensional form by the puppet-makers. This arrangement resulted in a situation where, unlike most films, the story followed the creation of the fantasy world (Jones 35). For Froud, the role of conceptual designer and the medium of film offered new possibilities and challenges compared to small-scale visual narratives for books.

Born in England in 1947, Froud graduated from Maidstone College of Art in 1971 and has since been involved in a variety of projects, most notably the illustrated taxonomy with Alan Lee, *Faeries* (1978). One is tempted to compare their commitments to craft- and research-based conceptual design; Froud for Henson’s *The Dark Crystal*, *Labyrinth* (1986), and *The Storyteller* (1988), and Lee and John Howe for Peter Jackson’s more recent film trilogy of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (1998–2003), the accompanying documentary which is comparable to *The World of the Dark Crystal* in its attention to detail. Both Froud and Lee use a mixture of watercolor and pencil, and the work of both appears stylistically reminiscent of the English art historical tradition, including the early twentieth century “goblin-master” illustrations of Arthur Rackham and the mid- to late nineteenth-century paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, such as John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who dedicated themselves to detailed study of the natural world while depicting scenes from Shakespearean literature and Arthurian legend. Building on Tolkien’s epic imagination, the conceptual design for *Lord of the Rings* perhaps finds its conceptual precursors in both *Faeries* and in Froud’s designs for *The Dark Crystal*. Indeed Jones aptly describes *The Dark Crystal* as “a standard quest saga in the richly landscaped Tolkeinian [sic] tradition” (23). One might comfortably compare the dark and light aesthetics of the Orcs and Elves of *Lord of the Rings* with the Skeksis and urRu in *The Dark Crystal*, and compare the Hobbits with the Gelflings. Where Tolkien’s characters Bilbo and Frodo Baggins are the custodians of the ring, Jen’s magical object is the Crystal Shard. Moreover, the landscapes are marked by conflicting

moral standpoints; where the goodness of the Shire is represented as green and leafy, evil Mordor is mountainous and jagged. This is true too of the contrasts between Kira's Swamp and the Skeksis' Castle of the Crystal, the political implications of which can be explored further with reference to another, more contemporaneous fantasy trilogy. Visually and ideologically, *The Dark Crystal* lends itself to further comparison with the contemporaneous sci-fi trilogy *Star Wars*, particularly the third film, *Return of the Jedi* (1983), which features the tree-dwelling Ewok tribe. As with the heroes of *The Dark Crystal*, the Ewoks conceptually play on the aesthetics of the cute, cuddly, and furry as a kind of plush taxidermy that is highly marketable. There were, however, some small distinctions in their performances. On the one hand, the characters of *The Dark Crystal* predominantly involved sophisticated puppetry techniques while the Ewoks were portrayed by dwarf actors, including Warwick Davis, in costumes. Jones tells us that Henson was hesitant to use actors due to his "commitment to the puppet medium" (49, 54), though children and little people were employed for the full-length shots in *The Dark Crystal* and puppetry techniques and expertise were deployed for *Star Wars*. In fact, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), the second film in the initial *Star Wars* trilogy, utilized a cross-fertilization of conceptual design between the two production teams. The producer of *The Dark Crystal*, Gary Kurtz, helped George Lucas co-produce the first two films in the early *Star Wars* trilogy. However, Kurtz and Lucas did not work together on the third film, *Return of the Jedi*, supposedly after a disagreement over the mythological aspects of the films. Jones claims it was because Kurtz wanted to pursue his own project and had already committed to co-producing *The Dark Crystal* in return for Frank Oz and Wendy Midener's assistance with Master Yoda's conception (36–7). There are certainly similarities in the respective conceptualizations of fantasy landscapes. In Marcia S. Calkowski's persuasive article on Ewokese linguistics and semantics, she argues that a political message can be perceived through their Tibetan-inspired culture and use of guerrilla warfare tactics as well as the rural setting of the forest moon of Endor versus the technologically-advanced evil Empire in their encroaching space station (58). *Return of the Jedi* offers clear-cut, binary representations of the 'goodness' and 'wholesomeness' of craft-based nature versus 'the dark side' of the Empire; what the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin would describe as the politicization of art versus the aestheticization of politics (235).

In *The Dark Crystal*, the political situation is similarly mirrored in the landscapes: Kira's sun-lit Swamp is lush and fertile while the evil Skeksis live in a dry, barren desert with a lightning storm brewing above. We can observe this dichotomy further in the Castle of the Skeksis versus Valley of the Mystics, again a corrupt, violent civilization versus gentle, moral nature. Jones explains

that the black/white morality was supposedly the result of a conversation Henson had with his twenty-two-year-old daughter Lisa during the initial stages of the project (22; 35). However, Froud insists that: “We didn’t want this to be just *black and white*. We didn’t want ‘evil’ against ‘good.’ We wanted to show that both have their qualities and their drawbacks” (Zimmerman 64). It is now necessary to consider the surface and depth of the world of *The Dark Crystal*, arranged taxonomically by character units as species or fantasy races.

### *Aughra: The Astronomer*

Of the race of Aughra, I, Aughra, am alone, the first and last [WDC, 13].

Aughra, a Keeper of Secrets, is perhaps the strangest character encountered in *The Dark Crystal*. As the book explains, she is an ancient and unique being, close to the race of Gelflings but forged from the landscape of roots and rocks that puts her in touch with nature (13). As Gideon Haberkorn points out in his essay in this volume, Aughra, the last of her race, faces inevitable extinction which lends her an extra-ordinary wisdom and poignancy (85). Froud appears to have conceived of her as a wrinkled, matriarchal creature, swamped in the natural history which she embodies. Like the witches from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, she is a prophetess with a detachable eye; a visionary Sibyl or sorceress with powers of foresight. Much of *The World of the Dark Crystal* is thus narrated through her as the *Book of Aughra*, a fictional, translated version of her “manuscript,” serving as a pseudo-encyclopedia to the strange world she exists within. She inhabits the Observatory that appears like an over-stuffed curiosity cabinet or sixteenth-century laboratory, a Galilean site of knowledge augmented by the giant Orrery, a mechanical, planetary device which models the universe in a heliocentric configuration. According to the book, such “astronomical calculations” are beyond “Newtonian or Einsteinian” physics (22), which highlights the physical difference between our real world and the imaginary world of *The Dark Crystal*. Aughra serves an epistemological role within the film; where the Mystics are wise, she is the key “researcher” or scholar who has been assigned as the custodian of the Crystal Shard until the prophecy can be fulfilled. Aughra, or more accurately Froud, has charted the universe by drawing up a detailed mathematical astrology of the Dying Sun and its immanent triple convergence with the other two suns (the Great Sun and the Rose Sun) known as The Great Conjunction. The copious diagrams and ciphers often appear as hieroglyphic, rune-like pentagrams suggesting that Aughra has pagan leanings. Her post-menopausal, disheveled representation of femininity marks her in the

tradition of the archetypal crone while her ram-like horns add a note of astrological association and gender-bending enfreakment like sideshow representations of the bearded lady. Her swollen bosom and enormous cranium seem disproportionate for her size, and when she kneels the weight of body forces the expiration of an arthritic groan. Like Master Yoda of the *Star Wars* films, there is a lot of Frank Oz's personality in her character (Jones 34, 37). Oz embroidered a complex transvestitism into her conception, though it is the female actor, Billie Whitelaw, who is credited with Aughra's voice. Aughra is the unrivaled, favorite character of both Froud and Oz. The puppet itself was realized from Froud's design by a team which included Lyle Conway and Tom McLaughlin, who made fourteen skins for Aughra from an innovative latex mixture, though only three such pelts were accepted (Jones 45).

## *The Gelflings*

"I thought I was the only one!"—Jen  
"I thought I was!"—Kira

According to Froud, the Gelflings are the heroes and protagonists of the film, the ones that we feel the most empathy with, and, in Henson's view, the "bridge characters [...] through which the audience enters this world" (*WDC*). Elsewhere, Henson further explains the need for their "clichéd appearance": as stock characters or blank canvases, the heroes act as the "audience's stand in," guiding us through the narrative (Horsting and Stein 55; Jones 49). This is not to suggest that the Gelflings are entirely vacant. There is evidence of post-traumatic stress and survival instincts built into their characters' portrayal as well as the more common heroic traits of love and courage. But the world of *The Dark Crystal* is a complex place, so the story had to be relatively simple and the characters readily identifiable in order to create a legible fantasy.

The Gelflings are the most distinct in gendered terms. At first believed to be an orphan and the last of his kind, Jen's discovery of Kira is important because her existence implicitly means that reproduction of their endangered species is still a possibility. Both are capable of sharing their memories through touch, known as dreamfasting. Through this act, they learn that they had similar infancies, rescued from extinction after attacks by the evil Garthim. Jen was adopted by the Mystics, while Kira joined the Podlings, divergent cultural upbringings which are reflected in their choices of dress (Finch 22). The Gelflings are equipped with different skills and survival tactics. Kira can speak many languages while Jen can read. Later in the film, we learn that female Gelflings have wings that distinguish them from males, reminding one

of a stereotypically feminine fairy.<sup>2</sup> Though the Gelflings are both ‘feminine’ in their elfin appearance, Kira is pinker, perkier and blonder in her coloring with rosy cheeks, whereas Jen is darker and earthier with blue streaks in his hair. Traditional notions of gender representation, typical of many fairy tales, are therefore sustained where they had been transgressed against the older body of Aughra. The Gelflings were mainly designed by Wendy Froud (*née* Midener) who talks through their conception in the documentary. She wanted them to be humanoid but found it challenging to make the female “pretty enough” (*WDC*). Jen was initially designed with blue skin that would have aligned him with the Hindu deity Rama, though he was later modified to a warm-blooded, human color (Jones 32). At first sight it is tempting to compare Kira and Jen with popular gendered children’s toys of the 1980s such as Barbie and Ken, or the colorful, cute aesthetics of the Cabbage Patch Kids or My Little Pony, though, on closer inspection, the dolls and puppets which Wendy Froud sculpts are specialized, hand-crafted art objects which are far more intertextually complex than commercial playthings, drawing on her interests in the Pre-Raphaelites, Greek mythology, and fairy tales including those by Carroll and Adrienne Segur (see *The Art of Wendy Froud*, 10–12).<sup>3</sup>

### *The Mystics Versus the Skeksis*

The Mystics (urRu) and the Skeksis are the “goodies” and “baddies” of the film. We learn that they were once the same race, the ethereal Urskeks, but upon the previous conjunction of the three suns, were correlatively divided in their beings into diametric opposites; one group being the reverse of the other. Froud has continued an awareness of fantasy dichotomies in his topsyturvy book, *Good Faeries, Bad Faeries* (1998), where he accepts the existence of creatures with malicious purpose as the antithesis of their more morally upright counterparts (11).

Both species appear in some way primal as if they had evolved from dinosaurs. The Skeksis are reptilian and vulture-like, while the Mystics seem more reminiscent of a weighty and ponderous, long-necked dinosaur. The Mystics are stylistically closest to the giants Froud had been illustrating prior to his design work for *The Dark Crystal*, especially if one considers Froud’s front cover illustration for Larkin’s *Once Upon a Time* and, as Howard Zimmerman suggests, the Troll Witch from *The Land of Froud* (36). In the case of the Skeksis, Froud claims that they are “part reptile, part predatory bird, part dragon,” and he insists he always began their designs with the focus on the “penetrating” eye of each character (*WDC*; Finch 21). Angler fish were

also researched as possible visual sources (Zimmerman 34, 36). *The World of the Dark Crystal* book further charts the evolution of Froud's designs, hinting at a "mutation" which the Skeksis have declined to document themselves (102). Commenting on their construction, Conway explains how the Skeksis puppets became more realistically revolting in appearance as production went on: "rotting rubber, permeated with cold KY jelly and putrefying noodles" (43). The Skeksis are, indeed, a rotten civilization predicated on greed, jousting, and lack of table manners. The spiral tattooed, long-haired Mystics are far wiser, slower, and more restrained in their actions, like aging hippies. While the Skeksis are grotesque, carnivalesque monsters (Haberhorn "Muppets" 27–8), the Mystics comport themselves with more dignity. When the emaciated Emperor of the Skeksis dies, his face crumbles and implodes while the wisest of the Mystics evaporates more gracefully in a puff of twinkling stars. While the disheveled Skeksis parade their torn rags and garish bling designed by Kathryn Kubrick, the Mystics wear subtle, decorated coats and amulets with a pseudo-Celtic symbolism (*WDC*, 52, 54, 59). Elsewhere, Finch notes the motifs from Neolithic and Mesopotamian archaeology that have been borrowed for Froud's "cosmography" (28). As Froud admits: "I steal from everywhere. I trace out of the best books!" (qtd. in Jones 47). Tracing paper is included in *The World of the Dark Crystal*, creating an overlay between the symbolic geometries and the conceptual sketches. Again Henson credits Froud, who: "developed a whole symbolic structure that permeates the 'reality' of *The Dark Crystal*" (Horsting and Stein 52). Furthermore, the English writer and linguist Alan Garner was credited for his assistance with the ancient Egyptian-derived language which was initially devised for the Skeksis, though it was later decided that they should speak English for the sake of audience accessibility (Hutchison 19; Jones 53).

Like the Gelflings, both groups have stock character types within them. The Mystics include: the Ritual-Guardian, the Healer, the Chanter, the Alchemist, the Cook, the Herbalist (credited as the Hunter), the Scribe, the Numerologist, and the Weaver, while the Skeksis (or Masters of the Dark Crystal) are cast as: the High-Priest (Ritual-Master), the General (Garthim-Master), the Chamberlain, the Scientist, the Gourmand, the Slave-Master, the Treasurer, the Historian (Scroll-Keeper), and the Ornamentalist. Again, the evolutionary precursors can be found in the Land of Gorch where the characters were more obviously a family kingdom: King Ploobis, Queen Peutra, their son Wiss, the servant girl Vazh, the servant boy Scred, and a stone oracle called the Mighty Favog. Henson explained that the Skeksis were loosely based on the seven deadly sins, even though they ended up with nine different characters (*WDC*). Furthermore, the banquet scene appears oddly reminiscent

of the Biblical *Last Supper* imagery in its composition, which may be a deliberate parody.

In terms of gender, the Garthim-Master Skeksis seems the most traditionally “macho” in strength, aggression, and leadership, though some of the Skeksis are more ambiguous in their conception, possibly an amalgamation of both male and female, including the camp Gourmand, the effeminate Ornamentalist, and the weak and sleazy Chamberlain. On the whole, gender and sexuality are more difficult to discern among the Skeksis and the Mystics than with the two Gelflings.

### *The Garthim Versus the Landstriders*

The varying landscapes and clear-cut representations of female and male, light and dark, good and evil, seems to have been more visibly absorbed by the supporting cast of working creatures. The Garthim are dark, crustacean-like masses, while the Landstriders offer their visual antonym as light, tall, and elegant creatures. The Garthim are the armored bouncers or warriors created by the Skeksis to guard their castle and capture the Pod People. The Garthim are clumsy and accidentally incarcerate Aughra after breaking into her observatory, ruthlessly vandalizing her property, and mistaking her for a Gelfling. The oaf-like characteristics of the Garthim remind one of troops that kill ruthlessly in the pack mentality but are incapable of thinking for themselves as individuals. According to Jones, Froud based the Garthim on insects, particularly beetles, for their hard shells, large claws, and scuttling movements (46). The insect world is an alien place that entomologists are still exploring, and thus a useful source of inspiration for Froud. In *The World of the Dark Crystal* book, the Garthim are suspected to be a mere “thought projection” of the Skeksis because they disappear at the moment of defeat (116, 126).

The Landstriders are the tamable, long-limbed, “beasts of swift passage” for the Gelflings in their quest to The Castle of the Crystal (116). According to Finch, the meat of a fallen Landstrider is the Skeksis’ favorite meal (13). Froud reveals that the Landstriders evolved from “land spiders” as his designs moved off the page and into three-dimensional action (Zimmerman 37). One aspect that the documentary makes clear is the physical investment of the puppeteers in Froud’s designs. The Landstriders were played by costumed performers on stilts while the Garthim wore heavy costumes that required the performer to crouch uncomfortably for short periods of time. Henson claims he always put emphasis on the performer rather than mechanics or technolo-

gies that could only enhance the performance. Many of the movements were choreographed by a Swiss mime, Jean Pierre Amiel, for consistency (Harris 31; Jones 48).

### *Other Species/Miscellaneous Designs*

The Podlings, Pod People or “master gardeners” (WDC 43) are perhaps the most reminiscent of the Muppets and the most literally “down to earth” of all the species within Henson’s fantasy world. In the documentary, Froud explains how their closeness to the earth meant their visual conception was very much based on the shapes of potatoes (WDC). Historically, potatoes are the food of the working classes as seen in well-known representations like Vincent van Gogh’s painting *The Potato Eaters* (1885). Spud-like, the Pod People are kind, generous, wholesome, musically gifted, and communal in their activities. They are also the most defenseless and the most easily captured and corrupted. They are perhaps not the brightest of creatures — a potato having connotations of thickness and simplicity.

Another curious creature is Kira’s pet Fizzgig, credited as “A Friendly Monster,” who at first seems to consist of little more than an angry mouth, like a distant relative of the Muppet character, Animal. Fizzgig is well-named, often fizzing up and flying off the handle before cowering and whimpering apologetically. In the book, his species is described as “quadruped” (43), and in the film we later see that his body includes feet and a tail. Jones explains the hybrid combination of lion, fox, raccoon, lamb, and opossum gleaned from old fur coats (39, 41), and the amount of effort and characterization that sculptor Rollie Krewson and performer Dave Goelz put into “what is essentially a ball of fur” (41). Fizzgig is perhaps best likened to a small Shih Tzu who is both a loyal, canine companion and badly tempered, spoilt familiar reminiscent of Miss Piggy’s lapdog Foo-Foo on *The Muppet Show*.

The Crystal Bats are part-mammal, part-mineral, a discreet, closed-circuit surveillance system sent by the Skeksis as literal spy glasses. As mentioned earlier, it is significant that Froud tends to begin his characters by drawing their eyes. Like any crystal ball, they offer a view of what is happening elsewhere in their world and have adapted to a wide variety of conditions in order to map diverse terrains. They are an enemy of the Gelflings and a guide to the Garthim, who also have Crystal eyes (WDC 116). Surveillance in the fantasy genre often strikes a sinister tone. Compare the Crystal Bats with monumental burning Eye of Sauron from *Lord of the Rings* or the red and green glowing crystal ball of the Wicked Witch of the West in Victor Fleming’s

1939 film adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*. Where Aughra's single eye is a symbol of knowledge and foresight, the Crystal Bats are mindlessly fishing for information.

The remainder of flora and fauna in the film, book and world of Thra are said to have the triadic structure which reflects the "dominant patterns of thought" and the prevailing shapes of the universe as observed and catalogued by Aughra (10, 61). As Haberkorn suggests: "The fictional ecosystems of *The Dark Crystal* [...] cannot be interpreted usefully as reflecting the natural world," for one must remember that this is a fantasy space however lifelike the environment appears (75). Indeed one might question the limits of the conceptual designer's ability to play naturalist. Working in the fantasy genre, Froud's project is always more natural fiction than natural history. On the other hand, the sheer extent to which he and the production team went allows a greater suspension of disbelief. Among the profusion of "environmental creatures" designed by Froud (see Finch, 73), many "strange beasts" are said to have appeared since the "darkening of the world," as listed in *The World of the Dark Crystal* (34). One thinks of the organic aberrations that emerge after a nuclear disaster. Some of the vegetation in the Swamp of the Black River is carnivorous, like a Venus Flytrap, while the mosses offer more healing properties. Considering the extreme attention to detail and the commitment to believability so far, it comes as no surprise to learn that John Coppinger, an expert in scientific sculpture from the Natural History Museum, was recruited to advise on the Swamp's set design (Finch 71).

### *Mineral Treasures: The Crystal and Its Shard*

"What was sundered and undone shall be whole — the two made one."  
— Aughra and Ancient Prophecy

While the Crystal and its Shard lie at the heart of the narrative as coveted, fairy tale objects, they are easy to overlook within the aestheticized paraphernalia of surrounding genus and species, myth and legend. The breaking of the Harmony or the Darkening of the Crystal was the symbolic event which heralded the split between good and evil. The book explains that the cracking of the Crystal and the loss of the Shard occurred after the violent Skeksis first emerged and fought. The film's narrator presents a slightly different version of events: that the cracking of the crystal was the cause of the splitting of the UrSkeks. Perhaps the legend is so old that no one can really remember the chain of events of this chicken or egg scenario. Either way, the darkness of the film's title suggests that the moral balance has tipped over into evil and

that goodness and light require restoration. This is part of the prophecy that has been foreseen. The Crystal is suspended above a pit of fire and ice at the center of the Castle of the Crystal and is amethyst in color and texture, illuminated by the rays of the Dying Sun. It is much coveted and a great source of power for the Skeksis. They have exploited its powers by placing a reflector underneath to hypnotize more innocent species, like the Podlings, and suck out their “essence.” This essence reverses the aging process, like cosmetic Botox or collagen implants, and provides long life for the Skeksis. Such essence-drinking is arguably the darkest part of the film as it involves one species forcing another in a form of ritual sacrifice and animal cruelty. The emaciated, hollowed out appearance of the Podlings, post-essence extraction, may also be an intentional visual reference to concentration camp victims, again reminding us of the horrors of the dark empire.

Meanwhile, the Shard is the missing piece in the puzzle. As its temporary custodian, Aughra produces a selection of crystal shards for Jen to choose between upon his arrival to fulfill his destiny. Like a handful of keys, Aughra has forgotten which one is the true Shard, but Jen quickly whittles down his selection to a short-list of three and identifies the correct piece by blowing his pipes and enchanting a glowing amethyst color from it. The Shard is a synecdoche of the larger Crystal, a part that stands for the whole. Like Jen, it represents a microcosm of the larger universe. Once the Shard is restored to its rightful place within the Dark Crystal, the world is reunified, and evil is conquered. The purple-tinged Dark Crystal becomes the gleaming white Crystal of Truth.

Another mineral documented in the film and book is the *Haakskeekah* Stone, an imitation of the Dark Crystal, suspected to be made of basalt or a variant, which is much less powerful and less valuable than crystal. The Skeksis use it within their ritual jousting, “trial by stone,” to determine who will emerge triumphant as the next emperor (*WDC* 112). The Dark Crystal and the *Haakskeekah* Stone both mirror Froud’s architectural designs for the Castle of the Skeksis. Like the recurrent motif of the astronomical triangle, the twisted crystal shapes seem to be a metaphor for foreboding time and space.

### *The Production Team and Audience*

At this point it is worth returning to the background of the production team as their own invisible species in order to more fully appreciate their motivations and dynamics. Often the production team appears to have mimicked the otherworldly taxonomies and behaviors of the characters in *The*

*Dark Crystal*. In the film's credits, Creative Fabrication is listed in units: Gelfling Unit, Skeksis Unit, Mystic Unit, the Garthim Unit, Aughra and the Urskeks Unit, Landstriders Unit, and Podling Unit. In the documentary, the various puppet-making groups are said to have developed tribal instincts:

The various groups of people did become very attached to their creatures and there was a little bit of rivalry sometimes between the groups, not only over the creatures themselves but sometimes over how much time they had to finish. Occasionally there was jealousy because one group was needed before another group [WDC; Conway, 44].

This suggests that the production team had become so immersed in this fantasy world that they had started to mimic the characters on set as well as off.

Moreover, the innate *darkness* of *The Dark Crystal* leads one to question its audience which was interestingly a mixture of both adult and children. This is true too of Froud's *œuvre* which on a surface level may appear like children's book illustrations, but on closer inspection can be demanding in its complex taxonomies and intertextual sources. Today Froud's work is arguably as coveted by an adult collector's market as its childhood readership. By extension, *The World of the Dark Crystal* is not to be confused with conventional children's illustration but is more of an *objet d'art* or *Livre d'Artiste* (artist's book). However, one might argue that children are far more capable of dealing with the darker side of this world than many would care to accept and that Froud is highly empathic and shrewd in this regard.

## *Conclusion*

*The Dark Crystal* is now being re-interpreted by a twenty-first century audience as a cult classic. By moving between the inner fantasy world of the film and book and its real-world fabrication, we have been able to trace the archaeology of Froud's illustrations and think about him as a "naturalist" of the world he has designed. In many ways the illustrations speak for themselves; playing on familiar dichotomies found in fairy tales, the denotations of light and dark are easy to interpret. Representations of gender and class are more variable between species but are often binary, with a small number of exceptions in between. Masculinity and femininity are stereotypically represented in the case of the Gelflings but more creatively reinterpreted in the cases of Aughra and some of the Skeksis. Class distinctions are denoted through the architecture: the Mystics and Pod People inhabit the earthy valley while the ruling Skeksis live in the Castle. The most extreme dichotomy is the schizophrenic split that has occurred between the Skeksis and the Mystics as good

versus evil, dark versus light. While this seems to have been the initial idea on Henson's part, Froud's conceptual designs have elaborated the dark/light fantasy split into a multilayered natural history.

The emergence of *The Dark Crystal* in the early 1980s provoked a wealth of texts, graphics, and fanzine-ephemera to excavate. More recently, Froud's graphic novels, *The Dark Crystal Creation Myths*, are beginning to help fill in the gaps in the narrative and natural history that were left open or unexplained in the film. It seems important to preserve and acknowledge the documentary material surrounding this cult classic in the lead up to the sequel, *The Power of the Dark Crystal*, which is currently in production by the Jim Henson Company and Omnilab Media in Australia. This film will feature new technologies of 3D live action that may enhance, revolutionize, or even damage both the complicated stratigraphy so carefully represented in *The World of the Dark Crystal* and the craft and skill of the potentially obsolete puppet film industry. While one may be skeptical of the lack of materiality endorsed by new technologies, Brian Froud's involvement in the conceptual design of this forthcoming film surely inspires a great deal of confidence and anticipation.

## NOTES

1. Grateful thanks to Karen Falk for her suggestions for alternative research materials and to the editors for their helpful comments which helped shape this paper.
2. However, the recent *Creation Myths* explain that the female Gelflings' wings have more empowering origins, a coping strategy representing the strength of the maternal body (Holguin 2011 unpaginated).
3. Work by Wendy Froud was included in *The Doll as Art* exhibitions curated by Neil Zukerman's whose CFM Gallery in New York also deals the Surrealist art of Leonor Fini whose paintings, in turn, have a similar doll-like aesthetic. Surrealism's commitment to alternative realities also offers a possible precursor for 1980s fantasy realms.

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