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"C" is for Cookie, Culture, and Capitalism: The Muppet Phenomenon in the United States

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“C” IS FOR COOKIE, CULTURE, AND CAPITALISM

The Muppet Phenomenon in the United States

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

Nicole B. Cloeren

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

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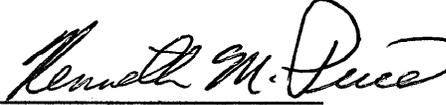


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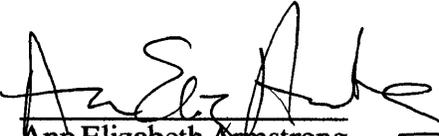
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Arthur Knight



Kenneth M. Price



Ann Elizabeth Armstrong
Theatre

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ABSTRACT

The Muppets have enjoyed unusual success for puppetry art in the United States. Their impressive popularity with audiences of all ages invites a study of their impact, their meaning, and their effect in American culture. In this essay I look at what characterizes the Muppets as distinctly American, and how their success hinges on the reflection of specific American ideals. I argue that the Muppets become representative of certain ideas of freedom and utopia, and provide a space for people to escape the seriousness and the rules of every day life.

The Muppets have grown into a cultural phenomenon, reaching far beyond their television and movie performances. Their images surround us and their spirit is adopted by a large range of fans who celebrate them for their optimism and parodic wit. Especially appealing is their ability to join opposites such as notions of the real/unreal, education/entertainment, and art/capital gains.

As puppets they invite their audience to engage in self reflection. As specifically American they represent the possibility to reinvent ourselves, the illusion of immortality, the promise of exploration and innovation, the freedom of mobility and speech, and monetary success.

I uncover some ways in which Muppets express, contribute to, and critique various aspects of American culture by 1) examining the aesthetic definition of a Muppet; 2) looking at how the myth of the Muppets circulates in the popular press; 3) relating the Muppets as celebrities to the Hollywood star system; and conclude my work with an inquiry into whether the Muppets can offer their public the rewards of art while simultaneously thriving in, relying on, an interacting with the system of capitalism.

“C” IS FOR COOKIE, CULTURE, AND CAPITALISM

The Muppet Phenomenon in the United States

Introduction

The Muppets¹ are more than an art form, they are more than simply entertainment, and they are more than educators. The Muppets have grown into an original American cultural phenomenon. The phenomenon consists of the physical Muppets themselves and all the (mythic/imagined) potential they embody; the actual productions they star in (ranging from the U.S. to foreign countries, from Sesame Street to Muppet movies, and encompassing night shows, talk shows, news, adult motivational business video tapes, skating performances, their own amusement park, and more); the stories told by the muppeteers, the stars working with the Muppets, and all who help create them; all the products in which they are depicted; and their audience's responses. Because of their infusion into our lives, and their very real existence in economic, material, and conversational life, the Muppets are a topic about which almost every American² could say something. They are part of our popular culture, and yet they are more than this. They are part of innovative interactive computer technology advances, part of public television's economic struggles for survival, and they are the topic of political and

¹ The word "Muppet" refers to the registered trademark of Jim Henson Productions, and the characters created by JHP.

² For convenience, throughout my essay, I will use the term "America" to refer to the United States of America only, not other North or South American countries, although the Muppets are popular there as well.

educational debate. In short, the decorated foam and fuzzy material of the Muppets has in many ways been incorporated into the fabric of American lives.

I will attempt to explain how the Muppets' enormous popularity relates to certain aspects of American culture. The American voice the Muppets speak with is one that still believes in chasing dreams and holds out a hope, and stands as an example, of the possibility of wedding opposites. Filmmaker Francis Coppola said, "I feel that there is a ... certain American sensibility that comes from this combination of something simple and something fantastic and [Jim Henson] is in that tradition" ("The World of Jim Henson"). Sometimes the wedding of opposites is paradoxical. Contradictory notions of the real/the unreal, educational value/ entertainment, idealism/realism, and the world of art/the world of capitalism are simultaneously expressed in the Muppets. In a way, this expression reflects the sometimes harmonious and other times discordant coexistence in American life of various beliefs, cultures, lifestyles, and preferences.

When measuring the Muppets' success we must differentiate between financial gains and gains of a more impalpable nature such as the lessons, pleasure, and expressive freedom they may provide. In The Rainbow of Desire, Augusto Boal discusses theatre as a form of therapy. Many of his explanations of how space and bodies work on stage are useful for a study of the Muppets. Boal believes in the manipulation of cultural stereotypes through signs expressed in body language. He believes that theatre can be politically freeing because it provides a space to transform reality, a space in which we may practice using signs and make sense of things by creating a new language of

representation. In the case of the Muppets, parody is often used to challenge cultural stereotypes and reality is transformed through the blending of human and Muppet actors, puppeteering talent, and intelligent camera shots. In Boal's model we can see the Muppet productions as an aesthetic site recreating our realities in a way that allows for discovery of new ideas and possibilities.

In Boal's image theatre, desire becomes transformed through signs of body language into something more concrete which can therefore better be studied, analyzed and possibly transformed. Similarly, the Muppets give us an object, a physical body other than our own, through which to project our ideas with the distance necessary to observe and consider them better. Boal explains that

The extraordinary gnoseological (knowledge-enhancing) power of theatre is due to these three essential properties: (1) plasticity, which allows and induces the unfettered exercise of memory and imagination, the free play of past and future; (2) the division of doubling of self which occurs in the subject who comes on stage, the fruit of the dichotomic and 'dichotomising' character of the 'platform', which allows -- and enables -- self observation; (3) finally, that telemicroscopic property which magnifies everything and makes everything present, allowing us to see things which, without it, in smaller or more distant form, would escape our gaze. (28)

The plasticity of the Muppets comes from their existence being based largely on the imagination of those who create and recreate them, and those who continue to accept them. For Boal, the emphasis is on the actor who becomes self-aware of his position as "subject and object, conscious of himself and his action" (25). In regard to the Muppets we could extend the self awareness to viewers who see aspects of self and humanity

mirrored in the Muppets. It is the awareness of being put in an observable spot that makes the performer more conscious of observing herself, and consequently more capable of understanding and critiquing situations being worked through in performance.

Muppeteers develop a sense of double self as they construct their Muppet characters out of bits of themselves. They are entirely aware of their performance as they watch their movements with the Muppets on individual video monitors while they are rehearsing and filming. Of course, as Muppets appear on film, the camera takes on the role of magnifying subtle movements and assisting in expression of thoughts and in building a mythical space where Muppets really exist.

In Mythologies, Roland Barthes examines the language of mass-culture by breaking it down into signifiers, signified, and signs. He works to unmask collective representations by recognizing the sign-systems behind them and discovering that myth has the double function of making us understand the certain signs it points out to us, and imposing them on us so that we must cooperate with the collective acceptance and language of the sign system, for to resist would be to be misunderstood. The Muppets employ various sign systems aesthetically and in their language and actions. Most of these signs work towards a sense of reality. Barthes writes:

The fact that we cannot manage to achieve more than an unstable grasp of reality doubtless gives the measure of our present alienation: we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified.
(159)

As we try to break down the myth of the Muppet we begin to see what factors contribute to an overall understanding of their existence and role in American culture.

This quotation captures the suspension viewers experience between reality and imagination while watching the Muppets. It also illuminates why their continued success relies on willing acceptance of the Muppets as signifiers. If we strip the myth away from the Muppet, we have only a puppet, only an object with no life, and no cultural significance. When we acknowledge that through the discussions and commentary on Muppets, the purchases of Muppet products, and the viewing of Muppet performances we participate in elevating the Muppets to something that exists in our minds and collective code of culture, we have returned them to a complex phenomenon.

I have labeled the abundance of Muppet related material as a Muppet “phenomenon” because it exists on so many levels both materially and conceptually. Such a wide variety of artifacts and representations are referred to as “Muppet” that we need to be careful to specify what is meant when we employ the term. That is, aside from being actual puppets, Muppets are for sale as stuffed animals, as drawings in picture books, as computer creations, and in a variety of decorative and functional forms, including curtains and toothbrushes. Additionally they mean different things to children and to adults, to educators and business people. Since the definition of a Muppet varies depending on who is doing the defining, we must continually ask ourselves, “what is a Muppet?”

The term “Muppet” operates on multiple levels. On one level, the Muppet is a mechanical, material puppet. The technological aspects of the physical Muppet are crucial in establishing the concept of Muppet as character and personality. The filming combined with the personalities gives the illusion that the Muppets are real. This illusion of reality is readily accepted when people choose to believe that Muppets embody certain ideals in American culture: the ability to reinvent ourselves, the illusion of immortality, the promise of exploration and innovation, harmony within diversity, mobility to go anywhere, and monetary success in a capitalistic society. Once these myths have been successfully and inseparably connected to the Muppet characters, other objects made in their likeness can stand in as signs representing both the physical and conceptual Muppet.

The Muppets, however defined, are generally celebrated for their charm, optimism and parodic wit, all of which give a hopeful tone to present circumstance while humorously recognizing an imperfect reality. Jim Henson’s emphasis was always set on artistic creation, but his goals were inseparably linked to the economics of a capitalistic and materialistic society. Early on the Muppets began carving out a career for themselves by appearing in television advertisements. However, “when Sesame Street brought [the Muppets] a new level of fame, ... they stopped creating commercials because of Jim’s concerns about the characters doing a children’s show at the same time” (Finch, The Works 22). Even now, after the Muppets have become an established artistic success, their existence is sustained by a consuming public. American fans love to claim the

Muppets as their own, as linked to their national identity, and try to possess them literally through the purchase of Muppet paraphernalia. Coppola also said about the Muppet performances:

There was, I think, a uniquely American voice that was very human at heart, but which had a kind of humor, a sly humor, a satirical humor that ... poked fun at certain types of people or certain attitudes. ... I remember running around the house yelling, "Cookie!" because that was a certain aspect of people. So [Henson] was, in a way, using puppetry and television as a kind of American author. ("The World of Jim Henson")

Keep in mind, however, that what is now hailed as an American popular culture success story took the belief and support of a British television producer, Lord Lew Grade, to get the Muppet Show on its feet when at first no network in the United States would give Henson and his crew a spot.

Those who have written about the Muppets have eschewed a more scholastic analysis of them. My intention is not to subscribe to any one theoretical interpretation, but rather to incite careful thought and suggest new ideas in order to achieve a more complex understanding and viewing of Muppet performance and existence, and to explicate the Muppets as a cultural phenomenon. In my essay I uncover some ways in which Muppets reflect, contribute to, and critique various aspects of American culture. The first part gives a brief overview of Muppet development, history, and accomplishments. The second part explores the aesthetic properties of a Muppet and the relationship between the physical body of the character and its personality. In its third part, my discussion deals with the relationship between the viewer and the Muppets

through an examination of how the myth of the Muppets circulates in popular publications. The fourth part analyzes the Muppets as celebrities in the Hollywood star system. With the help of a few key postmodern theorists, my fifth part inquires into how the Muppets offer their public the rewards of art while simultaneously thriving in, relying on, and interacting with the system of capitalism.

The huge amount of printed materials, consumer goods and Web sites related to the Muppets has given birth to a metanarrative of the characters in a way that reflects American ideals and values. They have turned the Muppets into a heightened version of what they were created to be -- puppets that allow us to see aspects of ourselves and others -- and become popular culture icons, and in some cases even idols. In any case, they have become characters that exist outside of their physicality. Muppets and their viewers continue to shape each other in the truest nature of what puppetry is, an interactive performance, rather than a manipulation of characters and audience alike.

The Birth of a New World

Greatly influenced by the purchase of a family television set around 1950, Jim Henson, who watched Burr Tillstrom perform Kukla, Fran and Ollie at age twelve and Bil Baird's Snarky Parker and Heathcliffe at age thirteen, must have started dreaming early on about the new medium in conjunction with puppetry (Finch, The Works 4-7). More than

puppets, however, Henson was enthralled by television itself. It was this love that led him to audition for a puppeteering part on a local station. He landed the low-paying, short term job and remembers, “it was interesting and kind of fun to do - but I wasn’t really interested in puppetry then. It was just a means to an end” (Finch, The Works 8-9).

At the University of Maryland, Jim Henson concentrated on art courses and met his future wife, Jane Nebel, who was his first major performing partner (Finch, The Works 9-10). In 1954 the two performed on a show for the NBC owned WRC-TV in Washington D.C. The next year Jim began a new five minute show called Sam and Friends, which aired until 1961. Sam and Friends provided important space for experimentation of what would later be developed in Muppet productions. In 1957, Jim and Jane earned income and experience making commercials that were characteristically comical, short, and to the point. In a time when “agencies believed the hard sell was the only way to get their message over on television, we took a very different approach” said Jim Henson (Finch, The Works 22). The puppet humor was a novelty. As inventor, director, set designer, puppet builder and performer, Henson honed many new skills and revolutionized the puppetry world. Jerry Juhl, head writer for the Muppets, likens Henson to D.W. Griffith. He says that Griffith put actor and dramatic storytelling together to create something completely new for the film medium, much as Henson remade puppetry in a similar transition from puppet stage to television (“The World of

Henson”). Over the years Henson’s success grew, and he and his Muppets were invited for regular performances on the Today Show and The Ed Sullivan Show.

In 1968 groups of concerned experts met at seminars for The Preschool Educational Television Show to share ideas about how to launch a television show, headed by Joan Ganz Cooney, especially made to reach out to underprivileged inner-city children. Upon a special request from head writer Jon Stone, Henson attended a seminar and was finally persuaded to collaborate on the project. At first he was not thrilled with the prospect of working for children, but after being convinced that the goal was to appeal to adults as well, he began to appreciate the level of sophistication involved and the possibilities open to him. Sesame Street was born in 1969, finally obtaining its name after a special skit written by Jon Stone making fun of the difficulties everyone was having in coming up with a name for the program. Mockingly the Muppets proposed such options in the skit as “The Kiddie Show,” “The Itty-Bitty Little Kiddie Show,” and “The Inner-City, Itty-Bitty Little Kiddie Show” (Finch, The Works 54-55). Thirty years later, the Muppets continue to play a crucial part on Sesame Street.

Henson’s achievements are as extensive as they are outstanding.³ Among the best known is The Muppet Show that first began airing in 1976 and ran for five seasons. The original, and misleading, name for what eventually turned into The Muppet Show was

³ For an elaborated timeline of Henson’s productions and achievements, see Christopher Finch’s Jim Henson: The Works or JHP: Time Line on the web at <http://vr.ncsa.uiuc.edu/BS/Muppets/JHP/timeline.html> and also further links at <http://studentweb.tulane.edu/~bfink/muppet/muplinks.htm>

The Muppet Show: Sex and Violence. The pilot aired in 1975 on ABC. At the beginning of the show, the free standing words “Sex and Violence” are exploded apart, showing very early in Muppet productions both the willingness of Muppet producers to pander to the audience, and the desire to criticize the very process of pandering to the audience. This early version of the show had no guest stars and was hosted not by Kermit, but by an undistinguished human-looking Muppet named Nigel. When five major CBS stations agreed to run The Muppet Show, Lord Lew Grade (the head of British based Associated Communications Cooperation) set out to produce twenty-four half-hour shows in England for syndication in the American market.

Several Muppet movies were also made: The Muppet Movie (1979), The Great Muppet Caper (1981), The Muppets Take Manhattan (1984), and carrying on his spirit after his death, Henson Productions’ The Muppet Christmas Carol (1992), and Muppet Treasure Island (1994) and soon to be released Muppets from Space (summer, 1999). The Muppet Babies’ cartoon series premiered in 1984. Other important appearances include Ted Koppel’s Nightline in 1987 on which Kermit and Fozzie explain the difference between a bear market and a bull market and Fozzie is eventually chased off the set by angered bulls. The first meeting films, created by special order for businesses who wanted a humorous way to teach their employees about successful managing of affairs, were taped in 1975. In light of these many accomplishments, Brian Henson says of his father: “His vision was a very simple one about life and about people and a very honest

one - the vision of the world of Muppets, and the world of Dark Crystal, and the world of Labyrinth, and the world and the world and the world, you know. How many worlds can one guy have in his head?" ("The World of Henson"). More than anything, Henson's vision encompassed a love of art and a zeal for experimentation and creativity that would feed the human soul. This sentiment was evident in the interactions of the crew and in the innovative risks taken. In a brief biographical sketch of Jim Henson's life James Collins sums up part of Henson's vision: "through his work [Henson] helped sustain the qualities of fancifulness, warmth and consideration that have been so threatened by our coarse, cynical age" (192).

In 1989, tired of the complications of running a business, Jim Henson announced an agreement-in-principle for merger between Henson Associates, Inc. and The Walt Disney Company, but he quickly became unhappy with the decision. He could not reconcile himself to the "decisions made at the corporate level [which] had to be affirmed by the heads of separate divisions, whose interests were sometimes in conflict" (Owen 35). Disney did not seem to share the Henson company's vision or respect the informal family atmosphere with which business was conducted. Henson complained that "Disney was being unnecessarily aggressive in its dealings with his company and that Disney lawyers seemed to keep changing the agreement" (Owen 35). Additionally, Henson Productions accused Disney of infringing various trademarks and copyrights. Worst of all, Disney was tinkering with the very nature of the Muppet art, denying the intimate relationship between Muppeteers and Muppet by planning to dub voices and

use performers as interchangeable animators (Owen 36). Before Jim Henson could settle accounts, he died in 1990 of a streptococcal infection. As new president of Jim Henson Productions, Brian Henson has continued and even strengthened what his father began, in part by successfully terminating the merger negotiations. Consequently the Muppets live on, each day strengthening their claim on immortality. By dissecting the Muppet phenomenon we should begin to understand, on a tangible level, what is behind the Muppets' effect and their related success.

Muppet Aesthetics

While recent scholarship on popular culture increasingly emphasizes the meaning given a text or object by a culturally specific audience, now recognized as active rather than passive, we must not forget, additionally, to examine the crucial aesthetic value of an art form. Such an examination is especially important in light of Simon Frith's assertion that "the aesthetics of popular culture is a neglected topic, and it is time we took it ... seriously" (571). We should remember that formal aspects of cultural objects are not necessarily assigned randomly.

The Muppets provide a premium example for understanding the interplay between object and person, because the very nature of a puppet inherently demands at least one person who is the performer. An explanation of the material and physical

aspects of Muppets will aid us in grasping how central the form as well as the concept of the Muppet is to delivering a desired message and spurring the audience's engagement. Carroll Spinney (puppeteer of Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch among others) has stated, "the real secret of the Muppet's life is that the thought process is physically demonstrated... If I put [Big Bird] at certain angles I can even get a smile out" (qtd. in Borgenicht 185). Since puppetry is an art that relies on the willingness or ability of the audience to perceive the puppet as capable of assigning meaning, certain aspects in the construction of a puppet may make this process easier. For example, giving a puppet a mouth will likely be related to the power of speech and the power to create meaning through sound and spoken discourse. For, although an object cannot truly be animated (given life), it can "fulfill the function of a living object in man's associative fantasy" (Obraztsov qtd. in Tillis 23).

Here we can begin to see the complexity of defining a puppet. In a sense, without the puppeteer, a puppet cannot exist. Without the puppeteer, one has a sort of doll. The puppet's existence depends also on the audience, who must choose to imagine a certain reality about the puppet. Therefore, inherent in the puppet is the semblance of life which is achieved through many methods, the greatest being the puppeteer, a close second being aesthetical form. Steve Tillis's work, Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art, is a good place to turn for an understanding of what a puppet is. In this book Tillis outlines the basic element of puppets as: "the designed figure, the movement

and speech given to that figure, and the audience that knows the figure to be an instrument of theatre, and yet participates in the illusion it creates” (7).

Tillis emphasizes a sign system inherent in the design, movement, and speech of a puppet, which can be recognized and interpreted by an audience because they are related to the signs generally recognized as signs of life. Tillis writes that his book “attempt[s] to comprehend the puppet by examining how the deployment of abstracted signs creates an illusion of life that the audiences know is not real, and ... develop[s] a concept called double-vision, which postulates that an audience sees the puppet in two ways at one time: as a perceived object and as an imagined life” (7). He believes, along with other puppeteers, that puppetry, as a distinctive form of theater, “pleasurably challenges its audience to consider fundamental questions of what it means to be object and what it means to have life” and “by its very nature leads to a fresh understanding of humanity as the maker and breaker of myths about itself and its world” (Tillis 10, 11). Let us apply Tillis’s aesthetic segmentation to the Muppets so that we first establish their elements and effects of design, second explore the meaning of the Muppets’ movement and speech, and third understand how the Muppets create a believable illusion of life.

Four crucial elements of the Muppets’ sign system of design are color, texture, size and shape. On a very practical level, the vibrant colors of the Muppets’ fur is picked up particularly well by the camera. On a more conceptual level, Sesame Street makes use of the Muppets’ colors (though they weren’t initially designed for this purpose) to teach children about different cultures, ethnicity and interracial harmony. In

one episode of Sesame Street in 1990, for example, Whoopi Goldberg visits with Elmo and has an enlightening conversation about the beauty of different types of skin and fur. The interlude includes Elmo stroking Whoopi's arm and admiring the softness and the pretty brown color of her skin. Whoopi tells Elmo that she really likes his bright red and soft fur too. When Elmo suggests that the two trade skin and fur, Whoopi explains that not only is that impossible since skin and fur don't come off, but that she really likes her skin and hair and wouldn't want to trade it. Elmo agrees that he wants to keep his own fur "just where it is - on Elmo. Right next to Whoopi" (Borgenicht 85).

Children and adults enjoy being close to the Muppets and interacting with them in part because of their common characteristic of softness, which adds to their approachability. Texture is a design element closely connected to the sign system of movement. The different Muppets are made of various materials, but each has been chosen to give the Muppet a certain flexibility. Thus, Kermit's personality can express itself through his facial gestures, whereas the slightly stiffer headed Grover tends to express himself in his lanky limbs that dangle in every direction. Oscar, the Grouch, similarly "wears" his personality in the matted, dirtied, and disheveled fur as well as the thick eyebrows that cast a heavy irritability over his eyes which are mostly half opened in an expression of half interest and half disgust.

Indeed, the process of character creation is two directional. The puppeteer uses the physical limitations to create the persona, and the persona in turn determines what physical movement will be employed. For example, Miss Piggy's ability to deliver her

famous Karate kick in moments of extreme frustration or anger contributed to her short temper developing as one of her main personality traits. In response to asking how such expressions develop, Frank Oz says, “The characters in the Muppets are made in different ways. Certainly the design is important. How the character looks, that feeds you. That just feeds you if a character is happy, sad, angry, fat, skinny” (“The World of Henson”). But, he says, “What we are doing is so complicated that you don’t really have time to think about how you are doing it. ... I don’t want to sound pretentious, but there’s a kind of Zen thing that happens. First your body understands, and then your mind grasps what you’re doing” (Finch, Muppets & Men 75).

Size and shape are also important physical traits to consider as they play a great role in the Muppets’ presentation and personalities, and are closely connected to the sign system of movement. Tillis writes that “the absolute size of the puppet is a sign that conveys meaning not by contrast to its surroundings or to other puppets, but intrinsically” (125). He describes hand puppets as tending to be “charming and playful,” and the “greater-than-life-size” puppet as “powerful and foreboding” (125). Perhaps this same analogy can not be applied to the Muppets since grouchy Oscar can hardly be described as charming, nor the gentle Snuffleupagus as foreboding. Nonetheless, we should think about the role and effect size does have since, for instance, it is by growing into a gigantic version of himself that Animal saves Kermit from being shot in The Muppet Movie (an episode I will analyze in some detail in part five). The Muppets vary from the seven feet tall and twelve feet long Snuffleupagus and his best friend the

eight foot two inch Big Bird, to the slightly more than two inch worm, Slimey. Big Bird, although ostensibly only six years old, tends to take command of organizing events on Sesame Street. In part, this comes from his ability to walk around freely. His expressions come from his loping gate, tilting neck, raisable eyelids, and welcoming arm gestures. He has the ability to relate to the human characters in many ways because he is physically capable of taking part in a wide variety of activities. His freedom of movement is derived from being a full body puppet with Carroll Spinney's arm and hand working the neck and beak, and his body and legs costumed as Bird's body and legs. Big Bird can go almost anywhere (and he takes advantage of this traveling to the Great Wall of China in one Sesame Street special) and do almost anything other kids are doing, such as roller-skating. But Big Bird was not always the lovable, curious six year old we know him as now. When Spinney first took on the role, writers had envisioned Big Bird as a goofy, rather stupid adult character. Spinney used a gruff voice and loped around, but this just didn't feel right to him, and no characteristic body language developed until Spinney had the idea to play Big Bird as a very tall kid.

The voices, of course, as part of Tillis's sign system of speech, are another important aspect of the aesthetics of the Muppets and a key to the effect of animation. Their acoustic quality is a material value that takes its sound cues from our culture. Oscar's gruff voice was inspired by a New York cab driver who growled comments at his customers. One Muppet on Sesame Street, Rosita, is bilingual, speaking English and Spanish. Some Muppets, such as Animal, Beaker, and the Sesame Street Martians, speak

in squeaks and sounds rather than in any language humans speak. Their lack of identifiable speech both reflects a frustration in lack of communication skills, and a freedom to use one's voice in gestures other than verbal. They explore a continuum between sound and meaning. Sometimes these Muppets remind us of the pre-verbal years of childhood and the frustration of not being understood. Other times they seem more to suggest the empowerment in learning foreign languages. The meaning behind the voices projecting words and sounds is a further key in defining who the Muppets are. The Muppets give the puppeteers a certain sense of freedom to express themselves, and this message of freedom is then conveyed to the viewers through the Muppets' verbal liberties. Their verbal comments can be quite cutting, especially those of Waldorf and Statler in The Muppet Show. More often, though, the Muppets' freedom of speech manifests itself in puns, rhymes, double entendres, overly literal understandings, and other word games, and the characters remain mostly civil toward one another.

Naturally, the actual piece of cloth and material of which the Muppet is constructed does not possess a voice by itself. The voice actually comes from the puppeteer behind the Muppet, or sometimes some other device. However, as previously stated, a defining attribute of the puppet is its ability to give the semblance of life. We have already seen how certain aesthetic aspects, especially pliability of material, can contribute to a Muppet's ability to look and act alive. Another reason why the Muppets appear quite real to the viewer is because the Muppets interact with other real things such as people, places, and props. They inhabit a televisual environment that is

relatively familiar to the viewer. The Muppets achieve a further level of liveliness from special filming techniques which capture them performing many kinds of lively activities without any apparent aid from the puppeteer. The puppeteers are able to give a more convincing performance thanks to the technology perfected by the Muppet crew, which includes a video camera and monitor system that allows the puppeteer to see what his/her Muppet is doing, without putting himself in the view of the recording camera. All of these materials and electronic devices create the physical Muppets and affect their personalities and their presence by allowing certain freedoms, yet also imposing restrictions of movement and therefore of expression. However, an even more significant part of their liveliness comes not from tricky or careful camera manipulation, but from the artistic ability of the Muppeteers.

The ingenuity of the puppeteers begins in careful observation of self and others. They take their cues from their own and others' personalities and actions. Puppeteer Fran Brill talks about how she "stole mannerisms from kids" for her development of Zoe's character (Allis and Wang 142). Puppeteers are actors and actresses who create their puppets' personalities much in the way any actor or actress would develop his or her on screen character. Frank Oz tells us: "Aspects of all my characters exist somewhere inside me, but they're still just characters that have been invented by me and the writers, the same way a novelist invents character for the story he's telling" (Finch, Muppets & Men 75).

The Muppet characters draw on recognizable signs of movement and speech, made possible through careful design, to embody a certain amount of human familiarity. Yet, they also have a way of turning the world we are used to upside down, providing an appealing escape from our own reality. Just as the facial and oral expressions take their cues from people, so does the environment of the Muppets. How these familiar signs are manipulated, however, introduces us to a zany Muppet environment which brings us to a new understanding of our own environment. This works on the same principle as the parody sketches and plays on genre that the Muppets often employ. They purposely begin with something familiar so that they may lure us into an inverted comic version of reality. The portrayal of a world in which oxymorons and paradox abound is the basic principle from which the Muppets perform. After seeing how important design elements are to the success and effects of the Muppet style, we can begin to explore the audience's response to the careful aesthetic choices by reading journalists' and critics' comments that abound in the popular press.

Muppets Popular in the Popular Press

A review of the wide range of literature published on the Muppets reveals --at least in part-- how America has conceptualized these characters. From this review, eight groups of concerns emerge. Group one analyzes the Muppets for their educational value.

Group two consists of program and performance reviews. Group three records the technical advances and innovations the Muppets have brought about or use. Group four deals with the Muppets use of parody, marking this style one of their dominating appeals. Groups five and six treat the Muppets within the realm of politics and business respectively. Group seven outlines the wide range of appearances the Muppets make. Group eight celebrates the Muppets as a form of nostalgia. All groups tend to laud the Muppets for being an effective expression of hope and optimism in a complex and often unhappy world, and share a general (though not universal) approval and appreciation of the Muppets. Usually, several articles in each of these groups acknowledge and share a substantial cross over of purpose with other groups. For example, those writing about the Muppets ability to teach children to read often discuss briefly the appeal to adults and the idealism embodied in the creatures themselves apart from any formal educational value. I have, therefore, artificially separated these eight topics in Muppet literature by their most prevalent focus to simplify the process of analysis and deepen our sense of the Muppets' impact in American society. After examining these categories of concern individually, we can re-synthesize the groups in a more complete understanding of the Muppets as a cultural phenomenon that infuses so many aspects of American life, and exists in many contexts other than the realm of entertainment.

From newsmagazines like Time and Newsweek, to financial journals such as Business Week, to education publications such as The Education Digest, and theater and film periodicals such as Variety and American Cinematographer, the Muppets are

discussed, praised, and constantly reconsidered. In all of these periodicals one thing becomes clear: all types of analysis take as self-evident that the Muppets are successful in attracting a young audience and a family audience, and in making a lasting impression so that the brand name of the Muppets lingers in viewers' memories. Some articles expressed greater enthusiasm over the effects of attracting such an audience than others, which were concerned about the educational nature of certain Muppet shows. No matter what angle of analysis was used, writers only described a part of the Muppet phenomenon. Demonstrating their true versatility, the Muppets inspired articles from diverse points of interest and expertise. It is their ability to appeal to a large audience, and to encourage consumption of a wide array of Muppet products, that insures Muppet survival.

Many of the Muppet products are toys for children, hardly differentiated from the hundreds of other toys on the shelves. Ironically, the mass production, though an acknowledgment of the Muppets success, actually works counter to the flair for originality and uniqueness the Muppets embrace in their productions. But children and adults choose these often mediocre quality objects because of what they represent. Children may relate to Muppets and see them as friends and characters who understand their position as children. Adults wear Muppet ties and T-shirts as markers of their own frivolity. It is slightly bold and daring to depart from strict codes by wearing a silly Muppet tie rather than a traditional one. Still, we must consider that though the Muppets purport a rebellious image and attitude, in fact they play exactly by the rules of

capitalistic society. Nonetheless, these purchasable objects become encoded. They are more than functional ties and T-shirts, they brand the wearer with an attitude, a statement that says: “This person knows how to have fun and make fun in life.” Like so many other products in the United States, Muppet paraphernalia may be so coveted by adults because they believe to have the power to purchase a cure for the doldrums, an escape from the formal structure in their adult lives. They readily buy into this myth so that it eventually becomes a meaningful and recognizable (though perhaps empty) sign for a free, fun loving attitude.

One review in People Weekly captured succinctly the love of playfulness in American Culture. Shamelessly the reviewer states, “those Sesame Street Muppets are amazing. Just when their prime-time special makes you think you’re back in kindergarten, they come up with something that just has to entertain you, no matter how old or jaded you may be” (Jarvis 9). A big part of the appeal is the interaction between Muppets and people, especially famous people. The adult viewer is given a vicarious allowance (through the stars who already exist to offer such vicarious experiences) to indulge in playfulness. Americans seem to value the Muppets for creating a space where in a highly competitive society (enforced from school through business and more) we can relax and take ourselves less seriously. Or rather, we are allowed to acknowledge publicly that we like to have fun. This notion is especially enforced the starker the contrast between people’s serious and frivolous roles. For instance, Robert MacNeil of the MacNeil-Leherer Newshour interviews Cookie Monster on a Cookiegate scandal, and

Barbara Walters is persuaded to sing with the Muppets. The reviewer additionally states what is best is “how they get even the high and haughty to make fools of themselves” (Jarvis 9).

Adults used these articles as yet another way to approach and participate in the Muppet phenomenon. It was especially interesting to see *how* the authors had chosen to write about the Muppets, not solely what they had said. The two most overwhelming and consistent characteristics I found across the literature was a playfulness in language when discussing the Muppets, and a tendency to validate the reality of the Muppets. Why do so many delight in attributing a reality to what they know to be lifeless? Perhaps the traits the Muppets embody and ideas they vocalize reflect a reality or a desired reality in the American consciousness.

Throughout the literature there exists an acknowledgment that the Muppets use of parody is often directed more at adults than children. Richard Blake writes, “The Muppet Movie, starring Miss Piggy and her friends ... is billed as a children’s movie, but don’t believe the advertising” (36). Beyond recognizing a sophisticated level of humor and sometimes explaining the references employed by the Muppets, writers avoid a more in depth and scholarly examination of the meaning and use of parody. Blake also says, “a ponderous cinematic analysis could spoil the fun, but survivors of ‘Modes of Filmic Communication 101’ will be fascinated and delighted by the skillful use and parody of Hollywood conventions” (36). “Spoiling the fun” seems to be the main cause for resistance to a deeper analysis of Muppet productions. In making this comment, the

author points to one of the appeals of the Muppets - a space created where seriousness can be suspended.

The existence of a cache of articles that capture, reflect, and celebrate the trademark parody style of the Muppets, points to an audience that delights in punny humor, and laughing at itself. Tom Cunneff's article in People Weekly, "Never fluffing her lines, Sesame Street's Meryl Sheep is TV's new dyed-in-the wool star," exemplifies this trend of article particularly well. His writing is packed with puns and allusions. The playful writing style reflects the playfulness that the Muppets represent, and shows how adults can be part of the humor and fun. Here follows a good sample: "Her own pre-Sesame life, as only one of that show's characters could concoct it, was the stuff of high drama. Raised on a small farm, she was saved from a life in the sweater shops by her theatrical mentor, Sam the Shepard. Under his tutelage Meryl says she enjoyed shear success as an actress, keeping audiences flocking to such Sheepspearean classics as Lamlet and The Taming of the Ewe" (Cunneff 33).

A differently scripted playfulness occurs at the bottom of "The TV creator Jim Henson" in Time, where the editor writes about the author of the article: "James Collins is Time's TV critic. His household includes two Kermits and an Elmo" (194). This byline contributes as much to our understanding of the position of Muppets in American culture as the article itself. It reveals another level of familiarity. Time, a major national publication, recognizes the Muppets as an intricate part of familiar living. Substituting Muppet characters for family members not only supplies parody in true Muppet

tradition, but acknowledges how close to our hearts and at front of our consciousness the Muppets lie.

Much as Muppets help viewers to suspend seriousness, they also help us to suspend reality. Indeed there exists a fascinating dichotomy between reality and unreality. Sometimes the relationship seems paradoxical, suggesting both a truth and a fantasy to the reality portrayed. “Sesame Street ... 20 and Still Counting” praises the 20-year anniversary special of Sesame Street hosted by Bill Cosby and isolates as “most [notable, Cosby’s] commentary about how the show mirrors life” (96). The moment when genuinely emotional cast members explain Mr. Hooper’s death to Big Bird stands out as an example of the show reflecting real life experiences. It is especially illuminating that the review highlights the mirroring of life, for in many ways, of course, the Muppets present an ideal, or at least escapist aspect of life, and not actuality at all. This is what is so appealing: finding something to idealize and wishing it prevailed. By entering our living rooms and offering a communal experience shared by a whole nation, the Muppets both submit to our reality and purport to alter it in some ways.

Even to those working most closely with the Muppets, to whom the mechanical aspects of the creations are obvious, the Muppets seem to be alive. Director James Frawley says “these characters are real to me, just as they are to millions of Muppet fans all over the world” (qtd. in “Behind the Scenes” 666). This notion of reality is strengthened by placing the Muppets into the real world in The Muppet Movie, as opposed to bringing in one ‘real’ person onto The Muppet Show. The real world seems

to make the Muppets real, but at the same time, the fantastic quality of the Muppets place fantasy into our reality. Frawley says, “the Muppets have an exciting new dimension in the outside world, and the outside world is made a more magical place by their presence. We hope that by the time the audience comes out of the theatre, they won’t be sure who’s a Muppet and who isn’t” (qtd. in “Behind the Scenes” 666).

Frawley expands on these ideas in an article entitled, “Directing The Muppet Movie,” where he maintains that “in choosing a cinematographer three things were important: technical expertise, a vivid imagination and, most importantly, the ability to accept the reality of the Muppets with absolute conviction” (673); “I would very often give directions to Kermit, rather than Frank Oz” (675). Reading such strong statements by highly respected professionals builds the myth of the reality of the Muppets.

Interestingly, the most in depth discussions of the Muppets in their movies are those centering around the technical effects of the film making. As authors take apart technically complex scenes and explain optical illusions, they also begin to deconstruct the semblance of reality. Articles such as the one by Joseph Westheimer, “Optical Magic for ‘The Muppet Movie’” in the professional journal American Cinematographer, explain some of the difficult optical illusions and how they were created. Yet all this is still done based on a premise of fascination with the resulting reality of these technical advances. Emphasis is placed on the ingenuity of those working on the picture and the actual equipment and techniques employed. Such technical discussions celebrate a certain level of sophistication which is generally overlooked in other aspects of the film. The

preoccupation with the technical aspects of the film illuminates two key factors in the way Americans think about the Muppets. One supports the fascination with technology that American culture is currently very involved in. The other seems to suggest that the most acceptable and “adult” manner in which to spend time discussing the Muppets is in a high tech forum -- one that is removed from the “childishness” of the subject matter.

Other writing is also geared toward adult enjoyment of the Muppets and in a nostalgic way acknowledges the childhood pleasure of watching them. 1999 marks the thirtieth anniversary of Sesame Street. It is perhaps this event that brought on the recent publication (1998) of CTW Sesame Street Unpaved, written by David Borgenicht, which supports the Muppet myth. The cover, done in a characteristically playful manner that mirrors the popular “unplugged” music albums, promises to reveal “scripts, stories, secrets, and songs.” Borgenicht states explicitly that his book addresses adults who grew up with Sesame Street, and now revel in Sesame Street nostalgia. Focusing mainly on the Muppets though clearly emphasizing puppeteers and cast members, Borgenicht invites his readers to “enjoy [their] trip back to the street of [their] youth” through this book of “shared generational memories” (10).

The book does indeed, as promised, recall special moments and specific scripts. Additionally, it places within the very pictorial layout of the book short personal information sketches of Muppets and characters of Sesame Street. Though many of the facts and secrets are well documented revelations of either Muppeteers, cast members, writers or producers, these sketches are more ambiguous. From other literature we may

know that indeed it is true that Big Bird was created with the psychological make up of a six year old. However, are we to believe that each Muppet actually has a birthday and a star sign? Or is this Borgenicht's participation in the creative invitation of Sesame Street that gives him free reign in linking Oscar the Grouch to fellow Gemini Alanis Morissette who, according to Borgenicht, shares Oscar's problem that he's "either happy that he's miserable, or miserable that he's happy"? He goes on to comment on this characteristic in Oscar echoing contemporary fads by stating, "Who says Prozac's just for humans?" (107).

Sesame Street Unpaved is filled with clichéd, but still humorous comparisons between the monumental impact of the program and other famous American historical events. One headline reads, "Where were you when Gordon, Susan, Bob, Maria, and Luis saw Snuffy?" (Borgenicht 40), echoing the question often connected to more devastating events like the assassination of President Kennedy. By making such connections, Borgenicht creates a metanarrative that feeds the myth of the Muppets. I do not claim that this metanarrative is constructive or destructive, good or bad, but rather use it as an example of how people make personal connections to Muppets and mold them to their personal likes and dislikes. Another example of how Muppets are refashioned can be found in the homes of young viewers, where children use their stuffed Kermit the Frogs and Cookie Monsters to become extensions of themselves, no longer Muppet, no longer existing in the Muppet world.

In fact, the articles I surveyed contribute to lifting the Muppets out of their own world and into ours. In the Summer of 1989, People Weekly chose Kermit as one of the Stars to profile. The article states: “Maybe it takes furry hunks of foam that look like animals to be really human” (“Kermit” 58). Closer inspection of this statement encourages us to understand one of the unique characteristics of the Muppets. We come to believe that they are capable of being more human than we are generally allowed to be. In other words, they are represented as transcending the typical boundaries of the work place and social codes, and represent a certain out reaching of warmth that seems to be absent from our hectic self-preserving society. Trying to explain the appeal of the Muppets, Jim Henson once said, “I think it’s a sense of innocence, of the naïveté of a young person meeting life. Even the most worldly of our characters is innocent. Our villains are innocent, really. And it’s that innocence that is the connection to the audience” (qtd. in Culhane 125). As the articles lift the Muppets off of the screen and write them into our lives, they try to recreate our perception of reality by including some of the Muppets’ innocence. This notion is shared by Harrison Rainie who supports the idea of Muppets as utopian escape for adults by writing in U.S. News and World Report: “[your daughter] is just a pretext you use so you can keep these funny companions in the room. They certainly are a greater pleasure than the morbidities and absurdities in that newspaper you are scanning” (12).

The concept of reality is complicated in the plot of The Muppet Movie. The movie is said to be about how the Muppets got together and got into show business. Yet,

a line from Kermit himself, within the script, problematizes this simplicity when his nephew asks him: “Uncle Kermit, is this how the Muppets *really* got started?” and Kermit answers, “Well, it’s sort of approximately how it happened.” Within these few lines we begin to understand the complicated existence which so fascinates viewers. The Muppets are created by their “real” experiences with actors and other Muppets on the screen, and they are additionally created by “fictitious” plots within the scripts. It is this blending of fictional and real worlds that captivates audiences in film anyway, which is augmented by the very nature of what the Muppets are. They are wholly created, and yet some experiences are more real than others. I believe part of the reason this paradox so intrigues Americans is because it touches on the crucial issues of defining the individual for the public as well as the private sphere. American culture has long been rooted in competition and a split between the working image and the home or family image. It is refreshing to see characters so invert these boundaries that we no longer know which is the true self, making every moment appear genuine. In the Muppets there is presented an opportunity to be one’s natural self, though paradoxically one can argue the Muppets themselves are completely constructed and not natural. Then again, we too are constructed by the events that surround and shape our personalities and effect our actions.

The Muppets exist at many levels. We may see them as marionette and puppet, and we may also see them as myth and reality. There is the idea (or concept) of Muppet, and then there is the actual artistic reality of the Muppet. The relationship between these

factors maintains a constant dynamic in our conception of the Muppet phenomenon. The publications I have covered in this section contribute to the Muppets' image and our understanding of their existence. The issue of reality becomes a central question in the Muppet myth on which these articles expound. By revering characters for their personal traits as well as for embodying an overall Muppet idealism, authors set up our thinking about Muppets as stars. They build up our appetites and expectations of when, how, and where the Muppets will make their next appearance. The literature functions as an additional venue for the Muppets' vision of parody, fun, and harmony (among others) to present itself. Actors and actresses have agents to help construct their star persona; the Muppets have this popular literature to help them spring into stardom.

This Little Piggy Went to Hollywood and Took a Frog With Her: Muppets as Stars

Then it was time to do my big scene with Miss Piggy, and it still wasn't working - it just wasn't resolving itself properly. I had the feeling that what I really wanted to do was to slap Piggy's face. That was what the scene demanded, but how could I do that? Miss Piggy is a superstar! I was censoring myself.

-Linda Lavin (Finch, Muppets & Men 104)

Miss Piggy, Kermit the Frog, Fozzie Bear and all their Muppet friends: these are the dominant stars of puppetry. Jim Henson's vision and ingenuity of capturing puppets on film catapulted the Muppets into the limelight where they were appreciated in various forums by adults as well as children. One can even argue, as I do here, that the Muppets

have achieved the same, and even surpassed, the level of fame that many human actors have reached. When the two types of stars come together, as they do in most Muppet performances, the stage is set for a lively study of the star system. The interplay between human stars and Muppet stars employs as well as challenges conventional notions of stardom. Jim Henson and head Muppet writer Jerry Juhl highlight this multifaceted interplay in their discussion of The Muppet Show.

“Jerry Juhl and I,” says Jim Henson, “have an ongoing debate as to the relative importance of the guest star. My feeling is that the guest star is very important indeed. I tend to think of every show as being built around that individual guest. Jerry, on the other hand, feels that the emphasis should always be on the Muppets themselves.” “It’s my impression,” says Jerry Juhl, “that people tune in to the show to see the Muppets. As a general rule, people do not tell me, ‘I loved the show that starred so-and-so.’ They say, ‘I loved the show in which Fozzie did such-and such.’” (Finch, Muppets & Men 95)

Naturally, a show that aims to appeal to both a child as well as an adult audience, will function on several levels. There is truth in both Henson’s and Juhl’s statements. It is exactly this mix and tension that contributes to audiences’ continuing fascination with the Muppets. Perhaps the guest star does draw new viewers to the show, but the Muppets themselves provide the series with continuity that keeps viewers tuning in for more.

John Belton offers us a sort of precedent to considering the role of Muppets as stars, in his case study of Mickey Mouse. He writes, “The transcendent nature of stardom is perhaps best illustrated not by Liz [Taylor] or by Elvis [Presley], whose physical realities serve as solid foundations for their appeal with the public, but by Mickey Mouse, whose star status rests upon a purely imaginary form of existence” (90).

He goes on to say that like John Wayne and others, Mickey Mouse always played himself. Similarly we could argue that, for example, Kermit's only image is his star image. As an actor one is still a person, but a puppet is always a puppet. However, the comparisons between human stars and Muppet stars is more complicated than simply designating a character as a star. The audience must accept Kermit and Miss Piggy as stars on their own, not simply because the script writes them as such. Many factors that contribute to the creation of stars relate to Muppets as well as people. Mickey Mouse as cartoon, Muppets as puppets, and actors as stars share an aura of invincibility as their image often outlives the actual actor. Hence the incredulity when an actor, such as James Dean, dies unexpectedly, and why after Jim Henson's death, Kermit lives on.

By looking at how critics have outlined the star system in general, we can consider those traits that are most applicable and useful in the context of the Muppets. Stars are fabricated through a complex process. Many aspects contribute to the construction from makeup to movie to media. Often a star is constructed as a sort of tragic hero to emphasize strength in the ability of overcoming hardship. This aspect then draws audiences to empathize, and to seek role models for their own difficulties. At other times stars succeed because their image stands for the glamorous life of riches that many dream of having. Most of all the public loves an actor/actress who came to stardom from the same humble beginnings in which the public finds itself. Belton says,

The star provides the studio with a tangible attraction, with an image that could be advertised and marketed, offsetting the less tangible qualities of the story, direction, acting, art direction, costume design, and overall studio style.

Though these latter elements could be marketed as well, they rarely achieved the identifiability of the star and could not, in themselves, guarantee that a film would make a profit. (85)

The Muppets vividly represent the commercialization and consumability of stars. Like other famous stars, the Muppets' images can be found on posters, T-shirts, lunch boxes and various other paraphernalia. One can even buy puppet forms of the characters, though they are not identical in design to the originals. As Belton has outlined, "the star's persona recirculates in these other media, where it acquires new meanings more or less on its own, beyond the control of the individual actor or actress" (90). Of course, the Muppets never could possess control of the image they portray. Such control lies in the Muppet constructors, and the Muppeteers. Both their physical as well as their star images are completely fabricated. If, as Belton maintains, "stars become stars when they lose control of their images, which then take on a life of their own" (90), then we can already begin to see how Muppets are stars. In any case, the marketability of the Muppets exists similarly to that of -- but also beyond that of -- human stars.

The construction of a star is a process of transformation. Richard Dyer states,

First, the person is a body, a psychology, a set of skills that have to be mined and worked up into a star image. This work, of fashioning the star out of the raw material of the person, varies in the degree to which it respects what artists sometimes refer to as the inherent qualities of the material; make-up, coiffure, clothing, dieting and body-building can all make more or less of the body features they start with, and personality is no less malleable, skills no less learnable. (5)

The Muppets offer an extreme example of the physical construction that takes place at the beginning of star creation.

Most regular characters on The Muppet Show take shape in the New York workshop, where plastic eyes and urethane foam, along with other exotic and familiar materials, are turned into the puppets that will become familiar to television viewers around the world. Special attention is paid to such details as costume and miniature footwear, which are custom made. Some creations are fitted with cunning mechanisms that control movement of the eyes or ears. (Finch, Muppets & Men 54)

Because the final star product is often quite changed from the original actor persona, some stars, according to Dyer, feel they have been used, “turned into something they didn’t control ... because the commodity they produced is fashioned in and out of their own bodies and psychologies” (6). Though I strongly believe that puppets embody a certain freedom (evident, for one, in the improvisational aspects of Muppet performance)⁴ on some level certainly puppets symbolize this manipulation which appears to be one further connection between human and Muppet stars.

Looking at Kermit the Frog, we can trace some of the exact steps of the transformation process that leads a star’s image to take on a life of its own. Kermit, indeed, did not start out as a frog. He began as more of a “simple, green, lizard like character” and “was constructed by Jim in 1955 from a spring coat abandoned by his mother and two halves of a Ping-Pong ball” (Finch, The Works 18, 19). With the

⁴ Many puppeteers have commented elaborately on the puppet’s part in different ways as controller, not controlled. See Tillis: Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet and Bil Baird: The Art of the Puppet.

elaboration of his physical appearance, and the creation of other characters with similar trademark characteristics, a further change took place - that of the name Muppet rather than puppet. This appellation was established fairly early on, setting Henson's creations apart from other puppets.

Along with the physical alterations and the new category, Kermit and fellow Muppets' personalities evolved. Belton writes that "actors develop a persona or portrait of themselves out of the personalities of the various characters they have played over the course of their careers and out of elements of their personal lives that have become public knowledge" (88). The same can be said of Muppet characters. Their personalities evolved through the roles they played and the experiences they had in encounters with others. Kermit's debut was in Henson's first show called Sam and Friends, in which "Kermit often was a hapless victim of circumstance" (Finch, The Works 37). He was devoured by surprise monsters and did not have the pseudo -- or always vulnerable -- authority with which he later became associated in his role as Sesame Street reporter. Of course, even later, in the mayhem of The Muppet Show, Kermit had trouble keeping things under control; nonetheless, he was the director. With each new role in different movies and television appearance, Kermit's persona deepened. The layer of previous experience effect our viewing of him as a weathered star. Cookie Monster is another example of how the roles performed by Muppets shaped their persona. He "grew out of a game-show sketch we had no ending for" remembers John Stone, head writer for Sesame Street. "Cookie himself was a trunk puppet - a general-purpose monster with no

character assigned to him - but we used him in that sketch, and when Frank brought him to life we realized we had something” (qtd. in Finch, The Works 59). Winning the game show, the monster was asked what he would rather claim as his prize, a vacation to Hawaii or a cookie. He chose the cookie and became a symbol for instant gratification. Finally, with all these steps of growth many Muppets rose from persona to real star.

Richard deCordova emphasizes how important a semblance of reality is in the star image. He writes, “In reading the film, the spectator is confronted with a series of questions directed toward the discovery of the reality behind the representation. With the star system, this ‘reality’ (which could be understood in other, more analytically sophisticated ways) is reduced largely to a question of the ‘true’ identity of the actor as the film’s source” (112). Dyer agrees with centrality of the star’s reality in asserting that “the star phenomenon gathers these aspects [media construction, biography, word of mouth, film moment] of contemporary human existence together, laced up with the question of ‘really’” (2). With the Muppets the question of ‘really’ is something a little different. We believe in the material reality of the puppet, but question the reality of its life.

The Muppet is real in so far as we know it exists as a physical object that can be touched. Yet, we also know that it is not real, in the sense that it is not alive. Part of the appeal of puppets comes from this dichotomy of real versus unreal, which questions the principles of truth about the world we live in. The Muppets come to life as individuals with consistent personalities who are capable of interacting with other puppets as well as

with people. In a good puppet performance audiences rarely think of the puppeteer (except for the instances when the very point is for the audience to question reality by acknowledging the presence of the puppeteer). Therefore, the puppet itself appears all the more real. The puppet exists through the builders and performers, yet has a personality distinct from both. Carol Burnett, a guest star on The Muppet Show, attests to the reality of the Muppets: “When Kermit is up there staring you in the face, you believe in him completely. I feel that Kermit has a soul. As for Animal, I had to dance with Animal and I had no difficulty believing in him either because I was *terrified of Animal!*” (qtd. in Finch, Muppets & Men 109). Jane Henson makes the point that “viewers’ acceptance of the characters -- who have become as real as the characters in any live-action show -- is central to the success of the show” (qtd. in Finch, Muppets & Men 25).

We can piece together aspects of particular Muppets’ identities by evaluating their filmic moments. Other than the information of personal lives offered in interviews or tabloids, “our knowledge of movie stars is necessarily secondhand; we can only experience screen personalities *as personalities*. [Most of us] have contact with them only through the roles they play and come to know them as personae rather than as persons” (Belton 87). Taking a character like Kermit who has played in Sesame Street, The Muppet Show, and The Muppet Movie, we discover an interesting complexity. Kermit, although retaining his characteristic traits, takes on slightly different roles in

different venues. We have already seen how Kermit's career began in Sam and Friends.

In Sesame Street,

Kermit the frog and a little girl are talking about the words "near and far." As they demonstrate being "near" to each other, on impulse they exchange kisses. The girl catches a bit of the puppet Kermit's fuzz on her lips, becomes intrigued by Kermit's fuzziness, and begins to explore it by gently rubbing his head and body. Kermit understands her curiosity and holds patiently, as does the camera. (Lesser 251)

The calmness and patience necessary for a show with preschoolers differs from the frustrated frenzy Kermit can work himself into on The Muppet Show. In The Muppet Movie Kermit shows a wide range of emotion from excitement at new prospects, to bravery in facing villains, to disappointment in thinking he has failed, and finally to a triumph he freely shares with those around him. Taking Kermit's performances as a whole contributes considerably to the depth of his character. His fiction is his reality -- it accumulates rather than alternates like that of a human star.

A star's reality is enforced every time his/her image appears in some form or another. deCordova emphasizes that

star discourse extended the boundaries of the cinema as institution so that it could more fully occupy people's lives. ... The newspaper columns advertised not only particular stars and films, but the entire experience of the cinema. ... They were able, obliged perhaps, to continue their search for the truth of the actor's identity after the movie, between films. (113)

This is largely impossible with Muppets. Their only life after their performance is in the literature of the press and the play with Muppet products. Even Henson maintains, unlike other puppeteers who make puppets put up an act of resistance when they are put

back into the trunk, that once he puts a Muppet down, it is no longer a life form. On the other hand, they do have an image, like other stars, which is out of their control.

Although it has nothing to do with their performance, their images are used in parodies such as the T-shirts being sold with Kermit's underwear elastic showing just over his jeans, declaring, "Kermit Klein, Under Where?", and Miss Piggy's perfume, "Moi."

Perhaps with Muppets, viewers are not so much searching for truth about Muppet lives, as they are deriving pleasure from imagining they are real, the way people enjoy believing the tabloids about stars are true. The Muppets offer people, in a fantastical way, an alternative lifestyle to imagine. As a matter of fact, even serious businesses tapped into the lure of the Muppets. IBM commissioned Jim Henson to create a series of "meeting films," or "coffee break films." Finch explains, "The idea was to make mini-films for use at IBM business seminars - mini-films that taught lessons in salesmanship and corporate creativity, but taught these lessons with humor and even a touch of craziness rather than with solemn admonitions" (Finch, The Works 143).

Another focus of reality in stardom is derived specifically from actors' personal lives. deCordova reminds us that, "with the emergence of the star, the question of the player's existence outside his or her work in film became the primary focus of discourse. The private lives of the players were constituted as a site of knowledge and truth" (98). Especially interesting to fans were clues to the star's life in relation to marriage, home, family life, pleasure of wealth and leisure time, and hobbies. We may consider certain ways in which Henson productions tried to establish a private life for the Muppets. The

Muppet Movie can be seen to give the fictional history of the Muppets as a group, as well as privately. We learn that Kermit was an “ordinary” banjo-strumming pond frog before he went to Hollywood to become famous. Miss Piggy was a local beauty pageant participant, and Fozzie, no surprise, a small town bar comedian. The backstage element of The Muppet Show is another space in which we may see the “private” side of the Muppets. It is there that we learn of Piggy’s aggression and Gonzo’s love for Camilla, sides of their personalities that they try (though often unsuccessfully) to mask during the pretended front stage performances. Once again Belton’s writing on Mickey Mouse is useful: “Though he had no private life of tabloid existence, Mickey’s image was widely circulated, not only through consumer products but through the media, including newspapers, fan magazines, and comic strips, making him one of the most recognizable figures in the world” (91).

Belton claims that though the ultimate ‘reality’ of a star is manifest in his/her financial success for the industry, they achieve their popularity with the public from their authenticity. Real stars, according to Belton “are essentially honest with themselves about the nature of their talent, ... [and] by tacitly acknowledging that which is false in his image, he wins our trust” (85-86). The parody that the Muppets employ makes blatant fun of their own talent. For example, The Muppet Movie parodies the whole process of the rise to stardom.

The economic benefit of stars is the reason that Hollywood supports the star system, but it is the audience members who perpetuate it by craving “true” knowledge of

the lives of the famous. It becomes a hobby to collect as much trivia as possible, and fashionable to be up to date on the most current gossip. The Muppet productions, such as The Muppet Show and The Muppet Movie, use stars in the conventional manner. Guest star appearances lend credence to the Muppet performances and attract viewers' interest. However,

one of [executive producer David] Lazer's problems during the first year was the fact that many stars were reluctant to do the show. "It's understandable, I suppose," he says. "Jim [Henson] has always been respected in the business, so nobody actually laughed at us, but there were a lot of polite refusals. The point of view was 'A puppet show? ... In prime-time access? ... In England? ...' We relied on friends, those first few months, and those friends really came through. Take someone like Lena Home, for example. She never does television and people had told her the show was sure to bomb, but she believed in the Muppets and she did it. When the word got out that we had people like Lena, and Candy Bergen, and Peter Ustinov booked onto the show, then things really started to turn around." (Finch, Muppets & Men 24)

The stars may have attracted viewers, especially new ones, but the show would not have extended to a five year stretch (from the maximum anticipated three years) if the Muppets themselves had not evolved their own stardom. Jim Henson's and Jerry Juhl's debate discussed in the opening of this section kept the show lively and balanced. As the show progressed, star roles were strengthened, but never at the expense of the Muppets (Finch, Muppets & Men 101).

The backstage scenes of The Muppet Show achieve what Dyer says the media do for stars. It assures us that we are being taken "'behind the scenes,' 'beneath the surface,' 'beyond the image,' there where the truth resides" (Dyer 11). We must acknowledge, however, that though we are taken behind the scenes of The Muppet Show, we are not

actually backstage. In fact, the set has only been constructed to look like the backstage. Here we begin to see how the Muppets challenge conventional notions of stardom. David Lazer says, “We tend to go for people who don’t do much television, or for television stars who can do things other than what they’re best known for. If we find that the lead in a dramatic series can also sing and dance, that’s promising. We want to give the viewers something they don’t see every day” (qtd. in Finch, Muppets & Men 101). In this sense the producers are still trying to offer the viewers a glimpse of the star’s sought after hidden identity. However, viewers are misguided if they are expecting to see what the stars will do with the Muppets, because more likely than not, they will be watching what the Muppets do with the stars (Finch, Muppets & Men 96). A highly improvisational element works to dismantle the typical star image. When Linda Lavin became irritated with Fozzie’s intimate touch on the shoulder, she said: “I responded as I would have to a real person who was taking a liberty - I gave Fozzie an elbow in the ribs” (qtd. in Finch, Muppets & Men 102). Moments like these take the star out of her image during a performance. Ordinarily these revelations of a star’s true personality are reserved for off camera interviews, not performances. So, in fact, it shows the star/person simultaneously, calling to mind the artificiality of a star’s image as opposed to the star’s natural persona.

An underlying question remains to be addressed: what about the puppeteers? Shouldn’t they, rather than the bits of fur and plastic which they give life to, be seen as stars? Carol Burnett expressed her admiration in saying, “They are not just puppeteers,

they are actors, and very good ones” (qtd. in Finch, Muppets & Men 105). We have already come to see that “stars essentially consist of three personalities - the star, the actor, and the ‘actual person.’ Each of these personalities consumes the entity which lies immediately beneath it. With actors, the real person disappears in the creation of a fictional character” (Belton 88). deCordova sets out similar aspects of those appearing in movies, only names them the character, the actor, the picture personality, and the star. Of the Muppet performers we could say the same then. With Muppets, though the audience is actually drawn to the personality of certain Muppet characters, they are also drawn, if unknowingly, to the talent of the puppeteer and the range of the physical aspect of a particular puppet in the same way that they are drawn to a human star for his/her range of performance talent. The actual person, for example Jim Henson, is an actor when he works Kermit and other Muppets, and hence deserves recognition as a star along with Kermit. The interesting paradox, however, is that although this seems to be a logical argument, Henson is revered as a creative giant, a talented puppeteer, and a successful business man, but not as a star.

Both Dyer and Belton, and certainly others, have argued that stars appeal to the public because they offer a certain lifestyle to be consumed vicariously. What do Muppets offer the audience for vicarious consumption? They definitely inhabit a different world and live by different rules as Belton has suggested of all stars (Belton 83). Perhaps they provide an escape into an alternative reality. The reality a star may offer depends on the current social climate. Belton says “the star answers a particular need

that the public either consciously or unconsciously has at a particular time for a particular figure of identification. In other words, the star functions as a sociocultural barometer of sorts, giving expression to and providing symbolic solutions for specific fears, desires, anxieties, and/or dreams that haunt popular consciousness” (94). Perhaps in an uncontrollably violent world, viewers in part seek a fantasy in which no one really gets hurt. Perhaps they enjoy the “chaotic harmony” in which the many different Muppets are equally respected for their individual differences disconnected from cultural attributes. Or maybe they are drawn to the old American dream, that is no longer so vivid, that anyone can become a star. In any case, they play with a basic human fascination with discovering what is real and what is not. Dyer writes that our interest in stars comes from the connection to our interest in how we are human. He says,

we’re fascinated by stars because they enact ways of making sense of the experience of being a person in a particular kind of social production (capitalism), with its particular organization of life into public and private spheres. We love them because they represent how we think that experience is or how it would be lovely to feel that it is. Stars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed. (17)

Harry Belafonte, a guest star once on The Muppet Show, provides a good example of the world that the Muppets escape into. He says:

I recall that we rehearsed a scene - it didn’t appear in the final cut of the show - in which I was required to argue with one of the Muppets. It didn’t work and Jim explained to me that a certain kind of anger never could work in the Muppet world, no matter what kind of mischief you were reacting to, because the characters are incapable of acting in a truly immoral way, they are free of greed

and avarice and all those things that afflict the human condition. Once I understood that, everything became easy. (qtd. in Finch, Muppets & Men 112)

The Muppets, like other stars, highlight aspects of contemporary society and the human condition. The Muppets have an added advantage, due to their abstraction, to embody more completely one or another human trait that is either critiqued or celebrated. Oscar the grouch is consistently and insistently contrary. He “despises the standard virtues (friendliness, cleanliness, consideration for others, gregariousness, etc.) and thrives on what others reject (disorder, dirt, surliness in dealing with others, total privacy, etc.)” (Lesser 126). Grover tries his utmost to please, though often fails because of his overzealous nature. Muppet characters have the ability to isolate and become magnified symbols of our desires, fears, and pleasures, much as human stars are mainly identified for their glamour, riches, strength, or passion. Ironically, despite this flattening out of personality by distilling it to specific traits, stars remain endlessly fascinating.

Jim Henson and the entire Muppet team use the star system both by including guest stars in their productions and by placing the characters in a fictional star environment. They cleverly design the shows to create a sense of reality, and give their characters both professional and personal personalities. The public has responded with an enthusiasm that landed the Muppets in stardom. Though these special types of stars cannot control themselves, or us, and we hold power over their stardom, somehow we concede control of our emotions and beliefs to them.

Pair o' Ducks and Capital Ism in The Muppet Movie

When The Muppet Movie made its debut in 1979 it was a pioneering achievement for the world of puppetry. It turned out to be the precursor of several more Muppet movies and fuel to fire the growing Muppet fan frenzy. There is irony in a monetarily driven Muppet mania, for it reflects the very condition to which The Muppet Movie speaks. Repeatedly, and in several different ways, the movie plays out a paradox: it simultaneously rejects and perpetuates the capitalistic world and its rules.

An analysis of The Muppet Movie can pursue many different directions, construing different meanings for the film each time. To simplify the process of interpretation, I concentrate, in this essay, on the elements of paradox that infuse many aspects of the movie, and comment on how the use of generic codes illuminates these paradoxes, which comment specifically on the role of art in the capitalistic world. Specific camera employment uses a visual language to enhance the myth that artists can survive in a society focused on creations that enrich the wallet rather than the spirit. Accordingly, The Muppet Movie suggests that film is the art form that can straddle seemingly contradictory goals.

Fiddles and a banjo play a happy carefree tune as Kermit commences his journey to Hollywood down a dirt road on his bicycle. In terms of show business he is still green, and this is reflected in his surroundings. The first shot of the scene is Kermit in front of a

very natural background of exceptionally rich green and golden hues. The Second shot complicates this semblance of simplicity, subtly introducing us to the paradox of Kermit's idyllic ideology of going to capitalistic Hollywood simply to make millions of people happy by singing and dancing.

The camera tracks with Kermit as he moves forward on his bike, heightening the sense of activity on Kermit's part. To further remind us of and make explicit the complexity that lies behind the mechanics of bringing a puppet to ride a real bicycle, the second shot uses a partial fade to impose an extreme close up shot of first the front wheel of the bike, and then of Kermit's leg moving with the pedal. The focus on his leg serves the additional purpose of introducing us to the importance Kermit's legs will play in the plot of the story.

It is in this scene as well that we are given the first of many billboard shots. This first billboard makes its entrance rather dramatically when it is discovered by Kermit who does a double take and murmurs in surprise, "What the...?" over the fast bowing of orchestral strings on a single low note. The pan which had been following Kermit on the bike rests for two complete seconds on the billboard, which is slowly zoomed in on until it fills the entire screen. The billboard is important both as emblem and for the content that appears on it. As an advertisement for Doc Hopper's French Fried Frog Legs, it informs us that Kermit will face villains and become the object of a chase, ultimately resulting in the showdown in which Kermit can deliver his life philosophy. It sets up Kermit's journey as a running from evil, not simply a running towards fame. The

showdown scene, which will be examined later, is then a confirmation that running is no solution, and confrontation is a must when pursuing the American Dream (whatever that may be for each individual).

The billboard is a tangible sign of our capitalistic world on which the film is commenting. As an advertisement it reproduces its images identically over many billboards until they finally lose the impact of their meaning. Jean Baudrillard writes,

We have arrived at a paradox regarding the image, our images, those which unfurl upon and invade our daily life - images whose proliferation, it should be noted, is potentially infinite, whereas the extension of meaning is always limited precisely by its end, by its finality; from the fact that images ultimately have no finality and proceed by total contiguity, infinitely multiplying themselves according to an irresistible epidemic process which no one today can control, our world has become truly infinite, or rather exponential by means of images. It is caught up in a mad pursuit of images, in an ever greater fascination which is only accentuated by video and digital images. We have thus come to the paradox that these images describe the equal impossibility of the real and the imaginary. (194)

The Muppets seem to remind us of this postmodern concern while simultaneously challenging it. In light of Baudrillard's words, we should consider that the repetition of Muppet images in products does seem to hollow them out. Oddly, this contributes to their desirability because they are constantly able to reconstruct themselves. Their morphing in form is largely possible, without boring us with their constant presence, because their very identities are capable of endless flexibility. It is not the empty image that people are purchasing, but rather the spirit-feeding myth behind it: the myth that Muppets are real and somehow have the power to bring ideals back into our lives.

The shot of the billboard reveals not only the completed sign, but identical parts lying on the ground which will be used for other billboards. The Muppets themselves are positioned strangely between the real and the imaginary, interacting with the human world, but not adhering to all the human rules. Hence they are anthropomorphic, yet they don't eat what people eat, and they retain their animal traits, such as Kermit's ability to jump, and their Muppet traits, such as being capable of rejecting unpleasant human constructions (certain aspects of capitalism) and building their own world in which words truly are mightier than violence.

Adding to the sense of foreboding are the oversized artificial frog's legs that Kermit rolls past in a following shot. Here again the camera forces the viewer to recognize the fragmentation of a meaningful whole when it is subjected to the grind of capitalism. In a shaky upward tilting pan we see parts of the flippers as though from Kermit's point of view. While Kermit is busy making sense of his new surroundings, a long shot reveals that he is about to be sandwiched between two pieces of road building equipment. The steamroller, representing all that is hard and depersonalized in the world, threatens to squash Kermit's artistic dreams. Kermit recognizes the danger but it appears to be too late. In a medium close up, his trembling head and his banjo seem to be crushed by the steamroller, which comes straight at the camera in an extreme close up that fills the screen with its pressing roller. A quick shot of Max, directing the building operations, who covers his face with his hand and hat, saves us from having to witness the apparent disaster. But then, we *are* talking about the Muppets, the magical creations who have

beaten all odds to bring puppetry to the mainstream audience. So, of course, the next shot reveals a crushed bike, but, zooming slowly upwards and to the right, a safe Kermit with his banjo sitting atop of the steamroller, implying his victory over these crushing forces. Looking down and into the camera, Kermit asserts his unassuming superiority. Recognizing the viewer, he delivers his final lines á la stand up (sit down?) comedy - Muppet style, complete with word play, pun, and parodic cultural allusion: “Hmm, that’s pretty dangerous building a road in the middle of the street, I mean, if frogs couldn’t hop, I’d be gone with the Schwinn.” Here the camera rests on him, which together with the zoom into his face, makes possible the difficult task of capturing Kermit’s static eyes looking straight at the audience.

In only 30 seconds, Kermit has moved from the natural landscape to a highly mechanical and artificial one. The scene could be said to hyperbolize the change that takes place in the artistic process as it moves to Hollywood. In Hollywood art is given a makeover, and lights and cameras create illusions of the original truth (some may say nature) from which art stems. The possibility to reproduce the film becomes an art itself, as Walter Benjamin comments in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin’s discussion of technology as it relates to art deepens our understanding of how The Muppet Movie presents the paradox of both resisting mass reproduction and surviving by its very nature. Benjamin writes: “Technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholders half way” (220).

Although Benjamin refers to photography here, we can apply his ideas to puppetry. The ability to reproduce any particular Muppet, identically or with modifications, allows the character to enter situations which “would be out of reach for the original.” For some scenes, Muppets were moved by remote control, allowing a freedom of movement otherwise impossible to create. Television which is essential to the Muppets’ existence and popularity, is the means by which “the original” may meet “the beholder” half way. The viewer can enjoy the image of the Muppet, but not the actual presence of the Muppet. Still, since the Muppets rely so much on camera angles to heighten the sense of their reality, one might almost argue that the reproductions of the objects in an image are more alive than the original which lacks the magical mediation of the camera.

Benjamin also writes that “what withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (221). But the Muppets seem to contradict this claim. Even though filming a movie disrupts the traditional ritual of acting because it deprives the actor of an immediate audience to react to, the process has the artistic power to force an audience’s perspective. Films can direct the audience’s gaze to small details and subtle movement that could easily be missed on stage. Benjamin agrees that “the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (237). He also claims that film responds to the “withering” of the art’s aura “with an artificial build-up of the ‘personality’ outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered for the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity” (231). Benjamin sees

mechanical reproduction and the star system linked as a result of capitalistic society. Finally he outlines how the appearance of reality in film is actually the result of “the height of artifice” (233).

The paradox of apparent simplicity embodying technical complexity -- which highlights the paradox of Kermit’s simple performance in the swamp being compatible with Hollywood show business -- is expressed even more explicitly in the showdown scene towards the end of the movie. Kermit has decided: “I can’t spend my whole life running from a bully. It’s time for a showdown.” With this echo of Gary Cooper’s lines in High Noon (“It’s no good, I have to go back. ... They’re making me run. I’ve never run from anybody before.”) director James Frawley invokes a strong sense of the western genre for the ensuing scene, which comments on American identity. The Muppets enfold the American myth of the West into their own ideology. Using a familiar concept as background makes it easier for the audience to understand and accept any new philosophies, such as a more harmonious coexistence between art and capitalism. Traditionally people push west for freedom, for new beginnings, and to escape unpleasantness of rule ridden societies. In today’s world with highly developed modes of transportation, it is no longer a physical crossing of borders, but a conceptual one we think more about. In this scene, Henson’s idealistic vision is expressed explicitly and entails partially the necessity to face conflict head on but in a peaceful manner.

The very fact that The Muppet Movie plays with different genres such as the Western (and in other places, for example, the Gangster and Woman’s film) resonates

with Jameson's comment that in the postmodern era, "the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past, [to] the imitation of dead styles, [and] speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture" (74). Jameson maintains that the referent for history no longer exists and we are subsequently forced to reconstruct and find meaning "by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach" (79). Kermit, as cowboy, is in a way a simulacrum, a superficial, unreal likeness to the cowboy of the western genre (who is himself a simulacrum of the "real" cowboy).

Although I think the appropriation of Western generic elements is pleasurable and, therefore, satisfying in The Muppet Movie, it is true that it works because the image of the cowboy has become marketable and available as a costume to suit anyone, even a frog puppet. In this way it has lost the sense of reality, and is used for the very purpose of evoking nostalgia. By dressing Kermit in boots with spurs and a cowboy hat, the director, through Kermit as character, can call to mind an ideology useful for his own message. Part of this ideology is the simplicity embraced by the cowboy, as well as his quest for justice and his pioneering spirit. If we remember Baudrillard's lament of the impossibility of both the real and the imaginary, we may again recognize that the reproduction of the cowboy by Kermit in a single scene does appear to hollow out the meaning of the cowboy, as though it were an attitude to pick up briefly when called for. But to see the use of the Western genre only as a hollowing out of meaning is to deny the strength of the audience in genre film. Rick Altman reminds us that

thanks to generic shorthand, spectators take quite specific expectations to genre film viewing. While the generic audience is often considered rather simple-minded, regularly repeating familiar rituals, it is only through the added level of generic expectations that the most complex viewing patterns can be established, along with the added complication of frustrated generic expectations. (279)

Emphasizing genre, the first shot of the scene is an establishing shot that attaches much importance to the actual landscape of the scene which has had almost personified roles in Westerns. The bus is filmed in a head-on shot, as though something were already in this ghost town waiting for the Muppets. This increases the tension of the unknown, as we ask ourselves “*what* awaits us and the Muppets?” In the same shot the bus eventually veers off to the right of the screen and the camera zooms up to give a high angle survey of the entire area, resulting in the establishing shot which removes us from attachment to the Muppets, to a more detached narrator perspective.

Kermit exits the bus into the silence of the dusty *mise-en-scene* very much like that of High Noon. His first destination is, of course, the saloon. The viewer accustomed to Westerns knows to expect action in or around the saloon, the hub of the town. Here, however, we are jerked roughly out of our generic expectations, for suddenly a very loud carnival song interrupts the serious silence as a musical rotating rain barrel snaps into action. Dr. Bunsen Honey Dew and his assistant Beaker introduce themselves as living there and “perfecting useful inventions.” Kermit continues to evoke the Western aura by his entrance through the swinging saloon doors, which show first the doors and then his shoulders and head in mimicry of the entrance of the generic big shot of the Western. A

fast pan to the right and up captures the clock on the wall at 11:55, another reference to High Noon.

Oddly however, this saloon has become the locus for scientific and technological experimentation. The jar of insta-grow pills are cleverly filmed to appear closer to the camera and therefore strangely magnified, foreshadowing the results of animal's consumption of them. Outside of the saloon we are drawn back to our generic expectations. Two vehicles enter the town, kicking up dust behind them, much as any villain's horse might. However, the shot reverse shot between Doc Hopper's posse and the Electric Mayhem bus won't let us forget that this Western is strangely different, and we know that this story cannot end with(out) a generic twist.

Kermit's brave cowboy voice from behind the saloon doors answers Doc Hopper's request to come out and meet them, "man to frog." The repetitive shot of the saloon doors once again reinforces the importance of actual location for the Western. We imagine that these are doors that have witnessed many showdowns before they were deserted -- the showdowns inevitably being those of the countless Westerns the viewer remembers.

Building on the tension introduced by the previous silence, Kermit's jingling spurs announce the arrival of the heroic cowboy. Importantly, only Kermit's legs (the object of negotiation in this scene) are visible at first. The camera pans by the legs, then crosses behind a post and reemerges with an unexpected shot of Kermit's head in a cowboy hat, rather than the legs again which we expect in a continuous pan. This disjuncture reminds

us that our perspective is entirely manipulated by the artifice of filmmaking and that the seeming liveliness of the Muppets relies on clever editing. Hopper's men are shot between Kermit's legs, underscoring the importance of Kermit's frog legs again, as well as emphasizing the wide stance of the strong cowboy image. The same shot is then filmed from beneath Doc Hopper's legs towards Kermit, placing the two on equal footing, so to speak.

Kermit wears boots and a hat, but he carries no gun. As he stands opposite a firing squad of Hopper's men, Kermit's only tool for protection are his words. Unlike violent action films that portray the United States as world police and righteous strong man, Kermit expresses an individual peace-loving American dream. He delivers his monologue: "Yeah, well I've got a dream too, but it's about singing and dancing and making people happy. That's the kind of dream that gets better the more people you share it with." At this point the camera pans to the right to include the rest of the Muppets who have left the bus to stand, literally and metaphorically, behind Kermit and his ideas. Kermit continues, "And, well, I found a whole bunch of friends who have the same dream. And that kind of makes us like a family. You have anyone like that Hopper?" We discover, of course, that Hopper doesn't. Kermit's monologue fails to convince Hopper to have mercy on him, but despite its exaggerated sentimentality and idealization, the viewer accepts it as a beautiful truth. Why? -- Because the good cowboy is a figure we have come to trust and admire. He is often a lonely and silent type, but when he does speak, he reveals truths about the inner nature of humanity.

Luckily for Kermit, the camera starts shaking and victorious adventure music begins to play. Hopper's men struggle to stand up to the power of the Muppets ideology as Animal, having swallowed insta-grow pills (Alice in Wonderland style), crashes through the roof of the saloon. This uncanny Über-Muppet, seen from a high angle shot, towers above the ghost town and lets out a yell that shakes the earth even more. The impressive action here stands in for the violence that would mark the climax of other commercially popular films. This over-grown Animal seems to be an example again of the first paradox. The Muppets are designed along a principle of simplicity, yet it is when this artistic simplicity is combined with the scientific advancements of the contemporary world that the Muppet can survive best of all. Science in the story has made Animal larger than life, much as the movies and television have created a sense of "reality," and a realm and audience for puppets much larger than previously possible.

So what is it about the Western that is useful to The Muppet Movie? Altman explains that "westerns negotiate opposing American values of individual freedom and community action" (285). When at times our society seems in danger of fragmenting, the Muppets show a way to embrace both individuality and community. They refashion the western idea of community as restrictive, into a supporting and nurturing environment for the individual. A Muppet community is both cooperative and flexible. "Weirdoes" like Gonzo may retain their peculiarities without reforming, while sharing in the camaraderie and help from his peers. Such a utopian view is particularly fitting for a nation actively striving for harmony in diversity.

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson mention in “Types of Film” that the “cowboy is often poised between savagery and civilization” (56). Kermit, when seen as a cowboy, is placed between the savagery of the capitalistic world, and the civilization of his family, and on another level between childhood and adulthood. Paradoxically however, it is the “Animal,” with incoherent speech who, in the end, is the largest representative of the civilization Kermit chooses. Usually the cowboy escapes civilization to return to the wild, but the Muppets embrace the civility of their somewhat “wild” family and the eternal child in the adult.

Gary Wills writes of John Wayne,

Wayne’s innate qualities are not enough to explain [his mainstream and long-lived popularity]. He had to have filled some need in his audience. He was the conduit they used for communicating with their own desired selves or their own imagined past. When he was called *the* American, it was a statement of what his fans wanted America to be. For them, Wayne always struck an elegiac note. He stood for an America that people felt was disappearing or had disappeared - for a time ‘when men were men.’ (40)

Of Kermit, we could say that he stands in part for the childhood that people remember with nostalgia. Although a child’s life is anything but simple, especially when viewed from the perspective of the child, as adults we tend to glorify its imagined simplicity.

The Muppet Movie with its sophistication of production, as well as word games, offers adults a world in which pleasant nostalgia is compatible with, and important in our ever increasingly fast-paced capitalistic society. Adults enjoy the memory of childhood while children are initiated into adulthood. Viewers, both children and adults, find in Kermit

some level of simplicity, which seems obtainable because he is obviously part of the same complicated world as they are.

Kermit is a complex character because he both embodies the capitalistic world and tries to escape it. Director James Frawley seems to use Kermit to deliver a message of what is missing and must come to coexist in our contemporary era. Kermit's associations with the cowboy make it possible for the audience to accept this message. This element of paradox, repeated throughout the movie, is sensed early on in the story when Kermit begins his metamorphosis from simple swamp frog to sophisticated Hollywood star, and made explicit in his dialogue of the showdown scene. One way to see resolution of this tension, is to accept Kermit's idealistic ideology as the missing element which Frawley suggests can and should coexist within his contemporary landscape.

In a mechanical and technical nation perhaps it is the preoccupation with dehumanization, "the end of the old Realism [where]... illusionism takes its place, not only in art but also in life" (Hassan 55-56), that has welcomed puppetry -- an art that has questioned reality and physicality since its beginning. In any case, the very mixing of Muppets with humans, and the fact that the Muppets were especially designed to be captured on film, points to a new kind of artistic development. Art is valued, but for it to survive it must learn to coexist and interact with a capitalistic society, one that threatens to tear it "limb from limb" at any moment.

Conclusion

In accepting the Muppets as stars, I found Americans continue to emphasize the playfulness of the Muppets and the duality between appeal to children and adults. They also embrace the optimism embodied by the Muppets. The potential that these creations represent brings back the call of the American Dream, which many claim no longer exists. The Muppets celebrate the American ideal of freedom of speech. Carroll Spinney who operates Oscar the Grouch says, "As Oscar, I say some things I'd never have the nerve to say, things I'm *thinking* about but would never say aloud" (qtd. in Paisner 159).

What impressed me most while surveying the literature of the popular press on the Muppets, is the repetition of the same stories. Year after year similar stories are retold. In the process of praising and glorifying the Muppets, writers raise them to a mythic status. This myth of idealism reveals what people want out of the Muppets, a safe and passive space to enjoy the ridiculing of and playfulness within our society. On the whole people choose not to criticize the Muppets since this would shatter a myth that brings happiness. Our culture is full of myths from the American Dream to Santa Claus. They exist as a golden untouchable that in some way encourages us. Discovering that Santa Claus does not exist may be as devastating to the safe, intact, and happy part of a child's world, as recognizing that the American Dream is a myth is to a young adult. Interestingly, the literature reveals that adults tend to argue a stronger case for the reality of the Muppets than for Santa Claus, and perhaps not accidentally because the Muppets

seem to reflect the American dream. Apparently the Muppets draw some of their semblance of reality from believing in the same myths and realities that are important to the viewer, and additionally presenting *themselves* as a new desirable myth to their audience.

The Muppets interact with the American Dream on several levels. Their own existence reflects the Dream. If part of the Dream concept is to go from rags to riches, then Mrs. Henson's old coat ready to be thrown out, from which Kermit was originally constructed, is literally as close to a rag as we can get. Then there is Jim Henson, the genius himself, who as a young man dreamed of succeeding in television and tried his hand at puppeteering for that sole purpose. Additionally, I reiterate that the first Muppet appearances were in advertising. As artistic as the performances are, they were from the very start, part of the capitalist economy on which the American Dream is hinged. Starting out as small fish, (or should I say tadpoles?), with two, five minute daily appearances before The Huntley-Brinkley Report, and The Tonight Show, Jim Henson and Kermit eventually founded an entrepreneurial venture that would lead to a multi-million dollar enterprise (Finch, The Works 15). All those who work on bringing the Muppets to life seem to embody the "where there is a will there is a way" spirit. Commenting on how all sorts of technical obstacles were overcome, Robbie Knotts (credited for special effects in The Muppet Movie) says: "On The Muppet Movie, the motto was: 'Ask for the world, and someone better give it to you'" (qtd. in "Mechanical Special Effects" 723). In The Muppet Movie itself lies embedded the story of the

American Dream. Kermit leaves the small time pond to make it big in Hollywood, traveling cross country in a Kerouac reminiscent fashion - going West and possessing a key to mobility being obvious markers of American lore.

Kermit and his friends do succeed, overcoming villains, car accidents, and poverty, and are finally offered the “standard rich and famous contract” by none other than Orson Welles, guru of the golden screen. Orson Welles? Didn't he write his own version of the results of chasing the dream which didn't turn out as rose-budded as one might have hoped? And so we begin to question the seeming simplicity, the seeming idealism of the Muppets and discover much paradox and much critique, while undeniably remaining lulled by Kermit's sweet optimism and beautiful wish to make millions of people happy by singing and dancing. Perhaps the Muppets offer us a recycled dream in which success is hinged not only on making money, but in making others happy as well. The Muppets do appear to make people happy. They make them laugh and they keep them coming to the theaters and tuned into the television, but is the pleasure they offer us enough to separate us momentarily from our money driven society, even as we hand over our \$6.50 for a movie stub?

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