

Kermit Culture

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Kermit Culture

Critical Perspectives on Jim Henson's Muppets

Edited by JENNIFER C. GARLEN
and ANISSA M. GRAHAM

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For the lovers, the dreamers
and everyone who helped
make this book happen

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Preface

“This is a narrative of very heavy-duty proportions.”

Dr. Teeth, *The Muppet Movie*

Television viewers in the late 1970s found a landscape filled with comedy. Thinking comedies, like *All in the Family*, *Maude*, *M*A*S*H*, and *The Jeffersons*, asked their audiences to consider major social issues, like race relations and sexual equality. Then there were the more standard comedies, like *Three’s Company* and *Laverne and Shirley*, with their reliance on broad slapstick to get a laugh. In many ways, the decade of the 1970s was the age of the sitcom. Added into this cauldron of hilarity in 1976 was *The Muppet Show*. Most comedies in the 1970s involved a fixed cast of characters who had weekly adventures to which the audience played voyeur. *The Muppet Show*, while it involved a fixed cast, departed from the sitcom formula with its incorporation of the variety show format so popular in the early days of television. Perhaps the most obvious difference between *The Muppet Show* and its competition was its cast. The types (a harried organizer, a bossy woman, a bumbling sidekick) were common on all sitcoms, but the actors on *The Muppet Show* were startlingly different because they were puppets! Still, these puppets held their own against live actors both within the confines of the series and without in the ratings.

A brief history of *The Muppet Show* offers some insight into the elements that made it unique among television comedy programs. Jim Henson and his core group of puppeteers had already been working with Muppets for years when they first created *The Muppet Show*. Early versions of the Muppets had appeared on television commercials, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *The Jimmy Dean Show* and *Sam and Friends*. Muppet characters like Big Bird and Bert and Ernie had become well-known to American children after *Sesame Street* first hit the airwaves in 1969, but Henson and his performers wanted to do more with the art form and push the envelope for puppetry, and this meant that they needed to create their own venue in which to pursue those goals. Thus the concept for *The Muppet Show* was born. When the half-hour

syndicated program aired in the United States, it appeared in the adult-oriented prime time slot, indicating the scope of its intended viewing audience and differentiating it from other televised puppet shows. Each episode was built around the appearance of a guest star with numerous sketches by regular Muppet characters. The show's writers, including Henson, Jack Burns and Jerry Juhl, among others, worked with the puppeteers to create a wide range of sketches, from the tastefully classical to the truly strange. The chief puppeteers over the course of the show included Henson, Frank Oz, Dave Goelz, Richard Hunt, Steve Whitmire, Jerry Nelson, Louise Gold, Kathy Mullen, Eren Ozker and John Lovelady. Each puppeteer had particular Muppet characters to perform but also worked large numbers of Muppets for chorus lines and crowd scenes, which allowed the puppeteers to develop minor Muppet characters into major ones over time and to upstage one another with scene-stealing performances by ostensibly "background" characters. The dynamic nature of the show meant that viewers never knew what to expect from one episode to the next. The fact that no human actors formed part of the regular cast might have accounted for some of the difficulty that *The Muppet Show* faced in attracting guest stars during the program's first season, but the appearance of Rudolf Nureyev in the second season proved a turning point, and for the rest of its career the show drew from a wide range of celebrities, from Liberace and Julie Andrews to Johnny Cash and Roger Moore.

By the end of their five year run on television, the Muppets had transcended their original medium to become true multi-media celebrities. They appeared in books like *The Muppet Show Book* in 1978, their first movie, *The Muppet Movie*, was released in 1979, and they became familiar icons in the world of personal accessories from clothing to jewelry. Today, Muppets are everywhere. We see them on billboards and buttons, on television commercials and talk shows. Nobody has to explain who they are; consumers recognize Kermit and Miss Piggy the way they recognize Marilyn Monroe and Mickey Mouse. Recently, the release of the series on DVD has helped the Muppets' presence to expand again with new lines of products and a sizable presence on the Internet, including their very own Wiki (http://muppet.wikia.com/wiki/Main_Page), an online encyclopedia written by devotees of the show. The Muppets' popularity today is as great as it was at the height of the original show's run, thanks in part to savvy marketing by their various parent organizations over the years, including the Walt Disney Company. In fact, Disney's work to perpetuate the Muppets' appeal predates its official acquisition of the characters in 2004; Disney integrated an entire theme park attraction featuring the Muppets into its Hollywood Studios park in 1991 and California Adventure park in 2001, thus ensuring that millions of children and adults from around the world would continue to be exposed to the Muppets in all their zany glory.

Good marketing certainly accounts for some of the Muppets' continued success, but other elements played a significant part in forging their original appeal. To begin with, the innovative puppetry that formed the core of the program attracted adult audiences as well as children. There had been successful television programs featuring puppets before: *The Howdy Doody Show*, *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*, *Captain Kangaroo* and *H.R. Pufnstuf* all used puppets to great effect, but they were simpler shows, more focused on entertaining children than their parents. *The Muppet Show* merged many different types of puppetry, including traditional hand puppets, marionettes, rod puppets and full body puppets, into a single show, which set it apart from other puppet programs; furthermore, the sheer artistry that the Muppet puppeteers demonstrated—in tap dancing numbers, motorcycle rides, and intricate puppet performances of all kinds—fascinated adult viewers. Many of the programs featuring puppets before and after the Muppets incorporated a strong didactic element, as well, using the puppet characters to teach children moral lessons about sharing or rudimentary ideas about reading and math. *The Muppet Show*, however, eschewed such overtly didactic concerns in favor of a variety show format that took its cues from vaudeville and popular adult programs like *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *Top Tonight Show* and *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*. The Muppets' connection to this kind of programming ran deep; many of the characters and sketches that eventually appeared on *The Muppet Show* had originally debuted on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Additional influences came from the show's production in Britain, where *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *The Goon Show* popularized the kind of absurdist comedy that *The Muppet Show* frequently embraced. Each episode of the original series featured a sketch intended solely for British audiences; these sketches were cut for commercial time on American television. These exclusive British segments, and many segments that aired in the United States, as well, evoked London music hall culture and featured traditional tunes that British audiences would have recognized immediately, although American viewers ignorant of their origin might have found them odd choices, even for *The Muppet Show*.

The Muppet characters reflect these diverse influences and ideals in their personalities; sophisticated, nuanced and highly individuated, they nonetheless embody the conventional character types of classic situational comedy. Kermit, the harassed manager of the show, functions as its voice of reason and acts as straight man to many of the jokes and gags. He also performs the role of host and interviews guest stars in traditional talk show style. Miss Piggy, the resident diva, evolves from first season chorus girl to fully fledged star over the course of the series; she takes her star status seriously, domineering her co-stars, guest stars and especially her beloved frog. Fozzie, the bumbling bear comedian, peddles his vaudevillian shtick to a tough audience,

but his insecurity and genuine sweetness make him lovable even when his jokes are terrible. Fozzie also often works as Kermit's sidekick, the Costello to Kermit's Abbot. The relationships between these three major characters clearly connect *The Muppet Show* to the situational comedy; they persist over time but develop and fluctuate as the characters interact with one another.

The backstage scenes draw mainly from this sitcom tradition, and many of the show's "on stage" sketches take their cues from musical variety programs, but *The Muppet Show* also manages to run the gamut of television genres, particularly those that were most popular during the era when the program was originally on the air. The recurring sketches that make up some of *The Muppet Show's* most memorable bits function as parodies of these genres. "Pigs in Space" is a hilarious mixture of *Star Trek*, Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers, with some *Dr. Strangelove* allusions thrown in for good measure. "Veterinarian's Hospital" mocks the medical drama and soap opera simultaneously, taking its inspiration from the long-running *General Hospital* but also nodding to shows like *Marcus Welby, MD*, and *M*A*S*H*. "Bear on Patrol" skewers the cop show, "Muppet News Flash" parodies the newscast, and "Muppet Sports" takes on Howard Cosell and ABC's *Wide World of Sports*. Additional characters add even more layers and genres to the sketches that make up the show: Gonzo epitomizes the obscure performance *artiste*, Bunsen Honeydew and Beaker mock scientific methods in "Muppet Labs," Statler and Waldorf function as equal parts peanut gallery and Greek chorus, and the Electric Mayhem both parody and perpetuate the myth of the rock band.

Given this complexity and the enduring appeal of *The Muppet Show* and its cast, it is surprising that so few scholars have thus far offered critical readings of them. Only a handful of articles and essays have been published (although *Sesame Street* has, of course, drawn considerable attention over the years because of its role as an educational program). In the work that has been published, the Muppets tend to appear as examples or means to the ends of the authors' other arguments: they themselves are not the actual subjects of the discussions. The release of the original show on DVD should allow for some correction to this critical oversight. The maturation of Generation X scholars, who literally grew up with the show, also means that more work is likely to be done, especially considering the rising recognition of the importance of popular culture studies as a whole.

This collection of essays seeks to begin to fill this gap. *Kermit Culture* represents the work and ideas of a global community of scholars and Muppet enthusiasts. Although we recognize the appeal and importance of the larger Muppet universe, including *Sesame Street*, *Fraggle Rock*, *The Dark Crystal*, *Jim Henson's The Storyteller*, *Farscape* and the many additional creations of The Jim Henson Company and Jim Henson's Creature Shop, our efforts

here focus on the core group of Muppets from *The Muppet Show* and the other films and productions that feature them. The essays presented in this volume approach different elements of *The Muppet Show* and different Muppet characters and themes using a wide variety of critical perspectives and academic disciplines.

The first part, "Audience Participation," presents essays that focus on the Muppets' relationships with their audiences, both real and imaginary. Ben Underwood's "How to Become a Muppet; or, The Great Muppet Paper" focuses attention on the ways in which shared aspirations unite the Muppets and make viewers become part of the Muppet community. Gideon Haberkorn investigates the discourse and content of the show as a means of examining personal identity in "The Muppets as a Metaphor for the Self." In "Stuffed Suits and Hog-Wild Desire," Lynne D. Schneider evaluates the roles and significance of Statler and Waldorf, the Muppet Theater's resident hecklers. In "*The Muppet Show* Re-Forms the Fringe," Anissa M. Graham contends that the series realigns viewers' notions of normal and fringe culture through its characters and guest stars.

Part Two, "Adaptation and Performance," collects essays that offer interpretations of the Muppets as performed characters, actors and adaptors of cultural material. In "From Muppetry to Puppetry," Jennifer Stoessner delves into Henson's career as a puppeteer and *The Muppet Show's* relationship to and promotion of puppetry as an innovative art form. Hugh H. Davis explores the Muppets' use of Shakespearean texts and influences in "The Muppets and Shakespeare." Ginger Stolle's essay, "Starring Kermit the Frog as Bob Cratchit': Muppets as Actors," considers the complex duality of the Muppets as fictional characters and performers. Alissa Burger critiques the Muppets' revision of L. Frank Baum's classic novel in "A Rainbow for the 21st Century: *The Muppets' Wizard of Oz* and the Reimagination of American Myth." Jennifer C. Garlen offers a reading of Gonzo as *The Muppet Show's* chief agitator for art and culture in "Gonzo, (the Great) Cultural Critic."

Part Three, "Theories and Strategies," offers essays that view the Muppet characters, programs and films through various critical lenses. Tara K. Parmiter discusses the Muppets' use of travel as a metaphor in "The American Journey Narrative in the Muppets Movies." Kathleen E. Kennedy investigates the changing roles of sexuality and violence over the course of the television series in "It's Time to Get Together for Some Sex and Violence on *The Muppet Show*?" In "'British to a Fang, British to a Whisker': Reconsidering *The Muppet Show's* National Identity," Rayna Denison argues that the show's largely American cast and team of writers do not prevent it from being a quintessentially British creation. Julie G. Maudlin analyzes the relationship between *The Muppet Show* and the state of American education in the late 1970s in "*The Muppet Show* as Educational Critique." In "The Uniquely Strong

but Feminine Miss Piggy,” Maryanne Fisher and Anthony Cox evaluate Miss Piggy’s use of traditionally masculine and feminine behaviors, making the claim that Miss Piggy’s duality allows her to have universal appeal. Andrew Leal rounds out the section with his examination of the theme of consumerism and commercialism in “Muppets and Money.”

This volume, intended for both scholarly and general audiences, serves merely as an introduction to the wealth of ideas and readings that *The Muppet Show* and its characters can inspire. Our goals are to demonstrate the breadth and scope of the Muppets as cultural icons and to offer some understanding of why they hold so much meaning for so many viewers around the world. We hope, too, that this collection of essays will inspire future critical readings that explore the wider world of the Muppets and Jim Henson’s creations, so that we can eventually gain a fuller, clearer picture of the impact one imaginative man and a handful of felt has had on the world we live in today.

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PART ONE

Audience Participation

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