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**The lovers and dreamers go corporate: Re-authoring Jim Henson's
Muppets under Disney**

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Muppets under Disney**

by

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Dedication

To my parents, who taught their children to be imaginative and hard working, and who introduced me to Jim Henson's work.

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Abstract

The lovers and dreamers go corporate: Re-authoring Jim Henson's Muppets under Disney

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The Walt Disney Company's acquisition of the Muppets in 2004 caused a significant rupture in the authorial history of a beloved franchise. Created in the 1970s the late media icon Jim Henson and his creative team, the classic Muppets enjoyed many years in the spotlight during the 1970s and 1980s—on *The Muppet Show* (1976-1981), and in *The Muppet Movie* (1979), *The Great Muppet Caper* (1981), and *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984).

The physically wacky and colorful puppets are known for their irreverent and chaotic antics, and they still have a sizeable cult following devoted to them. Fans attribute the character's "Muppetness" to Jim Henson's creativity as an author. However, Henson worked with a team of creative artists who all contributed to the Muppet franchise. As a result, is both impossible and inadvisable to try and breakdown Muppet authorship by contributor. Instead, I label Henson's authorship a brand in order to analysis the value of his *perceived* authorial power. These perceptions are what put the Muppets in such opposition with the corporate image of Disney.

Disney, by contrast, has a reputation for commercial, family-oriented entertainment. The production studio has grown into a media conglomerate that saturates the market with merchandise, cross-promotions, and advertisement campaigns. Its dominant position in the media industry affects fan reception of any Disney-led project, so the re-launch of a long-dormant, independent brand like the Muppets creates an understandable tension among critics, popular press writers, and fans.

By tracing media industry shifts the 1990s and 2000s and Disney's changing image and corporate structure, I analyze how it has "authored" the Muppets in the past few years. Both in its Muppet advertising campaign and in particular its treatment of the infamous character Miss Piggy, Disney has re-branded the Muppets for a new time and new generations, while attempting to hold onto the historical traits that make the Muppet brand appealing and profitable.

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Introduction

“Life’s like a movie, write your own ending. Keep believing, keep pretending. We’ve done just what we set out to do, thanks to the lovers, the dreamers and you” (Henson & Frawley, 1993).

Despite my fervent attention to the Muppets since childhood, I was shocked to learn in 2008 that the Walt Disney Company had acquired the objects of my longtime obsession four years earlier. Like many fans, I had somewhat given up on the Muppets as a living franchise. After the disappointment of three not-so-Muppet-ish Muppet movies in the 1990s—*The Muppet Christmas Carol* (1992), *Muppet Treasure Island* (1996) and *Muppets from Space* (1999)—I took solace in the calendars and other Muppet merchandise that lazily circulated through the 1990s and early 2000s. With a potential string of new Muppet narratives in the future, however, many questions arise. For instance, how will Disney attempt to capture the spirit of a franchise driven by a creative leader who died more than twenty years ago? Also, should fans and audiences expect to see a new kind of Muppet gang that is more akin to the vast army of animated creatures of Disney? Finally, can any company expect a nostalgic franchise like the Muppets, whose original Muppeteers and creative team have disbanded, to jump back into American popular culture and perform as they once did? I address these and other questions through the lens of authorship. As the Muppets have changed hands multiple times in the past 25 years, their identity as a brand has been both tenuous and lasting. I hope to explore how this brand has moved through the years and weathered a stormy media industry to finally fall into the lap of one of the world’s largest companies today.

Jim Henson’s Muppets—a portmanteau of “puppet” and “marionette” or “moppet”—are a collection of hand and rod puppets¹ designed, built, and performed by Jim Henson and his creative team. Henson attained fame and fortune through his comical narratives featuring these Muppets, and has become a cultural icon because of this work, most notably on *Sesame Street* (1969-present), *Fraggle Rock*, and *The Muppet Show* (1976-1981). Henson started his career at 18 when he created puppet shorts called *Sam and Friends* (1955-1961) on a Washington D.C.-based TV station. His witty and often culturally salient humor found favor with major companies like IBM and Purina Dog Chow, who had the young artist create TV advertising spots for them in the 1950s and 1960s, but it was not until *Sesame Street* (1969) that Henson began his progress toward media stardom. Henson created his own company, Henson Associates, with a network of writers, performers and directors who would help him on future projects like *The Muppet Show* and the Muppet films. Henson himself wrote for, performed in, and often directed his productions. By all accounts, he had a hand in everything that went on in his company, from Muppet design to licensing. He was a meticulous worker and a productive creative lead whose dedication and innovation made him and his Muppets global stars.

Henson’s Muppets refer to any and all puppets created by Jim Henson Company, but the most recognized and famous Muppets rose to prominence with the start of *The Muppet Show*. For the purposes of this discussion, I focus on these Muppets—which I’ll refer to as the classic Muppets—because they are the characters that compromised the Muppets Holding Company. The classic Muppets are the characters we expect to see in a

movie or show with “Muppet” in the title, such as *A Muppet Family Christmas* (1989), *Muppets Tonight* (1996-1998), and *The Muppet’s Wizard of Oz* (2005). Characters like Big Bird or Grover on *Sesame Street* are also Muppets, but the show title does not explicitly imply this, and the characters are called instead “bird” or “monster” respectively. The distinction is more than a formality, since naming a specific group of Muppets as *the Muppets* gives the group a marketable value and a particular identity.

The most iconic of these classic Muppets is Kermit the Frog. Kermit was one of Henson’s first Muppets and reportedly made out of an old coat and two halves of a ping-pong ball. The frog puppet, performed by Henson himself, is the most ubiquitous character, featured in almost every Jim Henson Company narrative and for many years the face on the Jim Henson Company logo. Kermit’s status as an icon for the company and also Jim Henson is significant to Henson’s authorial style and the progression of the classic Muppet brand, which I will explore in this paper.

During Jim Henson’s life, the classic Muppets—Kermit, Miss Piggy, Gonzo, Fozzie, the band members of Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem, and many more—starred in numerous shows and features on TV and in films. Some of the most notable works include three feature films *The Muppet Movie* (1979), *The Great Muppet Caper* (1981), and *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984). The bunch then moved back to television in an animated children’s series *Muppet Babies* (1984-1991). The characters starred in many other TV movies and television specials during the 1980s, including *The Muppets Go to the Movies* (1981), *The Muppets: A Celebration of 30 Years* (1984),² and *The Muppets at Walt Disney World* (1990). The Jim Henson Company was not limited to

work on the classic Muppets, nor indeed Muppets in general, but the company did focus on puppet technology, which led them into animatronics and computer animation.

Critical and biographical work on Jim Henson and The Jim Henson Company, however, is consistently classic Muppets dominated, since this brand was and is especially popular.

The classic Muppets are also the subject of my argument because of Disney's 2004 acquisition and the evident tension in audience expectations. The deal came at the end of a fourteen-year investment on Disney's part and a few legal battles between Disney and The Jim Henson Company. After Jim Henson's untimely death in 1990 at age 53, the result of a bacterial infection in his lungs, the Jim Henson Company went to Henson's children. The Henson family produced a handful of movies and shows featuring the classic Muppets in the 1990s, which kept the characters in the public eye, but due to the loss of Jim Henson and the growing popularity of computer animation, the Jim Henson Company could not turn a significant profit with Muppet-based feature films. The Walt Disney Company, an animation production studio founded by brothers Walt Disney and Roy Disney in 1923, was by 2004 a major global media conglomerate with significant holdings in the media industry, which include franchises like ESPN, ABC and MTV. Its purchase of the Muppets may not be as financially important to Disney as some of the previously mentioned brands, but Disney has put a fair amount of marketing behind the rag-tag troupe of fuzzy performers. After a few years on the backburner, Disney started to aggressively promote the Muppets in 2009 via viral video, merchandising, television specials and commercials, red carpet appearances, and the promise of feature films on the Muppets. This campaign also pushed into Web 2.0

participatory culture, as fans, bloggers and independent artists have picked up on the resurgence in popularity of the Muppets and produced user-generated materials on the Web.

Much of the significance of Disney's purchase of the Muppets has to do with brand perception, which has been discussed extensively in trade and popular press. According to *The New York Times* author Brooks Barnes (2008), the Muppets exhibit an irreverence and chaos unfamiliar to the controlled morality of Disney—the company as well as its family-oriented products. Barnes' assertion is factually inaccurate, as we shall see, but reflects a vital ingredient in the commercial success: branding. While Disney's diverse holdings extend far beyond family-friendly entertainment, their corporate brand association remains in the realm of kid-safe, mainstream entertainment. Disney's ownership of Miramax—an “indie” studio that championed often times explicit and shocking films like *Pulp Fiction* (1994)—complicates Disney's reputation on an industrial level. The company has also released numerous live action films, from *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) to also *Pirates of the Caribbean* series (2003 to 2007), which earned an R rating and PG-13 rating respectively. However, Disney's brand image does not acknowledge this variety, which is not uncommon for larger companies, whose diversified portfolios can potentially cloud an otherwise recognizable corporate image (Holt, 2004). In this case, the audience seems to associate Disney's corporate brand with its family movies and especially its animation department. What is different about Disney than the other “Big Five” media conglomerates—GE-Comcast, Walt Disney Company,

News Corporation, Time Warner, and Viacom/CBS—is that it has such a distinct brand despite its varied holdings.

Another contradiction to Muppet purists is the fact that Henson supported a Disney-Muppet collaboration. In addition to creating a TV special that linked the two corporate brands, *The Muppets at Walt Disney World* (1990), Henson and then-Disney CEO Michael Eisner were in talks to sell the classic Muppets to Disney. When Henson tragically died in 1990, however, the deal fell through. Due to Henson's family wishes and Disney's hesitancy to buy the brand after Jim Henson had died, the acquisition did not occur for another fourteen years. The purchase of the classic Muppets by Disney and the ensuing marketing campaign (circa 2008-2009) caused both excitement and anxiety among fans. Some were simply happy to see the Muppets back in the action and anxiously awaited the next Muppet film (originally set to release in 2010 but now in November 2011). Others were wary of "the Disney touch" and how it may affect the relatively small and independent "character" of the classic Muppets (Grover, 1991).

It is this character that I will refer to as "Muppetness," a term I first encountered in a *GeekDad* blog entry in which Matt Blum criticized a 2009 Muppet TV special *Letters to Santa*. Blum is only one of many who characterize the Muppets as intrinsically non-commercial and who disapprove of Disney's effort to mainstream the Muppets. They are right to suspect a highly commercial image of the classic Muppets. Jim Henson described his company as cautious owners of valuable and desirable characters: "We're always riding a line between servicing the needs of the audience [...] and shov[ing] a whole lot of products out there." Companies start "taking advantage of the audience and

we really try desperately not to do that” (qtd. in Lee, 1984). He also famously refused to use the Muppets in *Sesame Street* in the advertising campaigns he was working on in the 1960s to ensure that his educational characters would not influence children to buy from certain companies. Henson was not outside the capitalist media industry, but negotiating a space that felt right for him and his company. What Muppet scholars and other critics fail to realize is that the classic Muppets were the Jim Henson Company’s most popular and therefore most marketed—and marketable—brand. Especially in the 1980s, the company supplied fans with their Muppet demands, releasing apparel, décor, toys, McDonald’s Happy Meal gifts, a collection of books and albums, and even a cereal.

Despite the Muppets’ commercial success, the anti-institutional aspects of “Muppetness” still have salience for the classic Muppet brand, with two major threads of discourse that stand out. First, the Muppets are considered subversive, satirical and a site of analysis for representational politics, especially in terms of gender and class. This thread of discourse comes primarily from scholars considering *The Muppet Show* and the classic Muppet films (Abate, 2009; Fisher & Cox, 2009; Leal, 2009; Rowe, 1995; Schildcrout, 2008; Underwood, 2009). Second, the Muppets are inherently innocent and pure of heart. We see this aspect of the classic Muppets primarily through Kermit the Frog’s dialogue and monologues in the classic Muppet feature films—*The Muppet Movie* (1979), *The Great Muppet Caper* (1981) and *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984)—in which the frog promotes optimism, personal agency and a loving community. The Muppets live in cynical world, but it is their idealistic and unrealistically optimistic goals that compel them to succeed. The Muppet audience laughs during scenes in which

Kermit, Fozzie and Miss Piggy's naïveté or simplicity gets them into trouble: but in the end, the Muppets always realize their goals as a group. It is this mix of innocence and satire that define Muppetness.

This strong brand, which some fans attach specifically to Jim Henson, or at least to the pre-Disney Muppets, led me to think about the role of authorship in shaping audience's perception of the author's creation, or in Disney's case, the corporation's product. In other words, how does Disney's reputation as an international, largely family-oriented media empire affect American audiences expectations of its treatment of the Muppets? To break down that question, I explore the significance of individual authorship in creating the historical narrative of the Muppets and authentic Muppetness. My chapters address these very issues of authenticity and authorship, and seek to explain how economic and industrial trends affect the reputation and profitability of this particular brand.

The first chapter examines Jim Henson's career as a children's media author and explores the significance of the Muppets origin story. I look at Jim Henson's career from his beginnings in television narratives and advertising, to the emergence of the classic Muppets through his collaboration with Disney, trying to qualify the "genius" of his work by understanding how his skills made him a unique authorial figure in the industry. The importance of Jim Henson's legacy after his death, both to fans and to the marketability of the Jim Henson Company in the industrial landscape, also affected the evolution of the Muppets as a brand. While they were still under the Jim Henson Company in the 1990s, the Muppets floundered with poor showings at the box office, which I theorize as a sort

of crisis of authorship. With the Disney acquisition in 2004, the Muppets encountered a new symbolic author, which both endangered the Muppets as a valuable property and challenged Disney to reinvent itself as an owner.

Jim Henson's earlier work, including *Sam and Friends* and advertising spots, is more recognizable as the work of an auteur, since Henson directed, wrote and created the visual mood of these pieces. He also voiced most of the characters.³ These pieces were known for their irreverent treatment of late 1950s culture and institutions, as well as a violent, slapstick humor reminiscent of vaudeville and burlesque theater. Transitioning into work on *The Muppet Show*, Jim Henson was joined by new colleagues, some he'd met on the *Sesame Street* project and others who simply auditioned to join Henson based on the work they'd seen. *The Muppet Show* was a collaborative project, in which each puppeteer generally formed the personality of the Muppet he or she manipulated. Jim Henson produced additional works like the films *The Dark Crystal* (1982), *Labyrinth* (1986) and the TV series *Storyteller* and *The Jim Henson Hour*. Most of these projects played more with frightening creatures and elaborate makeup design, adding to Jim Henson's cult appeal, especially for adult fans that grew up on these texts. The progression of Henson's career compares with Walt Disney and allows us to understand their authorship in technological fields of media—animation and puppetry.

Chapter 2 addresses the Walt Disney Company's ownership of the Muppets and the marketing campaign Disney launched to re-establish and recruit fans for the Muppet brand. Disney purchased the Muppets Holding Company in 2004, and the Muppet brand subsequently went silent. Except for a couple of books and an under-publicizing TV

movie *The Muppets' Wizard of Oz*, the Muppet remained a moribund franchise. Disney accounts for this “sleeper” period by pointing to their reverence for Jim Henson’s legacy, giving ample time to the consideration of the brand’s re-emergence into the market and cultural consciousness. It may have also been waiting for the proper time to begin creating buzz around the release of the 2011 Muppet movie, *The Muppets*. Broadcast and online campaigning started to surface in 2008, with some marketing streamlining the Muppets with Disney’s brand and others separating the Muppets from its parent company. The aptly named Muppet Studio—the Disney-made production group that does all creative work on the Muppets today—represents one example of Disney separating its name from the campaign. One of Muppet Studio’s most popular sites of discourse on YouTube presents itself as a grassroots campaign wholly disconnected from Disney. Disney has also started to release *The Muppet Show* DVDs and connect the Muppets with contemporary celebrities and bands like Ok Go, Weezer, Lady Gaga, and Food Network star Cat Cora. While some of these initiatives are simply synergistic moves that allow Disney to cross promote, others seem to be tied more to building cultural capital for the Muppets.

The second chapter also examines Disney’s authorship and return to prominence, starting with Michael Eisner’s appointment at Disney CEO in 1984 and culminating in the tensions between Disney and its computer animation partner-turned-acquisition Pixar during the 1990s and 2000s. This relationship helps to explain Disney’s evolving authorship and ownership and sheds some light on its dealings with the Muppets.

Chapter 3 takes Miss Piggy as a case study for Disney’s Muppet advertising scheme. As the only primary female Muppet and a pop icon, Miss Piggy had inevitably stood in as a female icon. A collaborative effort of performer Frank Oz and designer Bonnie Erickson, Miss Piggy has one of the strongest personalities—and karate chops—of any Muppet, and has prompted academic discussion of her gender performance and sexual agency. On the opposite side of the feminist spectrum, the recent history⁴ of Disney, which is particularly tailored to young girls as consumers and fans, presents more restricted feminist characters. I focus in particular on the Disney Princess collection, one of the company’s most profitable merchandising campaigns. This ideologically problematic group of female characters, ranging from Snow White of *Snow White* (1937) to Belle of *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) to Rapunzel of *Tangled* (2010), is meant to offer signifiers of girlhood in Disney’s fantasy world. By diversifying its cast of characters over the years, Disney has allowed more girls the opportunity to see themselves as one of the princesses. While the merchandise is geared toward girls, the affiliation with the Disney Princess extends to women as well, which strengthens the connection to Miss Piggy, a character that speaks to an adult audience but carries relevance with a youth audience as well. This final chapter will explore Miss Piggy and her role in the Disney culture industry and how she fits, or does not fit, in the overall marketing strategy for girls and women. I look at Disney’s historical and postfeminist permeations of “girl power” culture within the Disney Princess brand and position Miss Piggy as an extension and interruption of girl culture as it exists in the Walt Disney Company.

THE AUTHOR DILEMMA: JIM HENSON AND WALT DISNEY AS THE MEN BEHIND THEIR COMPANIES

Jim Henson has long been revered as the quiet artist whose creativity and craftsmanship launched a new world of puppetry, starting with American and British television, moving to the big screen, and finally saturating the global consumer market with adorably simple but expressive characters that have charmed generations: Walt Disney is the hard-working all-American man who started a cultural empire centered on childhood and animation. Both men are central to their company images, and credited with the genius that brought them success. Their stories are practically mythic in scope, perhaps because they created children's entertainment and thus are connected to the innocence of childhood. Or, maybe it is simply because their creations have been so influential.

Biographers and academics have slowly demystified Walt Disney's reputation. Janet Wasko writes about the fallacies and embellishment of Walt Disney biographies in *Understanding Disney*. According to Wasko, Disney was responsible for constructing much of his own biography; he pointed to his upbringing on a farm, when in reality, he only lived on a farm for a couple of years. Even the creation of Mickey Mouse is not clear; some say that Walt Disney and collaborator Ub Iwerks made the character and others posit that Iwerks did all of the creative work himself (Wasko 2001). Fact checking aside, Disney's philosophy is clear: "I am interested in entertaining people, in bringing pleasure, particularly laughter, to others, rather than being concerned with 'expressing' myself or obscure creative impressions" (Wasko, 2001, p. 13).

DisneyWar by James B. Stewart (2005) and *The Disney Touch* by Ron Grover (1991) reveal tension in the Disney Corporation after Walt Disney's death in 1966 and the ensuing battles over the business' fate in the industry. This narrative is important to understanding branding in a corporation and attachment to "original" authorship. Much like the problems Henson's family and colleague dealt with after Jim Henson's death, the Walt Disney Company board and leaders struggled to find new leadership and regain status as a dream factory in a new setting under Michael Eisner, Frank Wells and Jeffrey Katzenberg.

Biographical work on Jim Henson includes books by Christopher Finch and James R. Parish. Both books include information on the other members of the Muppet team, like performer Frank Oz and writer Jerry Juhl, but the potency of their collaboration is qualified by Oz's or Juhl's recollections of Jim Henson and his genius. Finch especially addresses Jim Henson's ambition for his brands and incessant work on other projects, but all of Henson's other creative and commercial work is presented as the work of an artist. In addition, Jim Henson's classic car collection and many houses are described as the quirks of an artist, rather than a rich man enjoying the fruits of his labor. Certainly Henson was an artist, but the revelatory tone of the literature written about him and the fact that Henson's name is permanently affixed to the Muppet name—Jim Henson's Muppets—gives one man the credit for the work of many. Quote books like *It's Not Easy Being Green: And Other Things to Consider* also serve to amplify the myth of Henson and the simple but articulate hero of children's media (2005). In this book, quotes by characters from *Sesame Street*, the Muppet movies and *Fraggle Rock*, as well as

words from Jim Henson and his team are centered on Henson and celebrate his quiet resilient, work ethic and morality.

Andrew Leal's assessment of Henson's career lends a more rational perspective to the financial side of his productions, hypothesizing that the Muppet creator and owner understood the need for marketable products and negotiated his commercial success by creating villains in the Muppet film narrative that were greedy, powerful individuals (2009). In this way, Henson could distance himself from his own financial gain and promote a message of simple joys and self-esteem. Andrew Leal describes a more probable tension between artistry and commercialization.

THE MEANING OF MUPPETNESS

The Muppets as a brand signify irreverence, absurdity, and rebellion but also sweetness and childlike innocence, which I described earlier as Muppetness. The reason I am examining how trade, popular and academic articles define the Muppets is because so many of these works believe that Disney cannot succeed in developing creative work that captures Muppetness. Jordan Schildcrout celebrates the wacky, experimental nature of Jim Henson's work. "The Muppet Show...imagines the theatre as a venue for rebellion against propriety, where performers can irreverently 'play' with cultural norms" (2008). Mary Ann Abate focuses on the importance of the absurd in analyzing *The Muppet Show*'s attention to "normalcy and abnormalcy, identity and difference, and monstrosity versus 'freakishness.' Unpacking the subversive nature of the ostensibly harmless fun of The Muppet Show demonstrates the social, political, and cultural sense that is paradoxically encoded in its nonsense" (2009, p. 591). Indeed, the classic Muppet

narratives tend to avoid tight conclusions and streamlined narratives, instead favoring sketches that end with explosions, stage lights falls, or movie screens ripping open. Also, the sheer number of mumbling, incoherent characters lends itself to the chaos Schildcrout and Abate refer to.

Miss Piggy is an especially rich character for discussion of gender play and aggressive behavior, something Disney was not traditionally known for. I say “traditionally” because Disney has recently created characters that cross dress and play with norms of masculinity and femininity (like Mulan); but the company is more typically aligned with traditional understandings of society and hegemonic norms. Kathleen Rowe’s book *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* explores Miss Piggy’s resistance to conform to acceptable female behavior. She argues that Miss Piggy exists outside the confines of femininity and is therefore a difficult character for traditional audiences (Rowe 1995).

Miss Piggy is a hero for marginalized groups like plus-size women and gay men. One Miss Piggy fan site (misspiggyfans.com) emphasizes Miss Piggy’s self-esteem through her disgust for dieting. One page even includes a photo with a scale that points to positive attributes like “ideal” or “perfect” instead of numbers (Bowen). Miss Piggy also celebrates outrageous performance, which has made her a hero both for feminists and gay men. Jordan Schildcrout explores this gender play: “Miss Piggy’s performance of diva femininity mixed with her aggression and physical prowess might put the viewer in mind not so much of a 1970s feminist but of an old fashioned drag queen [...] She regularly uses drag queen shtick, such as comically switching from a high-pitched feminine coo to

a basso profundo masculine growl” (2008, p. 830). Funnily enough, the new Muppeteer for Miss Piggy is unable to vocalize the same high pitches that Franz Oz used in the past, and has received criticism for sounding too “draggy.” If we consider Miss Piggy as the pinnacle of Muppetness—bizarre and outrageous behavior—how do she and the Muppets fit into what is perceived as the Disney mold? Disney is perceived as a normative, traditional business that churns out entertainment, while fans love Jim Henson and the Muppets for their absurdity and irreverence. So despite the fact that Disney likely has the creative capacity to satisfy Muppet fans, can it win them over to the Disney empire?

ANXIETY OVER DISNEY’S OWNERSHIP OF THE MUPPETS

Many fans and pundits articulate fear and anxiety over the Muppets’ move to Disney and the possible loss of their Muppetness. *The New York Times* has published a few articles about the purchase, one of which expresses hesitancy over Disney’s new Muppet film:

Kermit the frog, perched on a log inside a soundstage here a few weeks ago, was pouring on the charm. None of those smart-mouthed, skewering asides [...] The Green One was simply strumming his banjo in a digitally engineered rainstorm, crooning the words of his dreamy signature song—‘someday we’ll find it, the rainbow connection’—as if his professional life depended on it. And it just might. (Cieply & Barnes, 2011)

This gloomy perspective on the next Muppet flick emphasizes the idea that the Muppet characters are fighting for survival in an artificial and commercial industry that uses them for their appeal. Another critic writing for *The New York Times* critic lampoons a Disney-produced special starring the Muppets: “I am no Muppets purist (perhaps alone in the world, I am Muppet-neutral), but I know enough to realize that the cognoscenti are not

going to soak up this offering. Why? Because this effort at Disney-fying the Muppets feels like a big old sellout” (Bellafante, 2008, p. C5). This article also includes a quote from a blogger, who wonders, “what good will it do to get kids to like the Muppets if they lose their essential Muppetness in the process?” (qtd. in Bellafante, 2008, p. C5). This widespread concern is essential to my argument about the perceived brand personality of the two companies and fans’ role in creating expectations for a beloved franchise.

Some writers like Brooks Barnes question the Muppets’ ability to exist beside Disney figures like Mickey Mouse and Ariel the mermaid: “The wisecracking, irreverent Muppets... don’t fit that neatly in the Disney culture, as they differ from most of the company’s bedrock characters in two big ways: Kermit and coterie were primarily created to entertain adults, and they live in the real world” (2008). This comment is understandable but short sighted considering the diversity of Disney’s holdings. In my thesis, the major tension is Disney’s methods of engagement with the Muppet brand. While parts of the campaign recognize the Muppets as a distinct entity, Disney also used the Muppets to promote its theme parks, which builds an alliance between these brands and threatens to alienate fans. As Barnes points out, it seems that Disney is encouraging young children, a new generation of consumers, to see the Muppets as part of Disney. On the other hand, Disney also seems intent on pleasing older fans that remember the earlier works of Jim Henson. Perhaps one major concern is that these two generations are members of the same family, and that the loyalty of the parents to Muppetness will dissuade them from buying “Disney-fied” Muppets.

Additional work by James B. Stewart supports Wasko's image of Disney's corporate workings, though Stewart adds the story of Disney executives collaborating and fighting to control the company's vision. Stewart also highlights instances of synergy, including the Broadway renditions of *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and *The Lion King* (1994), which made tidy profits for Disney. The potential profit and brand recognition extends to my discussion of Disney's YouTube channel for the Muppets. Their Webby Award-winning version of "Bohemian Rhapsody," which received over one million hits in one day, creates buzz for the upcoming movie, when Disney can cash in on the success of its viral campaigning (Chowdhry, 2009).

My thesis discusses how Disney seems to be adapting itself to a convergent, Web 2.0 marketing space in its advertising of the Muppets, though it proceeds with the care and precaution of a traditional corporation. Disney used to pull "inappropriate" appearances by its characters from YouTube, but with the Muppets, it has allowed videos with Muppets using recreational drugs to remain on the site. However, it is still fair to say that Disney is a rigid corporation, which butts heads with conceptions of Jim Henson's authorship of the classic Muppets. By examining Henson's management of the Muppet brand, we can begin to understand why Disney signifies a disruption to Muppetness.

Chapter 1: Jim Henson and the Muppet Brand

Fans, academics, and trade professionals alike regard Jim Henson as a leader in the media industry, an innovator of children's entertainment and a creative genius. His Muppet creations have fascinated audiences in films, television shows and even early television advertisements. According to biographers and some popular press articles, Jim Henson's unique philosophy, artistry, and approach brought his Muppets to life onscreen. He is the central figure in the majority of books on the Muppets, a kind of auteur of puppets in media. Frank Oz states in one work, "Jim didn't tell you what to do. He just was. And by him being what he was, he led and he taught" (Henson, 2005, p. 35). People often refer to Henson's gentle and stoic demeanor as markers of his genius, as well as his love for playful, satirical, and sometimes dark humor. While these traits are all true, Henson's personality is often incorrectly mapped onto the characteristics of the classic Muppets, or Muppetness.

While I treat Henson and the Muppets as two distinct entities, I argue that his authorial presence is central to the audience's perception of the Muppet brand and that, in turn, the Muppets inform opinions of Henson the man. This *mélange* drove Henson's career, and was largely responsible for the fall of the Muppet brand at Jim Henson Company after his death in 1990. By understanding Henson as a brand himself, I analyze his perceived, not inherent, value to the Muppet brand. This is not because I wish to devalue Henson's creative influence, but because for the sake of my argument, it is not Henson's literal authorship but the associative value of Henson's reputation that affects

the Muppet brand's salience, especially when the characters encounter new authorship under Disney.

This intertwining Henson and Muppet brands became most apparent when Disney acquired the Muppets Holding Company in 2004. Anxiety and excitement over the Muppets' future saturated trade and popular publications as well as fan response.

According to some fans and journalists, Disney cannot harness the genius of Henson and his Muppets franchise. The international media giant is perceived as politically "safe" and exclusively for children's narratives, which does not resemble the subtly anarchic and chaos-mongering Muppet clan. Others were excited to see the return of the Muppets, and they often expressed enthusiasm over the Muppets as an extension of the Jim Henson brand and not as a Disney property. These reactions indicated a nostalgic attachment to a defunct franchise, but also a humanist element to authorship that makes it difficult to divorce a media text, or set of texts in the case of the Muppets, from their authorial history.

The mainstream perception of Jim Henson as an author falls under early concepts of auteurism, discourse built by French critics in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* that privileges the motion picture director's ability to rise above industrial and societal limits in order to express his or her unique vision and artistry. Due in part to his untimely end and to his reputation in the film and television industries, work on Henson is reverent, laudatory, and almost entirely devoid of criticism. Henson's influence clearly shaped the evolution of the Muppet narrative and reach, but to say that Jim Henson's spirit is the Muppets, or that Henson's being and not his work drove the Muppets, as Oz implied above, is

misleading. It is not my goal to define Henson’s authorship, as others have attempted to do with filmmakers like Alfred Hitchcock, William Wyler, John Ford, etc. (Custen, 1997; Lane, 2003; Leitch, 2008; Sarris, 2004). Such endeavors generally end in the replacement of one “auteur” with another, ignoring the power implications of privileging a certain narrative. Instead, I seek to place Henson’s authorship in the context of a greater industrial history, understanding how it evolved during his life, after his death, and taking the Walt Disney Company’s influence and acquisition of the Muppets Holding Company in 2004 into consideration. This authorial history helps us to understand the expression of human agency in the corporate media landscape, and how “humanistic brands” are invoked, or not invoked, to promote a certain consumerism. In the case of Jim Henson—who was literally the namesake of his production company, the business manager of his franchises, and creative director of the Muppet narratives—iterations of the Muppets after his death must somehow refer back to his authorial style if they are to win over the fan audience. As we will see in this and the following chapters, Disney has both attempted to harness this creative past and redefine the Muppets without the memory of Jim Henson in order to separate them from an authorial history that many deem inconsistent with Disney’s corporate image.

POWER IN AUTHORSHIP: PERSONALITIES VERSUS PERSONAS

For the purposes of this study, two major concepts characterize authorship: the author as a creative individual and the author as an economic agent in a Western, capitalist system. The seminal work on authorial inspiration began in the Romantic period of literature when Edmund Burke and others theorized that the author or artist

communes with nature and/or God in order to channel his or her creative energies (Burke, 1996). In this model, the author is a free agent and the sole creator of the text, excluding possible subliminal inspiration from godly forces. This conception of the author translates into media studies—and specifically film studies—in the form of auteur theory, in which the auteur’s unique vision is evident in his or her films. Part of a film enthusiast discussion among French scholars and directors in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the *Cahiers du Cinema*, the term “auteur” referred to classical Hollywood directors—and some non-U.S. directors—who somehow expressed their creativity despite the restrictive film production industry (Grant, 2008; Bazin, 1963; Godard, 1966; Sarris, 2004). In her essay on authorship approaches, Janet Staiger (2003) points to the continuing influence of auteur theory. According to Staiger, a focus on auteurism can obscure the importance of historical context, production practices and reception. In addition, auteur theory implies that the auteur is somehow part of a morally elite class of artists and challenges the more mundane cinematic work of the mainstream. While many have worked to challenge these assumptions, the author remains a major draw for fans, scholars and critics, and so auteurist ideologies are consistently invoked in popular analysis of media creation.

In addition to creative power, the authorial power also holds economic implications, which Michel Foucault refers to as the power of designation in “What is an Author?” (1970/1975). According to Foucault, the author gains both critical and economic power as the designated individual associated with the text. It is therefore not necessarily literal authorship, but the naming of a creator and owner of a text that gives power to the designated author. Roland Barthes adds to the discourse, criticizing the

notion that the author/text relationship take on a temporal value: “The Author, when believed in, is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a *before* and an *after*” (1977, p. 145). This sort of father-child relationship, as Barthes deems it, obfuscates a text’s existence outside of, or before, its author. Staiger explores the Judeo-Christian tradition of authorship through the author biography: “If the author’s life was devout, wholesome, upright, then the writings—a flow of the author’s morality onto the page—must display and reveal the morality of the life, and, of course, vice [...] versa” (Staiger, 2003, p. 30).

This vice versa connection is more relevant to this discussion of authorship, since Jim Henson’s personality, as presented in biographies on him, seem directly connected to popular perspectives on *Sesame Street* and *The Muppet Show*. The child-like idealism presented in the posthumously published *It’s Not Easy Being Green: And Other Things to Consider*, display this dynamic of author personality. The quote book credits Henson, the Muppets and his friends as joint authors of the book, with Henson’s name displayed most prominently. Henson was not alive when the book was produced, and many of the quotes are not by him, but taken from other Muppeteers and from characters’ lines in *Sesame Street*, *The Muppet Show*, etc. As the foreword by Cheryl Henson (Jim Henson’s daughter) explains, “The world knew my father through the Muppet characters that he performed and the words of the writers with whom he worked” (Henson, 2005, p. 2). This admission that the texts define the man “to the world,” unintentionally expresses the fallacy of the author persona. Cheryl Henson is acknowledging that Jim Henson is not his work, but that this is how people know him.

This connection between author and text is unavoidable, since Western traditions of ownership and authorship require a capitalistic designation, but the tradition of a single, rational author is problematic when considering film and television texts, which generally require more than one creator, as media scholars exploring the film industry have highlight (DiMaggio & Hirsch, 1976; Schatz, 1988; Staiger, 1995). In addition, it is not realistic to see the author's morality as inherently stated in his or her texts since many authors protect their reputations and the reputation and economic vitality of their work by employing public personas. I explore Jim Henson's authorship as brand built on persona instead of personality. Personality implies an attempt to pinpoint truths about someone based on their attributes, which I believe is too difficult at this point. The Henson family is protective of Jim Henson's history and the Jim Henson Company archives are private, which makes it virtually impossible to sketch a sense of the day-to-day Jim Henson. Besides the difficulty inherent in this task, what I analyze is not Henson, but the effectiveness of his persona, or brand, which influenced the Muppet franchise's profitability and relevance and put it into crisis after his death in 1990.

AUTHOR AS BRAND

Taking into account the Foucauldian notion of economically driven authorship, I use "brand" to analyze the author's power and influence within the media industry. Brand as a concept addresses both commercial viability of a product and the precedence of audience perception of that product over its reality. In other words, a brand does not inherently signify anything about an object as much as it promotes a set of beliefs about it. Marketing theory in the last ten years has acknowledged a late 1960s/1970s shift in the

advertising industry from product-oriented to service-oriented marketing (Carah, 2010). According to Philip Cotler (1969), advertising affected public life by influencing the values, attitudes, and behaviors of consumers (Cited in Carah, 2010). This belief was part of a greater trend that championed service advertising as a less tangible, but more social interaction between marketers and consumers (Brown, et al., 1994). This interaction, central to brand culture today, was described as a “love relationship” by Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laurie Ouelette (2011). Their description captures the potential intimacy between brands and people. Brands that mean something to people, according to Douglas B. Holt (2004), “embody the ideals they [consumers] admire, brands that help them express who they want to be” (p. 4). I would combine Banet-Weiser and Ouelette’s description with Holt’s to define the brand-consumer relationship as a socially meaningful tie that involves a consumer-created conception of the brand’s “personality.” This humanistic attachment creates affinity and trust between consumers and their.

Corporate branding addresses this personal, associative value: “product brand associations only relate to product quality, while corporate brand associations also relate to other types of social roles that the company as a whole has” (Van Riel & Berens, 2003, p. 117). Van Riel and Berens do not acknowledge that products can be associated with corporate brand image, devaluing what is a complex relationship between product and image. However, they do pinpoint the humanistic social quality that we as consumers attach to companies with strong brands. Consider Apple, for example. This company rose to prominence because of the computer hardware’s sleek design and functionality, and stays profitable partially because of the their executives’ refusal to make products and

accessories compatible with other hardware and platforms. Apple's success, though, is maintained through strategic branding that markets their products as a young, vibrant and sexy alternative to comparatively stodgy and business-oriented competitors like IBM and Microsoft.

In this case and others, the strength of a brand is made up of the story or image a company projects to consumers, and the accumulation of "experiences or exposures" a consumer has with the brand (Aaker, 1991, p. 109). In authorship studies, authorial branding has primarily been discussed as "persona," or the reflection of an author's work and his or her public image. Thomas Leitch (2005) mentions branding in reference to well-known film people like Alfred Hitchcock and Walt Disney, who attained "household name" status, concluding that a public persona is the most powerful trademark of the author. Personas, which parallels brand, connect the audience with the author through exposure to the author's body of work, interviews and public appearances, and marketing materials. The Walt Disney Company brand gets much its power from the memory of Walt Disney's persona and a connected history of animated family entertainment, similar to the Jim Henson and the Jim Henson Company's legacy. Both of these companies have long narrative histories that audiences can experience in order to build an image of the corporate/authorial brands. Disney has transitioned into one of the largest global media conglomerates and yet still maintains this historical brand image connected to Walt Disney's vision of family entertainment. The Jim Henson Company, whose brand culture was primarily tied to Jim Henson and the Muppets and not the company itself, lost its brand strength when Jim Henson died, and even more so when it sold the Muppets. Jim

Henson's long and successful career as a filmmaker, television producer, writer and performer help explain the power of his authorial brand, as well the evolution of the Muppet franchise.

HENSON'S FOUNDATIONS IN EARLY TELEVISION⁵

Jim Henson started out in television in 1955 writing and performing short puppet sketches for children on WRC-TV, NBC's affiliate in Washington D.C. These spots turned into five-minute segments that aired twice a day called *Sam and Friends* (1955-1961). The show featured Sam, a humanoid marionette, and multiple sock puppets, including the soon-to-be-legendary Kermit the Frog. *Sam and Friends* consisted of lip-synching and short sketches, and allowed Jim Henson to play with the televisual effects of puppetry on screen (Finch, 1981). Because he had almost exclusive creative control over the show, Henson was also allowed to experiment and develop his burgeoning skills as a writer, director and puppeteer. As early as 1957, his reputation as a short-form TV producer landed him and his puppets in advertising, with clients like IBM, Wilkins Coffee and Purina Dog Chow. Interestingly, Henson was one of the first television writers to create comedic commercials that sought to provoke a response instead of simply touting the benefits of a product. Especially in the Wilkins Coffee ads, where the anti-Wilkins Muppet Wonkins frequently meets his demise, Henson created simplistic, childish puppets that acted out scenes of violence. In one ad, the spokesman, aptly named "Wilkins," states, "You need to go with Wilkins or you just don't go," and Wonkins is immediately crushed under a literal Wilkins bandwagon (Young, 1957-1961). Most of the ads follow a similar narrative in which Wonkins dies because of his reluctance to try

Wilkins Coffee. Of course, Wonkins returns for the subsequent ads, taking a bit of the sting out of Henson's morbidity, but these early advertising spots establish Henson's interest in wild and dark comedy.

Another early character that Jim Henson performed was Rowlf the Dog, a fuzzy brown dog with a relatively amorphous torso, expressive arms, and a husky voice. First a hawker of Purina Dog Chow, Rowlf came to be a nationally recognized Muppet when he joined *The Jimmy Dean Show* (1963-1966).⁶ Also, he was the first Muppet constructed by another puppeteer, Don Sahlin. Commissioned by Jim Henson in 1962, Sahlin went on to be Henson's head Muppet builder until his death in 1978. He also added two major contributions to Henson's puppetry aesthetics—"the Magic Triangle" and the "Henson stitch."⁷ Henson himself expressed the importance of the Magic Triangle, a geometric concept that concerned eye and mouth positioning: "It would be the last thing [Sahlin] would do, and he always wanted me there, to make sure it was right for both of us—making sure the eyes had a point of focus, because without that you had no character" (*Wikia*, n.d., n.p.). While Henson apparently drew many of the original Muppet sketches, Don Sahlin and his Muppet-building team were primarily responsible for the construction of the Muppets in *Sesame Street* (1969-present) and, to use Henson's own words, partially responsible for the "character" of the Muppets.

Henson handpicked two other key figures to join his company. The first was head writer Jerry Juhl, who recalled his early exposure to Jim Henson: "I met Jim Henson in 1961. By then, the Muppets already had a cult following with a reputation for bizarre, slightly dangerous comedy" (Finch, 1993, p. 19). The other was Frank Oz, a puppeteer

whose performance partnership with Henson shaped many of the Muppet's characters, most notably Fozzie the Bear and Miss Piggy. Oz, according to Henson, "is probably the person most responsible for making the Muppets funny" (Finch, 1981, p. 72). Of course, this personal recollection is not a pure fact, but Frank Oz did perform many of the more popular Muppets. It is important to note these figures and their influence, since their work undercuts perceptions of Jim Henson as a singular auteur and helps to better understand how the Muppets began to form as a franchise and a brand.

Christopher Finch, who is responsible for one of three complete biographies on Henson in 1993, and wrote specifically on *The Muppet Show* in 1981, is the most cited biographical author across academic work on Henson and the Muppets. His 1993 book, *Jim Henson: The Works – The Art, the Magic, the Imagination*, includes information from the closest friends and family of Henson. So it comes as no surprise that the book does not critique Henson nor does it in anyway diminish his auteur mythos. Also, it was written three years after Henson's death so it follows that the book would be particularly reverent. Finch's 1981 work, *Of Muppets and Men: The Making of The Muppet Show*, written in the middle of *The Muppet Show* run, includes much interpretation of Henson, based on Finch's observations and quotes from Henson's colleagues.

Finch's descriptions and quotes build Henson as the "anti-Hollywood hero" and a humble celebrity. He describes Henson as a casual Renaissance man, unaffected by fame and fortune: "Jim Henson's office at ATV studios is large, and contains a desk big enough to satisfy any latter-day Hollywood mogul, but its ambiance is unaffected" (Finch, 1981, p. 59). Finch goes on to describe Jim's weekly schedule, which spanned

seven-day weeks, and an average of 12 hours of work per day, explaining how Henson took “things in his stride. There is nothing hurried about his manner. He smiles easily, always has time for a joke or a pleasantry” (Finch, 1981, p. 60-64). Regarding his work relationships, Finch says that Henson almost never lost his temper and was understanding of creative differences: “Henson is a good listener and if someone has an idea that is better than his own, he accepts it without hesitation. It is because of this that the others listen to him and accept direction without feeling resentment” (Finch, 1981, p. 65). This comment is particularly troubling since the reader does not know how often Jim Henson thought that someone else’s idea is better, and we cannot know that every person on *The Muppet Show* set did not hold any resentment toward Henson. It is impossible to know the inner workings of Jim Henson’s psyche, but since his family continues to be more reverent than revelatory, we are left with Finch’s interpretation of Henson’s demeanor.

In addition to Finch’s work, Henson has created and starred in several TV specials over the years. One notable piece was *The Muppets on Puppets*, a 1968 educational special on puppet history and physical discipline of puppetry. The show aired on National Education Television (the precursor to PBS). Henson would go on to do several tutorials and talks on puppeteering, but this early example shows his team at the time—Frank Oz, Jerry Juhl, Dave Goelz, and Don Sahlin—as a troupe of voiceless artists working under Henson. In the video version of *Of Muppets and Men* (1981), we learn more about the cast and crew of *The Muppet Show*, and Henson gives credit to these people for the humor, puppetry, and artwork on the show. While Henson is always called quiet and reserved, he was the leader of the Jim Henson Company and frequently narrated Muppet

projects like these. If he did not enjoy performing, as he once professed, Henson certainly felt an obligation to explain his work in his own words (Lee, 1984). In interviews, he speaks in long-winded ruminations, as if the Muppets were always on his mind, and they likely were based on his long work hours (Finch, 1981; Lee, 1984; Finch, 1993; Henson, 2005). In this way, the Muppet brand was very much shaped by Henson's time and efforts, even though the characters and tropes of Muppetness were a group project.

MUPPETNESS AND THE MUPPET BRAND

The classic Muppets came about as a result of *Sesame Street*'s success in the 1970s. After writing and performing for *Sesame Street* for five years, Henson wanted to start another project not as much oriented toward young audiences. Henson Associates pitched the idea for *The Muppet Show* (1976-1981), originally named *The Muppet Show: Sex and Violence*, to ABC and NBC, but were turned down. Instead, they agreed to an offer from UK-based Associated Communications Corporation, an entertainment studio owned by Lew Grade, and moved production to England. Shot at ATV Studios and distributed by ITC in the United States on the CBS flagship stations, *The Muppet Show* became an international hit by the end of its first season in 1977. The series narrative followed a group of Muppets—mostly animals and nameless creatures—that produced a ne'er-do-well variety show. In the narrative, the head of production, Kermit the Frog, barely holds the show together as his cast and crew wreak havoc onstage and off. *The Muppet Show* included a celebrity guest star in each episode, including Steve Martin, Madeline Kahn, Peter Sellers, and Julie Andrews, and Alice Cooper, who performed in

most of the sketches alongside any combination of Muppets. True to Muppet form, chaos rules the day and almost every variety show number falls apart, either onstage or offstage.

In one episode, Sam the American eagle, an upright Muppet and a connoisseur of the arts, tries to class up to the show because their guest of the week is ballet dancer Rudolph Nureyev. In one sketch, Miss Piggy and her male pig opposite, Linc, perform the love duet in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* dressed as Wagnerian Vikings. Kermit introduces it as a piece by "Giuseppe Wagner" that is "in keeping with our tone of culture and classicism" (Juhl & Casson, 2007). Miss Piggy and Linc start the song together, but their increasingly violent attempts to upstage each other angers Sam and he lifts them offstage with a giant magnet. The bricolage of operatic styles and humor foregrounds the nonsense onstage. Miss Piggy and Linc sing an Italian piece in German-inspired Nordic costume and Kermit appropriately creates an artificial Italian-German composer name, "Giuseppe Wagner." He also calls the piece classist instead of classy, a mistake that reveals *The Muppet Show* writers poking fun at high culture. Then, the act ends with the performers exiting abruptly upward via magnet. This mixing of physical, social, and verbal play typified the show's humor, which was often messy, but purposefully so. Jerry Juhl described his experience on the show: "There's an incredible amount of freedom in writing a show like this [...] because you can sit down and type almost any insane fantasy you can think of on paper and there are people standing by to do it" (qtd. in Lazer, 1981). Kermit is the constant in a sea of variables, including the stage-hogging Miss Piggy, the insecure Fozzie and the daredevil Gonzo. Miss Piggy (performed by Frank Oz until 2002) is Kermit's romantic partner and in many ways his opposite. She is unfailingly confident,

short-tempered, but also steadfast. Fozzie Bear is a sweet, insecure character who generally exemplifies the failing comedian. His jokes are stupid, and he knows it, but he never stops trying. Gonzo (performed by Dave Goelz) is a “whatever”—his body is intentionally ambiguous. He is a perpetual risk taker and finds pleasure in sacrificing his body for another, whether it’s sticking his nose in a closing elevator door or jumping in front of a taxi, both of which occur in the film *The Great Muppet Caper* (1981).

The Muppets became stars and the show won over domestic and international TV audiences. Because of its success, Lew Grade asked Henson and his team to produce a Muppet feature film, which Grade financed for \$8 million. The result was *The Muppet Movie*, released internationally in 1979 (Durrett, 1994, p. 72). The film follows Kermit the Frog, performed by Henson, as he leaves the swamp for a chance at Hollywood fame. In a cross-country voyage, he meets up with Fozzie, Gonzo and his chicken friend Camilla, and Miss Piggy. The other characters of *The Muppet Show* feature in different scenes, as Kermit tries to get to Hollywood and avoid becoming the poster frog for a frog leg restaurant chain owned by Doc Hopper. The entire Muppet menagerie meets at the end on a Hollywood movie set, producing the film that has just played out in front of the audience. In the last moment, the set falls apart, the soundstage ceiling breaks open and a rainbow showers color over all of the characters in a pan to a wide shot as they sing about the lovers and dreamers. This last chorus echoes Kermit’s iconic banjo number that opens the movie, “The Rainbow Connection,” in which Kermit croons, “Someday we’ll find it, the rainbow connection. The lovers, the dreamers and me” (Henson & Frawley, 1993). Framed in optimistic terms, the film explores the possibilities of pursuing the

limitlessness of dreams. The scenes often play out like sketches on *The Muppet Show* where chaos rather than hope rules, but the narrative begins and ends with a positive message to the audience: that however hard the journey, one is limited only by the reaches of their imagination.

The movie grossed over \$65 million at the U.S. box office, and Henson went on to produce two more features, *The Great Muppet Caper* (1981) and *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984). Both were popular with fans, though their domestic box office grosses were not as impressive, \$31 and \$25.5 million, respectively.⁸ *The Great Muppet Caper* follows Kermit and Fozzie's adventures in London, a convenient location considering *The Muppet Show* was still being shot in the UK. The two Muppets play investigative journalists, who happen to be identical twins, who catch a band of jewel thieves with the help of their photographer Gonzo and hopeful fashion model Miss Piggy. Once again, the rest of the Muppets play feature roles in a series of scenes. *The Muppets Take Manhattan* returned to the brand's show business roots, starring Kermit and friends as a group of college graduates who want to produce their musical showcase, *Manhattan Melodies*, on Broadway. Also, Kermit and Miss Piggy, who spent most their *The Muppet Show* careers in a love-hate banter session, marry onstage during the opening night of *Manhattan Melodies*. This was the last theatrically released Muppet film during Jim Henson's lifetime.

The Muppet Show and the Muppet films solidified the Jim Henson Company oeuvre and gave it a distinct brand image that appealed to millions. The Muppets were charming, bizarre, witty and sometimes subversive. An early pitch created to sell *The*

Muppet Show to CBS slyly poked fun at the Nielsen rating system by reporting its broad appeal: “Small children will love the cute and cuddly characters. Young people will love the fresh and innovative comedy. College kids and intellectual eggheads will love the underlying symbolism of everything. Freaky, long-haired, dirty, cynical hippies will love our freaky, long-haired, dirty, cynical Muppets” (Juhl & Casson, 2005, *The Original Muppet Pitch Reel*). This moment was critical but also played to its audience. The Muppet frequently played outside the lines while understanding the limits needed to make the franchise marketable. The self-reflexive narratives criticized commercial interests and cultural hierarchies, but still championed innovation within existing industries and systems. In *The Muppet Movie*, for example, Doc Hopper tries to exploit Kermit’s potential to make money for his frog leg restaurants, but Kermit has his sites set on Hollywood. In another success story against all odds, Miss Piggy is initially passed up as a model in *The Great Muppet Caper* because of her unconventional physique, but ends up being a runway sensation anyway.

The film narratives tended to be simple and straightforward, allowing room for playful moments that did not have to propel the plot. The Muppet movies generally had several stand-alone scenes that allowed characters to play out short comedies reminiscent of the variety show format on *The Muppet Show*. In *The Muppets Take Manhattan*, for instance, the Muppets go their separate ways when they think *Manhattan Melodies* will never get produced. The only reason for them to disband, it seems, is so the film audience can enjoy the strange vocations they take up in each other’s absence. The band members of Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem, typically a 1970s jam band, become the house act

for a polka-dancing venue. Miss Piggy works at a perfume counter with Joan Rivers.

Fozzie the bear is too depressed to do anything and so he tries to hibernate.

Bizarre and tangential running gags also litter the films. For example, Carol Kane, a bar maiden with a lisp, turns up on a few occasions in *The Muppet Movie* whenever Kermit says, “myth,” thinking he is calling for her. Kermit is also in on the joke in this case, muttering, “Good grief, it’s a running gag” (Henson & Frawley, 2005). In many scenes of *The Great Muppet Caper*, Kermit shares his master plan to apprehend the jewel thieves with different characters, exclaiming with great weight that they will catch the criminals “red-handed,” and his listeners continually respond with, “What color are their hands now?” (Oz, 1981, n.p.). This playfulness exemplified Muppetness. The characters swung from the rafters, cracked jokes, and generally disrupted Kermit’s desire for order, but they also came together to solve bigger problems, working as a team toward a collective goal.

JIM HENSON THE BRAND

As the owner and manager of the Jim Henson Company, Henson drove the Muppet brand, inspiring his team and managing the TV and film narratives his company produced. As a result, the Muppets seemed to echo Henson’s life philosophies: “As children, we all live in a world of imagination, of fantasy, and for some of us that world of make-believe continues into adulthood. Certainly I’ve lived my whole life through my imagination. But the world of imagination is there for all of us—a sense of play, of pretending, of wonder” (Henson, 2005, p. 105). This and other quotes are printed in *It’s Not Easy Being Green: And Other Things to Consider*, a book published by Disney-owned

Hyperion Books in 2005, just after the company bought the Muppets. While the content is certainly truthful, the quotes by Henson and others are taken out of context. We cannot tell if Henson was answering interview questions, writing letters, or talking in a board meeting. Instead of constructing a written life of Henson, the book supports the author's brand image—an artist with a fervent imagination and a childlike sensibility. This was a man who also once said, “I don't think of myself as a person who relates terribly strongly with children” (qtd. in Lee, 1984).

Like many people, Henson had varied interests and at times contracted himself, but the Henson we see in interviews is the quiet man expounding on the physical and emotional life of his Muppets, often using Kermit as his primary muse. As Henson described it, “Kermit's function on the show is very much like my own, in that he's trying to hold together this group of crazies” (qtd. in Lazer, 1981). Kermit served as a symbolic representation of Jim Henson. As writer/biographer Christopher Finch put it: “Kermit is the Muppet character who is perhaps most like Jim Henson himself. Reasonably even-tempered and often long-suffering, the small green frog is the glue that holds the rest of the Muppets together” (Finch, 1993, p. 26). Jerry Juhl, head writer for *The Muppet Show*, also expressed this similarity by talking about Henson and Kermit's “only” difference: “The difference between Kermit and Jim [...] is that Kermit lives in the best of all possible worlds, a fantasy world in which everything can be resolved at the end of thirty minutes. Jim has to deal with reality” (qtd. in Finch, 1981, p. 65). Not surprisingly, many have made the connection between Kermit and Henson, but Frank Oz and others refuted a direct connection between the frog and the man: “If Jim was really

Kermit, he couldn't run this organization" (qtd. in Finch, 1981, p. 75). Certainly, Kermit's inability to rein in his fuzzy company of performers on *The Muppet Show* could not have been a direct mirroring of the production behind *The Muppet Show*, but the stoicism and pragmatic optimism that still define Kermit's character are strikingly similar to the characteristics of Jim Henson's persona. The "truth" of this comparison is irrelevant, but the fact that the connection existed, and still exists, indicates a crossover between Henson and the Muppets.

The influence of Jim Henson on the Muppet brand was also literal. The company's name and logo up until 2000 included Henson's name and his green alter ego. This authorial presence was not unlike that of Walt Disney over the Walt Disney Company. The history of the Walt Disney Company credits him with the imagination between the iconic character Mickey Mouse and the animation that made the corporation successful. He is in the name and he has an animated equivalent, Mickey Mouse. In both cases, the companies outlived their authors and struggled to remain true to their creative roots, while moving ahead and staying relevant as a brand. Even though Walt Disney died in 1966, the Disney brand is pervasive and recognizable and still holds to many of the ideals that were originally seen as some of Walt Disney's goals—dream making, imagination-stirring narratives for families. Later we will see how the power of the author brand was tested when these authors died. In the case of Jim Henson Company and Walt Disney Company, the corporations experienced moments of crisis before moving forward, the former less successfully than the latter.

MOVIN' RIGHT ALONG: THE MUPPETS AFTER HENSON

Just before his death, Henson had been in meetings with Michael Eisner concerning Henson/Disney collaboration and potential sale of the Muppets to the Walt Disney Company. However, the only project to come out of these talks initially was an ABC television special, *The Muppets at Walt Disney World* (1990). After Jim Henson's death, the Henson family sued Disney for illegally selling Muppet merchandise and planning a parks attraction called "Kermit the Frog presents MuppetVision 3-D." Disney counter-sued with a fraud claim, saying that Henson and Disney had an oral agreement that Disney could use the characters. The Henson family won the suit, but Disney was allowed to move ahead with its park—now called "Jim Henson's MuppetVision 3-D"—while the Jim Henson Company retained ownership of the Muppets until 2000. This phase of the brand's existence was relatively quiet, and altered the earlier conceptions of Muppetness, seemingly because the remaining creators and Henson executives could not conceive of Muppetness without Jim Henson. This loss also affects Jim Henson Company's reputation in the market. Jim Henson, after all, was the big name at the company and without him, how could the company turn out the same quality puppetry? Jim Henson had expanded the company's reach by creating a stable arts department called Jim Henson's Creature Workshop (now the Jim Henson Company's Creature Workshop), which built animatronics characters and puppets for hit films like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990).⁹



Figure 1.1. Kermit the Frog depicted mourning the loss of his creator.¹⁰

Despite the diverse influences and talents on the Muppet team, Henson had the artistic clout and brand recognition that drove the company. While he didn't single-handedly drive Muppet production, he was the differentiating element in the media market: the young artist who Children's Television Workshop scouted to make the puppets for *Sesame Street* and the industry leader who Disney required to head its proposed Muppet branch. This singular confidence in Jim Henson as an artist spelled trouble after his demise for the Jim Henson Company, which was primarily led by Brian and Lisa Henson in the 1990s. With animatronics fading into the past as computer animation became the more popular form of special effects, and an inability to keep the Muppets relevant as a film brand, the Jim Henson Company struggled to manage its holdings, including the classic Muppets, the characters from *Sesame Street* and *Fraggle Rock*, and its other puppet franchises.

Brian Henson was brought up in Jim Henson's Creature Workshop and looked a lot like his father, so he seemed to be a natural extension of Jim Henson's "hereditary" creativity. The fallacy of hereditary creativity is not unique to the Henson legacy. Roy O. Disney, Walt's brother, experienced similar pressure after the death of Walt Disney: "He was the one paraded before the world as the embodiment of the Disney Company [...] Crowds always seemed to respond to Roy, perhaps because, at age seventy-three, he bore such a close physical resemblance to Walt" (Steward, 2005, p. 2). It is unrealistic to believe that the authorial qualities of one person are passed on to another person, even a relative involved in the business. However, the importance of visual continuity to audiences seems to be a trend in both the Disney and Henson dilemmas of authorship. In addition to a physically symbolic legacy, Brian Henson was plagued by pressure to create productions in the same vein as Jim Henson. He had started in Jim Henson's Creature Workshop as a young man, with work spanning from design and special effects for *The Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984) and *Fraggle Rock* (1983-1987) to performing characters in *Labyrinth* (1986) and *The Storyteller* series (1988 and 1991). But the younger Henson was doomed to fail because he was not the same creative force as his father. While much of his career in the 1990s was taken up with maintaining Jim Henson's brands. Brian Henson's passion was poured into his sci-fi brainchild *Farscape*, which he saw as an important departure from his father's work. When asked if his father had any influence over *Farscape*, Henson answered abruptly, "No, not at all. He died two years before we even started talking about it" (*Broadcasting & Cable*, 2000). Brian Henson's primary

goal was to keep the Creature Workshop thriving in television and film, which turned the focus away from the problematic Muppet brand.

The Henson family's 1990s film projects for the Muppets are indicative of the company's inability to live up to Jim Henson's legacy. Idealized in memorial pieces by the press, Jim Henson's connection to the Muppets made it a difficult property to manage. As one would expect, references to Henson frequently pointed to his genius and unique abilities: "The master of Muppetry never seemed of this earth [...] A towering 6'3", Henson appeared to have access to farther horizons; the beard that hid teen acne scars gave him the air of a young Saint Nick. Above all, his gentleness—in art, business, and private life—bespoke a man for whom day-to-day matters were of less concern than the music he heard in his head" (Burr, 1997, p. 132). It is not unlike journalists to eulogize deceased celebrities, but it seems especially common for children's artists to gain mythic qualities post-mortem. Jim Henson was a media artist for 35 years starting in 1955, and his influence has affected generations of fans, even those who grew up on the movies made after his death: *The Muppet Christmas Carol* (1992), *Muppet Treasure Island* (1996) and *Muppets from Space* (1999).

However, these films display little of the Muppetness in the earlier films, maybe because Henson executives guessed audiences would not accept another standard Muppet movie without Jim Henson, or perhaps because it seemed easier to fall back on easy filmmaking frameworks, such as the adaptations *The Muppet Christmas Carol* and *Muppet Treasure Island*. Or, in the case of *Muppets from Space*, the Jim Henson Company tried to destabilize the centrality of Kermit by focusing on Gonzo's untold

story. The first two of these features, while favorites of some fans, expose the Henson family's mistrust of their own abilities to keep the Muppets alive. They relied on the established reputation of classical literature and on human actors to play the lead roles. This was uncharacteristic of the Muppets, who generally play themselves in present day. *Muppets from Space* shows a different set of weaknesses in the Henson family's maintenance of the Jim Henson brand. This movie featured the Muppets as the stars, the way they had been in Jim Henson's time. However, whereas the 1970s and 1980s Muppet films let Muppet antics fill in sparse plots, *Muppets in Space* attempted to privilege Gonzo's personal growth and narrative over those moments that define Muppetness. *Muppets from Space* lost money during its theatrical run, grossing \$22 million at the box office after spending \$24 million in production.¹¹

In interviews with trade publications, the Henson family was consistently asked about Jim Henson's "legacy" and the importance of their father's "vision" in future company projects. The authorial weight fell on Brian Henson's shoulders and those of his sister Lisa, who has co-owned the Jim Henson Company since 1990, though her role was not as vocal until she became co-CEO in 2002. For example, a *Hollywood Reporter* article entitled "The Muppets find their way home" put a family slant on the Henson family re-purchase of its Muppet holdings from bankrupt German media conglomerate EM.TV in 2002 (Bennett & Pryor, 2003). In another article in *Hollywood Reporter*, Brian and Lisa Henson defend their creative authenticity:

I think we pay a lot of attention to taking care of the vision Jim Henson had, yet we don't think of our job as just about history and the past. There is a balance between respecting where the company came from but understanding that it's

moving forward [...] Our dad was so technologically innovative in his time that our focus on being state-of-the-art does much to honor his memory and is an extension of the way he worked. (*Hollywood Reporter*, 2005, p. 6)

By the mid-1990s, the Muppets as a brand were no longer profitable, as evidenced by its film flops (Cieply & Barnes, 2011). The Jim Henson Company was drawing profits from other endeavors, while the classic Muppet tradition proved to be more of a burden than a benefit. After a short-term stint with EM.TV in 2002 and back with the Jim Henson Company in 2003, Brian Henson and his family sold the Muppets Holding Company—including the classic Muppets and the characters from *Bear in the Big Blue House*—to Disney in 2004. As Brian Henson said of the sale, “It became clear that Disney was best equipped to reposition the Muppets back to where they were in the beginning, which was an adult choice that was safe for kids, too. With Disney now controlling the brand, they'll have a stronger incentive to invest in the characters' long-term future and the brand's image” (qtd. in *Hollywood Reporter*, 2005, p. 6).

CONCLUSION

As the initial creator of the Muppets and a man utterly devoted to his artist endeavors, Jim Henson made his mark on the effectively defined Muppet brand. His work in puppetry made him an asset in early television, and despite the incalculable influence of his colleagues, Henson still receives the primary accolades for all Muppet work. This intertwining of branding and authorship affected the progression of the Muppet brand as the Henson family grappled with the Henson's legacy: “Jim Henson's vision plays on: His benevolent spirit hovers over the Henson Creature Shop creations for such movies as *Adventures of Pinocchio*; whenever Ernie warbles undying devotion to

his rubber duckie on Sesame Street” (Burr, 1997, p. 134). This strong persona also affects the franchise’s new creative handlers at the Disney’s Muppet Studio, who want to leverage the franchise without calling up Henson’s “spirit.” Disney is building on Muppet nostalgia with limited reference to its creator, leaving Jim Henson in the past.

Chapter 2: Re-branding the Muppets in a New Industrial Mediascape



Figure 2.1. Mickey Mouse and Kermit the Frog, the respective symbolic heads of the Walt Disney Company and the Jim Henson Company, are thrown together.¹²

The Walt Disney Company's acquisition of the Muppets Holding Company in 2004 marked the end of a fourteen-year ownership struggle. As discussed in Chapter 1, Disney had been in talks with Jim Henson for the few short years prior to his death in 1990, considering how to build a relationship between the Muppet franchise and Disney. However, these negotiations were never finalized and resulted in an intense legal battle between Jim Henson's heirs and Disney over the use of the Muppets. Before Henson's death, according to Disney's press agents and lawyers, Disney had signed a letter of intent with Jim Henson to merge Henson Associates/Jim Henson Productions with Walt Disney Company and sell the Muppet Holding Company (with rights to the classic Muppets) to Disney at the same time (Zonana, 1991, n.p.; Citron, 1990, n.p.). This letter never turned into an actual bill of sale, but Disney continued to plan its theme park attraction, MuppetVision 3-D, and to use the Muppets in theme park promotional

materials, including merchandise and a live stage show (*Associated Press*, 1991, n.p.; Lewis, 1991, n.p.).

The Jim Henson Company's lawyers argued that Disney had walked out of merger negotiations after Henson's death, and therefore had no rights to the characters. In the end, Jim Henson Company remained independent and held onto the rights to the Muppets, while Disney retained its theme park attraction. In addition, Disney continued to influence the future development of the Muppets, distributing two Muppet feature films (*A Muppet Christmas Carol* in 1992 and *Muppet Treasure Island* in 1996) and broadcasting a *Muppet Show* spinoff, *Muppets Tonight* (1996-1998), on its television network partner ABC. The Jim Henson Company sold the Muppets to EM.TV in 2000, but when the company folded in 2001, the Jim Henson Company bought the Muppets back. After this debacle between EM.TV and the Jim Henson Company, Disney finally bought all rights to the Muppets of *The Muppet Show* and put the characters on the shelf for the next few years.

Disney's persistent efforts to acquire this brand raises a few issues, including the perceived marketability of the Muppets at the end of the 1990s and Disney's overall plans for its family-oriented franchises. Clearly, Disney values the Muppets property for its potential to make money, but at the same time, the parent company has been careful not to "overexpose" audiences to the Muppets or overstate its own influence over the franchise. Between 2004 and 2008, Disney released three seasons of *The Muppet Show* on DVD and made an under-publicized ABC TV movie, *The Muppets Wizard of Oz*, but little else was done to push the Muppets into the limelight. The years 2009 and 2010,

however, saw a major marketing push by Disney. Muppets Studio—the newly named reconstruction of The Muppets Holding Company that does all creative work on the Muppets—released several viral videos on YouTube, one of which garnered over a million hits in one day and won a Webby Award. In September of the same year, Disney started a Disney parks volunteer program, with their TV ads starring the Muppets and select ABC TV stars. Also in 2009, the Muppets showed up at celebrity-laden events, including Kermit’s rendezvous with Lady Gaga at the 2009 MTV Music Video Awards and Miss Piggy’s appearances on *The View* and with fashion designer Marc Jacobs in his New York showroom. These viral videos and “celebrity” sightings of the Muppets are part of Disney’s greater marketing campaign to reintroduce the Muppets to American audiences.

While the sheer volume of Muppet-related content circulating on the Internet and in other more traditional media would seem conspicuous, Disney’s marketing approach has been rather subtle, releasing only a few pieces of content in different mediated sites of spectatorship—notably magazines, television and YouTube. Fans have also done equal if not more work to promote the Muppets in blogs and online participation with the Disney-lead campaign. Yet, in passing conversations and in surfing fan forums, I’ve observed that many people do not know that Disney owns the Muppets, nor have they noticed the content I’ve referred to above. Even self-proclaimed diehard fans may have only caught one or two instances of “Muppetry” on the Web or elsewhere.

Nonetheless, Disney’s marketing campaign is well underway, and it promotes a certain image of the Muppets as cultivated by the Jim Henson Company’s earlier work. I

intend to examine what role nostalgia and authenticity play in the “recharge” of the Muppet brand under Disney. I also examine Disney’s history as a brand manager, from Michael Eisner’s tenure as CEO to Robert Iger, who took the reins in March 2005. I then explore the role of nostalgia in the context of reintroducing brands and observe how Disney’s campaign approaches the Muppets’ return as both a “recharge,” or return to prominence, and more importantly, a re-branding of this franchise. As I discussed in Chapter 1, brand primarily addresses the associations and perceived social value of a product or body of work. In this case, the value of the Muppet brand could be threatened by Disney’s ownership because of the company’s corporate brand. As a result, Disney must approach the Muppets’ re-branding with careful attention to their narrative and cultural history. By servicing existing fans and introducing new fans to the Muppets, it seems that Disney hopes to both expand their audience and cater to a niche market of Muppet fans. Although Disney has been purposefully vague in the identity of the Muppets Studio team, the company’s strategic “re-authoring” of the new Muppet movie, *The Muppets*, and the authorial style of Disney Muppet marketing campaign signify the importance of authorship in a branded culture.

RE-BRANDING AUTHORSHIP IN THE CONGLOMERATE MEDIASCAPE

In Chapter 1, I addressed the emergence of corporatized branding and the social value of brands in consumer culture. To recap, brands are associated with social values, which can strengthen a consumer’s attachment to brands that align with his or her values or world view. My notion of today’s brand culture relies both on Arjun Appadurai’s definition of mediascape and Nicholas Carah’s invocation of term “brandscape.”

Appadurai (1995) defined mediascape as the availability of electronic channels of mediated information, the dissemination of media through these channels, and the images of the world created by media. Nicholas Carah (2010) layered the notion of brand onto Appadurai's mediascape, asserting that the brandscape reproduces "social structures of taste that empower capital accumulation" (p. 72). Both terms allow us to understand branding as pervasive and socially motivated. In an electronically connected world, people relate to each other through the media experiences they enjoy. For instance, people share YouTube videos and state affiliations on social networking sites not so much to define themselves for their own benefit, but to *connect* their mediated identities *with* others. Companies insert their brands into mediated social interactions between consumers, thereby integrating the brand "naturally and organically [...] into their lifestyles" (Carah, 2010, p. 2).

The Muppet brand is still associated with Jim Henson and other past Muppeteers who are no longer performing their characters. The nostalgia attached to the Muppet brand presents a major obstacle for Disney as it attempts to rewrite, or at least obscure, the Muppets' past. Stephen Brown, Robert V. Kozinets and John F. Sherry Jr.'s paper on brand revival outlines some key theories and practices that make a rebuilt brand successful. They understand a historical brand as a valuable source of market value, so long as an advertiser can unlock the "legitimacy and authenticity" tied up in the past of the brand (Brown, et al., 2003). Nostalgia, according to Brown, et al. plays a larger role in reviving a brand. They contend that since classic brands not only embody the original creativity and moral/political ideology of the brand, but also remind consumers of a

“better time,” when the world seemed safer and less commercial. They reference Fred Davis and his conception of personal and communal nostalgia: “The former is associated with individual life cycles; as people age, they are wont to reflect on the palmy days of their youth. The latter, conversely, occurs at a societal level in the wake of epochal changes precipitated by wars, revolutions, invasions, economic dislocations, or environmental catastrophes” (Brown, et al., 2003). However, the article also stresses the importance of balancing “progress and primitivism,” since a simple copy of the old brand does not sufficiently address a contemporary audience” (Brown, et al., 2003). While I am reticent to offer a generalized theory for Muppet fan unrest, some older Muppet fans are most certainly reacting in part to Disney’s conglomerate corporate brand image when lauding the Muppets’ past and disparaging its future under the corporation. Jim Henson ran *The Muppet Show* under the independent media mogul Lew Grade, who allowed Henson complete creative control, while today’s Muppets encounter the limits of Disney’s synergistic motives and corporate image.

The mediascape as it exists today reveals an environment influenced simultaneously by the 1990s merger-and-acquisition phase that put a handful of global media powers like Viacom, News Corporation, Time Warner, and Walt Disney Company in control of the industry, and an age of convergence in which multimedia narratives decentralize the source of content and allow for more effective user participation in brands while allowing corporations more insight into audience interests and desires. The Disney-ABC merger in 1995 created the largest media conglomerate at the time, and shook some critics’ confidence in the ethics of vertical integration and quality control of

synergy (Negus, 1997, p. 80). What the industry saw was a consolidation of film types into distinct groups: the high-grossing franchise films that often come in a series, the “Indiewood” films that garner more clout but are influenced by their conglomerate owners, and truly independent films that struggled even more to make it into the festival circuit and get picked up for distribution (Schatz, 2009).

As conglomeration took hold in the late 1990s, an equally strong convergence of media channels and communication technology took place, partially due to conglomeration and also the mainstreaming of the Internet and mobile devices. Convergence culture, Henry Jenkins argued, includes the multi-channel, synergistic marketing power of conglomerate businesses, but also the necessity of audience participation in a Web 2.0 environment. The “migratory behavior of media audiences,” or what I’ll refer to as an active audience, allows consumer creativity and sharing, but just as importantly, creates free information and advertising for brands (Jenkins, 2006, p. 2). Marketing theorist Christopher Locke (2001) also recognized this shift, explaining that advertisers would have to appeal to a fragmented and active market audience. A corporation can leverage this cultural capital and turn it into dollars by giving consumers what it thinks they want, for a price. In his further work on transmedia storytelling in the age of convergence, Jenkins asserted that transmedia storytelling is where the “integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience [and] each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (2009, n.p.). Although we’ll see that Disney’s marketing strategy with the Muppets borders on

incongruence, they are servicing a “unified” Muppet story, which we will not see fully realized until the film release.

REBUILDING DISNEY

Disney’s corporate history from the 1980s to the 2000s maps onto these industrial trends, as we can see through its maintenance and expansion of non-media assets, as well as its strategic moves with narrative film and television franchises. After Walt Disney’s death in 1966, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the Walt Disney Company experienced a disunity of vision coupled with a barrage of reassuring press releases so as not to scare away investors and audiences. It also saw a rather quick succession of leadership changes before Michael Eisner became CEO in 1984. Between 1966 and 1984, the film sector languished while Disney depended more on its parks revenue and TV licensing deals (Knee, 2009; Bryman, 1995). The company was hesitant during this period to take narrative risks, especially in the animation department, where it felt Walt Disney had been the major creative force. Due in part to this creative lull, senior animator and informal department leader Don Bluth left the company in 1979 with a select group of other animators, causing even more chaos in the department.

It wasn’t until the 1984 arrival of Frank Wells, a corporate lawyer, and Michael Eisner, an executive at Paramount, came into power—as president/chief operating officer and chairman/chief executive officer, respectively—that Disney saw a major shift in its business model. Eisner began to stabilize the company through increased parks ticket prices and “synergy boot camps” (Knee, 2009). He was also attached to creative, synergy-oriented meetings, especially a week-long retreat called Disney Dimensions,

“during which senior executives from across divisions were forced to spend sixteen hours of daily undistracted indoctrination that included cleaning the bathrooms at the parks” (Knee, 2009, p. 243). There was also a permanent “Synergy Group” with representatives from each department that reported directly to Eisner. This group had weekly “gong shows” in which employees brainstormed new ways to further the Disney brand (2009, p. 243). In addition to this synergistic push, Eisner also brought former Paramount colleague Jeffrey Katzenberg with him and help rebuild Disney’s motion pictures divisions. The two recognized the need for a few major hits to restart Disney’s film sector, so Disney produced and released more adult-oriented films like *Splash* (1984), *The Color of Money* (1986), and *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) under its Touchstone Pictures label. In fact, Eisner and Katzenberg hoped to close down the animation sector completely, but Roy E. Disney, who had the support of Disney’s Board of Trustees, insisted on keeping the dilapidated studio open and active (Stewart, 2005). As a result, Eisner appointed Katzenberg head of animation in 1985, with Disney working under him. Starting most notably with the major hit *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Disney released a series of films in the 1990s—*Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992) and *The Lion King* (1994). In addition to box office releases, Disney had been re-releasing classical Disney animated films, driving expectations for the aforementioned films and more re-releases from the “Disney Vault.”¹³ *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* also enjoyed ancillary franchises of their own with critically successful stage releases on Broadway, with *The Lion King* receiving acclaim at the Tonys, Grammys and other award shows. This corporate shift not only bolstered box office revenues, but also solidified Eisner and

Katzenberg's reputations as industry leaders and reinstated the Walt Disney Company as an animation empire.

Disney's ownership of distribution company Miramax from 1993-2010 and its partnership with Pixar from 1995-2004 (Disney acquired Pixar in 2006) created profitable but fraught relationships for Disney as it continued to expand its holdings and evolve its brand. Miramax maintained more symbolic independence from the media giant, since it carried a different name and had more of an edgy, "indie" reputation, while Pixar became strongly associated with Disney because the films were labeled as Disney/Pixar co-productions. The *Toy Story* characters' similarity to the Muppets makes Pixar a valuable brand to analyze. Also, the timing of the Disney/Pixar partnership coincides conveniently with the period in which Disney did not have the Muppets: the *Toy Story* franchise started soon after Disney backed away from the legal battle with Jim Henson Company in 1991 and Disney acquired the Muppets during a particularly contentious period of the Disney-Pixar relationship in 2004. Pixar Animation Studios started in 1986 when then-deposed Macintosh head Steve Jobs purchased Lucasfilm's computer graphics division. The computer graphics studio, renamed Pixar, was led by Jobs, Ed Catmull, who had been the vice president of Lucasfilm's graphics division, and John Lasseter, also previously at Lucasfilm. The partnership between Disney and Pixar, and especially between their CEOs Michael Eisner and Steve Jobs, was tense almost from the beginning. Disney signed an advantageous early deal in 1991 with the cash-poor Pixar for a three-picture deal that gave Disney 85-90 percent of the profit share (Price, 2008). This agreement started with the groundbreaking computer animation hit *Toy Story*.

Although Eisner agreed to Job's request for a contract revision that favored Pixar by 1997, Jobs continued to try and free Pixar from Disney's hold as a brand and a company. Increasingly at odds, Eisner and Jobs' professional disagreements devolved into hostility. By the 2000s, when Pixar and Disney were in constant battle over distribution and profit sharing and in 2004, Jobs announced that Pixar was looking for new distributors.

Before long, however, Eisner was ousted from Walt Disney Company in 2005, largely because of his inability to get along with Jobs. Bob Iger took over as CEO of Disney, Disney acquired Pixar, Jobs joined the Disney Board of Directors, and John Lasseter became head of Disney Animation Studios, which includes Pixar creations. Disney's relationship with Pixar points to an overall shift in Disney's family-oriented feature films. Instead of producing only animated films, it began to farm talent from companies like Pixar in order to strengthen its own brand. This was also Disney's plan in 1990 when it intended to purchase the Muppets.

Narratively, Pixar and the Muppets also parallel one another. Pixar's original feature *Toy Story* (1995) presumably took its premise—and inspiration for some characters—from Jim Henson Company's Christmas TV special *The Christmas Toy* (1986), a story about toys that come to life when their "owners" are away. In the story, the toys—led by the child's favorite toy Rugby the Tiger—nervously await the arrival of a new Christmas toy, which turns out to be an action figure, Meteora, a toy convinced she is not a toy but a galactic heroine fallen among aliens.¹⁴ This story may sound oddly familiar to anyone familiar with Pixar's 1995 hit. Both Pixar's and Henson's creations also used technological and nostalgic humor to ground their narratives, which I'll

elaborate below. The significance of these similarities is Disney's role in marketing the Muppets and its confidence in the Muppets' potential as a profitable brand.

Pixar's role as an innovator is not only due to its aesthetics, but also to its corporate organization. Instead of a central director or creator, films that come out of Pixar are "Pixar films," not John Lasseter films. Even though Lasseter has lead the creative efforts at Pixar, his lack to literal presence in the Pixar logo puts him one step down from Henson's pervasive influence on the Muppets. While Henson's legacy is partially mythical, it projects an "origin story"¹⁵ onto the company, thereby attributing all original creativity to one person or character, Jim Henson/Kermit the Frog, respectively. With branding centered on an anthropomorphized metal table lamp, Pixar avoids a direct link between author and text. Pixar's ability to isolate a single, or even a collective designated author from its corporate identity frees in from an authorial origin story. In other words, because Lasseter, Jobs and others are not literally part of Pixar's name, it may be easier to change Pixar leadership and ownership without creating waves among audiences. This is not the case with the Muppets. I would argue that Disney has and will continue to encounter this problem with Jim Henson's legacy and the Muppets. The Muppets will never be the brand it was because so many of the people who once constituted Henson Associates have died or moved on.

The point is that human agency remains essential in the creative process, especially in the media industry. Although some companies, like Pixar, have certainly moved away from a romantic notion of authorship, human traits, or personality, cannot be removed from a franchise. William Brown writes on the future of cinema, which he refers

to as a “posthumanist” cinema that could destabilize humanity’s central role as creators. Brown is careful to allay apocalyptic fears by explaining that people will not be erased from the creative and technological process, but that our engagement with increasingly interactive and intelligent technologies, including digital cameras, influences the way in which we make film. While Brown focuses primarily on formal and technological changes to narrative cinema, he does believe that posthumanist cinema can release us from some of the limits of human creativity. I agree that technology has a great deal to do with how the industry can enhance a story. One of the major influences in Jim Henson’s career was the technology of puppetry, both how the characters are constructed and what they can do physically because of their forms. I would also argue, though, that technology is equally tied to human imagination and ability. So while computer animation helped propel *Toy Story*, and puppetry inspired the Muppets, these technologies require the human agency of Pixar and Jim Henson Company’s team to bring them to life.

DISNEY “LOSES CONTROL” ONLINE

Disney is infamous due to its opaque corporate structure synergetic brand building, and as one of the most severe protectors of intellectual property. But the company has loosened this hold recently to accommodate convergent audience expectations, especially in its advertising of the Muppets. Disney was part of the push for the Copyright Extension Act of 1998, allowing the company to retain ownership of its brands 120 years after creation of the brand, or 95 years after publication. Literature on Disney’s practices by Janet Wasko, James B. Stewart, and others constantly points to

Disney's control of its brands' images and focus on synergy. As a company that manufactures films for children, Disney requires that its animated and other children's characters be treated carefully. Wasko explains how this control extends beyond the youth market, as in the case of the University of Oregon's mascot. Disney licensed the Donald Duck character to the university, stipulating that the duck must "be used 'in a good manner' and not portrayed in a 'negative light'" (Wasko, 2001, p. 88). She also points to a notorious international copyright lawsuit in which a French non-profit organization portrayed the "protected" sex lives of some Disney princesses for a HIV-prevention campaign (Wasko, 2001, p. 84). The campaign included adult-oriented images of Snow White and hinted at Cinderella's sex practices. These adult depictions were not used for profit, which shows Disney's attachment to its animation studio's squeaky-clean image in addition to economic interests.

However, the recent proliferation of fan and consumer-made content on the Internet has made it virtually impossible for Disney to completely control the use of its content. It did try initially to keep sites like YouTube from hosting videos featuring its characters. One example was the dispute over cult artist "Kelly," a teenage transvestite who created several mock pop music videos in 2007. Kelly posted a tune called "Let Me Borrow That Top" in September 2007 made up of *The Lion King* clips. Disney requested that the video be taken down. The video returned to YouTube later, since Disney's many complaints to YouTube fell flat. In 2011, you can find full-length videos of almost every animated Disney film. Disney has even become the object of ridicule in a YouTube video by Dr. Eric Faden that explains copyright law and the abusers of fair use—namely

Disney's alleged abuses of its influence in the media industry to control its brands (*Law Vibe*, 2007).

Disney also maintains its corporate image through public relations events and releases. The company does a great deal of work to sustain its image and holdings by pulling the strings only a powerful company has. For example, Disney "creates" its own press on Disney corporate events: "Coverage of these events by the press is not left to chance, as the company is well known for 'schmoozing' journalists, treating them to expense paid trips to the theme parks and showering them with gifts. The results are often glowing 'news' reports about the company's activities" (Wasko, 2001, p. 104-105).

Disney has done this with a MuppetCast host Steve Swanson. The MuppetCast is the only Muppet and Jim Henson-focused podcast. Swanson started his podcast out of his home in Ohio in 2007, but gained enough notoriety for Disney to notice. He was invited to the Mouse Guest Experience 2 at Walt Disney World in 2009. From the audio footage he recorded at the event, the meet-up consisted mostly of meals, alcohol tastings, and experiencing the classic attractions at the different Disney parks, which contributes to Wasko's image of Disney's policy toward journalists, even amateur ones.

THE GREAT MUPPET CAMPAIGN

With the exception of a few guest appearances on television and book releases, the Muppets have been relatively absent since 1999. As a result, many children and younger teenagers were rarely exposed to the Muppet characters. A vital audience for the Muppets and brand consumption in general, the youth market is Disney's next target for the new Disney-owned brand. Since the members of the younger audience is likely

unfamiliar with previous iterations of the Muppets, or too young to have formed a coherent brand identity, they may be less suspicious of any gaps in authenticity and the role of Disney in the Muppet's future. Existing fans of the Muppets include people in their 20s to those in their 60s, and possibly older generations. Many of these fans are the parents and grandparents of members of Disney's youth audience and play a key part in reintroducing their children and grandchildren to the brand. While some may be critical of newer works, young viewers' exposure to the older texts would likely lead them to seek out newer iterations of the Muppets. Any familiarity with the Muppets could ultimately make money for Disney, so attracting both young and older audiences serves the campaign's goals.

Disney's marketing campaign to reintroduce the Muppets launched in late 2008, first to advertise Disney's release of *The Muppet Show: Season 3* on DVD, then to promote the Build-A-Bear-inspired¹⁶ customizable Muppets at FAO Schwarz, and finally to push the 2008 Christmas special, "A Muppet Christmas Special: Letters to Santa." Kermit and Fozzie appeared together—much as they used to in *The Muppet Movie* (1979) and *The Great Muppet Caper* (1981)—on *Fox & Friends* and *The View* to promote the first two campaigns. The pair played off of each other's humor in a way that seemed less natural than before. Under Disney and with his post-Henson performer Steve Whitmire, Kermit has been brash and not very contemplative. Maybe the appearances on the shows were too brief, or perhaps Kermit has fallen prey to a sound-byte, character-limited culture, but the frog certainly lacked some of his characteristic introspection and quiet charm. Fozzie, the insecure and lovable comedian, transition more easily with his post-

Oz Muppeteer Eric Jacobson. As in former years, he leaned on Kermit's more-contained presence and cracked a few failed jokes to the audience.

“The Muppet Christmas: Letters to Santa” (2008) received more press than previous Muppet TV specials, which attests to Disney's marketing power. Among other promotions, Kermit submitted himself to a *Dr. Phil* intervention in December 16, 2008 and Miss Piggy chatted up the ladies on *The View* on October 1, 2008. The holiday special on NBC received tepid if not cold reviews from IMDb users and one scathing review from *The New York Times*: “This effort at Disney-fying the Muppets feels like a big old sellout [...] This is not children's television operating on two levels, slyly speaking to adults and enchantingly colonizing the minds of 8-year-olds. It is possible that ‘A Muppets Christmas’ operates on no level” (Bellafante, 2008). The TV event seemed contrived and relied on salient and safe celebrities like *30 Rock*'s Jane Krakowski and Nathan Lane to carry the show. Despite the poor reception, the active Web audience on IMDb.com seemed to be hopeful about the Muppets' return.¹⁷ Grouchier fans desired authenticity and a return to a Henson-esque Muppet age are far outweighed by optimistic long-time fans and excited newcomers to the Muppet brand. This is perhaps what Disney is counting on: a slightly critical viewing audience that is nevertheless anxious to be impressed. Disney's approach reflects this audience expectation. The Disney marketing campaign has appealed to both nostalgic viewers and newer audiences by referencing and carefully reframing Muppet history without Jim Henson.

Disney eased its ways into acknowledging ownership of the Muppets over the years and even at the peak of their marketing push from 2008-2010. This can be seen in

Disney's "Give a Day, Get a Disney Day" campaign, in the evolution of the Muppets.com site and the 2009-created Muppets Studio YouTube channel. The Muppets Disney park-centered campaign, The "Give a day, Get a Disney day" also started in 2009 and offered anyone a free day at a Disney park if they volunteered for a Disney-approved organization for a day. The Muppets were part of the L.A. branch of campaigning events, did a talk show circuit on *Access Hollywood* and *Good Morning America*, and also appeared in TV spots with ABC's *Desperate Housewives* stars Terry Hatcher and James Denton, as well as Taye Diggs. The campaign coincided with the beginning of the show's sixth season, and so killed three promotions with one stone: launching Disney's park campaign, encouraging viewers to watch *Desperate Housewives*, and announcing the official return of the Muppets. Disney used this airtime to present tightly orchestrated 30-second spots showcasing the Muppet ensemble up to their same old antics. In one ad, Kermit benevolently directed his construction team in building a house, a process that looks as chaotic as the backstage of *The Muppet Show*; Professor Bunsen Honeydew, and his assistant Beaker, the ne'er-do-well laboratory duo, fiddle unsuccessfully with a fuse box while the giant Muppet Sweetums ignored his duties, humming his familiar tunes from the rooftop. Meanwhile, Miss Piggy lounges on a litter of two-by-fours being carried by two workers (TheDenisDiaries, 2009a). These ads allow short and concise re-exposure to the Muppets as fans knew them in *The Muppet Show*, while still recognizing their affiliation with Disney.

Because the Muppets.com site changes frequently according to the advertised item of the day, it is more helpful to look at the larger structural evolution of the site,

which reflect a slow change in branding and appeal. Jim Henson Company's site, which launched originally in 1998, contained bios on twenty-seven Muppets, a few games, and a link to the Jim Henson Company's online store. When Disney purchased the site in 2004 and pulled the site offline during reconstruction, a still image of Kermit the Frog in a Mickey Mouse hat was put up in instead. This clearly acknowledged Disney's ownership of the brand and showed Kermit as the central symbol of the Muppets. However, social networking and mainstream participatory Internet culture was just taking off so it is not likely that many people would have noticed the change unless they were specifically looking for the Muppets online. Even those who saw it would not have had the online sharing power that exists today with blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. The site that finally replaced this temporary image in 2004 did not indicate Disney involvement. In fact, Muppets.com did not redirect to Disney's site until February 2008, when it received a new Disney.com border and the top navigation¹⁸ that exists on the rest of Disney's sub-sites.

The main Muppets.com page opened with a live-action video intro, launching the user into a "backstage" moment akin to *The Muppet Show*. One example included a brief video of Animal in front of the Web site environment, which was an image of a theater backstage. The entire page the spun off the "reel," like a literal roll of film. Rizzo the Rat appeared against a blank screen, fixed the reel and the actual Web site environment reappeared. Formatted similarly to a children's educational game, the scene was cluttered, colorful and chaotic. The user could click on one of many dressing room doors with the primary characters names on them to learning more about the character and the

merchandise associated with him or her. For instance, the Miss Piggy room spotlights *The Diva Code: 10,000 Idiotic Things That Men Frogs Do*, a 2009 book release riddled with advice and life lessons from the perspective of the pig celebrity. This new site did a fair amount to bring the Muppet characters back into prominence by reintroducing the audience to Kermit, Miss Piggy, Fozzie, Animal, and Gonzo—as well as newcomer Pépe, the shrimp who was first introduced on *Muppets Tonight* in 1996¹⁹ but gained popularity as the spokesperson for the seafood fast food chain Long John Silver's. All the characters had individualized sub-pages on Muppets.com (redirect: Disney.go.com/muppets).

Influenced by the success of the Muppets Studio YouTube channel, the newest Muppets site (updated in early 2011) has the YouTube videos shorts rolling in the center of the site, with related video options below and a large green ad at the bottom right of the screen that advertises *The Muppets* feature film (still scheduled to release in theaters November 2011). The site has the same Disney top navigation and is otherwise similar to the 2008 updates. The significance of the update is Disney's re-branding of the Muppets in the online environment. As part of their transformation under Disney, the Muppets moved to a new kind of stage, the Muppets Studio channel on YouTube, which launched in September 2009.

YouTube has been a popular source of viral marketing for several years, encouraging people to watch multiple videos and share favorites with family and friends. As mentioned above, Disney historically worked to shut down YouTube, or at least regulate the site's illegal Disney-related postings. So the Muppets Studio YouTube

channel marked a significant change in Disney's attitude toward viral video and user-generated media. This channel's content represents a kind of contemporary version of *The Muppet Show*, a variety show complicated by the user's ability to choose the sequence of sketches and determine their own period of engagement on the site. The Muppets Studio crew, led by Lyle Breier, said in an MTV press release that the group is trying to reintroduce fans to the Muppets in their original format, the variety show. By working in viral video and "without a schedule," Breier says the team has time to be creative and true to the nature of the Muppets as fans know them.

The content on YouTube features prominent Muppets in different types of sketches and song parodies, similar to those on their original show—the Swedish chef does cooking shows, Rizzo follows the skateboarding dog at a park, Bunsen and Beaker advertise their inventions with disastrous results. Every video ends with a point-of-view shot from the perspective of the computer screen. The "viewers" we see are Statler and Waldorf, the octogenarians who criticized each sketch originally on *The Muppet Show*. In a similar fashion, they jeer at the screen, finding fault with each video, or we, have watched. All of their jokes are updated for today's audience. In one short video of the two men, Waldorf comments on the strange newness of Internet culture, and the following dialogue ensues:

Statler: Everything here [on YouTube] is immediately followed by sarcastic comments and nasty responses.

Waldorf: Yep. We're finally where we belong. ("Statler and Waldorf: hrmph", 2009)

The other Statler and Waldorf sketches also provide commentary on the Muppet's unique presence on the Internet and generally, though back-handedly, compliment the work being done by the Muppets Studio creative team.

Doubtless the Muppets Studio is also important to recognize the invisibility of Disney in this aspect of the campaign. While many informed users may have been aware of Muppets Studio's parent company, the lack of Disney presence allows the viewer relative freedom from the traditional online campaign that seeks to direct the user to a central site. Since early Web 2.0 marketing, one popular trend has been for advertisers to use print and televised advertisements, as well as links or buttons on multiple sites to draw users to a central location online. What Disney did on YouTube, however, does not actively push users to a Disney site. Muppets.com is included below each video, but doubtless Disney marketers are aware of the video-to-video click-through behavior of YouTube users and do not expect most people to click on the Muppets.com link.

The most popular video on the YouTube Muppets channel to date, "Bohemian Rhapsody," original sung by Queen in 1975, is the epitome of synergy and rewards fans and the technologically savvy with intertextual references and Muppet-centric changes to the song. First, Disney has owned the U.S. distribution rights to Queen's song catalog since 1991, and by using a Queen song, Disney could collect more profits from increased Queen album sales (Smith, 2009). Second, Queen gained prominence around the time of *The Muppet Show*, so anyone plugged into pop culture at the time would recall both entities. As a third and final bonus, the song attained cult status as a parody by Mike

Myers and Dana Carvey in the film *Wayne's World* (1992). This reference makes “Bohemian Rhapsody” accessible to Generation X and Y cultural participants, expanding the audience reach even more.

This Muppet parody of “Bohemian Rhapsody” in particular points to traditional Muppet themes, while providing subtle commentary on the video itself and the state of the Muppets brand. In the beginning of the video, we open on Gonzo singing with a group of chickens, typical of moments from both *The Muppet Show* and from *The Muppets Take Manhattan*. The song changes to Animal as he belts out “Mama” and instead of continuing the lyrics in the next phrase, he shouts again “Mama?”—a fun moment for people familiar with the Queen lyrics and fact that Animal’s vocabulary is limited to about 10 words (“The Muppet’s Bohemian Rhapsody,” 2009). He also appears on the drums, which is his position in the long-running fictitious band, “Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem.”

After the iconic shift from solo to operatic chorus in Queen’s chorus, we meet characters that have not been mentioned in Muppet lore for years, and who will likely go back into storage after this appearance, like the Christmas turkey from the 1987 TV special “A Muppet Family Christmas.” The Muppets featured most prominently include a few of the more famous Muppets—Kermit, Miss Piggy, Fozzie, Gonzo, and Pépe. Other Muppets like Animal, Statler and Waldorf, Camilla, Scooter, and Sam the American eagle appear occasionally in videos and on promotional photos, but Disney has clearly narrowed its key players to the former group. Some of the lyrics in “Bohemian Rhapsody” subtly criticize Hollywood and the entertainment industry, a nod to past

Muppet narratives that were also wary of these systems (*The Muppet Movie* and *The Muppets Take Manhattan*, for instance). Some extraneous fruit and cactus-shaped creatures sing, “Does anyone know if there is a part for me?” and we assume that they will not factor greatly, if at all, in later Muppet ventures, especially the movie. Also, a chorus with *The Electric Mayhem* shows the band’s uncertainty about free culture and overnight fame: “So they say that this video’s going to fly. All I know is we’re not getting paid tonight.” This may be excused as a universal concern of burgeoning musical talent who get paid next to nothing for publicity, but it also implies that the Muppet staff deserve payment and in the future will rely on the audience to pay for the pleasure of seeing them.

At the end of the video, the song concludes, and we see Kermit and Scooter, the tech wizard of the Muppets, sitting at the computer, disgruntled. Kermit asks Scooter not to set up any more video conferences, since they have proved unproductive, a final reference to Kermit’s frustration on *The Muppet Show*, when he continually tries to tame the chaos of all the other wild Muppets.

The “Bohemian Rhapsody” video is accessible to most audiences, but primarily offers enjoyment to Muppet fans by staying true to *The Muppet Show* tropes, and by avoiding a strong linkage to its parent company. Response to the video and the Muppets Studio channel in general has been overwhelmingly positive. The video won the 2010 Webby Award for “Best Viral Video.” Disney produced yet another video in conjunction with the award on rock band Ok Go’s YouTube channel that featured a starring contest between Animal the band’s drummer. The “event” took place behind the scenes at the

award ceremony and included Chicago Public Radio host Ira Glass as one of the instigators of the contest. This added another layer to the Muppet viral video ethos. With an intellectual icon like Glass and the relatively mainstream Ok Go, Disney once again attracted various audience segments in its campaign.

Fan comments on YouTube reveal only a few vocally disgruntled fans who, as expected, are not enthused by a Disney takeover (Muppets Studio, 2009b, n.p.). Interestingly, many of them were taken aback to learn that Disney owned the characters: “I am a bit disappointed [sic] that clicking on your website reveals a link to Disney!!! OMG, I had hoped you guys would never be assimilated into that! What a shame, what you do here is classic, please let Disney have no control over what you do ever!! We don't need no hidden cultural message/learnings etc, just plain fun!” Another fan is also bewildered to discover that this page is part of Disney: “Disney owns the Muppets? When did that happen? (Goes onto Google...) ‘Disney buys Jim Henson's Muppets (2004). The deal includes a four-year consulting arrangement with the Jim Henson Company and [sic] a three-year production deal to develop movies and television shows.’ OK, so are [sic] Disney out on their own with the Characters now?” (Muppets Studio, 2009b, n.p.). These responses reveal that Disney’s marketing strategy was somewhat hidden. Except for Muppet.com, which redirects to a Disney.com page, the Muppet appearances released on YouTube and elsewhere on the web are relatively Disney brand-free.

It comes as no surprise the Disney wants fans to associate the Muppets with their inherent Muppetness and nostalgia for their childhood instead of acknowledging that the

Muppets may change under new management. Many other fan responses on the site do express a nostalgia and sometimes even support for the Disney changing of the guard: “Jim Henson was a genius...I remember watching the originals as a kid...and now Jim Hensons [sic] son is entertaining my son...Thanks for the memories guys [sic].” “I’m repeating something I saw on this video’s comments... quote ‘I know Jim Henson is looking down smiling because he knows he left the muppets [sic] in good hands’” (Muppets Studio, 2009b, n.p.). “I’ve been watching The Muppets since I was little =3 I love them so much [sic]” (Muppets Studio, 2009b, n.p.). While we do not know the age of these respondents, their reference to an older time supports Brown, et al.’s assertion that fans tend to memorialize their pasts in connection to the brands they enjoyed, which is why Disney’s presentation of the Muppets, and their new authorial figures, is so crucial to the potential of the Muppets under Disney.

FINDING THE NEW HENSON ASSOCIATES: AUTHORSHIP AND THE UPCOMING MUPPET FEATURE FILM

As mentioned above, the Muppet brand cannot completely escape its strongly rooted author story. The Jim Henson Company, and in particular the representative authorship of Jim Henson, has a significant historical presence in the Muppet franchise. In order to both avoid invoking the ghost of Jim Henson and assuage audience and journalists’ fears of a cinematic flop, press releases for the upcoming 2011 Muppet film features a new pair of authors. Jason Segel is the head writer and star of the film, while James Bobin acts as a kind of creative second as the director. We have seen this problem of the “right” authorship before in other revived brands of the 2000s, including the

Batman franchise and *The Lord of the Rings* series. Kristin Thompson's work on *The Lord of the Rings* positions Peter Jackson's Tolkien fandom as key to the authenticity of the new trilogy release. His dedication to bringing the books to life assured fans that the new films would satisfy their grand expectations. Tom Schatz (2008) stated the importance of the indie film/Hollywood studio system collaboration. Part of this collaboration includes the use of independent directors on big budget films, which reinforces "the vital importance of directorially 're-authoring' an established narrative formula via distinctive, stylized treatment, to enhance its prospects for a successful revival" (p. 35). This trend plays into the re-authoring of the Muppets, in that Disney is not only attempting to recreate the Henson-Oz creative team, but also relying on the cult appeal of Segel and Bobin in attracting adult audiences, both fans of the Muppets and otherwise.

In preparing the public for the new Muppet movie, *The Muppets*, Disney has been careful in aligning the Muppet brand with independent artists who exemplify the original Muppet brand, only recently citing the importance of honoring Jim Henson's legacy. Jason Segel is a writer/director/actor associated with Apatow Productions, a successful, independent film production company. His comedic approach aligns with the somewhat raunchy and goofball humor of the Muppets. In addition, Segel is a self-proclaimed Muppet fan. His personal fandom, which is referenced in multiple press releases in 2009 and 2010 promoting *The Muppets*, is meant to authenticate his role in the production, and symbolically focus the authorship of the new feature film (Rosenberg, 2010, n.p.; Rottenberg, 2010, p. 14-15). His latest film writing collaboration, *Forgetting Sarah*

Marshall,²⁰ works the Jim Henson legacy into his oeuvre. In the film, Segel's character writes a puppet musical called *Dracula's Lament* that features a vampire puppet from the Jim Henson Creature Shop. The popularity of the fictional musical extended beyond the film, with a live performance of the title song by Segel on *The Late Show* and the MP3 downloads offered by Amazon.com.

The second major creative artist in the forthcoming Muppet movie is director/writer/actor James Bobin, who is set to direct and co-write the Muppet movie. James Bobin's previous work with *The Ali G Show* solidifies him as a socially conscious comedic writer, but while his writing and directing work with *Flight of the Concorde* connects him more closely with the Muppet brand. Quirky, bizarre and almost always parodying a music or film genre, the *Flight of the Concorde* show follows two New Zealand songwriters attempting to find fame in America. The show's narrative is frequently interrupted by a song, including such favorites as "Business Time," a musical account of a couple's uninventive sex life, or "Foux de fa fa," a part nonsense word, part elementary French frolic reminiscent of New Wave cinema and early French music videos. The absurdity and parody intrinsic to Bobin's style aligns him the classic Muppet style. While it may handle the marketing, distribution and production costs of the film, Disney has left creative control to these independent artists, as if attempting to recreate the Henson-Oz duo. As Lylle Breier, general manager of Muppets Studios put it, "we want the first movie that we make to be the right movie, and to be very special" (Swanson, 2009, n.p.). Clearly this involves a creative team disassociated with the Disney brand, at least for now.

Entertainment Weekly and the magazine's blog *PopWatch* have also done a fair amount to advertise the Muppets, mostly in relation to the new film. The first example was a "Reunions Issue" in the October 22-29, 2010 release of the magazine, which features several casts of past TV shows, movies, and bands. *The Muppet Show* section consisted of an interview with the characters about their relationships, favorite *Muppet Show* moments with the stars, and their upcoming film. While other reunion sections, including *The Lord of the Rings* reunion, told the history of the movie, *The Muppet Show* section said very little on the subject, probably to keep mentions of Jim Henson to a minimum ("EW reunion," 2010). In the November 12-19, 2010 issue, *Entertainment Weekly* spotlighted the new Muppet movie, with quotes from interviews with Segel and Bobbin. The article also introduced audiences to Walter, a tech-savvy Muppet made for "today's audience" (Rottenberg, 2010). Finally, *PopWatch* blogger Margaret Lyons posted an enthusiastic note on the upcoming film on January 19, 2011: "In these trying times of chaos and violence and filthy January slush all up in my shoes, Kermit and the gang shine like a flickering beacon of hope in the far distance" (Lyons, 2011). This kind of return-to-decency and fear-mongering rhetoric is decidedly anti-Muppetness, but reflects precisely the nostalgia that Brown, et al. mentioned in their article on brand revival. People may forget Jim Henson's passion for explosions, general violence, and dark themes, or recall the more child-oriented shows like *Sesame Street* and *Fraggle Rock* when reminiscing on their "palmy" younger days with the Muppets. This whitewashing of childhood is not unusual and works to further obfuscate Henson's work as a media artist. What is does do it excite fans about the upcoming film that features

their childhood heroes. The comments to *PopWatch*'s blog post support this, as the response was overwhelmingly enthusiastic and positive regarding the new Muppet film.

CONCLUSION

The Walt Disney Company acquisition of the Muppet represents not only a change in ownership but also a break in authorship that could potentially divide fans and diminish Disney's Muppet revenue. Disney's treatment of the Muppets is also reflective of the corporation's evolution from its 1990s return to power to its newer, less restrictive presence in a convergent culture. The Muppets would certainly have played a different role had Disney succeeded in snapping up the characters in 1991. Today, Disney must appeal to a fragmented market of niche audiences, playing a slightly different Muppet tune to each. Reception of the Muppet YouTube phenomenon has been overwhelmingly positive.



Figure 2.2. Fan-made Muppet creations that made waves in the blogosphere.²¹

In addition, fan art has popped up online that seems to coincide with Disney's Muppet push. Thanks to the shift to social networking and blogging environment online, fan-created and Disney-produced videos and images are circulated widely and rapidly.

Certainly there are impediments to a successful return of the Muppets, including Jim Henson's absence. Disney has taken an aggressive cross-promoting synergistic approach that somewhat diminished the Muppet characters to advertisers for Disney and its multiple holdings. The Muppetness of the Muppets may indeed be lost if Disney insists on profit before brand image and lets the Muppet characters flounder in future narratives.

Chapter 3: Princesses and the Pig: The Muppets' Leading Lady Gets Her Crown

With the purchase of the Muppets, Disney has consolidated its control over a long-coveted brand. Because of the Disney park attraction, MuppetVision 3-D, the Muppets have been directly connected to Disney since 1991, but Disney's ability to use the brand was severely limited. The 1991 Henson/Disney legal battle gave all rights to the Jim Henson Company, and so Disney had not been able to sell merchandise or promote the parks with the characters featured in the attraction. With the 2004 deal, however, Disney had free reign to use the characters as it liked. Starting with a major parks campaign, Disney swiftly moved to more widespread advertising pursuits in order to rebuild the Muppet audience in time for their 2011 film *The Muppets*.²²

Several primary characters—Kermit, Miss Piggy, Animal, and less so Fozzie and Gonzo—led the 2009-2010 campaign effort. Out of all of these characters, I would argue that Miss Piggy has been extended the furthest over Disney's advertising sites. She has enjoyed equal treatment to Kermit the Frog in publicity stills and promotion of *The Muppets*, but has featured more prominently than any other Muppet in advertising and TV marketing: promoting the Disney parks, advertising for Pizza Hut, and announcing her book and Muppet TV specials on *The View*. The only primary female in the Muppet ensemble, Miss Piggy has always been central to the Muppet brand. Her unanticipated appeal on *The Muppet Show* gave her lasting star power and still makes her an obvious choice as spokes-pig for the Muppets. She has also worked in other campaigns to extend

the Disney brand. As a role model for girls, however, she is not in line with Disney's traditional female leads. Less about personal virtue and more about common vices, fashion and celebrity, Miss Piggy is not a conventional Disney heroine.

The Walt Disney Company owes much of its success to girls and girl consumerism and has long profited from girls' connections to its female characters. Since the release of *Snow White* in 1937, the company has crafted many girl-centric animated feature films and provided narratives and merchandise that build a particular construction of girlhood. These girl characters are now grouped together under the portmanteau "Disney Princess,"²³ even if the same characters do not have any literal connection to royalty. Because the fantasy image of the princess became a valuable merchandising brand in Disney stores in 2000, the company expanded the "Princess" identity to include as many characters as possible, including a more racially diverse lineup. The Princess Collection has become Disney's primary connection to girl culture, including the young girl audience (age 2 to 6 primarily), but also the older female audience that Disney perceives as nostalgic for the "princesses" of their era. For example, women over 50 may not have as much of a connection to Belle of *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) as they may to Aurora of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), simply due to period during which they were children.

Especially for females, who Disney executives say experience an early attachment to princesses, identity with a female character during the post-toddler phase not only creates desire for products but a lasting connection that will cultivate devotion to the Disney brand through adolescence and adulthood (Forgacs, 1992; Licensemag, 2009, n.p.). As Disney Princess vice president and general manager Mary Beech put it, "We

keep the brand alive with moms that trust Disney as the authentic and original princess brand” (LicenseMag, 2009, n.p.). It is important to note, however, the Disney has always targeted the family audience with its animated features. The company’s comments on the Princess Collection foster an all-female brand experience around merchandise purchases, but the film narratives are meant to appeal to entire families.

Enter the Muppets, an ensemble of characters similar to those in *Toy Story*: male-dominated and full of goofy supporting characters. The Muppet brand, as I discussed in Chapter 1, has a long history of devoted fans and draws on already-existing body of work, the perfect property for a company like Disney that makes millions off re-releases. Unlike a typical animated Disney story, the Muppets have two lead characters, Kermit and Miss Piggy, with five or six other primary characters and a whole host of less-featured Muppets.²⁴ Miss Piggy, though, is a larger-than-life leading lady who demands attention more than any Muppet when she is in the frame. With a personality that “everyone identifies with and either loves or hates,” Miss Piggy has been an advertising asset (Jim Henson qtd. in Lazer, 1981, n.p.).

In this chapter, I re-examine the history of Disney Princesses and the evolution of their marketing appeal, especially after 1989. These post-1989 Princesses took a post-feminist turn, which made them identifiable for a young female consumer audience. I then compare these Princesses to the newest female star, Miss Piggy, in order to construct an idea of Disney’s girl-centered campaigns. I draw upon Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill’s explorations of postfeminism, especially McRobbie’s assertion that postfeminism is not politically feminist: “Elements of contemporary pop culture are

perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to ‘feminism’” (2007, p. 27). I also agree with Rosalind Gill’s assertion that postfeminism is not so much a historical shift, but instead a “sensibility” popularized in media culture that emphasizes the importance of “sexiness,” individualism and determination, self-discipline, and consumerism for girls in postfeminist media culture. Sexiness and discipline in particular are consumer traits since purchasing cosmetics and clothes to enhance the attractiveness of the body often promotes betterment of the “self”. The pursuit of sexiness is not always explicitly marketed in postfeminist discourse as means of attracting a man, but rather part of creating a “healthy” self-image and generally being self-sufficient. All of this determination and maintenance creates the “ass-kicking [,] able, independent, and cute” teenage heroines of television, film and magazine covers (Durham, 2003, p. 24-25). So, postfeminism is a media-inspired representation of femininity popular in the 1990s that masquerades as feminism by touting physical confidence, independence, and determination as markers of a strong woman or girl. However, postfeminism is still heavily influenced by mainstream conceptions of femininity, and focuses on the visual and commercial appeal of the female body. This is why, as Gill points out, a postfeminist woman must be sexy and appealing as well as strong and independent.

Miss Piggy does not quite fit into Disney’s postfeminist girl culture historically. Her contradictory nature complicates notions of girlhood and society’s expectations of female behavior. She has been identified as an adult icon, both because her personality is

not as simple to define as the princesses and because she acts as a fictional adult celebrity outside the text of the films and TV shows she plays in, but her aesthetic values and femininity may still be attractive to girls. Because of her celebrity status, she acquires a fair amount of face time as part of the Disney marketing campaign, but her image under Disney has become more “manageable” and cute, which I’ll discuss later. It remains to be seen in the upcoming film(s) if Miss Piggy’s subversive behavior outlives her unmanageable body.

BUILDING GIRLHOOD THROUGH FANTASY



Figure 3.1. The most commonly depicted Princesses in the Disney Princess Collection: (from left to right) Belle, Jasmine, Cinderella, Ariel, Snow White and Aurora.²⁵

The Walt Disney Company has been a multi-platform corporation for more than 50 years and profits from a highly lucrative family consumer market.²⁶ Especially since Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg succeeded in restoring Disney’s animated film studio starting with *The Little Mermaid* in 1989, Disney has approached filmmaking as a

conservative conglomerate, relying on blockbusters and expandable franchises—like *The Pirates of the Caribbean* or *Toy Story*—in order to remain profitable in the film sector. Despite this rather business-like approach, Disney sells itself as a dream factory, a safe institution of innocent pleasures made for children and adults alike. David Forgacs, in “Disney Animation and the Business of Childhood,” lays out Disney’s multi-age system: “The secret of Disney’s current success lies largely in its skillful handling of these relays between past and present, adult, adolescent and child” (Forgacs, 1992, p. 362). By combining the old and new, Disney creates a sense of timelessness for multi-generational audiences (Do Rozario, 2004).

This timelessness functions most notably in the Princess franchise as a function of glamour and fantasy. For example, all of the Princess films are period pieces, some recognizable to an older audience—such as the 1930s setting of *The Princess and the Frog* and the early years of the seventeenth century in the case of *Pocahontas*—and others vague, ranging from medieval times to the Victorian periods of fashion history. Because these histories are purposefully apolitical and nonspecific, they all fall under the general purview of an otherworldly fantasy, largely escaping the kitsch of “datedness.” *Snow White* may be the most dated Princess film due primarily to the stylized crooning in the film, but this has not made the film unsuccessful through multiple re-releases, nor would the Princess market, girls 2-6, necessarily recognize the 1930s-specific style. In fact, *Snow White* made \$8 million in 1937 (international) after Disney spent \$1.5 million to make it. Since then, the movie has made approximately \$118 million in U.S. theatrical re-releases, and \$20 million in VHS purchases. Disney has not released a total DVD

gross number for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, but 1 million copies of the DVD were purchased the first day it was released in 2001. The set will return to the Disney vault in 2011. Because of the general timelessness of the Princess films, and Disney's strategic release pattern as seen in the case of *Snow White*, helps to maintain the popular appeal of the characters.

Miss Piggy exploded on the Muppet scene in the first season of *The Muppet Show*. At first a minor character, the Miss Piggy cooed and karate-chopped her way to the front of the stage as Kermit's high-maintenance admirer and stage diva. With her old Hollywood glamour goddess look, Miss Piggy became one of the most popular Muppet characters: "Miss Piggy's become a phenomenon in the last few years and I think when we introduced her, we had no idea she would take off like she has. The media has taken her and made a big thing of her" (Jim Henson qtd. in Lazer, 1981). Known for her tacky ensembles, Miss Piggy has nonetheless evolved according to fashion and cultural trends. Her style choices started as more of a joke in the 1970s and 1980s, but she has been refurbished as a label-wearing trendsetter since Disney took the reigns, allowing female audiences the pleasure of coveting Miss Piggy's wardrobe. This Disney-fied image of Miss Piggy not only creates more buzz for herself and the Muppet brand, but it also dramatically changes the marketability of her glamour. Instead of an unattainable Hollywood fantasy, she is a Marc Jacobs-wearing star whose image is consumable. This transition to a buyable fantasy works with both the Princesses and Miss Piggy, both within their respective film texts and as part of the wider media culture industry. As characters, these figures are driven by aspirations and dreams, but as cultural images,

they extend fantasy and identification with the audience beyond the screen and encourage consumption as a part of realizing fantasy.

The Disney Princesses have been central figures in Disney's animated film industry, starting with the first full-length animated film *Snow White* (1937). This early technological innovation launched Disney reputation as a children's media company and an adapter of fairy tales.²⁷ While Disney's depth and breadth expand far beyond animated filmmaking today, it is most famous for children's fairy tales and family-friendly entertainment. Disney's success with female-centered narrative continued when profits from *Cinderella*, released in 1950, helped ameliorate losses sustained from subsequent animated movies, including *Dumbo* (1941) and *Pinocchio* (1940) (Arkoff, 2009). The third Princess film, *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), was the last of the cycle until 1989, when Disney released *The Little Mermaid* in 1989. These early princess films have been re-released in theaters and in limited VHS and DVD sales over the years, often in tandem with a new film release, reinvigorating classical Disney narratives that are now part of the famous collection.

Disney always made an effort to render the Disney Princesses identifiable for girls, while keeping the greater family audience in mind. While the pre-1989 Princesses are less contemporary and more closely tied to their fairytale roots, the visual manifestation of the Princesses was of special concern to Walt Disney's creative team. In the case of *Snow White*, one of the younger looking Princesses, Disney wanted to create something less glamorous: "They didn't want her to look like a princess [...] They wanted her to look like a cute little girl who could be a princess [...] sweet and graceful"

(Grim Natwick qtd. in Arkoff, 2009, n.p.). Snow White's youthful appearance differentiates her from both Cinderella and Aurora of *Sleeping Beauty*, who are fully developed and hourglass in shape by their mid teens.²⁸ However, all of the princesses, according to Beech, "appeal to little girls with their compassion and beauty" (Licensemag, 2009, n.p.). Other than these two traits, the most we get out of the princesses' rather two-dimensional existences is their wish to have their dreams come true without taking any action. These three princesses have little to recommend themselves character-wise, but they are part of a visual trend in the "teenage" body that promotes a certain feminine fantasy image. This attention to female form continues along with the postfeminist princesses of the 1990s and 2000s.

The Little Mermaid opened in 1989, earning \$110 million at the U.S. box office and \$222 million worldwide (Stewart, 2005). It was more successful than Disney executives had anticipated, and marked the beginning of a new era of Princesses who were not young women waiting on dreams, but teenagers coming of age and making choices for themselves. The princesses of the early 1990s—Ariel the mermaid of *The Little Mermaid*, Belle of *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and Jasmine of *Aladdin* (a 1992 adaption from the *Book of One Thousand and One Nights*)—represent a successful series of Disney animated features unwittingly influenced by girl power culture, while the later Princesses—Mulan, the Chinese female warrior of *Mulan* and the American legend Pocahontas of *Pocahontas*—are reactions to their largely white Princess predecessors. Finally, the Princesses of the 2000s, Tiana of *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and Rapunzel of *Tangled* (2010), serve commercial interests more explicitly, incorporating

marketable apparel, accessories, and hairstyles within the narratives to sell to young female audiences. What all of these princesses share is their adherence to a postfeminist understanding of popular girl culture, which coincides with a merchandisable image of beauty that Disney can sell to its audience.

The Disney Princesses of the 1990s and 2000s are all postfeminist teens coming of age and struggling with patriarchy: “The princesses learn forbidden dances, go into forbidden places, desire forbidden princes. At age 16, they cross the threshold of womanhood and investigate a world that has been taboo and beyond a father’s rule” (Do Rozario, 2004, p. 51). While the princesses seem to defy patriarchy, by the end of the films they tend to be folded back into hegemony. I will explore some of the traits that make these characters stronger than earlier Princesses while exposing the postfeminist flaws that contain them. First, the postfeminist Princesses are active figures. They are physically agile and strong, and make their own choices, despite their parents’ wishes. Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario makes a case for the athletic Disney Princesses in her work: “They enact a shift from the ‘princesses’ of ballet to the ‘heroes’ of sport” (2004, p. 47). I agree that some of the Princess characters—especially Mulan, Pocahontas, and Rapunzel—enact feats of strength and agility. However, their male counterparts are also lithe and physically capable, indicating that girls have caught up without endangering the boys’ status as heroes.

Additionally, the Princesses are quite a bit more fiery and courageous than Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora. These “prefeminist” princesses did not any and all personality, but they fit more solidly into a more passive “damsel in distress” role.

Comparing Ariel and Snow White, Janet Wasko illustrated an important point: Ariel is “sensual, aggressive, mischievous, adventurous, savvy, independent”—much like the Muppet star I examine—while “Snow White [...] is shy, obedient, hesitant, naïve, innocent, and motherly” (Wasko, 2001, p. 134). This distinction in images of girlhood does speak to an evolution in representation, but Wasko was also careful to say that these two princesses both actively desire a common fantasy: partnership with a man, and a presumably wealthy and powerful one at that. Not all the Princesses marry or are particularly focused on monogamous romantic relationship but every character nonetheless finds one. Miss Piggy also covets the attentions of a male love object, but instead of the Princesses, who come into womanhood by means of a lasting, fulfilling romance, Miss Piggy’s love for Kermit seems to be a byproduct of her ambition. Kermit is part of her natural drive to get what she wants, and seems to carry equal weight with her need to become rich and famous.

The Disney Princess Collection turns the Princesses into livable fantasies that girls can act upon. Instead of gazing at a screen, girls can own Princess apparel, manipulate Princess dolls to play out their own fantasies, and otherwise “live in-character” (Wohlend, 2009, p. 58). Karen E. Wohlend explores the tension of consumption and creation in her article “Damsels in Discourse: Girls Consuming and Producing Identity Texts through Disney Princess Play.” Wohlend concludes that girls manipulate the Princess world, taking up the role of the prince or hero, but also define their world by many of the same rules that limit the Princesses in Disney films, such as heterosexual marriage.

This should by no means discount the possible value of these Disney girls as role models. The postfeminist princesses are relatively complex characters, and certainly more three-dimensional than the earlier Princesses. One feminist blogger recalls the importance of her childhood Princess: “I identified with [Ariel] instantly. Her problems made so much sense. Her whole world was wrong - she knew where she belonged, but no one could understand. And she didn't care, she went for it anyway, became the person she knew she should be in the world where she knew she belonged” (Harding, 2010, n.p.). I also personally identified with Belle as a young girl, primarily because she is a brunette, but also because of her bookish and defiant personality. All I needed was the legendary yellow ball gown and a Beast. However, Belle also tolerates a life as prisoner at the expense of her own safety and happiness, which champions socially acceptable female traits like selflessness and patience. Femininity does not have to work against a truly feminist representation of girlhood, just as feminist girls do not have to toss aside all feminine traits, but to consistently qualify independence with self-sacrifice, or defiance with patience, limits the scope of female characterizations within an innocuous, postfeminist framework. The power of independence, determination and strength are tempered by conventional heteronormative desire and traditional female virtues.

These characterizations have been proved to affect girls' self-identity. In her article on race in Disney Princess imagery, Dorothy L. Hurley theorizes that images help children understand their social world: “Children’s literature [...] plays a role—along with other forms of print and electronic media such as television, magazine images, and movies—in providing visual images to children that give them cultural information about

themselves, others, and the relative status of group membership” (2005, p. 221). Karen E. Wohlend adds gender to this argument in her discussion of girls’ play with Disney Princess dolls: “Identity messages circulate through merchandise that surrounds young consumers as they dress in, sleep on, bathe in, eat from, and play with popular culture images [...] that communicate gendered expectations about what children should buy, how they should play, and who they should be” (2009, p. 57-58). This identity formation plays into the imagery of the Disney Princess Collection. As much as Disney has expanded the ethnic range of its Princesses, the collection presents a limited perspective on female personality and form. All of the Princesses are slender, pretty, and most are unrealistically curvy, like Barbies or other fashion dolls. In posters and book covers, the less curvy dolls, Mulan and Snow White, are generally “Photoshopped” to conform to the look of the other Princesses. Snow White at times crosses her arms in front of her hips to create the illusion of an hourglass figure. These kind of visual cues hint further at standards of beauty, an expectation that one particular pig violently rejects.

MISS PIGGY AND CHALLENGING “EMPHASIZED FEMININITY”

Miss Piggy first appeared as one of the ensemble on *The Muppet Show* in 1976, and her outrageous appearance and personality soon catapulted her in the limelight. Known for her overstated ensembles, French affectation, and overwhelming confidence, Miss Piggy was a perfect onscreen star. Her appeal found traction off screen as well. By 1981, Miss Piggy had appeared on the cover of *People*, *Time*, *Life*, and England’s *Saturday Evening Post* magazine. The pig starred as a shrewdly ambitious and obsessively romantic pig in the Muppet films produced under Jim Henson, and continued

to play a prominent role in the Muppet brand after Henson's death in the 1990s. Miss Piggy is also a female cultural icon, like the Disney Princesses, made to appeal to a wide audience but marketed to segmented markets. For instance, like the Disney Princesses, the majority of Miss Piggy merchandise has been intended for young girls. In a 1979 *People Weekly* magazine, an article pointed to the "hefty sales of Miss Piggy products," chief among them dolls and soap. Miss Piggy was also one of a few major characters sold as McDonalds Happy Meal toys in 1988 and 2003, and was generally a top merchandise seller, along with Fozzie, for Jim Henson Company through the 1980s and early 1990s (Darrach, 1979, p. 92; Mageira, 1992; p. 7). She has not lost any of her prestige under Disney. A beloved cultural icon, Miss Piggy has been utilized in Disney's promotion of the Muppets, both in connection with that brand and others. She loves fashion, food, luxury—all acts of consumption—which makes her a natural choice to play the exaggeratedly desiring consumer who we nevertheless identify with.

Keeping her narrative history in mind, however, Miss Piggy is an unlikely candidate for the Disney Princess Collection. While she seems to embody many of the postfeminist Princess tropes, her subversive behavior and appearance defies a normalized image of femininity. She is both a feminist and queer icon, and challenges notions of body image and appropriate female behavior. Miss Piggy's visual malleability and her star text make her the easiest Muppet to market, but this defies a more complex representation of Miss Piggy as a "woman" and star.

At first glance, Miss Piggy is the embodiment of "emphasized femininity," a culturally ingrained, performative femininity that renders women subordinate to the

sexual desires of men (Connell, 1987; Currie et al, 2006; Wohlend, 2009). On *The Muppet Show* and in the three Muppet feature films made during Henson's life, Miss Piggy wore highly feminine clothing, including a pair of opera-length purple gloves, a staple of the Miss Piggy look. Of course, Miss Piggy is a pig, and therefore not a traditional sexual object. In fact, her sex appeal was part of the joke, especially on *The Muppet Show*. Male guest stars either reviled or adored the pig diva. Armenian-French performer Charles Aznavour declared her "the girl of my dreams," but ballet star Rudolph Nureyev could not escape from the amorous pig fast enough (Juhl & Casson, 2005, Charles Aznavour; Juhl & Casson, 2007, Rudolph Nureyev). Whatever her feedback, Miss Piggy was convinced she was attractive to all. Her unflinching confidence and physical aggression, coupled with support from other characters, affirmed Miss Piggy's status as a star. She consistently won over male celebrities in Muppet movies, including the jewel thief Nicky Holiday. In *The Great Muppet Caper*, he almost bungles his criminal operation for the love of Miss Piggy (Oz, 1981). While her "exaggerated ego and her corpulence make her the butt of many jokes," Miss Piggy's larger-than-life character earned her hordes of fans so she would "become the star that she pretends to be" (Schildcrout, 2008, p. 829-830).

Miss Piggy's persona is often associated with less mainstream cultures. First, she became a camp icon when group of fans started CAMPO, or the Committee to Award Miss Piggy the Oscar, in 1979 (Darrach, 1979, p. 88). In addition, because of her over-the-top classical Hollywood glamour and the fact that Frank Oz, a man, provided the Miss Piggy voice,²⁹ she is still often coded as a drag queen (Schildcrout, 2009; Rowe,

1995). Miss Piggy is also a larger woman, which puts her in an alternative space of defining beauty. We know Miss Piggy is not the perfect image of womanhood we generally see in the media, but the pig star already knows she is the perfect size. The books “authored” by Miss Piggy fly in the face of diet plans, suggesting that women eat what they can lift and consider leisure as an exercise regimen (Beard, 1981; Lewis, 2009).

Fan and fashion blogs also continue to support Miss Piggy’s self-image and her “sexy and chic” style, which reject more normative standards of beauty (Makeup and Beauty Blog, 2009). These online spaces help women form a community around redefining beauty and Miss Piggy provides an iconic example of a famous larger woman who defies the norm. This kind of female “size empowerment” is outside the realm of postfeminism, which focuses on conventional if powerful sexiness seen in characters like Pocahontas and Jasmine. Also, Miss Piggy tends to overdo femininity in an “emphasized femininity” that borders on the grotesque: “Miss Piggy shows the cultural ideals of femininity to be both artificial and comical through her exaggerated performances of them” (Rowe, 1995, p. 28). Instead of being both sweet and strong, like Mulan, she is artificially saccharine and violently powerful. Her personality is not as concrete and cohesive as a Disney Princess, but instead made up of fractures and oppositions.

In addition to her feminine tropes, Miss Piggy is traditionally aggressive and sometimes violent. On *The Muppet Show*, she threatened her way into starring roles: “Listen, turkey! Ms. [Candice] Bergen says that I should stand up for my rights. Either I open the show or Ms. Bergen and I walk” (Juhl & Casson, 2005, Candice Bergen). It is

this kind of “‘karate chop/no holds barred’ attitude” the Miss Piggy uses in life and in love (Reed, 2010, n.p.). In one of her bolder moments in *The Muppet Movie*, Miss Piggy saves Kermit’s life and subverts gender expectations. When the pair are caught by Doc Hopper and a sadistic German doctor played by Mel Brooks, Miss Piggy literally bursts from her ropes and defeats the kidnappers and their cronies before releasing her frail lover from his hold. In this instance, the lady pig is the active hero, while Kermit is the character desperately in need of saving.

Miss Piggy and Kermit’s relationship outside the texts has been a subject of fascination and scrutiny over the years. Their celebrity romance is ongoing, but non-exclusive and rocky. In the beginning of their relationship on *The Muppet Show* Kermit mostly rejected Miss Piggy’s advances, while later in *The Muppet Movie*, *The Great Muppet Caper*, the two meet and fall in love, and finally in *The Muppets Take Manhattan*, they are married onstage. *People* magazine exposed this marriage as a farce in an interview with the stars, but their attachment is ever-present (*People*, 1984). Kermit and Miss Piggy also frequently admire other celebrities, as with Miss Piggy’s attempted seduction of stars on *The Muppet Show*. They do not always act as a monogamous pair, and mutual jealousy plays an important part in their star personas, but they remain a couple. When Kermit appeared in a publicity stunt kissing Lady Gaga at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards, he had to explain that the singer and he were only friends and Miss Piggy and he were still living together (Ditzian, 2009). This dalliance, as we’ve seen, is not one-sided and in fact, it seems that Miss Piggy more frequently forgets her attachment to Kermit when confronted with handsome celebrities like Roger Moore or

Taye Diggs. The amorous pig does not see her intended promiscuity in opposition with her love for Kermit, which redefines romance in less traditional terms.

Miss Piggy has defied many standards of femininity and beauty, but her indoctrination in Disney marketing has flattened some of her richer character traits. Because she has not starred in any feature length films under the company, we do not have any evidence of Miss Piggy's narrative evolution since the change in ownership. However, her role in Disney's Muppet advertising campaign is indicative of the company's overall shift toward postfeminist consumption. The Princesses of today's Disney, Tiana of *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and Rapunzel of *Tangled* (2010), are not so much folktale heroines as they are symbols of Disney's brand expansion and efforts to secure merchandising appeal. Similarly, Miss Piggy's character is used in ads to indirectly promote the upcoming film *The Muppets*, and creatively aligned with Disney's profitable sectors, like the company's theme parks.

CONSUMING FANTASY

Merchandise has always been a part of Disney's film release cycle, but it wasn't until 2000 that Disney began to strategically exploit the girl market with the lucrative Disney Princess Collection. President of Disney Consumer Products Andy Mooney attended a showing of *Disney on Ice* that year, and seeing a gaggle of young girls dressed up as princesses, he suggested Disney take advantage of the princess fantasies of little girls and sell Disney Princess-related merchandise. The Disney Princess Collection started that same year, with merchandise like dolls, "role play" materials—dresses and accessories—and books providing the primary sources of revenue for the franchise,

which grew from \$300 million in 2000 to \$3.7 billion in 2009 (LicenseMag, 2009; Harding, 2009). The Disney Princess Collection has expanded to include live events for children and adults, including an ESPN-partner marathon that encourages women to dress up as the Princesses.³⁰ Most recently, the brand launched a line of wedding dresses inspired by the most famous Disney Princesses.

The most recent Princess films—*The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and *Tangled* (2010)—are the only two films made after the creation of the Disney Princess Collection. This is evident in the narratives, which spend time introducing sites of consumption and work to stretch the corporation's image. For example, *The Princess and the Frog* character, Tiana, is the first Black princess, but her “marketable” image is more classic Disney Princess than “ethnic” Princess. This signified a safe move by Disney, since they systematically alienated East Asians and Native Americans with dolls that do not often show up in the collection precisely because they do not sell the girly fantasy. Tiana, while coded as a tomboy in the narrative, is sold in a ball gown similar to Cinderella's—which she wears for four minutes of the film—and her wedding gown, a fairy princess style dress.



Figure 3.2. On left: Two photos of Tiana of *The Princess and the Frog*.³¹ On right: Rapunzel of *Tangled*.³²

Rapunzel in *Tangled* is the first computer animated Princess and marketed even more aggressively. A blond in a pink and purple dress, she already fits neatly into the Princess fantasy. The film implies that she is 18, but her body looks somewhat “tweenish” and her facial features are more like that of a five year-old girl, which puts her right in the Princess target audience (2-6 year olds). This careful construction of the body allows young girls to identify with the character as a peer and an aspirational figure. In one scene, Rapunzel has her hair done in a transformative makeover moment that is classic to Hollywood and Disney. An abundance of braids and flowers styled by a gaggle of young girls, her hairstyle is more slumber party than salon. This moment once more implicitly calls upon girl culture in its presentation of beauty. The film is conscientious about showing Rapunzel’s living space as well: especially her bedroom, which is also a combination of purple and pink. Since one of the Disney Princess Collection’s major products is bedroom furniture and linens, the brief moment the audience spends in Rapunzel’s room is telling. The strategic selling of pre-2000 Princesses should not be

dismissed, especially when Belle is a top-seller,³³ but the later films acknowledge a fierce attention to girl-oriented styles based on the girl fantasy world Disney has constructed.

MISS PIGGY AT DISNEY: THE ULTIMATE SPOKESWOMAN

Miss Piggy's role in The Walt Disney Company world is not that of a character in a film narrative, but more that of a saleswoman.³⁴ While she had been used in TV ads in the 1990s, Disney has especially capitalized on Miss Piggy's image to sell products, experiences, and the Muppet brand. She was featured next to Jessica Simpson in a 2006 Super Bowl Pizza Hut ad, and more prominently in the 2009/2010 "Give a day, Get a Disney day" campaign. Her appearances in *People* magazine and on *The View* have added to Miss Piggy's star text, but more importantly, these cross-promotions serve Disney's brand more than Miss Piggy's character.



Figure 3.3. Miss Piggy and Taye Diggs in their "Give a Day, Get a Disney day" TV spot.

Miss Piggy's personality is even more evident in the "Give a Day, Get a Disney Day" ad with Taye Diggs (TheDenisDiaries, 2009b). This ad features a well-known version of Miss Piggy, the entirely self-indulgent pig who fantasizes her way through life. Miss Piggy is pampered like a princess, enjoying the attractions of what looks to be Walt Disneyland with Taye Diggs as her companion and prince. The fantasy culminates in an

all-out Cinderella moment, at which point the dream quickly ends and we are back building houses with the Muppets before their Disney day payoff. Miss Piggy had been used in advertisements under Jim Henson Company before Disney bought the Muppets. She was the spokeswoman for Baked Lays in 1996 and 1997, showcasing her glamorous and violent side in the pursuit of a bag of chips. While this campaign was more commercial than Jim Henson's desired advertising approach, which avoided aligning Muppet characters with products, it was not as synergistic as Disney's ads. Both the Pizza Hut and "Give a Day, Get a Disney Day" campaigns served Disney's partnership with ABC television and allowed Disney to expose audiences to the Muppets to different viewer segments in the market.

Miss Piggy's other notable appearances—post-Disney acquisition—have been on *The View*, a daytime talk show owned by Disney and Barbara Walters. This show is more clearly directed at women and features Miss Piggy as celebrity guest. In one show, she promoted the 2008 "A Muppet Christmas Special: Letters to Santa." In a more recent show in 2009, Miss Piggy promoted her book, *The Diva Code: Miss Piggy on Life, Love, and the 10,000 Idiotic Things Men Frogs Do*. Because *The View* traditionally works as a site for guest promotion, Miss Piggy slips easily into the roles, working for Disney to sell her book and sell herself as a "new" Disney character.



Figure 3.4. On left: Miss Piggy on *The Muppet Show* in 1979.³⁵ On right: Miss Piggy on *The View* in 2009.³⁶

Besides the obvious promotional possibilities in her guest appearance, Miss Piggy's 2009 talk on *The View* referenced her significant physical transformation. Miss Piggy has been under the knife, so to speak, since her tenure at Disney. In 2006 Pizza Hut ad, she still had the classic Miss Piggy frame: a heavy bust on top of wide hips and thick legs. By 2009 on *The View*, Miss Piggy body had slimmed down to a curvy hourglass with a perky chest. More notable were the drastic changes to her face. Her cheeks are higher, her lower lip protrudes less, and the bridge of her nose has gone from wide and prominent to non-existent, giving her a more upturned profile. Finally, her ears, which used to curve like a pig's, now sit erect on the top of her head, like Playboy bunny ears. All of these changes have made Miss Piggy cuter, taking the edge off of her formerly uncontainable personality. Much like the Disney Princess in the collection, Miss Piggy has been physically altered to be more appealing, which puts more emphasis on her physical appearance than her character. As I have said earlier, we have yet to see how

Miss Piggy will behave in the upcoming movie, but her physical change seems to indicate that Disney will play up any attributes that sell tickets and toys, and not the traits that actually make Miss Piggy a heroine for girls and women.

CONCLUSION

The Disney Princesses are at the center of Disney's current effort to appeal to a girl audience. The company's attachment to Princesses proves that they cannot imagine girls outside this construct, or that they are so caught up in the success of Princess merchandise that they are not willing to risk sales in an effort to break the girl "mold." Yet in 2010, Disney announced that it would not be making anymore Princess films: "Today, among little girls especially, princesses and the romanticized ideal they represent—finding the man of your dreams—have a limited shelf life" (Parker, 2010). This statement seems bogus, considering Disney's continuing success with the Princess franchise. The public relations blurb instead paid lip service to more progressive female audiences frustrated with stereotypical girl images while indicating a Disney's desired shift in its self-image. Instead of focusing on classical fairytale narratives, Disney has attempted to make its family-friendly film sector more edgy with "boy-friendly" brands like Toy Story and Pirates of the Caribbean. Even Tangled attempted to attract the boy audience with a less fairytale-oriented title and a mischievous male lead vaguely reminiscent of Aladdin. The Muppets, with a male-heavy cast and a tradition of adult humor, seem in line with Disney's attempt to evade its "feminine" image. At the same time, the female characters, still spunky and willful like their 1990s predecessors, work within a postfeminist framework strongly skewed toward consumerist desires. Miss

Piggy's narrative history is ideologically subversive, but Disney has altered her appearance and streamlined her desires to match its agenda, such as in the "Give a day, Get a Disney day" campaign. Her rich character could add variety for young girl audiences, but Disney's use of the character thus far has not shown the Miss Piggy of old but a more contained, consumption-driven pig.

Conclusion: The Muppet brand on the verge

The Muppet franchise offers a rich text with which to examine the evolution of a brand's movement in the media industry. From its beginning under the strong creative leadership of Jim Henson to its return to the mainstream under media giant Disney, the Muppet brand has been repositioned multiple times to attract a contemporary audience. In my exploration of Henson as an author, I also addressed concerns about the authenticity of existing Muppet literature, but also to offer another method of understanding media authorship. Exploring authors, texts, and franchises as brands acknowledges their social, economic, and iconic value to audiences and cultures. Branding also implies the incalculable value of perception that makes brands both culturally significant and economically unstable. A brand like the Muppets may have worked in the 1970s and 1980s under Henson, and may not sell today in a new authorial and cultural context. In future work, I hope to examine other specific brand types in order to help clarify the distinction between authors, companies and products and experiences. This would allow a richer investigation into media studies' interaction with advertising theory, and how these two industries work to sell certain brands and narratives.

In this exploration of the Muppets, I have looked at the value of authorship and brand in reinforcing perceptions of authenticity and quality. The Muppets are perceived as authentic under Jim Henson and after his death, but have come up against harsh criticism since Disney's purchase. Henson is one of many creative authors, and essentially the brand manager of the Muppets. His initial creative work attracted artists in

line with his mission, so in essence, Henson is the creative mind behind the Muppets, but the edgy personality of the brand itself is a result of many people's handiwork.

The Muppets' fate under Disney is still largely undiscovered. With the feature film pushback, I was unable to see how the corporation would play out the characters in a full-length movie narrative that purports itself as a throwback to older Muppet films. *The Muppets*, with all its supposed attention to the classic Muppets' "roots," will have to deliver in order to cause a significant stir among critical Muppet fans. Disney has spent a great deal of time and money on advertising and production costs, so if the Muppet film does not effectively reinvigorate the Muppet brand, Disney may effectively retire the characters. While I do not wish to overemphasize the quality of the Muppet brand under Henson versus the quality under Disney, the perceived value of the Muppet brand may be affected by fans' perceptions of "Muppetness." I would agree with critics that many of Disney's attempts at "Muppetness" have been disappointing, including many of the YouTube videos and the 2008 ABC Christmas special. These texts seem restrained, overly cute, and at times, just not funny. However, I would say the same about some episodes of *The Muppet Show*. Like any series, the show varies in its success from skit to skit. Some fans tend to overstate the genius of Henson's work, however, which does not bode well for Disney's re-launch. The company also took on the problems of the failing Muppet brand when it acquired it in 2004. Since Henson's death, the management of the Muppets by Brian and Lisa Henson, and the performances by newer Muppeteers, have not been able to capture the same characterizations that the original Muppet team had.

A global media conglomerate with a strong brand personality, Disney still attempts to challenge the perception that it is a children's company. Instead of continuing to extend its image through other names like Pixar, Touchstone, and Miramax, it attaches the name "Disney" explicitly to titles like *Pirates of the Caribbean* in order to win over audiences and change its clean family image. The Muppets are definitely part of Disney's effort to show it can do something less Disney-fied by reviving a brand with an equally specific brand image.

My overall goal, though, was to reveal the inherently social and human aspects of media by looking at a brand that has significant social and nostalgic value to successive generations of media consumers. The Muppets are just one example of a franchise with strong personal meaning. In my exhaustive discussions with people on this topic, I find that they are always intrigued and invested in the Muppets, and that they tend to start by listening to my topic, and end by telling me stories about their childhood interactions with the Muppets, Jim Henson, and Disney's animated films. People attribute aspects of their personal growth to these experiences and share their love of media with family and friends. This is what makes long-time brands more fascinating to me than flash-in-the-pan trends. This is also what makes the Muppets and other brands intangible and unpredictable. While Disney can interview audiences, and test market appeal with campaigns and online feedback, it cannot quantify people's unique experiences with the Muppets. In fact, Disney may have made too much of an effort to gauge popular support and, in doing so, may well let the artistic integrity of *The Muppets* suffer in an attempt to address every niche market's "needs." In taking on a project with a long history, Disney

cannot anticipate the Muppets contemporary appeal. Even by assembling a “dream team” of producers, writers, and actors who can supposedly authenticate Disney’s approach with the Muppets, the company cannot predict success with a brand reputation that always precedes it.

Notes

¹ A hand and rod puppet, sometimes referred to as a hand-rod puppet, is a puppet construction that allows a puppeteer to manipulate the puppet's mouth with one hand and move the arms with the use of two rods with the other hand. This particular construction is often credited as a Jim Henson invention, though the hand puppet and rod puppet precede his work.

² This thirty-year mark would signify that The Jim Henson Company considered *Sam and Friends* (1955-1961) the beginning of the Muppets.

³ Biographical and production details are taken from Finch (1993) and Parish (2006).

⁴ By recent history, I mean Disney's return to power and prominence in the 1980s and on. This is when Disney started aggressively producing full-length films and produced consecutive successful animated films for children and families.

⁵ The historical information on Jim Henson's life and his productions, unless indicated, can be found in multiple sources, including Bacon (1997); Finch (1981); Finch (1993); J.R. Parish (2006); Durrett (1994); and *The Muppet Wiki*.

⁶ Rowlf later joined the other classic Muppets on *The Muppet Show* (1975-1981). However, Rowlf was retired as a character after Jim Henson's death in 1990.

⁷ Don Sahlin invented the "Henson stitch," which allowed a puppet builder to make especially tight seams. This tighter seam is not as subtle as an invisible seam, but worked for TV and film.

⁸ All box office numbers were published by Box Office Mojo. See IMDb (n.d.) in the reference section for each title's records.

⁹ Jim Henson brought in \$5.2 million for designing the animatronic turtle costumes, which entailed full-body costumes and radio-controlled facial movements (Hammer & Miller, 1990).

¹⁰ Photo found at <http://adampasick.com/kermit-mourns-jim-henson>.

¹¹ Information available at boxofficemojo.com.

¹² Photo found at <http://www.muppetcentral.com/news/2004/021704.shtml>

¹³ The Disney Vault is a term used to explain Disney's strategic re-release cycle. Disney will allow retail stores to sell an animated feature film for an allotted period of time, often in conjunction with a new box office release, and then take that film back off the market for an unspecified amount of time. This drives increased purchases since the films are not always available.

¹⁴ *The Christmas Toy* was written by Laura Phillips, a TV writer who also wrote for *Fraggle Rock* an. Her sole writing credit on this holiday special may account for the more female-centered narrative, which is not typical of Jim Henson stories.

¹⁵ Janet Staiger's "author as origin" discourse in Staiger (2003).

¹⁶ The Build-A-Bear Workshop is a plush animal store where children can build their own toy from a set of parts.

¹⁷ Fan comments can be found at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1292569/usercomments>

¹⁸ Top navigation, also called a top navigation menu, or tabs, helps a user outline the content of a larger site with many sub-pages.

¹⁹ *Muppets Tonight* aired on ABC and then the Disney Channel as a sequel to *The Muppet Show*. 22 shows were produced in total before the show was cancelled.

²⁰ *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* cost about \$30 million to make, and grossed over \$104 million worldwide at the box office.

²¹ On left: Muppet cupcake tiers by Cupcake Occasions, a boutique cupcake shop in Suffolk, England (<http://www.plaebio.com/entertainment/family-pictures/muppet-cupcakes>) On right: “Minimalist Muppets,” an original graphic design poster by blogger Eric Slager (<http://ericlager.blogspot.com/2010/11/minimalist-muppets.html>).

²² The name of the Thanksgiving 2011 movie has changed twice over the course of one year and may not be accurate upon the publish of this paper.

²³ The Disney Princess Collection, started in 2000, includes most of the animated girl characters, but the list of Princesses fluctuates based on sales and new franchises. For example, Tinker Bell was at one time part of the Princess Collection until Disney created a new Fairy Collection headed by the lucrative blond sprite. For the purposes of this chapter, I am addressing the most recognized girls of the Princess Collection: Snow White (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, 1937), Cinderella (*Cinderella*, 1950), Aurora (*Sleeping Beauty*, 1959), Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989), Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991), Jasmine (*Aladdin*, 1992), Pocahontas (*Pocahontas*, 1995), Mulan (*Mulan*, 1998), Tiana (*The Princess and the Frog*, 2009), and Rapunzel (*Tangled*, 2010).

²⁴ Lylle Breier, general manager of Muppets Studio, LLC, stated on the *Muppetcast* podcast that everyone has a little Muppet in them (Swanson 2009).

²⁵ Photo found at: <http://www.disneypicture.net/r-disney-princesses-35-disney-princesses-image-278.htm>

²⁶ Janet Wasko further explores the importance of the business behind Disney’s world building in Wasko (1995).

²⁷ Merchandise was sold in tandem with *Snow White*’s original theatrical release.

²⁸ Aurora is 15 years old in the narrative of *Sleeping Beauty*. Cinderella’s age is not stated, though she is likely also in her teens, like all of the Princesses.

²⁹ Frank Oz retired as Miss Piggy’s voice and puppeteer in 2002. Eric Jacobson started playing Miss Piggy in 2001.

³⁰ Details at ESPN’s World of Sport webpage:

<http://espnwos.disney.go.com/events/rundisney/princess-half-marathon/>

³¹ Photos found at: <http://www.blackandi.com/2009/12/princess-tiana-my-she-ro/> and <http://stylefrizz.com/200903/tiana-the-black-princess-and-the-frog/>.

³² Photo found at <http://www.fanpop.com/spots/disneys-rapunzel/images/13076432/title/tangled-apunzel-disney-flynn-screencap>

³³ Belle is the most prominent Princess on the Disney Store site, and the second most visible Princess on the first, page of products page. She is second only to Rapunzel on this first page, but this is likely a result of the recent theatrical release of *Tangled* (opened November 25, 2010).

³⁴ The next Muppet movie is slated to come out in November 2011. Other features made my Disney, including *The Muppets Wizard of Oz*, (2005) do not explore the Muppets as characters, but instead superimpose them onto predetermined Oz characters.

³⁵ Screen capture from Juhl & Casson (2005).

³⁶ Screen capture from *The View*'s website: <http://theview.abc.go.com/video/hot-topics-miss-piggy>

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