

The Muppet Show: Sex and Violence: Investigating the Complexity of the Television Body

Rayna Denison

(1) 'I feel pretty, oh so pretty,' sings a blue, medium sized Muppet with small, feminine features wearing a blond wig. Then she pulls off her nose, eyes and hair and begins to add a new set of features. 'It's alarming how charming I feel,' she warbles as she plays with a shock of lime green foam hair, applying a large green nose and fanged teeth to her face, her voice changing from Fran Brill's to Jim Henson's on the pre-recorded song-track. 'And so pretty, that I hardly can believe that I'm real,' her now growling voice continues the Stephen Sondheim song as the blue 'Whatnot' Muppet finishes her transformation from girl to monster with a pair of menacing hairy-browed eyes (Charles Aznavour Episode, 17/01/1977. See note 1).

(2) Under the dressing table the Muppet sits at, two Muppeteers work in tandem to separately manipulate the head and arms of the blue Muppet, creating the impression of a single character for the camera. Watching their performance in the monitors at their feet, at one point they make the blue Whatnot dive under the table, replacing its mid-transformation body with another, pre-prepared version. The end result is a sketch that celebrates the puppet body's ability to shift between and beyond normative body categories, simultaneously showcasing the craft and skill of the puppeteers. Such sketches were common in *The Muppet Show* (1976-1981), bringing the 'real' bodies of the show's characters into question while celebrating the puppet as a site of spectacle and inventive performance. Such sketches also begin to reveal how *The Muppet Show* might offer an important corrective to simplistic notions of the body on television.

(3) The body on television is not always as straightforward as it seems. On many occasions, the mediated nature of the body on television disguises its unnaturalness. The stunt double standing in for Buffy, the falsified corpses of the *CSI* franchise made from plastics, make-up and CGI or the animatronic premature babies of hospital dramas are all instances of such constructed, complex bodies. In most of these instances the intention is to mask the body's construction or substitution. In masking the pieced-together nature of the performances that go to make up popular television characters, such shows hide the artistry, craft and skills of their production teams. This chapter seeks to investigate a television series for which the aim was not to disguise mediation of the body, but frequently to celebrate it. Following in well established traditions of puppetry and light entertainment television programming in which puppet or animated bodies were juxtaposed with real bodies, *The Muppet Show* delivered a melee of (re)presentational strategies designed to cross the borders between the human and the Other. *The Muppet Show's* celebration of the body can be seen in numerous ways, from the sheer variety found in its puppet bodies, to the adulation shown to its guest stars, to its insistent deconstruction and reconstruction of bodily boundaries and borders.

(4) For these various reasons alone *The Muppet Show* would deserve to be considered, alongside Henson Associates' (HA!) contributions to *Sesame Street* (1969-), as some of the most inventive and experimental television of its day. However, unlike the puppetry on *Sesame Street*, which was aimed primarily at a children's audience and intended for educational purposes, *The Muppet Show's* primary target audience was a family one that included as many adults as children. Monster Muppets played an especially important role in bridging this gap between child and adult audiences. Most frequently associated with the horror genre, a genre that *The Muppet Show* sometimes tapped into but was not usually a part of, monsters in the Muppets remain 'a perfect vehicle for engendering... curiosity... because monsters are (physically, though not generally logically) impossible beings.' (Carroll 1990: 182) 'Impossible beings' could describe the entire cast of Muppet characters from talking loaves of French bread and dancing feather boas, to singing pigs and comedian bears. Impossible, not just because the Muppets anthropomorphise and animate everyday animals and objects, but because the Muppets are puppets made of various fabrics and foams, with stuck on facial features and wigs used to differentiate them from one another, thus making it difficult, if not impossible 'to believe that [they're] real.' Of course, beneath their surfaces were human performers who worked to create the Muppets as believable characters with personalities very much of their own. However, it was the monster Muppets at the margins of the Muppet cast whose bodies were perhaps most flexibly imagined and performed. It was the Whatnots and 'Frackles' (brought to *The Muppet Show* from an earlier special TV appearance) in particular that proved the most transgressive bodies; bodies that exploded, changed features and surrounded (sometimes menacing, sometimes menaced by) the human guest stars of the show.

(5) These monsters often provided the violent aspects of the sex and violence that *The Muppet Show's* creators used to bridge between children and their parents. Sex and violence, part of the title of one of the early pilots for *The Muppet Show*, provided Henson Associates with previously inaccessible outlets for humour and added to their repertoire of audience appeals. *The Muppet Show* offered an almost identical set of appeals to a mixed family audience as Tex Avery's cartoons had done earlier in cinemas and on television. According to Paul Wells, Avery 'understood that children would be appeased by physical slapstick,' which *The Muppet Show* exhibited on a regular basis, 'while adults required a more knowing, *self-conscious* approach, which would engage with more mature themes.' (1998: 140 italics in original) Wells continues by asserting that underdog characters, irrational fears, survival instincts, resistance to conformity and, perhaps most significantly here, 'direct engagement with sexual feelings and identity' were at the heart of Avery's attempts to re-envision animation as a medium for adults (140. See also Sandler 1998). While the monsters provided slapstick violence, it was the interactions between guest stars and the central characters, and between the central Muppets themselves, that gave the show its 'sex.' Sex and violence represent important aspects of the Muppets that have been largely forgotten by academics working on the characters. By

embracing *The Muppet Show's* displays of sex and violence, a more complete and complex reading of the Muppet body can be undertaken, providing a better understanding of how the body on television has perpetually been a planned, constructed and mediated entity.

(6) Married to this re-reading of the bodies of *The Muppet Show* is a concern hereafter with how the show has been understood by critics. In the 1970s and 80s Henson Associates presented critics with Muppet bodies as, sometimes simultaneously, both 'real' and performed. As a result, lingering problems with the vocabulary of the body haunt the reception of *The Muppet Show*, as the reviewers attempted to negotiate between the real and unreal nature of Muppets. Academics have also demonstrated the complexity of the Muppet body, at times averring and at others disavowing the constructed nature of these television characters. The chapter will therefore begin by studying some of the responses to *The Muppet Show* and its characters, examining how academics and contemporary critics have reacted to the creations of Jim Henson and his Muppeteers, particularly in relation to their border-crossing bodies. This analysis of the discourses around the Muppets, contemporary with and subsequent to, the show's phenomenal success (Gambaccini and Taylor 1990: 308), should enable a re-reading of how its bodies have impacted on television. Untangling the complex web of omissions, confusion and disagreement around the Muppet body should help to explain some of the essential issues of the constructed body on television, offering a starting point for broader investigations of the bodily construction that takes place daily on our television screens.

'Muppetmania!': The Muppet Body in Academia and Review (Irwin, 1977. See Note 2)

(7) Attempting to put *The Muppet Show* into a critical context requires at least some consideration of how the characters have previously been viewed by academia. The Muppets have not been allowed to pass, unremarked, into history, but rather have been the source of some fractured academic analyses, especially following Henson's death in 1990 (see Note 3). The studies that do exist have been interested, not in *The Muppet Show*, but in its spin-off films and cartoons, and in its progenitor, *Sesame Street* (see Note 4). This lack of engagement with what was, for the films at least, their central Ur-text (Austin 2002: 126), fosters conditions in which the characters and their meanings can only be partially understood and, divorced from their history, are often misunderstood.

(8) Additionally, these studies of the Muppets have tended to come from a scattering of different disciplines that encompass at least the following three arenas of academic research: first, puppet studies; second, studies of children's media and lastly, gender studies. In the first of these approaches the Muppets have tended to be viewed as the massified end of the puppetry tradition, where puppet artistry meets commercial culture (see, for example, Cutler Shershow 1995; and Segel 1995). In the second, and largest body of research, the Muppets are variously viewed intertextually as the nexus for a network of texts

whose purpose is to generate profits; or, alternatively, they are examined for the role they play in childhood development (Penderson 2003; Kinder 1991; Hendershot 1998; and Mukerji 1997). Meanwhile, the third cluster of studies has tended to focus, to the exclusion of other characters, on Miss Piggy (Rowe 1995; and Mukerji 1997. See Note 5).

(9) Within these divergent studies of the Muppets, themes emerge that relate to the interests of this chapter. These themes include a concern with the puppet as a site of performance (Tillis 1996) and also politically significant symbols. Scott Cutler Shershow contends that the Muppets represent the shifting status of the puppet in contemporary culture, with the resulting loss of the puppet's oppositional voice: 'their narratives embody a utopian yearning to join with some collective whole—the harmonious, multicultural community of *Sesame Street*, the fantastic Hollywood of *The Muppet Movie*, or the equally fantastic Broadway of *The Muppets Take Manhattan*.'(241) While true of the Muppet films, I would argue that the inclusion of avant-garde puppetry in *The Muppet Show*, and its mixing of self-contained front and backstage theatre narratives lend themselves to a reconsideration of Shershow's argument. Providing a mixture of the backstage musical and variety show television programming, the front and backstage sketches of *The Muppet Show* hybridise a series of contemporary popular entertainment forms in order to defamiliarise them. In so doing, *The Muppet Show* does contain voices oppositional to contemporary American television presentations of puppets, and, moreover, *The Muppet Show* revels in presenting puppets as innovative, chaotic and disruptive performance objects (Tillis 1996; Feuer 1981 and 1982; and Neale and Krutnik 1990).

(10) Noting these chaotic representations, academics have attempted to classify the Muppets' bodies in a variety of ways. Chandra Mukerji offers an in-depth analysis of the archetypes of childhood offered by the Muppet characters claiming,

Different characters isolate and fore-ground a range of versions of "the child." As Kermit, Piggy, Gonzo and Big Bird display some of the innate variations in children, they embody different culturally sanctioned ways of defining "the child." Children watching the Muppets, then, turn out to be viewing some of the options for navigation childhood. (1997: 160)

In Mukerji's reading the Muppets offer stand-ins for children's experience of the world, and their passage into adulthood. However, there is interesting overlap between her reading of Miss Piggy and that proffered in Kathleen Rowe's (1995) 'Pig Ladies, Big Ladies, and Ladies with Big Mouths: Feminism and the Carnavalesque.' Mukerji tells us that 'Piggy is some kind of unspeakable creature, pretending to be a pig, pretending to be a girl.' (174) While claiming that 'Gender is Miss Piggy's *raison d'être*,' Rowe agrees with Mukerji that,

At the same, time, however, Miss Piggy's apparent femininity is constantly undermined aurally and visually. Her voice, a tremulous falsetto, is provided by a man, Frank Oz. Even more

strikingly, Miss Piggy physically dwarfs Kermit. She is enormous beside him, and her body is voluptuously physical. (27)

(11) Additionally, Rowe writes, 'More an image than a character fleshed out in narrative, Miss Piggy exists in a hazy real, triggering multiple and contradictory responses.' (30) It is easy to read the unease with which the Muppet body is met in these examples. The sheer complexity of Miss Piggy's construction (a man, playing a female character via a puppet attached to his arm, which is itself a representation of an anthropomorphised pig) leads these writers to make assertions about Miss Piggy's monstrous otherness. While these assertions are sometimes reasonable, they do not engage holistically with the production processes and experimentation involved in creating Miss Piggy.

(12) Implicit (and even explicit) in the language of these articles is a negative approach to Miss Piggy. For example, she alone 'looms' over Kermit, despite the fact that many of the Muppets were several times his size. The problem with Piggy seems to be her 'performance' of femininity, and it is here that a more thorough understanding of her characterisation and construction might be beneficial. First, one might consider that it was largely thanks to Frank Oz's performance of Miss Piggy that she developed at all. Richard Hunt was initially Miss Piggy's primary puppeteer, and performed her as a simple background chorus pig, playing minor roles in 'Veterinarian's Hospital' and 'At the Dance.' It was only from about halfway through the first season that Frank Oz took over her development, adding the karate chops, hair flicking and only sometimes required relationship with Kermit that have since passed into Muppet history. Oz also added much to Miss Piggy's voice, which was once described as 'the most delicate and flexible of instruments, reminiscent of Deanna Durbin one moment, William Bendix the next.' (Sirkin 1978: 14) It is these gender-divide transgressions in Miss Piggy's voice that Rowe seems to find most problematic. However, the adoption of various masculine and feminine traits is also part of the pleasure of Miss Piggy. Oz's adoption of gender-crossing identity traits provided the character with positive comedic attributes giving Miss Piggy an inherent strength that made her continual romantic rejection by Kermit funny and touching.

(13) For example, Miss Piggy seems to have developed into a caricature of various 1970s femininities. Missing from the above readings of Miss Piggy's gender status are some of the politically motivated subtleties of the first season, for example, the way in which this 'monstrous' female pig became an equal rights activist, doling out her now famous karate chops not just to get her own way or intimidate, but to demand species justice from her fellow cast members. In one early example, Miss Piggy complains 'I'm tired of these continual pig slurs,' misunderstanding Kermit's question about Shakespeare and Bacon and subsequently karate chopping Floyd in the same sketch for making a joke about her 'hogging' screen time. Later in the same episode, Kermit is also the recipient of a Miss Piggy beating for both rejecting her advances and making more jokes about Bacon and Piggy's 'ham' acting. In both instances Miss Piggy's attacks are backed by the appearance of a group of male pigs (the Bouncing

Borsalino Brothers) and her first is prefaced by her calling, 'Pigs of the World, Unite!' (Florence Henderson Episode, 16/11/1976) Here, and in other episodes Miss Piggy's violent behaviour is also linked to feminism. In the Candice Bergen episode (29/11/1976), Miss Piggy talks Kermit into letting her perform the opening song, claiming that 'I'm tired of any kind of pig joke! ... Ms. Bergen said I should stand up for my rights' with Oz alternating his delivery of her dialogue between simpering appeals to Kermit and aggressive threats. The uses to which Oz puts Miss Piggy's body and voice in these examples, one moment overtly sexualising her, the next re-imagining her body as a weapon, shows how central the issues of sex and violence were to *The Muppet Show*. Taking on board the changes to Miss Piggy's character across the first season, Miss Piggy's body provides a very different site to that described in either Rowe or Mukerji's articles, and, though there has been little enough space for it here, even these short examples suggest that a consideration of the men behind Miss Piggy might prove fruitful.

(14) The confusion over the Muppet's performed bodies does not end at academic appreciations of *The Muppet Show* and its characters. Journalists in the late 1970s and early 1980s also found much to comment upon when it came to *The Muppet Show*. One event in particular helped to foster discussion of and unease around the Muppet body in the 1970s, Lord Lew Grade's open day for the Muppets in 1977. *The Muppet Show* was made at Grade's Elstree Studios, and there was also a workshop there where Muppets were made. Grade brought Henson and the Muppeteers, notably Frank Oz, to the studio for the open day and the resulting articles show the difficulties journalists had in unpacking and discussing the Muppet body.

(15) Interestingly, and unlike their academic counterparts, the journalists invited to Elstree were quick to comment upon the constructed nature of the Muppet body, revelling in the details of their production (for an academic exception see McHugh 2002). For example, Richard North describes Kermit the Frog, saying, 'he is very individual and humane, his eyes may be ping pong balls, his body a sort of felt, and there may be several of him hanging limp on the workshop wall, but he remains expressive beyond words, fraught and hopeful in about equal measure.' (North, 1977) The constructed nature of the Muppet here is overtly linked to there having been multiple copies of each character, but is elided the next moment by his claims that there is something inherently 'expressive' about the characters, even when inanimate. Another journalist similarly comments on the tour journalists received at Elstree, stating, 'We are standing in the workshop, with muppets on the workbenches and hanging all round the wall - half a dozen Kermits in a row on one of them.' (Fiddick 1977) The tour forced a recognition of the Muppet body as a performing object, but one which, for all that it may have been constructed, retained something of its character's personality regardless of whether or not it was actively being performed. This fits with Steve Tillis' claims about the occlusion of the actor in puppet theatre. He posits that the puppet and performer act to separate out aspects of stardom: 'we should conceive of the actor as the *producer* of the signs that communicate a dramatic character, rather than as, necessarily, the

producer and the *site* of those signs' (1996: 109). Later in the same article, he provides the reverse angle on this argument

The puppet invariably exposes the presence of the operator behind it, even as it occludes that presence by taking focus as the site of the operator's performance: the ontological paradox of the puppet is, in this sense, the result of the simultaneous occlusion and exposure of the producer of signification. (115)

With this in mind, it becomes plausible to read Kermit as the site of Henson's performances, as an extension of his own star persona. It also explains why the character is seen to have a life of its own, signifying characterisation and life beyond its appearances on television.

(16) This life beyond *The Muppet Show* was something that Henson and his company fostered and exploited throughout the period when *The Muppet Show* aired. They seem to have done this in two ways. First, through off-screen performances explicitly aimed at showing the workings of character creation and manipulation. For example, in 1981, Roger North wrote:

Now I knew it was a mitten. I had seen it earlier, a piece of limp material on which the two halves of a ping-pong ball had been stuck, and I knew there was a hand inside it now. I must have muttered something about the economy of it all, for a familiar harassed voice spoke for the first time. "I know, I know. I'm economical, and there's not much to me". And for a moment, in an office in Elstree Studios, I almost found myself apologising to a mitten. (29)

Here, Henson's with/in-character interview helps to draw attention to the importance of his role as Kermit's performer, whilst simultaneously exploiting notions of Kermit as a 'real' or autonomous figure. A similar slippage occurs, or was performed for journalists, by other Muppeteers. For example, Frank Oz, in interview with Peter Fiddick, attempts to shift between answering questions as Miss Piggy, and answering them in his own voice and, as his voice breaks, he says, 'I want to tell you, I'm having a crisis of identity right here on the spot.' (1977) Oz's statement lends credence to the idea of the intertwined performer and performance object, emphasising his status as performer while giving Miss Piggy importance as an 'alternate' part of his persona. Thus the Muppet voice, if not body, is shown to be enmeshed in that of the Muppet performer, creating not occlusion of the actor, but suggesting that schisms in the body (or voice) of the performer create the personality of the Muppet character.

(17) A second strand of interviewing took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s in which the characters were afforded lives of their own. Miss Piggy in particular gave interviews with the press in which she was positioned as the backstage star behind the performances shown on *The Muppet Show*. Miss Piggy's popularity in this period should not be underestimated; she regularly received covers and articles in high profile magazines including *Vogue* and *Time* in the early 1980s. ('Muppet Morsels' *The Muppet Show Season One* DVD) In a rather lower-key British example, titled, 'The Men in My Life and the Life in

my Men – by Miss Piggy,’ she is presented as a backstage diva, keeping the interviewer waiting and making spurious claims about her career. Nowhere in the article is the fantasy of a ‘real’ Miss Piggy broken; nowhere are Oz or Henson mentioned. Instead, the focus is on Miss Piggy’s private life with Kermit. For instance, Salisbury asks, ‘Are you going to marry Kermit?’ To which, ‘Miss Piggy’ replies, ‘Oh Leslee, Leslee, yes, marriage is something I certainly want, but I have my wonderful career. Kermit is always begging me to marry him.’ (1978: 11) This dual address to audiences, with the Muppets as ‘real’ stars and, alternatively, unreal sites of performance, adds to the complexity of perceptions of Muppet bodies. The trend seems to have been borne out in later academic work on the franchise, some of which discusses the techniques of puppetry, while others address the characters as stars.

(18) Just as significant as these discussions of the Muppets’ bodies, was the difficulty that reviewers had in understanding why certain kinds of real bodies worked so well or so badly with the constructed bodies of the Muppets. Many of the episode reviews for *The Muppet Show* centred on the stars that appeared alongside the Muppets. One, for instance, from a later series that featured Johnny Cash, begins by discussing his appearance on *The Muppet Show*, but then hardly mentions the Muppets for the rest of the article, preferring instead to discuss Cash’s own ‘menagerie’ of animals at home. (Hiscock 1981; for similar see Ewbank 1979 on the Liberace Episode) Conversely, Richard Ingrams, in discussing the first season claims that ‘Only a very powerful lady like Ethel Merman...is able to hold her own in their [the Muppets’] company. Even so, when she was singing a duet with Piggy, I found myself watching the puppet.’ (1977) The intangible qualities that made for a well-received guest star seem to lie in their ability to blend with the personae of the Muppet characters, or, else, to perform ‘bigger’ than them in some way. This relationship is one which will be investigated further in the next section, but on the strength of the reviews considered here, it seems that a successful appearance alongside Henson’s creations was a valuable tool in legitimising the cultural positions of both stars and Muppets.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Presenting the End of Sex and Violence on Television ... It’s *The Muppet Show!*

(19) So says *The Muppet Show* narrator before a humanoid Muppet called Crazy Harry blows up the set around him in the pilot episode which provides the title for this chapter. As the title indicates, the cultural status of *The Muppet Show* was not certain during its first season (see Note 6). The title suggests the need Henson felt to break away from the children’s television tradition that his products had become associated with through *Sesame Street*. More to the point, Henson’s attempts to cross from children’s audiences to family ones necessitated a different kind of interaction between the Muppets, and between the Muppets and their human co-stars, than was found on *Sesame Street*. Sex and violence provided two inroads through which Henson’s new show could make gains with the adult, or family, television markets. In fact, there appears to have been much

incredulity on the part of reviewers concerning *The Muppet Show's* ability to appeal to an adult audience. One audience member's view, published in the *Evening News*, provides telling evidence as to why this critical misalignment happened. David Dowse cites the shifting status of the Muppets from a Saturday morning children's timeslot in *Sesame Street*, to 'ITV putting out a children's programme at peak viewing time on Sunday evening' as cause for concern (Dowse 1978). Registering his aversion to the format and content of the show, Dowse demonstrates the reluctance of some audience members to move away from the original viewing context created for the Muppets in *Sesame Street*. This stated, the shift from children's to general television audiences is, in large part, what enabled *The Muppet Show* to obtain the popularity that has seen it spun out into a fully-fledged franchise since the 1970s. This section will therefore attempt to analyse some of the ways in which *The Muppet Show* re-imagined the Muppets for a crossover audience.

(20) Foremost among the ways in which the Muppets changed was in their interactions with guest stars. These interplays were undertaken in numerous ways, and interactions depended largely on the kind of star persona involved. For example, Joel Grey's reputation as a star of musicals (on screen and Broadway) led to him interacting more with the musically oriented Muppets, such as Dr. Teeth and the Electric Mayhem band, as well as Gonzo, for whom he acted as a performance teacher. Likewise, British comedy star Bruce Forsyth was teamed with Fozzie Bear for much of his appearance, teaching him how to handle heckling from Waldorf and Statler. This tutelary position in relation to the Muppets is the closest link retained by the show to its *Sesame Street* roots. While this hold-over may account for some audience confusion, it shares little in common with two other frequently used methods of interplay between the Muppets and their guests.

(21) Most common amongst these was flirtations, usually orchestrated by Miss Piggy or Kermit. Kermit's flirtations with female guest stars took place largely during his 'Talk Spot' in the show, where he would be presented sitting on the edge of a banister-like structure in a simple set, with the guest star in front of the banister. These spots, as the season progressed, were more and more regularly disrupted by other members of the Muppet cast, most usually Miss Piggy or Fozzie Bear (allowing Henson and Oz to perform together with the stars), but one early example bears scrutiny. In one of the pilot episodes, starring dancer Juliet Prowse, she and Kermit have the following conversation:(x)

Kermit: The average frog doesn't have a lot going for him in the looks department.

Prowse: You are the Robert Redford of frogs.

Kermit: Hey listen, have you ever kissed Robert Redford?

Prowse: No I haven't.

Kermit: How about kissing the next best thing? (Juliet Prowse Episode, 25/04/1977)

At which point Prowse concludes with a joke about Paul Newman and, having stroked Kermit's head throughout, then gives him a quick kiss. The exchange is unapologetically filled with sexual innuendo and humour, and Kermit's behaviour here offers an unusual early insight into how sex and the Muppets would be managed in later episodes. Here Kermit is not, as Mukerji has proclaimed him to be, 'uncanny' in his childish virtue, but is rather exploring a more adult identity. (1997: 162) He is presented in this sketch as an attractive, adult male, and not as a child. However, Henson's performance of Kermit's flirtation actually positions the character more in the role of an adolescent, unsure of himself and bashful. This border crossing between childhood and adulthood can be seen even more clearly in the tempestuous relationships of Miss Piggy.

(22) Miss Piggy, as Rowe points out, has 'two aspects... basic to her identity: she is a "Miss," both the most strongly gendered of the main Muppet characters and the only female among them; she is also "Piggy.'" (1995: 26) Within even her name, therefore, Miss Piggy suggests the excessive femininity that would become one of her trademarks. While it is possible to read Miss Piggy's infatuation with Kermit as the motivation for her various flirtations across all the series of *The Muppet Show*, it is worth unpacking some of her 'courting' tactics here in order to better understand the different roles of sex and sexuality in *The Muppet Show*. Two examples of Miss Piggy's interactions with guest stars are useful here: her flirtations with French singer and actor Charles Aznavour and with Avery Schreiber (one half of a comedy duo that included *The Muppet Show* writer, Jack Burns). In the former example, Miss Piggy becomes the butt of sexualised humour in jokes about the beauty of the French language. During another 'Talk Spot' with Kermit, Aznavour is shown speaking to Miss Piggy in the manner of a lover, while Oz performs her quivering and sighing. The humour resides in the fact that Aznavour is merely reciting phone numbers and other meaningless phrases instead of actually 'making love' to her. Unusually, Aznavour escapes the scene unscathed, but a laughing Kermit is punished by Miss Piggy's karate chop.

(23) In the second example, Miss Piggy tries to convince Schreiber to flirt with her in order to make Kermit jealous. This is part of an elaborate scheme on Miss Piggy's part which lasts almost as long as the episode and takes in Scooter as a co-conspirator. In this example, Schreiber's refusal to go along with Miss Piggy's scam and her betrayal by Scooter lead to a flurry of violence in which both are on the receiving end of Miss Piggy's violent passions (there are five karate chops delivered in this episode, plus kicks). In these examples, the guest stars play a significant role in helping to define the adult relationships (or at least teenaged ones) of the central Muppet characters. Once again, adolescent behaviour patterns are visible in Miss Piggy, who is positioned alternately as an unwitting foil for male misogyny and the orchestrator of elaborate plans to ensnare the object of her affections. Her adolescent behaviour is marked by the intermingling of love with violence, making her neither a victim nor a mature adult in behaviour. Stars in these examples provide an alternative focus for Miss Piggy's passions, and the interspecies lust

and love demonstrated in them, either 'real' or 'performed' provides audiences with new ways in which to consider the sexualised body of the Muppet. As delineated above, star interactions with the Muppet cast also help to crystallise aspects of their star personae, often centred on the body, be it in vocal or physical humour as seen above, or in other ways that will be explored below.

(24) Another way in which the Muppet body was sexualised during Season One of *The Muppet Show* can be seen in the many inter-species relationships depicted throughout. One significant recurring sketch from the show demonstrates the Muppeteers' commitment to this idea, the 'At the Dance' sketch. Like the *Laugh In* (1968-1973) spot that it spoofs, 'At the Dance' centres on a ballroom around which couples dance while telling jokes. While these 'couples' do alter across the season, with some being more frequently used than others, there are some interesting consistencies. First, the only same-species couples are animal ones. An early version of Miss Piggy performed by Richard Hunt appears repeatedly early on in the season, dancing with another pig. It was also in this sketch that the Muppet rats were first introduced, dancing together and making risqué jokes based around affluence and an implied African American ethnicity. But other than these animal couples, every other dancing pair is 'mismatched'; animals and human-based Muppets together, or more commonly monsters and humans, with the occasional multi-coloured 'Whatnot' couple.

(25) Notable pairings from the first season include Rowlf the Dog paired with a young 'human' girl, seen making jokes about her wearing a flea collar; and humanoid George the Janitor who commonly dances with Mildred Hockstetter, a Whatnot member of *The Muppet Show* Season One panel segments. This Muppet miscegenation is clearly intended to enhance the parodic comedy in these sketches, signalling homage to *Laugh In's* successful format. However, more intriguingly, this combination of different kinds of Muppets also helps to foreground the range of bodies on display in *The Muppet Show*. Unlike Rowe's claim that the female body is absent from the Muppets, we can see in this sketch how necessary and insistently present it was. Moreover, we can see how the constructed nature of the body was celebrated in this sketch, with similar Muppets reappearing week on week but in different wigs, with different partners and sometimes in different outfits dependent on the jokes being told.

(26) Many of these jokes were intrinsically violent. Miss Piggy's violent nature is the most routinely cited example of Muppet violence, and is often used to cast her in a monstrous role in relation to the central Muppet cast. However, in Season One of *The Muppet Show*, Miss Piggy is not the most violent of Muppet characters by far. In fact, before her first karate chop, in the Ruth Buzzi episode (number 4 according to the order they were taped in), Miss Piggy remains a non-violent background character, becoming increasingly violent only as the season progressed. Violence perpetrated among the other Muppet characters falls into two broad categories. On the one hand, there are multiple instances across the first season of what might be called, Muppet-body horror, where one Muppet eats another. A good example

of this behaviour can be found in a sketch based on Sherlock Holmes, where a large purple monster butler slowly eats all the evidence that Rowlf, as Holmes, is trying to use to solve the case. The evidence includes Miss Piggy, playing a servant who witnessed the crime. (Joel Grey Episode, 18/10/1976) A less violent example includes a sketch where a crocodile, singing 'Never Smile at a Crocodile,' eats a series of frogs, only for them to jump out of his mouth at the end of the sketch (Sandy Duncan Episode, 04/10/1976). A final telling sketch takes place to accompany the song 'I've Got You Under My Skin', in which a large yellow monster Muppet called a Behemoth eats a smaller red and purple one, only to have the song become an unwilling duet as the little Muppet appears inside the Behemoth's mouth, pops his head through its shoulder and then is regurgitated before being eaten a second time (Vincent Price Episode, 31/01/1977). These examples of Muppet body-horror cannibalism stress the anarchic aspects of the comedy of *The Muppet Show*. The core of the humour in each sketch comes, often from the cannibalistic practices themselves, but also sometimes from the refusal of the eaten to remain so.

(27) On top of cannibalistic Muppets, there are the examples, like that discussed at the beginning of this chapter, of Muppets drastically altering their bodies during sketches. This different version of body horror usually plays with conceptions of beauty, as in the opening example where the 'attractive' female Whatnot chooses to become a monster, undermining conventional codes of feminine beauty. A similar example can be found in a running gag towards the end of the first season, with the 'Vendaface' machine. Here, various Muppets interact with a machine that offers to change their appearance, for example, Statler has his features 'rearranged' by the machine when it punches him in the face (Mummenshanz Episode, 06/01/1977). In a more extended sketch one Whatnot Muppet trades in the features of its monstrous, 'ugly' face for beautiful feminine ones, only for the next Whatnot to receive the first's 'scary' features in place of its dowdy ones (Kaye Ballard Episode, 11/22/1976). Beauty and the search for physical perfection thereby become mocked concepts in *The Muppet Show*, with chaotic, ugly and transmutable bodies frequently depicted as preferable to any standard definitions of physical attractiveness.

(28) On the other hand there were the many slapstick instances of violence seen in *The Muppet Show*. Interestingly the most extreme violence on the show was generally perpetrated by its 'monster' characters against either other monsters, or against the central cast of Muppets. On occasion though, stars would get violent with the Muppets and vice versa. In one example, Broadway star Ben Vereen is repeatedly blown up by Crazy Harry and is shown hanging from the set's light rigging (Ben Vereen Episode, 24/01/1977). In another, and more common kind of interaction, Rita Moreno does an interpretive dance in a bar setting with a life-size Muppet and spends much of the 'number' throwing a limp stand-in replacement Muppet across the set and through the walls (Rita Moreno Episode, 20/09/1976). Ruth Buzzi similarly performed 'Can't Take My Eyes Off of You' with larger than life-size Muppet monster Sweetums, and they spend the entire number alternately hitting and hanging off of one another (Ruth Buzzi Episode, 11/10/1976). This guest-to-Muppet violence was an important part of

the comedy of the first season, offering slapstick and excuses for physical interaction between the Muppets and their guests. Such violent encounters helped to reinforce the corporeality of the Muppet bodies; as they banged into the human stars, they helped to make the Muppets seem more 'real.'

(29) Muppet-on-Muppet violence was an altogether more chaotic affair. In one all-monster sketch, from the episode starring Joel Grey, the Muppet monsters sing 'Comedy Tonight' while throwing daggers, shooting guns and arrows and exploding one another. This is the most violent of the sketches in Season One, but is by no means unusual. Crazy Harry reappears across the season, most frequently blowing up Waldorf and Statler, while Frackles are used in a variety of sketches where their heads are blown off, particularly 'At the Dance' sketches. What these sketches share is a common understanding that, as with Avery's cartoons, the Muppets' bodies would be repaired and return to the show unscathed. This forced attention on the unreality of the Muppet body and with it on the creators' ability to construct and reconstruct characters' bodies at will. Violence here then, unlike with the guest stars, emphasised the performer over the site of performance, the Muppeteer's skill over the Muppets corporeality.

Conclusions: 'Yes, but a couple of what?'

(30) Janice asks this question of Floyd in an 'At the Dance' sketch in Season One (Rita Moreno Episode, 20/09/1976), making a joke of the sheer variety of Muppet bodies displayed in *The Muppet Show*. From men in costumes almost ten feet tall, to rod puppet inchworms, to medium sized hybrid hand and rod puppets, *The Muppet Show's* bodies are highly variable entities. Moreover, the juxtaposition of Muppets with the human bodies of stars foregrounds their constructed natures, while placing the Muppets in a backstage musical-style narrative worked to make their constructed natures invisibly visible. By this I mean that just as Janice's question throws their constructed natures into relief, so the backstage portion of the show that follows works to naturalise and justify the Muppets within their environment. By making their constructed natures part of the narrative of the show, *The Muppet Show's* creators carefully maintained the mixture of adult and childish appeals that would draw in the family audiences they required. As a result, the Muppet body becomes one of the show's central concerns, a concern that manifests on a variety of narrative, aesthetic, performance and reception levels.

(31) However, it is not just the visible Muppet body that matters. As can be seen in the case of Miss Piggy, the performer also matters. Her character only emerged fully in the series in the hands of Frank Oz, remaining undistinguished when performed by Richard Hunt. Without Oz creating the character, much of what would become associated with this 'unspeakable' yet highly voluble character would have been lost. Indeed, the interviews performed by the Muppeteers in the late 1970s and early 1980s often actively worked to blur the boundaries between their bodies and those of the Muppets they performed. Kermit has frequently been discussed by Henson himself as an extension of his

own personality (North 1977: 49; Rogers 1981 or Irwin 1977). This blurring of the lines between performance object and performer helps to equate the separate bodies of the Muppets and those who control them, while taking the focus off the characters as stars.

(32) Sex and violence within *The Muppet Show* add to this discussion of the Muppet body by helping to unravel some of the means by which the Muppets were differentiated from their brethren in other shows, and also from the majority of puppets on television in the 1970s. The discussion above has indicated some of the many ways in which the Muppets' bodies were utilised not just as sites of performance, but as liminal sites, shifting between the registers of adult and children's culture in order to maximise audiences, whilst also shifting between the monstrous and beautiful, the male and the female, the human and the Other. By refusing simple conceptions of the body as beholden to cultural constructs of beauty, gender or the 'human,' *The Muppet Show* provided an experimental space in which identity and the role of the body could be explored. Hence this chapter's claims to complexity of the Muppet body in this light entertainment show.

(33) The result of Henson Associates' experiments, in some cases, appears to have been the creation of liminal 'adolescent' personae for the core cast of characters. Miss Piggy and Kermit were the key adolescent characters of the series, with their flirtatious relationships acting as the focus for much of the show's sexual tension. That Miss Piggy's response to her emotions was often violence also indicates how enmeshed sex and violence became to the heart of the show's characterisations. However, at other times the Muppets bodies provided much more anarchic spaces for deliberation about sex and violence, as when vending machines pull apart Muppet faces, only to replace them with others that break cosmetic rules of beauty. Sex and violence were used to further problematise the Muppet body, to create a space in which they could be seen as both 'real' characters and replaceable component parts which could be literally deconstructed, or blown up, on a whim. Various types of Muppet-on-Muppet and Muppet-star violence help to make this point, ranging from cannibalism to fighting to attempted explosive 'assassinations.' By using this kind of violent, Tex Avery-inspired humour, the Muppet body becomes a site for defamiliarisation. In this way, such 'unreal' bodies were used to draw attention to the act of performance, to the skill and craft of the Muppeteers. Transgressed bodily boundaries, like Muppets inside other Muppets, helped to remind audiences of the men inside the puppets on screen.

(34) It is this border crossing that has enabled the Muppets to inspire generations of puppets on television. From the remarkable episode of *Angel* where the hero is transformed into a Muppet-styled puppet (see Feasey, this collection), to the use of Henson's companies in the making of science fiction series like *Farscape* (1999-2003) and films like *Brotherhood of the Wolf* (*Le Pacte des Loupes*, 2001), to films like *Meet the Feebles* (1989), the Muppets continue to influence our understanding of where puppets are appropriate in contemporary culture. *The Muppet Show* broke new ground for the puppet on television and has thus made room for a far greater variety of puppet

bodies to be shown thereon. *The Muppet Show* thereby provides a good example of how considerations of the body on television still require development. Differently to any other show before or since, *The Muppet Show* made the body its central concern, and by combining performance object bodies with human bodies, the Muppets act to draw our attention to the constructed, mediated nature of the body on television. In attempting to answer the question of, 'A couple of what?' offered by a Muppet, we become better able to understand what the body on television might be made of.

Note 1: Whatnots are a generic kind of Muppet, to which any number of different eyes, noses and mouths can be added as necessary. (For more see Finch 1986) Dates indicate first airing of episodes in New York, USA, wherever available.

Note 2: All newspaper sources taken from the British Film Institute Newspaper Clippings archive for *The Muppet Show*, which is catalogued under *The Muppet Show*, ATV/Henson Ass. 1976 (2) and 1980 (4) and also under *The Muppets, Characters*, unless otherwise stated. These do not always have full references, but all available information will be provided in the Bibliography.

Note 3: The first full-length book on the Muppets was recently announced, in a call for papers for a forthcoming edited collection by Anissa M. Graham and Jennifer C. Garlen called *Kermit Culture: Perspectives on Jim Henson's Muppets*

<http://cfp.english.upenn.edu/archive/Collections/2821.html> (Accessed 14/06/2007).

Note 4: While the reasons for this elision of the show from the history of the Muppets are unclear, it is possible that they lie in the inaccessibility of the text. Until recently, *The Muppet Show* was not available for home viewing, while the films were available on VHS and then DVD, and the *Muppet Babies* (1984-1991) cartoon was airing around the time some of these studies were undertaken. The *Muppet Babies* cartoon was based on a sketch from *The Great Muppet Caper* (1981) film, and not on the original series.

Note 5: One notable exception to the categories would be Jack Zipes' excellent technical reading of Henson's *The Storyteller* (1987) (1995, pp. 109-126).

Note 6: One reviewer cited it as 'television's unlikeliest success' in the wake of its Season One hit status. Fiddick, 'All Hands on Deck.'

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