

Metatheatre, Modified Reality, and the Muppets

It isn't often that the worlds of theatre and television are placed together, nor does it often happen that television be considered a form of theatre. But looking at the conventions of the art form over the years, it is easy to see that television absolutely took its form from vaudeville and theater – early programs like *The Jimmy Dean Show* and Johnny Carson's *The Tonight Show* were little more than interviews and skits that combined news and vaudevillian skits into a thirty minute or hour long production for the entertainment of the consumer audience. It was really the second-generation of television professionals that began to change and experiment with the form, and turn it into something different. And while there are many names associated with this particular entertainment history, perhaps none is so important to the idea of television-as-theatre than Jim Henson, creator of the Jim Henson Company and his world-renowned cavalcade of characters known as the Muppets. It is the Muppets themselves that carry the key to the idea of television-as-theatre, due to the nature of the Muppets as creatures of metatheatre. Because they are metatheatric, the Muppets have created theatre that is then televised, instead of simply creating a television program – that they exist not only within the confines of their media makes them metatheatric, and they bring that theatricality to the audience watching via the proscenium of the camera lens.

The term “metatheatre” comes from a series of essays published by Lionel Abel in 1963. Abel (1963) coined the term in an effort to “suggest the nature of a comparatively philosophic form of drama” (p. V). In the essay “Metatheatre: Shakespeare and Calderon,” Abel (1963) sets up the concept of metatheatre with regards not only to the play-within-a-play mechanism, but to “theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized” (p. 60). This definition is what gives metatheatre its relevance with regard to *The Muppet Show*; a show that exists in a world that is

presented theatrically, but which is already highly theatricalized. Abel expands on this principle, saying that these characters are not theatrical simply because the playwright made them so, but “because they themselves knew they were dramatic before the playwright took note of them.” One of Abel’s key figures is Shakespeare’s Falstaff, called by Abel (1963) “nothing if not a dramatist, for not only is he witty himself, but his is the cause of wit in others” (p. 66). Falstaff’s great tragedy is that he is too imaginative to exist within the confines of *Henry IV*, but must at last succumb to the historical fact that drives the narrative. What seems to make him metatheatrical are his interactions with Prince Hal - specifically their moment in the tavern wherein first Falstaff takes on the role of Henry IV and then Prince Hal follows suit. The exchange, as written by Shakespeare and according to Abel (1963), is “pure theatre, of the most imaginative kind” (p. 67). This is due to the argument of Falstaff’s against the advice of Henry IV; “I speak it, there is virtue in that Falstaff. Him keep with, the rest banish,” and Prince Hal’s echoing of this sentiment. Jack Falstaff sets himself up as a man of virtue and a figure who should, must, persist within the world of the play. This, of course, runs counter to the stories of Henry IV and Prince Hal, and upon the Prince’s ascension to Henry V he dismisses Falstaff as he is bound to do by the need to adhere to historical fact. It is, however, Falstaff’s larger-than-life nature and his far more interesting characterization that makes him metatheatrical – as he attempts to sway his own dramatic story despite the direction it must go.

The concept of metatheatre put forth by Abel can perhaps be best explained by his summation of what makes Cervantes’ classic hero Don Quixote a dramatist in his own world, despite being a character in a novel. As Abel says (1963), in modern terminology, Don Quixote is not only his own dramatist, but his own director and stage manager, as well as his own scenic designer:

He seeks out those situations he wants to play a part in; he will not wait for life to provide them in a natural way. He calls upon his imagination to substitute itself for reality wherever the real is lacking in quality, bravura, excitement, delicacy. His imagination obliges; most often, as in the case of the windmills, to his discomfiture. But Don Quixote is not discouraged. In fact he even learns... how to develop and refine his own taste for illusion. He grows wiser before our eyes in his lust for great adventure (p. 65).

Don Quixote certainly stands as a pillar of Abel's definition of metatheatre – despite his existence in a novel, the character's existence is nonetheless driven by his own need for the theatrical, and the self-gratification that comes with being the hero of his own world. And he is the hero, both of Cervantes novel and of his own imagined story wherein windmills are monsters.

One important factor to reckon with when discussing metatheatre and a medium like *The Muppet Show* is the meaning of the term in regards to popular culture – at least, the meaning of the term “metaknowledge” and how it relates to metatheatre. By definition, Abel's concept of metatheatre refers to a character's own dramaticism outside of that assigned them by the playwright. A character's ability to influence their own narrative within the narrative of the play itself determines that character's metatheatricality – whether or not a character can be described as a dramatist or playwright seems to be the test ascribed to the convention by Abel. Certainly his essays spend a great deal of time determining who is or is not a dramatist within the worlds of the works he examines (1963): within *Hamlet*, Polonius is “an amateur playwright par excellence” while Hamlet's ability as a playwright sits much higher (p. 50). Within the mind of the popular culturally minded, however, the subscription to the concept of metaknowledge is something not quite the same. “Metaknowledge,” as defined for the purposes of this essay, refers

to a character's knowledge of the world outside of the world in which they exist, and their knowledge that they are a part of a fictional world – more often than not, this equates to an ability to break the fourth wall in a knowing fashion. One of the most popular current examples of this is Marvel comics' character Deadpool, who spends a great deal of his time making reference to events happening outside of the comic book world – indeed, one of his defining traits is his knowledge that he is actually a comic book character – current issues of the comic have him making reference to the fact that Ryan Reynolds recently played the character in a feature film. Deadpool does not, however, have Abel's metatheatricality. Despite his mastery of metaknowledge, Deadpool cannot affect his own story; his best efforts to be a hero are often ruined by his own self-destructive ways – despite a successful move from comic book to film, Deadpool cannot exist outside of his own fictive world, he can only be aware of his status as a fictional character.

While this form of self-referential metaknowledge is not uncommon or unheard of in theatrical media, it is often times played for a gag and then moved away from. At one point in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* (2015), the titular character says “Don't modulate the key then not debate with me,” in reference to his opponent's modulation of musical key to avoid a proper rebuttal of fact. Within the world of the Muppet Show, metaknowledge is an indispensable tool, one often played to great comedic effect – many times referring to other acts of puppetry as silly or making tongue-in-cheek comments about how weird it is seeing puppets in motion. Ultimately, the difference between metaknowledge and metatheatre is a necessary distinction to make before moving forward; the key difference is that metatheatre is the quality wherein characters in a fictive world are dramatists or playwrights in their own world while metaknowledge refers to an instance of knowledge that breaks the fourth wall of the world.

While metatheatrical characters can and do exhibit metaknowledge, the two qualities are not married together – Don Quixote may change his world to suit his will, but he displays no real knowledge that he exists within the confines of Cervantes’ writing.

It is also important to talk briefly about dramatic irony. In particular, it is important to establish the concept of metatheatre and dramatic irony going hand in hand. Friedrich Schlegel, according to States (1971), is responsible for “liberating the term from the realm of simple verbal raillery” (p. 3). According to Schlegel-via-States, irony stands at the apex of literary art; that through irony, the character of a work is “utterly objective, and yet reveals the subjective wisdom, will, and love of the creator,” (p. 3) and it is this quality that is going to prove most important in building the ultimate argument of this essay. This is not to say that the strictest definition of irony is not important, and that will be discussed forthwith, but it is Schlegel’s subjective wisdom and love that gives ultimate metatheatrical power to the Muppets even now, over twenty-five years after Jim Henson’s death – for while the Muppets continue to exist in what is objectively an ever-changing and fluid world, Henson’s wisdom and love can still be clearly seen in each generation of Muppet media, from the original series in the 70’s and 80’s to the most recent. The distinct parts of the series that can be traced back to Henson’s original show are based in the Henson’s own subjective morality and belief system. This is, ironically, what makes the Muppets what they are even today; even a cursory glance at that universe in relation to the Muppet universe of the 70s and 80s shows very little difference outside of the differences that come with the passage of time. And even if the show is examined through stricter definition of the term, irony finds a way into the proceedings of each episodes, with understood scenarios being played out in directions that do not lead to the expected outcome or venture in such a way that the audience is left laughing at the absurdity of the resolution. It is the commitment to

dramatic irony that makes the inclusion of irony as a storytelling device important – to best understand what the show offers and why it matters, it is important to understand two things: that metatheatre and irony work well when used together, and that both elements are on display in full-force in the collected series of Jim Henson's Muppets. The key point to remember when discussing metatheatre and dramatic irony together is that not all dramatic irony is metatheatre nor is all metatheatre dramatic irony – the two are separate facets of drama which may overlap to enhance the other. And while the focus on dramatic irony is often applied to tragedy as the master form of the device, something which States speaks on at length and which Canadian professor G. G. Sedgewick has an entire book about, the use of irony in the comedic form can lead to great success. Irony is, at its simplest, a method of subverting expectations held by an audience about any given circumstance. Subverting or outright countering those expectations is one of the greatest available methods for creating good comedy, something the Muppets accomplish in an almost effortless fashion. This is due in large part to the nature of the world of the Muppets – the Muppets themselves are puppets, of course, but in-world they are living, breathing creatures without the need for assistance while moving, dancing, or singing. Despite this, the Muppets do display a clear awareness of their nature as puppets on regular occasion, particularly when it is horribly ironic to do so. In this way, irony becomes the vehicle for the metatheatrical elements of the show. These two techniques combined provide the necessary elements for what will be referred to as modified universe or modified reality.

Modified reality is not a new concept to the theatre world, but it is one that perhaps is not recognized in the same way that concepts like metatheatre or theater of the absurd are recognized – modified reality is, however, used as a vehicle for the message of a work in the same way that absurdism is used. Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, one of the most famous of the Theatre of the Absurd

plays, almost qualifies as modified reality; the townspeople's transformations serve as a vehicle to explain the spread of nationalistic Nazism, but the only express tie that the audience has to that world is the mention that the town exists in France. Ionesco could easily have set the play in fictional Illyria and the message of the play would not have changed – in this way, *Rhinoceros* is more akin to an alternate reality play than a modified one. In order to be considered modified reality, a work must very clearly take place in the same world that the audience inhabits while presenting that reality with enough changes to prove that the world itself isn't quite normal, and the characters within the work must be aware of this fact and must be dramatic of their own accord. Jim Henson's *The Muppet Show* provides the greatest example of this modified reality. The Muppets very clearly exist in the same reality as their audience, which is impossible of its own accord. Additionally, the characters within the show satisfy Abel's definition of metatheatre, with the ability to be the playwrights of their own lives and to be live theatrical lives within media that is itself already theatrical. Additionally, the Muppets display knowledge of the world that extends beyond the fourth wall, frequently in such a way that draws attention to their nature as fictive beings or to their own metatheatricity.

To discuss the Muppets as a form of modified reality with any measure of success, it is important to understand who and what the Muppets are. And it is impossible to talk about the Muppets without first discussing Jim Henson. According to the official Jim Henson Company (1999) biography, Henson was born in 1936 and grew up largely influenced by the artistic talents of his grandmother, who was “an avid painter, quilter, and needleworker” and who encouraged the young man to pursue artistic success and to “use his imagination and take delight in the world around him.” In 1954 Henson made his first television appearance, working on a local Washington, DC show on Saturday mornings using puppets. The next year found Henson, now a

college freshman at the University of Maryland, working on a twice-daily five minute special called Sam and Friends which established what may be the most important convention of the future *Muppet Show*; the removal of a puppet stage and the use of the camera itself as the proscenium of the work. The show also featured an early version of Kermit the Frog, who has perhaps become Henson's best known character. His first nationally known character, however, would be Rowlf the Dog. Rowlf was the culmination of the collaborative efforts of Henson, Don Sahlin, and Frank Oz, who joined Muppets Inc. in 1963, the same year that Henson and his partner and wife Jane Nebel moved to New York to handle the increasing demands of national television appearances. And from 1963 to 1966, Rowlf the Dog would appear frequently on *The Jimmy Dean Show*, giving Muppets Inc. its first chance to work on the stage that is national television. Soon after Henson and Muppets Inc. would do work with Children's Television Workshop on a show that would premiere in 1969 and create several iconic Henson Muppets; *Sesame Street* would also bring Henson the opportunity to practice new film techniques and experiment with new creations – the eight-foot-two Big Bird would be one of the first of Henson's larger costume puppets and certainly one of the most successful, particularly with children. However, Henson believed that his puppeteering skills and those of the members of what would become the Jim Henson Company could appeal to a larger family audience; in 1975, a London based producer would give Henson that opportunity. At Lord Lew Grade's ATV Studios, production on *The Muppet Show* began, and through a combination of the creative talents of both the writers and creators of the show and the guest stars who appeared on each week's episode, the world was introduced to the likes of Kermit the Frog, Ms. Piggy, Fozzie Bear, The Great Gonzo, and the host of classic Muppet entertainers who would go on to star in three television series all their own. Throughout the 80s, Henson would go on to make not only

Muppet movies, but other films that challenged the limits of his creative teams. Some of the most notable films from that time are the Muppet takes on both *A Christmas Carol* and *Treasure Island*, but the 1980s also saw *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*, both of which gave Henson a chance to practice creating more complex, three dimensional puppets. But for the purposes of the arguments regarding the concept of modified reality, Henson's work on *Sesame Street* and *The Muppet Show* will remain the most important, while the continued work of the Jim Henson Company on *Muppets Tonight!* and ABC's *the muppets* will be examined to see if they retain the necessary qualities to exist in modified reality.

The Muppet Show, as has been discussed, definitely exists within the confines of modified reality. Airing from 1975 until 1981, with reruns aired throughout the 80s and 90s and even in the mid-00s. The show itself follows a very simple premise: each week the performers of the Muppet Theatre put on a revue of song, dance, and skit, and each week are joined by a guest from a different part of show business. Over the course of its production *The Muppet Show* saw guest appearances by some of the most famous performers of the times, with entertainers like Diana Ross, Dizzy Gillespie, Liza Minnelli, Victor Borge, Joel Gray, Zero Mostel, George Burns – *The Muppet Show* didn't seem to have a strict criteria for the guests that frequented its theater, but the inclusion of celebrity performers grounded *The Muppet Show* in the real world and created a new, modified reality in which the Muppets themselves existed alongside human beings. And while the episodes themselves did not have deep plots, the elements of metatheatre persisted throughout the show. The Muppets themselves were creatures of theatre. This is not due solely to the fact that they were employed, in a loose usage of the term, by the Muppet Theatre, but also because each character had their own story to tell. They functioned as real people (or frogs) who had their own dreams and aspirations – much like Cervantes' Don

Quixote, the Muppets were in charge of their reality as much as any other person in their world – which happened to be our world as well. Additionally, the Muppets knew that they were themselves existed in a reality that was simultaneously real and not. In clips shown in a 1994 documentary, *The World of Jim Henson*, Fozzie Bear and Kermit discover that they have “people under them,” much to the glee of the audience watching the segment. During certain segments of *The Muppet Show*, guest puppeteers who have worked with Henson perform segments with their creations, while the Muppets look on and comment about how weird puppets are, often times followed by a Carol Burnett-style take at the camera nearest them, or followed by a hearty laugh shared amongst the group. In particular, Kermit the Frog, perhaps due to his nature as the head of the group and the core of the Muppet family, seems the ideal model for the modified reality dramatist – it is around and through Kermit that we see the majority of the action that surrounds the Muppets. As the stage manager of the Muppet Theatre, this should come as no surprise. Still, due to his ability to almost magically change the proceedings of the show at a moment’s notice, Kermit appears to be a frog of metatheatre.

Of course, this theory of metatheatricality only works in conjunction with the theatrical conventions that the show puts forth; despite being a television program, *The Muppet Show* is a work of theatre in a new style of playing space. Henson’s usage of the edges of the camera as the proscenium for his puppetry creates a new world that functions as theatre – the camera work itself is treated more theatrically, with many of the numbers being shot at wide and medium angles to capture the entirety of the action on stage and working counter to television and film’s typical reliance on close ups to convey emotion. Another technological aspect that adds to the theatre of the performance is that the show is performed, technically, in front of a live audience. In order to accurately capture the necessary emotional content that the Muppets were supposed to

put forth, the puppeteers would watch themselves on small monitors – the puppeteers would watch the Muppets to accurately move the Muppets that they were watching. This technique first came about when Henson drew the original sketches for the Big Bird puppet in Sesame Street. Big Bird's mouth was controlled by the puppeteer's right hand, while the left arm moved the Bird's left arm and the puppeteer's legs became the Bird's legs. Inside the costume, the puppeteer had a small monitor to watch themselves on, and a wireless headset to speak through for voice capture. And through new usage of these budding technologies, Henson was able to create something in television that hadn't been done before, and which gave a sense of theatre to the whole operation.

Sesame Street, too, exists in a modified reality. It first establishes this reality by including real human beings in its cast, who live and work alongside the Muppet creations who become the vehicle for the children who watch the show – this in particular applies to Big Bird, who becomes something of a metatheatrical figure within this particular universe. Big Bird was meant to be, according to *The World of Jim Henson*, a character that the children who watched the show could see themselves as – Big Bird at his inception was meant to be a character who could convey to children information in a way that made them feel connected to the learning process. If Big Bird is indeed a dramatist under Abel's definition, then he is a student of that dramatism; Big Bird is unable to affect his own world by himself, but spends each episode learning to do so bit by bit. While Big Bird may never be a Hamlet or a Don Quixote, he does exhibit the ability to learn about his world and affect it. The most telling method of this ability was once in Big Bird's ability as the only character on Sesame Street to see Aloysius Snuffleupagus – arguably making Mr. Snuffleupagus an imaginary friend who was shared between Big Bird and the audience in much the same way that Don Quixote shared his monsters. This of course changed in 1985, when

Big Bird, with the help of Elmo, managed to introduce Snuffy to all of the adults on Sesame Street who didn't believe in the creature's existence. In this way, Big Bird and Elmo combine their meager powers as metatheatrical beings to change the reality of the world they live in. The actual events of the episode play out in a mundane fashion, with Elmo holding onto Snuffy's long snout to prevent him leaving Big Bird's nest before the adults arrive. However, in doing something so simple, and with Big Bird's call for the adults of the street to come to his nest, an established convention of the work was altered outright. For this reason, the Muppets of Sesame Street can be said to be of the same metatheatrical stock as their counterparts from *The Muppet Show*, and due to the crossover interactions of characters like Kermit the Frog, must exist in the same modified reality as the other Muppets.

However, does this principle hold true throughout the other worlds in the Muppetverse? Surely it must, if the characters of Sesame Street are cut from the same cloth. The next series in the Muppetverse that must be discussed is the sequel to *The Muppet Show*. *Muppets Tonight!* follows the further exploits of the Muppet family as they run a television station. Despite the change in venue, the show follows the same basic premise of its predecessor; the Muppet crew presents a televised revue show interspersed with light plot elements that typically involve the show's guest star. In the episode featuring Rick Moranis, a great deal of the subplot follows Rick's quest to perform a "Salute to Late Fifties Crooners, Obscure British Bands, and Bill Withers" while newcomers Seymour the Elephant and Pepe the Prawn pitch a cooking show – which results in Rick Moranis crooning while a giant bread monster fights with Seymour and Pepe. Another episode sees the resident Muppet singer Johnny Fiama meet his idol Tony Bennett and collapse of stage fright. Ultimately, the changes between *The Muppet Show* and *Muppets Tonight!* are largely cosmetic. None of the newer Muppets seem to have the same metatheatric

powers as the previous group; Johnny Fiama must be tricked into overcoming his fears, and Seymour and Pepe, while entertaining in their own way, do not present the same level of dramatism that the other Muppet stars exhibit. This does not in and of itself remove *Muppets Tonight* from the realm of modified reality. Rather, the inclusion of more characters without the same dramatic abilities serves to highlight those qualities in other members of the Muppet family – throughout it all, Kermit’s ability to further the narrative of the show despite the expected outcome remains as the glue that holds the Muppet family together. Despite the inclusion of another leader – Clifford – it is Kermit who frequently solves or corrects the problems on the show. And while status as the protagonist of the show does not automatically confer metatheatrical status, it is Kermit’s own inherent theatricality and, like Falstaff, his inability to be held within the confines of his writing that keeps *Muppets Tonight!* within the realm of metatheatre that its predecessor held.

It is perhaps *The Jim Henson Hour* that is hardest to classify within the tight definition of modified reality. This show is altogether different in its intention – no longer is the focus of the program on the extended Muppet Family’s exploits, but rather on various ventures of the Henson Company. The program is typically broken into two segments: the first takes place in a world Henson calls Muppet Central, where Kermit the Frog has control over every television signal in the universe and must select the best collection of clips for the show – with the help of several Muppet faces who had not appeared prior nor appear after. This particular instance gives us the strongest argument for Kermit the Frog as a being of metatheatre and for the modified reality of the Muppetverse as a whole: we actually see him interact with Jim Henson via monitor, leading us to believe that they can somehow exist simultaneously within the confines of the Muppet reality. Additionally, Kermit’s assistant Vicki states during one episode that as a child she used

to love to watch *The Muppet Show* – to which Kermit immediately responds “Well, we don’t need to go into that.” This connection establishes that *The Jim Henson Hour* must exist within the confines of the same universe as the previous Muppet programs. This is further strengthened throughout the run of the show, with guest spots featuring popular performers in various skits as well as ventures of other members of the Muppet cast into the real world. But it is Kermit’s ties to the real world through his interactions with Jim Henson that strengthen his connection to the metatheatrical and to the concept of modified reality.

The most recent venture into serialization for the Muppets is with a new mockumentary style program called simply *the muppets*. This particular work is a major break from the previous shows styles, as it features no revue or overly wild and far-fetched reality; the Muppets simply exist and work to keep the Miss Piggy Show afloat in-universe. This series could actually stand very powerfully beside it’s originator as an example of modified reality, if there were stronger moments of metatheatre. In its current form however, the show presents the Muppets in a wholly realistic way, without the tongue-in-cheek wink-wink-nudge-nudge understanding that they are aware of their own impossibility. The characters do, however, retain their metatheatricity – they seem to exist both inside and outside of the world of the show. This principle was, of course, established long ago by Jim Henson. In its current form, *the muppets* does nothing to break new ground or establish a new concept regarding the Muppets themselves; the show is a shift in form and tone that brings the over-the-top creatures to a more human level of existence. This is, arguably, reason enough to view the work as one of modified reality – perhaps in its purest, most distilled form. In truth, the status of *the muppets* as a work of metatheatre or of modified reality may require more episodes of the program and further study of the newer storytelling conventions utilized. Ultimately, it is the originator of the series, *The Muppet Show*,

that eclipses its descendants in terms of its metatheatricality and which, through the establishment of its characters and their role in relation to both their program and the real world has given the Muppets themselves the powers of metatheatre that they possess.

The collected works of Jim Henson are, without a doubt, some of the greatest manuals available for creating and telling quality stories that appeal to a wide generation of audience members. With the utilization of techniques that spans an almost 70 year existence, the Jim Henson Company will most likely continue to make and affect media for years to come – the Muppets alone certainly will. But it was commitment to creating characters that gave Jim Henson's ideas staying power, and ultimately created a new form of televised theatre and opened up a new category of metatheatre. With the reality that came from the mind of Jim Henson, stories could be set up to cover a wide variety of subjects and performance styles – even when staged, the Muppets retain their charm and vibrancy in spite of the fact that they are only puppets controlled by a collective of great performers. But many of the mainstay Muppets contain a powerful force of personality that catapults them from being mere puppets behind a television screen to being real, live creatures with hopes and dreams and aspirations just like the humans who watch them, and it is this quality, this zest for life that removes them from being purely denizens of their own world and makes them creatures of metatheatre.

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