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The Muppet Movies as The Classical Hollywood Musicals

When Jim Henson died in 1990, he left behind a legacy which included a multiple of television shows and movies encompassing a myriad of characters. He will forever be tied however, to The Muppets, and particularly the movies he made with them. Between 1979 and 1984 Henson made three feature films starring his most famous creations: *The Muppet Movie*, *The Great Muppet Caper* and *The Muppets Take Manhattan*. Each was a huge success, and each was a musical.

Henson himself directed only one of the films (1981's *Great Muppet Caper*), and several more featuring The Muppets were made after his death. It is clear however that the three mentioned above form an unofficial trilogy. Of the films made after Henson's death, all but one have been direct adaptations of existing stories (*A Muppet Christmas Carol* and *Muppet Treasure Island*) and the other, *Muppets From Space* was not a musical, containing only one diegetic song, a production number of the preexisting "Celebration" by Kool and The Gang (Lemire). Furthermore, the conclusion of the third film, *The Muppets Take Manhattan* "make[s] you wonder if the characters are going to be retired" (Arnold), having a strong sense of finality. From the simple fact that the three films were made within a five year period, and that six more years had passed without a fourth before Henson's passing, it is reasonable to conclude that the triumvirate were intended to remain a closed set.

The idea of *Muppets From Space* being a musical was so easily dismissed above. How then,

can the first three films be so easily classified as musicals? Besides the obvious answer that each movie contains several original, diegetic songs, it can also be shown that they all subscribe to the form of the classical Hollywood musical. One can easily identify in them numerous instances of such characteristics commonly found in the classical musical movies of the thirties and forties as reflexivity, direct address, bricolage, dream sequences, and the conflict between high and low art.

The conflict between high and low art is represented consistently in the Muppet movies through the travails of Miss Piggy. From her first appearance in *The Muppet Movie*, she is presented as a symbol, as ridiculous as she may make it seem, of high culture. While songs thus far have been such folksy fare as “The Rainbow Connection” and “Movin’ Right Along,” Miss Piggy’s introduction is immediately followed by the fantasy-sequence production of “Never Before, Never Again” with full orchestral backing. It is also worth noting that her appearance is heralded by no less a figure than puppet luminary Edgar Bergen, to whom the film is dedicated and whom the filmmakers obviously had a high opinion of.

Miss Piggy lives up to her presentation as well. She is frequently changing costumes, while the other Muppets rarely if ever wear costumes in the first place. With her misguided attempts at French (“Adios mon cheri”) she serves as a constant lampooning of “high” culture. She is dressed better, and more importantly strains to act better than the other Muppets. When she first meets Kermit’s friends in *The Muppet Movie*, she immediately seems put off by their low-brow nature. However, we soon see that she really is just longing to be one of the crowd. This behavior repeats during her date with Kermit in *The Great Muppet Caper*.

Miss Piggy is only one specific, constant example of the high versus low feud. Her and Kermit’s first date in *The Muppet Movie* is an excellent example of the way the movies lampoon

high culture. Their waiter, played by Steve Martin, seems to be dressed in a rather fancy tuxedo, until it is revealed that he is wearing shorts. Kermit splurges on a ninety-eight cent bottle of champagne (“Would you like to smell the bottlecap?”) allowing the filmmakers to then exploit one of the limits of working with puppets by having the young lovers drink through straws.

The Great Muppet Caper is filled with juxtapositions between high and low. Diana Rigg’s portrayal of fashion designer Lady Holiday for example, is first seen (not counting her brief, histrionic appearance in the opening song) speaking on the phone while she alters dress designs currently being worn by models, one of which she spontaneously pours a bottle of ink on, prompting polite applause from her entourage. In a more heavy-handed use of the high versus low concept, Kermit, Fozzie and Gonzo’s residence in London, the Happiness Hotel on Cheapside Street, is juxtaposed with where Miss Piggy claims to live, on Highbrow Street. Establishing shots of each building feature a street sign in the bottom right corner of the frame.

As is to be expected however, the Muppet movies are not using the concept of high versus low culture to make any kind of point about art or drive any plots. They are simply using the awkward juxtapositions it provides to make a joke.

Each of the films also enjoys a dream sequence courtesy of Miss Piggy. Appropriately, these sequences play host to various parodies film styles. In *The Muppet Movie* there is a montage of these parodies, featuring Miss Piggy and Kermit falling in love in the style of a period drama, a film noir and some kind of medieval romance. *The Muppets Take Manhattan* features the Muppets as babies singing a doo-wop number, “a kind of ‘Romper Room’ version of ‘Grease’” (Arnold). In *The Great Muppet Caper* the sequence is a grand Esther Williams style water spectacular. In true irreverent Muppet style, the form is used for humor: while underwater, bubbles stream out of Miss Piggy’s

nose, her high heels are never removed, and fish swim by as an obviously dubbed Charles Grodin croons operatically.

This is far from the only occasion in *The Great Muppet Caper* where old musicals are brought back to life. In preparing for his date with Miss Piggy, Kermit dresses up to the nines to the tune of a song called “Stepping Out With A Star,” and as soon as he puts on a top hat, it is clear that he has become a puppet incarnation of Fred Astaire. The choreography flirts with the bricolage concept, having Kermit bouncing off the bed and finally taking on the prop dance, paired with the coat rack à la Royal Wedding (Feuer 5).

For their date, Miss Piggy and Kermit go to a posh supper club. Fozzie, in yet another example of the juxtaposition of high and low culture, comments that at “a fancy place like this, you’d think they’d have pretzels on the table.” Piggy and Kermit dance to the sounds of the club’s band. The dance gradually becomes a song, as first an unseen chorus sings along (“The First Time It Happens”) and then the whole thing turns into a production number in the grandest Busby Berkeley style. Being a Muppet movie however, the Berkeley style clichés are subverted for greater effect. For example, where Berkeley would make patterns out of his female dancers to shoot from overhead, the patterns in this number are formed by men and are shot from below with the men looking down at the camera. The “typical Berkeley ‘crotch shot’ in which the the camera travels down a row of girl spread-eagle on the floor as one by one their legs ‘go down’ for the phallic lens” (Feuer 42) is replaced instead by a similar shot where the camera travels down a row of men, each one expanding his collapsible opera hat as the camera goes by. The scene ends with a dreamlike composite shot of Miss Piggy. In true reflexive form, Kermit remarks “What a great number!”

Amazingly, even with its own separate, non-reflexive plot, *The Great Muppet Caper* at times

threatens to be even more reflexive than the other two films. In its opening number (“Hey! A Movie!”), we are introduced to the idea that we are not watching the Muppets themselves but rather the Muppets playing other characters, who happen to have the same names as the Muppets. “See, in this film, me and Fozzie play crack investigative reporters for the Daily Chronicle” Kermit explains. “And Gonzo, he's our photographer, and it's gonna be terrific.”

On the surface this does not seem all that different from the first film, where the main narrative is framed with material telling us about the film. In *The Muppet Movie* however, there is a very well defined distinction between the main-narrative and the meta-movie. In *The Great Muppet Caper* on the other hand, Muppets freely flow in and out of character, frequently making comments about the film from within the film itself. Often this is done openly, as when Diana Rigg's Lady Holiday explains her dialogue to Miss Piggy saying that “It's plot exposition. It has to go somewhere.” Other times the reflexive comments are worked directly into the narrative. Early in the movie the filmmakers reflexively poke fun at their own reflexivity and that of the previous film, by having Kermit and Fozzie's first investigative report be about their becoming investigative reporters. More often than not however, these types of comments are delivered directly to the audience in a fully conscious break from the diegetic dialogue in which the fourth wall comes tumbling down in the middle of a scene.

It is through these devices that Henson the director has constructed a new form of reflexivity. The result is epitomized in a scene where Miss Piggy and Kermit are in the midst of an argument, borne of the fact that she lied to him, pretending to be Lady Holiday. Suddenly, the audience finds that they are no longer arguing about that but have instead proceeded to yell at each other about their respective acting abilities. They turn from the camera to try and sort out their differences, seemingly

ashamed of their behavior in front of an audience. Their argument is resolved with the song “Couldn’t We Ride?” but precisely which argument the song has been used to resolve is not made clear, nor does it need to be. It is understood that both arguments are resolved and, paradoxically, that while Miss Piggy who lied to Kermit is a character being played by Miss Piggy, they are both the same Miss Piggy. The audience accepts this fluid movement between narrative and meta-content based on the precedents laid out in the film’s first scenes. Those precedents however, are acceptable in the first place because they initially appear to be within the standard reflexive confines of the classical Hollywood musical.

This is not meant to downplay the incredibly creative nature of the reflexivity present in *The Muppet Movie*. The film begins without any opening credits, setting the scene at a large Hollywood studio and then charging headfirst into a screening room filled with manic Muppets where it is revealed that they are to be watching the movie they just finished making. The opening credits finally appear as the “real” audience watches the movie along with them. However, that audience never actually sees the Muppets watching the movie. As soon as it begins, the film within the film fills the frame. Throughout the course of the film, there is never any yelling or throwing things at the screen, surprising for the crowd presented in the opening scenes. Save for a brief interlude when the projector in the screening room breaks down, the real audience’s experience is never intruded upon by their film counterparts.

The finale of the film involves the Muppets actually making the movie they are now watching on a Hollywood sound stage, complete with deliberately flat set pieces evoking earlier scenes in the narrative. The accompanying song “The Magic Store” (echoing a comment made by the Hollywood agent who prompts Kermit to go there in the first place in the film within the film’s first scene), is

all about the so-called magic of the movies. When the set explodes, the Muppets are left standing in a pile of rubble where their magic used to be. An inspirational reprise of the opening song “The Rainbow Connection” accompanies the true magic as a rainbow bursts through the studio roof. At this point, reflexivity takes over again in a different form, as the giant monster Sweetums bursts through the screen in the screening room, reminding the audience that even the “true magic” represented by the rainbow is just a special effect, and that real magic comes from real people.

The Muppets Take Manhattan requires special consideration in this discussion. The film would appear to be, on the surface, the one of the three which most embodies the spirit of the classical Hollywood musical. So much so in fact, that this was even noted by reviewers upon its release, who exclaimed that “‘The Muppets Take Manhattan’ recalls ‘Babes in Arms,’ ‘Babes on Broadway’ and ‘Girl Crazy,’ that is, if Mickey Rooney had been a frog and Judy Garland a pig” (Canby) and that “you half expect to see Mickey Rooney pop up and say, ‘Let’s put on a show in the barn!’” (Sterritt). This attitude is due to the plot, which involves the Muppet gang attempting to make it big on Broadway. Clearly this is a highly reflexive musical in the grand classical tradition. On closer inspection however, the movie might be considered to be the least classical of the three.

Unlike its predecessors, *The Muppets Take Manhattan* actually begins with a title sequence which leads into the plot proper; there is no discussion about the credits, as in *The Great Muppet Caper*, and no discussion of what we are about to watch as in *Caper* and *The Muppet Movie*. The credits music itself, which includes a whistling, humming Kermit, flows directly into the opening number which has Kermit singing solo. When the title music becomes the song, the viewer is lead to believe that the entire overture was in fact just a rather long intro to the diegetic number and was diegetic itself. However, a closer listen reveals a complexity in the orchestration occurring

immediately before the transition. Suddenly there are bells and a melodic violin solo reminiscent of a wedding, raising the cue from simple intro to foreshadowing theme.

The film's first image as the overture makes its transition is of Kermit alone on a completely dark screen. He is soon joined by Miss Piggy and Fozzie. The audience is given no indication at first that this song is in fact taking place on a stage in the world of the film. For the entirety of the song's first verse, all the audience sees are Muppets in front of darkness singing directly to the camera. It is only an abrupt burst of applause and a head-on shot of the audience within the movie that allows the film's audience to realize what they are watching. They had been lead to believe that what was in fact a performance within the film's universe was a production number directly addressed to themselves. The film viewer however never sees the show from the diegetic audience's point of view (the opening images are too close up to be considered as such) and in fact several times the diegetic audience is seen over the performers' shoulders.

This is in stark contrast to the other films, particularly *The Great Muppet Caper*, where oftentimes a song completely integrated with the narrative is subverted into a performance. There are two ways to do this, and both can occur within the same song. One is to have the number become a performance within the film. An excellent example of this is "The Happiness Hotel" in which a small partition with curtains suddenly appears out of nowhere to provide the illusion of a stage for The Electric Mayhem. At the conclusion of the same song, the entire cast sings directly to the camera, turning the song this time into a performance directly addressed to the audience. This illusion is quickly disrupted however, as we find the cast to be posing for a picture. A similar situation occurs at the conclusion of the song "Stepping Out With a Star." Though the number begins with Kermit, Fozzie and Gonzo dancing and singing around a room with a fourth wall, by the

end they directly addressing the audience. Again, the illusion is broken as soon as the song ends as the camera reveals that they are in fact looking at themselves in the mirror. Yet a third example of this is the conclusion of the aforementioned “The First Time You See Her,” at which point everyone in the club breaks out into applause, turning the sequence into a performance.

Going back to *The Muppets Take Manhattan*, there is in fact no other song right up until the end which is rationalized within the narrative. Where songs in *The Muppet Movie* and *Great Muppet Caper* almost always have onscreen accompaniment, be it Rowlf’s piano, Fozzie’s ukelele, or all of Electric Mayhem, no one in *The Muppets Take Manhattan* is ever seen playing an instrument during the musical numbers. Several of the songs, including “You Can’t Take No For an Answer” and an instrumental which accompanies the search for Kermit are presented as musical accompaniment to dramatic montage, as opposed to the production numbers which we have grown used to.

All of this returns however, for the grand finale which can be seen in many ways to be a mirror of the opening number. The finale begins as the camera pans up from a Playbill and then over the heads of the audience within the film to show the stage. The first two portions of the medley (“Right Where We Belong” and “Somebody’s Getting Married”) are presented in a distinct visual style where everything is presented in such a way so that we can believe them to exist within the confines of the proscenium. The camera looks at the sets straight on as a theatrical audience would be forced to, dollying left and right, but never panning.

After one more brief, head-on shot of the audience (similar to the one which signaled the transition point in the opening song), the film then retreats into a four-walled environment as the action transfers to the inside of a church which had first been presented as a set piece in the Broadway production. The sudden suspension of reality is underscored by what is going on outside.

Contrasting with the opening scene's dark backgrounds, light pours through all of the windows, and the doors when opened. As the song ("She'll/He'll Make Me Happy") progresses, there is more and more singing directly towards the camera, including the church choir of penguins, and climaxing with a shot of the entire church filled with Muppets, swaying and singing in harmony. As if to drive the point home that this is not just a performance, the film steals a cue from the 1941 Fred Astaire/Rita Hayworth vehicle *You'll Never Get Rich* by revealing that Miss Piggy has surreptitiously placed a real priest in the wedding scene. The narrative complexity escalates as the entire cast announces, still in harmony, "They're finally getting married... now." The statement refers not only to the characters of Miss Piggy and Kermit within the film, but as cultural icons, using the audience's external attachments to the stars in a way not dissimilar to the use of the audience's attachment to the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers team in *The Barkleys Of Broadway* (Feuer 27). As the ceremony (completely sung of course) concludes, so does the film, with Kermit and Piggy in a crescent moon over the Manhattan skyline, daytime flyover shots of which began the film.

The Muppets Take Manhattan more than the other films is using the classical Hollywood musical ideals to create a completely different type of movie. Because the plot is stereotypical of the genre, an audience is willing to accept it as part of that genre. However, for most of the film, all of that is abandoned in the name of finding it again. The deconstruction begins as the opening song is demoted from classy Hollywood production number to an amateur stage production, and is complete when Dabney Coleman's con-man Broadway producer is arrested, bursting the Muppet gang's optimistic "let's put on a show" bubble. The rest of the film is spent trying to reclaim what has been lost, resulting in the super-Hollywood ending. Without a preconceived notion of what the musical should be, the audience cannot possibly know what has been lost.

This is not to say that main body of *The Muppets Take Manhattan* does not utilize the characteristics of the Hollywood musical at all. Like it has done with reflexivity however, and like all Muppet movies, it uses them on its own terms. For example, the dream sequence occurs when Piggy and Kermit are finally reunited in the first of many steps towards the reconstruction of the shattered dream. The bricolage concept is utilized in a massive way for the “Rat Scat” which features rats cooking in a diner kitchen, with the various apparatus providing both percussive sounds as well as choreography. The sequence however, is not a part of any other musical number, serves no narrative purpose and seems to exist explicitly as an entertaining segue between scenes.

The three canonical Muppet feature films used the classical Hollywood form of the musical, but they used it on their own terms. With it they created new ways to laugh and new ways to tell stories. All in all though, they managed to keep the magic coming from the magic store. There is a moment in *The Great Muppet Caper* when the choreography has the Muppets spinning around. It has never been more evident that what’s being shown is not in even the remotest sense of the word real; that these are in fact foam puppets. But it doesn’t matter. It’s a musical.

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