

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: FROM *ÜBER-MARIONETTES* TO MUPPETS.
FINDING ANCIENT JOY IN THE MODERN
DAY WORLD.

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ABSTRACT:

In the spring of 1907, writer and director, Edward Gordon Craig first exclaimed that the actor must exit the stage, and, in its place, we would welcome the *über-marionette*. The mystery behind Craig's "puppet" creation is left unsolved to this day. What is an *über-marionette*? Is it a metaphor for the perfect performer? An oversized puppet? A performer inside a puppet? Multiple scholars have tried to sort through Craig's metaphorical writings in order to figure out the construction of the *über-marionette*. But, perhaps instead of looking for information about its' appearance, we should be looking for what the *über-marionette* would bring. Using the works of Jim Henson and the styles of puppetry used in his feature film, *The Dark Crystal*, this thesis is a comparative analysis and thorough exploration of the works of Edward Gordon Craig's philosophies and Jim Henson's practices.

FROM *ÜBER-MARIONETTES* TO MUPPETS
FINDING ANCIENT JOY IN THE MODERN-DAY WORLD

by

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DEDICATION

For my Opa, who taught me how to dream and for my Oma, who taught me to never, ever give up. You are my whole heart.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication	i
Acknowledgements	ii
I. Introduction: A tale of two puppeteers	1
II. Untangling the strings: Interpretations of the <i>Über-marionette</i>	5
III. Putting Theory into Practice: The path from Craig to Henson.....	24
IV. Connecting the cables: The rise of the “ <i>Digital Über-marionette</i> ”.....	30
Wondrous Worlds.....	31
Perfect Performers	35
Colossal Creatures.....	39
Hidden Handymen	42
A “ <i>Digital Über-marionette.</i> ”	50
V. Conclusion: Finding our “ancient joy”.....	55
VI. Appendix	59
Bibliography	84

I. Introduction: A Tale of Two Puppeteers

“I pray earnestly for the return of the image - the über-marionette to the Theatre; and when he comes again and is but seen, he will be loved so well that once more will it be possible for the people to return to their ancient joy.”

Edward Gordon Craig

“When I was young, my ambition was to be one of the people who made a difference in this world. My hope still is to leave the world a little bit better for my having been here.”

Jim Henson

In the spring of 1907, writer and director, Edward Gordon Craig first exclaimed, “The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure - the *Über-marionette* we may call him, until he has won for himself a better name.”¹ It was the first time the artist and scholar had introduced his fascination of puppetry and his *über-marionette*, but it would not be the last. As said best by Claudia Orenstein, Craig’s essay “has become foundational to critical discussions of puppetry, as well as an important reference in the field of theater studies.”² As a puppeteer and scholar, I often come across Craig’s essay or find it referenced in many books or articles on puppetry studies. For anyone with an interest in pursuing puppetry or the study of puppetry the essay is arguably crucial to examine as it not only introduces a glimpse into the history of puppet theatre, but also a certain level of respect for the craft and puppets themselves. But, while Craig provided us with a myriad of theories, ideas, and essays on puppetry and the theatre, he left us without answering the most important question: what is an *über-marionette*? Though his essay provides plenty of praise and encouragement towards practicing the art of puppetry, Craig never specified what the *über-marionette* was supposed to act like or more importantly, look like. Not only did Craig spark a fascination of puppetry, but he inspired

¹ Edward Gordon Craig, *Craig on Theatre* (Methuen: 1983), 85.

² Claudia Orenstein, “Our Puppets, Our Selves: Puppetry’s Changing Paradigms.” *Mime Journal* 26, no. 1 (2017): 91

a search and incredible debate on the *über-marionette*. To this day, we do not know what or who the *über-marionette* is and when exactly it will come...that is, if it hasn't already arrived.

Fast forward to 1955 when a University of Maryland student, Jim Henson, would create a five-minute puppet show that would earn him his first Emmy in 1958.³ What began as a love of comics and television grew into his puppet empire that is known today as "The Jim Henson Company." Little would anyone know that the day Jim Henson stepped into his first puppetry class, he would later go on to create some of the most memorable and famous puppets in the United States and arguably the whole world. Jim Henson has become a puppetry studies icon who continues to be an influence on children and adults alike.

Edward Gordon Craig and Jim Henson shared a common interest and admiration of puppets that is reflected in Craig's essays and Henson's creations. When placed alongside Craig's theories, Henson's puppet creatures seem to move in time with the words. The film "The Dark Crystal" in particular shows common themes and ideologies that establishes parallels between Craig and Henson's artistic concerns. Not only do Henson's puppet creations mirror that of Craig's imagined *über-marionette*, but his practices often align with Craig's philosophies as well. Personality wise, the two could be considered polar opposites, with the exception of their love of puppetry. Yet, regardless of character, both Craig and Henson believed that puppets possessed a magic that was not easily described, especially by Craig, whose *über-marionette* ideas left nothing behind to give example except a couple of writings and some etchings.

³ Brian Jay Jones, *Jim Henson: The Biography*, (New York, Ballantine Books, 2013), 71.

A comparison between Craig and Henson is important to consider when discussing the growth and trajectory of puppetry and puppetry studies. What started as a dancing wooden dream in Craig's imagination could now compare to Henson's animatronic super puppets that would move and dance across television screens around the world. Craig and Henson both treasured the art of puppetry, leading me to believe that Henson, might have unknowingly, projected Craig's theories into the modern-day world. Henson's practices and puppet productions reflect multiple interpretations of Craig's *über-marionette* theory. While I will not and cannot prove that Henson has created the *über-marionette*, (a debatable topic to this day) I vehemently believe that Henson and Craig shared a common belief that puppetry could change the world.

The next chapter will introduce Craig's 1907 periodical, "The Actor and the Über-marionette" and will discuss the various interpretations of several puppet scholars who have contributed to the *über-marionette* search and debate. In the third chapter I will use these theories to establish parallels between Craig's ideas and Henson's practice. The fourth chapter will examine how Henson's various types of puppets seemingly align with the *über-marionette* interpretations previously explored in the first chapter. I have chosen Henson's film, "The Dark Crystal" to show how the variety of puppet creatures in this film aligns with the *über-marionette* variations including, but not limited to cable control, radio control, and animatronics. I will suggest what Henson created is a sort of "Digital *Über-marionette*" and will show how his utilization of new technologies paved the way for the future of puppetry. In the final chapter, I will conclude with an examination of how the understanding of Craig's theory has evolved throughout the years, but that its overall objective remains the same. While it is impossible to assume Craig's opinion of

the future of puppetry and the fate of the *über-marionette*, there are clues within his essay that offer a glimpse into his intention for writing it in the first place. Whether he would agree with Henson's decisions to leap into the digital age is left unknown, but what is certain is Craig's desire to bring puppets out of the shadows and back onto the stage.

In his essay, Craig expressed the hope that puppetry would one day make a comeback, that people would begin to respect the "god-like" creations again. This topic is relevant today not only because of the continuing growth of puppetry in the digital world, but also as it is an attempt to recognize both Edward Gordon Craig, whose ideas sparked both debate and admiration and Jim Henson, whose works and words to this day still inspire and stand the test of time. The ideas of these two puppeteers together weave a timeline of the reemergence and growth of puppetry in popular culture and modern-day theatre, resulting in the recognition of puppets once again as powerful figures of art and imagination. The *über-marionette* is presumably a common end goal of puppeteers alike, a puppet that is respected, admired, and loved by all. Whether Henson actually created this dream doll is left unknown. However, I aim to prove how his creations fit the *über-marionette* criteria and serve as influences on puppeteers around the world, in the hopes that the *über-marionette*, more so what it stands for, will rise again. But the question still remains: what is an *über-marionette* and what would it mean to the world?

II. Untangling the strings: Interpretations of the *Über-marionette*

The *über-marionette*'s first appearance came in the April 1907 edition of Craig's periodical, "The Mask." In this puppet manifesto, Craig weaves an intricate journey of curiosity and critique, beginning with an analyses of the actor and his flaws, and ending with a detailed description of the puppets of old, the respect they once garnered but have now lost, and the coming of the *über-marionette*, a super puppet that would bring joy and make theatre worth watching again. But his puppet dreams and philosophies were met with mixed reviews, more often bad than good.⁴ In his article on media arts and puppetry, scholar Christopher Maraffi explains that "he was often misunderstood by his contemporaries who either took his words at face value, or assumed he was writing in metaphors."⁵ . There are many who have considered Craig's fascination and utilization of puppetry to be mere ramblings of a madman. However, as uncomfortable with Craig's claims as the public appeared to be, there must have been a hint of intrigue hidden within that frustration as an infectious puppet fever was sweeping throughout Europe. However, it is likely that Craig's interest came off sounding more like obsession with his quoting of Eleanora Duse that "To save the theatre, the theatre must be destroyed, the actors and actresses must all die of the plague...They make art impossible" and his own declaration that, "the actor must go."⁶

⁴ Olga Taxidou, *The Mask: A Periodical Performance by Edward Gordon Craig*. Contemporary Theatre Studies, V. 30 (1998): 36.

⁵ Christopher Maraffi. "Roots of Performatology: From Uber-Marionette to Performative Embodied Agents." (2011): 2

⁶ Craig, *Craig on Theatre*, 85.

Perhaps the public's skepticism raised the stakes and was the cause of Craig's lack of puppet productions. Unfortunately, after the essay was published, Craig's performances were, for the most part, void of any of the puppets he would call the "descendants of a great and noble family of images, images...made 'in the likeness of God.'"⁷ While he provides clues on the nature of the *über-marionette*, there is no evidence that would help us understand today how to go about creating his dream puppet. We are left with only a handful of sketches, but no detailed construction or explanation. Even though Craig failed to produce his dream and as controversial as his opinions on actors might have been, one cannot deny that this particular essay sparked a curiosity of puppetry and made a serious impact on modern day theatre itself. Once again Christopher Maraffi, in Craig's defense, writes, "Though technologically impossible in his lifetime, Craig never gave up trying to realize his concept (the *über-marionette*), nor did he ever admit that it was impossible to build."⁸ However, with such a lack of evidence, it is difficult to simply summarize the meaning and intention of Craig's theories. Various scholars have unpacked multiple interpretations of his work but have yet to reach a conclusion on the functionality and aesthetic of the *über-marionette*. And so, the question remains: what was Craig truly trying to say about actors, puppets, and the theatre?

On the surface, Craig's essay simply demands a reformation of the theatre, within that question is whether he intended for the complete elimination of the actor or rather to demote the actor to a smaller role on the stage. However, Craig uses his passion for puppets and combines it, perhaps a tad insidiously, with a somewhat manic obsession with his detestation of the actor. Many scholars have already placed their bets on what

⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁸ Maraffi, *Roots of Performatology*, 2.

Craig's puppet opus really was. Interpretations of Craig's essay usually fall into the realms of whether the *über-marionette* is an actor, an oversized puppet, or an actor within a puppet. Though each scholar presents significant evidence that aids their arguments, the *über-marionette's* true image still remains a mystery. But, woven together, these scholars have discovered clues and insights into what the *über-marionette* could possibly be. Yet, regardless of what form the *über-marionette* dons, its' purpose to change the theatre and the audience remains the same. Craig wanted the theatre and world to change for the better, and so this chapter will explore the various interpretations of the *über-marionette* theory and how they compare to passages from Craig's essay.

Though Craig often hints at what his theatre's desired outcome would look like, he delivers very open-ended and metaphorical sentences that change meaning depending on the reader's interpretation and experiences. To some scholars, the assumption that Craig simply wanted to obliterate all but puppets from the stage is a premature accusation. In fact, some scholars even argue that the *über-marionette* serves as a metaphor for the perfect performer. There are passages within "The Actor and The Über-marionette," that would seemingly support this claim. At the beginning of the essay, before diving into his own theories on why acting is not an art, he notes that this subject has been the topic of debate for a long time. Uncharacteristically, Craig disagrees with some of the writers who have criticized acting stating, "The arguments against acting being an art, and against the actor being an artist, are generally so unreasonable and so personal in their detestation of the actor, that I think it is for this reason the actors have taken no trouble to go into the matter...So now regularly with each season comes the quarterly attack on the actor and

on his jolly calling; the attack usually ending in the retirement of the enemy.”⁹ The beginning of his essay is indeed a surprising defense of the actor, yet one that quickly unravels as he continues saying, “My intention here is not to join in any such attempt; I would merely place before you what seem to me to be the logical facts of a curious case, and I believe that these admit of no dispute whatever.”¹⁰ So while Craig will admit that some critics of acting and the actor are “unreasonable” he still vehemently believes that his arguments are steadfast and undeniably true, of “no dispute.” It is therefore difficult to believe that Craig, who easily critiques others without turning the mirror on himself, would still want actors to perform in his productions. Yet, knowing that Craig rarely expresses his ideas in linear form, there are some parts of his essay that when dissected could potentially align with this interpretation of *über-marionette* as performer.

It is easy to get lost in Craig’s negativity towards the actor with passages such as, “...the body of man...is *by nature* utterly useless as a material for an art.”¹¹ However, Craig doesn’t necessarily blame the actor for this, more so the way acting is taught, a claim which is supported later in the essay when he presents an escape route for the actor who has fallen into the trap of being “useless.” He writes, “But I see a loophole by which in time the actors can escape from the bondage they are in. They must create for themselves a new form of acting, consisting for the main part of symbolical gestures. Today they *impersonate* and interpret; tomorrow they must *represent* and interpret; and the third day they must create. By this means style may return.”¹² It appears as though Craig has somewhat of an idea of how to change the way actors perform, however in the

⁹ Craig, *Craig on Theatre*, 82.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹² *Ibid.*, 84.

following passages he lists the downfalls of the actor including a comparison of actors to “photo-machines” that are simply made to reproduce art. After exploring these ideas Craig quotes Eleanora Duse in that ““To save the theatre, the theatre must be destroyed, the actors and actresses must all die of the plague. They poison the air, they make art impossible.”” He then immediately launches into the theory of the *über-marionette* itself saying “The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure- the Über-marionette we may call him, until he has won for himself a better name.”¹³ Although Craig momentarily offers a solution to actors it is immediately clouded once more with reasoning as to why the actor should be replaced by the *über-marionette*. However, there are still scholars that believe Craig’s *über-marionette* to actually represent an improved performer.

Denis Bablet is among those who believe the *über-marionette* to symbolize a live, embodied actor. In his book, *Edward Gordon Craig*, Bablet states that Craig’s essay and words were often misconstrued, stating, “Of all his writings...[the *über-marionette* essay] did most to create the myth that he [Craig] was a Utopian dreamer with a contempt for the art of the theatre, and give rise to the greatest number of misconceptions, misguided commentaries and biased interpretations.”¹⁴ To summarize, Bablet believes the reception of the *über-marionette* essay was more focused on Craig’s frustrations with the theatre and less on the actual ideas he was trying to convey. According to Bablet, Craig’s irritation with acting and the theatre were a result of his experiences as a performer. Craig had once been an actor himself, therefore he had witnessed the egotism that comes with the profession. Bablet adds that Craig’s beliefs on acting and the theatre come off as

¹³ Ibid., 85.

¹⁴ Denis Bablet, *Edward Gordon Craig* (New York, Theatre Arts Books, 1966), 104.

highly critical and insists the *über-marionette* essay be read alongside other written works of his, in particularly his essay, “To Madame Eleonora Duse” within which he writes,

No one can seriously call an actor or actress an artist of the Theatre...the actor brings his own part up to a certain incomplete perfection. He knows his own lines, he knows how much emotion to pour into them, and having done this he thinks he has created a work of Art. He has not done so: he has been content with very much less than the least perfection – he is not an artist.¹⁵

Craig often criticizes the actor in his writing, and yet perhaps it was more so the method and ways in which the actor performed than the actual person. Bablet believes the *über-marionette* serves as a metaphor. He argues that the focus of Craig’s essay was less the removal of the actor but rather the critique of how the actor functions and performs onstage. Bablet notes that Craig calls acting a “series of accidental confessions”¹⁶ which to Bablet is a form of exhibitionism where the actor’s sole focus is revealing himself.¹⁷ Craig’s biggest frustration was that instead of honing in on the purpose or plot of the play or dramatic work as a whole, the actor’s individuality would pull the focus entirely, ruining the production. Bablet believes that Craig imagined the *über-marionette* in an attempt to change what he despised most about actors and acting techniques. Bablet writes, “By requiring the actor to strip himself of all egoism and learning to control himself, and by advocating the resumption of masks, Craig was making the actor into pliable material. By de-personalizing him, he was destroying the seeds of any possible resistance...*The Actor and the Über-marionette* shows the actor how to discipline himself.”¹⁸ Bablet proposes that rather than rid the theatre of actors Craig’s intention is to train them in the way he sees fit. In actuality, Craig’s proposed style of acting was

¹⁵ Ibid., 106.

¹⁶ Ibid., 106.

¹⁷ Ibid., 107.

¹⁸ Ibid., 111.

highly influential on modern day theatre perhaps expanding further than is recorded on paper.

Other scholars agree with this theory, including Christopher Innes who also believed the *über-marionette* to be an embodied performer. In his book, *Edward Gordon Craig: A Vision of Theatre*, he argues that Craig was indeed very misunderstood stating, “Like many innovators, Craig habitually overstated his ideas in order to distinguish them clearly from orthodox thought and to gain attention. Unfortunately, all too often the impact of such a tactic is at the expense of intelligibility, and few of Craig’s ideas have been more misunderstood than the *Übermarionette*.”¹⁹ Innes, like Bablet, argues that Craig sought to lay the foundation of what good acting should be. He supplements this theory with other statements and essays written by Craig outside of the *über-marionette* theory. For example, Craig once compared admired actor Henry Irving to the *über-marionette*, saying that he was the closest he would ever get to having met someone like what he had imagined in 1907.²⁰ Therefore, it is suspected that what Craig was fantasizing was more so a different kind of performing rather than a replacement with an inanimate object. Innes adds that in 1930 Craig also wrote a piece titled “*The Actor*” in which he wrote, “Now an *Übermarionette* is all sorts of things at which I have hinted in books and drawings which I have made since 1907. I only hope that I have not wearied anybody with the notion of an actor who should be all that a marionette is and much more – and that I do not weary you now.”²¹ These other essays provide further insight into Craig’s mind which appears to align with Innes and Bablet’s notion that the *über-*

¹⁹ Christopher Innes, *Edward Gordon Craig: A Vision of Theatre* (Amsterdam, The Netherlands, Harwood Academic, 1998), 122.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 231.

marionette is indeed a human actor. Craig's 1930 's essay proves that he never intended to either erase or entertain the idea that the actor should be or strictly embody every single trait of a wooden puppet. On that note, Innes writes, "But if we examine the qualities Craig attributes to puppets it becomes clear that his real aim was not quite so radical. What he specifically refers to are the puppet's 'noble artificiality' in portraying abstract emotional states rather than in projecting live emotions; its symbolic character, which presents human nature in generalized or generic, rather than individual terms; and its subordination to the aesthetic requirements of the drama. Yet the one thing that cannot be achieved with puppets is the flowing rhythms of natural movement, which Craig was simultaneously proclaiming as basis of his new art form."²² Innes suggests that Craig simply wanted actors to possess the qualities and traits of puppets, knowing that the same "wooden figures"²³ could not move with the same life as real actors. Both Bablet and Innes fall into the realm of belief that Craig simply used the art of puppetry as inspiration for how the actors in his theatre as he wanted it returned to its "primal state."²⁴ They believed that the *über-marionette* was simply "an actor who was totally in control of his emotions and his means of expressing them."²⁵ Therefore both Bablet and Innes fall into the realm of interpretation that the *über-marionette* was not a wooden puppet, but the perfect performer, possessing the abilities of both puppet and human.

While Bablet and Innes have both compiled evidence of this that is somewhat supported by the *über-marionette* essay and other writings there are still a lot of holes in their theories, which comes with the territory of interpreting Craig's work. While I agree

²² Ibid., 123.

²³ Ibid., 124.

²⁴ Ibid., 126.

²⁵ Ibid., 163.

that Craig's words can indeed be misunderstood, his demand of replacing the actor with "the inanimate figure"²⁶ does not leave a lot of room for interpretation. While inanimateness can be performed, the performance itself would only be a representation, which Craig states is the downfall of the actor. Again, though Craig presents ways in which the actor could improve he doesn't go into much detail on the ways in which acting can evolve in this essay. Craig's blend of puppet history with his exclaimed detestation of acting leave little room for the idea that the actor could be the *über-marionette*, however perhaps a puppeteer could be what Craig was attempting to describe? Craig also seemed to understand that his essay wouldn't make much of a difference in terms of changing the way the Theatre viewed actors. He writes, "I know perfectly well that what I have said here is not yet going to create an exodus of all the actors from all the theatres in the world, driving them into sad monasteries where they will laugh out the rest of their lives, with the Art of the Theatre as the main topic for amusing conversation."²⁷ The word "yet," is somewhat concerning and seems to say that Craig ultimately believes that actors will one day be made obsolete. Nevertheless, like many of the *über-marionette* interpretations, by aligning passages and sentences Bablet and Inness seemingly come up with a solution, however it is one that can easily be ripped apart by other rearrangements of Craig's writings.

While some believe that the *über-marionette* isn't an actual puppet, there are other scholars who think that it refers to a literal figure, a towering puppet with larger dimensions. This interpretation is somewhat easier to follow as in the essay Craig does detail the puppets of old which he clearly holds in high regard. When introducing the

²⁶ Craig, *Craig on Theatre*, 85.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

über-marionette, Craig mentions that “Much has been written about the puppet, or marionette. There are some excellent volumes upon him, and he has also inspired several works of art.”²⁸ From this we see that Craig has clearly done some research on puppetry. From here he launches into a somewhat strange presentation of the *über-marionette* as a sort of “god,” stating, “Today in his least happy period many people come to regard him as rather a superior doll- and to think he has developed from the doll. This is incorrect. He is a descendant of the stone images of the old temples- he is today a rather degenerate form of a god. Always the close friend of children, he still knows how to select and attract his devotees.”²⁹ What really stands out in this passage are the images that Craig is evoking as well as a reverence for puppets that is somewhat peculiar. He denies that the puppet developed from the doll, a smaller creation, then calls it a “descendent of the stone images of the old temples” or a form of “god,” which are larger creations. There is definitely a difference in size and greatness being described in this quote. There is also a strange worship of the puppet, that while understandable, seems to go a step too far in terms of adoration and respect. Craig speaks as though the puppet was an actual god and while art and puppetry do have significant history, it is with his grandiose description of the puppets of old that it is easy for the actually good ideas and points about puppetry in his essay to become lost. However, despite his dramatic tone, Craig does point out how puppets have been misused in modern day theatre and by doing so seemingly describes an image of a larger figure. He says the mother of puppets is “the Sphinx”³⁰ and that they are “the descendants of a great and noble family of images, images which were indeed

²⁸ Ibid., 85.

²⁹ Ibid., 85-86.

³⁰ Ibid., 86.

made ‘in the likeness of God.’”³¹ He also notes that “many centuries ago these figures had a rhythmical movement and not a jerky one; had no need for wires to support them, nor did they speak through the nose of the hidden manipulator.”³² It is in this passage that we see Craig begin to describe the *über-marionette*. What is so intriguing about this sentence is that it could prove all three interpretations correct. For the perfect performer interpretation, Craig could simply be describing a person with fluidity of movement, however again, this theory could easily be dismissed by several passages and writings by Craig on the actor. He could also be describing a large puppet, that often times is too large for a wire-based construction and cannot possibly be voiced by a nearby manipulator. For a better explanation of the “rhythmic movements,” I referred to Irène Eynat-Confino, who believes the *über-marionette* to be an oversized puppet.

Irène Eynat-Confino argues that Craig’s essay only partially reveals where he birthed the vision of the *über-marionette*. In her book, *Beyond the Mask: Gordon Craig, Movement, and the Actor*, Eynat-Confino points out passages from Craig’s notebook “Confessions,” to show the reality of the *über-marionette*’s ambiguity. She argues “he mentions a ‘being’ that was to come instead of the actor, but it is not clear whether it was intended to be another human performer or something else.”³³ Eynat-Confino’s research focuses more on how Craig’s environment and predecessors inspired and shaped his ideas for the *über-marionette*. She reminds us that Craig admired artists like Maeterlinck who also proposed that the marionette replace the actor on the stage. Therefore, in time, Craig found himself entangled with puppet-plays, artists, and theories. As somewhat of an ode

³¹ Ibid., 87.

³² Ibid., 87.

³³ Irène Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask: Gordon Craig, Movement, and the Actor*, (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 85.

to Nietzsche's *übermensch*, Craig's "Über-Marions" notebooks bring the idea of what Craig calls the "beyond puppet" to life in the realized form of the *über-marionette*.³⁴ Using these glimpses into Craig's world, Eynat-Confino identifies that, "All these diverse sources, in some unknown measure, may have fused into the inspiration for the *über-marionette*—an outsize marionette, with a new range and style of movement and new functions as a performer."³⁵ Eynat-Confino is of the belief that Craig actually wanted to bring marionettes into the forefront in a way that was larger than life, in the form of an oversized puppet.

Eynat-Confino notes that the marionette had been "the favorite" of the Symbolists and the Impressionists, as well as Craig and his "aesthetic circle." It is assumed that in 1902 when a small book of puppet history, *The Home of the Puppet-Play* by Professor Richard Pischel was published, Craig heard of it from this "aesthetic circle" and read it thoroughly. The book is a "historical survey of the puppet, in which he [Pischel] traces its origins in India and its subsequent appearance in Java. He contends that the actor and the drama were late imitations of the puppet and the puppet play."³⁶ The book in combination with "Apology for Puppets," a piece within Arthur Symons' *Plays, Acting and Music: A Book of Theory* (1903) were what Eynat-Confino believes inspired Craig's own *über-marionette* essay. She argues that the "beyond puppet" Craig speaks of in the "Über-Marions" notebooks, the "fallen idol who had become a Punch and Judy," was to be resurrected and avenged in the form of a "Big marion."

³⁴ Ibid., 87.

³⁵ Ibid., 88.

³⁶ Ibid., 86.

Eynat-Confino goes into great detail on the specifics and construction of the *über-marionette* saying “The special large size of the über-marionette is very important because of its immediate physical and emotional impact...Only slightly smaller than the human being (a small reduction in size being an element of distancing), this new alter ego was now a far more serious threat to the actor than the Lilliputian traditional puppet.”³⁷ Big puppets make big impacts, notes Eynat-Confino, exemplifying Bread & Puppet’s creations to show how large puppets make big impacts on audiences due to their overwhelming size. The larger the puppet the bigger the believability, which is why Eynat-Confino stays steadfast to the belief that Craig’s *über-marionette* is larger than life. As far as “rhythmic movement” is concerned, Eynat-Confino writes, “The impersonality of the über-marionette and its stylized movement, Craig suggested, would make possible the treatment of certain topics that had been banished from the stage by what Craig called ‘the dictates of taste,’ or if dealt with at all, were treated vulgarly: ‘That which you may express by means of über-marionettes you may not express by means of live beings. Birth. A woman in child. Death. Suicide. Love. R[omeo] & J[uliet].’”³⁸ With a larger puppet, one could supposedly bring all of these characteristics to life. But, would a larger puppet be able to encapsulate everything that a performer is not? Would it not still need a manipulator?

While I personally believe in the respect and admiration that is shown to larger puppets, there still appears to be a disconnect between Craig’s theories and this oversized interpretation. While Craig believes that puppets have lost the respect they once possessed years ago, he doesn’t dislike the modern-day puppet, more so the performances

³⁷ Ibid., 92.

³⁸ Ibid., 92.

the puppet must give. He writes, “But as with all art which has passed into fat or vulgar hands, the puppet has become a reproach. All puppets are now but low comedians. They imitate the comedians of the larger and fuller blooded stage. They enter only to fall on their back. They drink only to reel, and make love only to raise a laugh... Their bodies have lost grave grace, they have become stiff. Their eyes have lost that infinite subtlety of seeming to see; now they only stare. They display and jingle their wires and are cock-sure in their wooden wisdom.”³⁹ Craig does not blame the puppet, but the performers that have been tasked to manipulate them. He even says, “the marionette appears to me to be the last echo of some noble and beautiful art of a past civilisation”⁴⁰ which would seem to say that regardless of size, Craig still believes the modern-day puppet to possess a noble quality. It would make sense that a larger puppet would inspire respect in an audience, but what doesn’t seem to align is the quality of movement. The larger, stylized movements that Craig suggests are difficult to perform with a large puppet. Even with several manipulators, the movements can still appear “jerky.” Again, I do not deny the credibility or evidence of these interpretations, but perhaps a combination of puppet and manipulator could be the answer.

Weaving these theories together, Patrick Le Boeuf’s opinions of the *über-marionette* are similar to Eynat-Confino’s as well as Bablet’s and Innes’s. However his opinions on the *über-marionette* have evolved over time. He believes that while many of his colleagues’ interpretations hold water, they fall short in evidence. In his essay “On the Nature of the Über-marionette” Le Boeuf writes, “Myself, I wrote in 2008 that it (the *über-marionette*) is ‘not an actor, but rather a gymnast whose muscular control over his

³⁹ Craig, *Craig on Theatre*, 86.

⁴⁰ Craig, *Craig on Theatre*, 86.

body is absolute, and whose way of moving is derived from that of puppets.’ I now reject that statement as entirely wrong, but it reflects well my sincere conviction at that time.”⁴¹ Le Boeuf currently claims that the *über-marionette* is a “full-body puppet,” meaning an actor within a puppet costume.⁴² He references scholar Thomas Spieckermann’s work, who thoroughly evaluated the three hypotheses of what the *über-marionette* could be, stating, “It could be a life-size string puppet, but such a thing would be extremely difficult to manipulate and the strings would be necessarily so thick that they could not be hidden from the audience; it could be a full body puppet manipulated from within by a human performer encased in it, but the sizes explicitly indicated by Craig make that hypothesis “*eher unwahrscheinlich*” (rather unlikely) or it could be a rod puppet manipulated from beneath the stage floor, but again there are too many technical objections.”⁴³ He concluded that the issue cannot be solved unless further material is discovered. In response, Le Boeuf writes, “Craig’s terminological hesitation may indicate that he regarded such performers as half actors, half manipulators. Such phrasing sounds very odd if you think of *über-marionettes* as outsize string marionettes. It becomes quite clear and logical if *über-marionettes* are actually full-body puppets, since the performer within a full-body puppet is indeed at the same time an actor and a manipulator.”⁴⁴ To summarize, the ambiguity of Craig’s description of the *über-marionette* construction has led Le Boeuf to believe that the actual *über-marionette* is a combination of both actor and puppet.

⁴¹ Patrick Le Bœuf, "On the Nature of Edward Gordon Craig's Über-Marionette." *New Theatre Quarterly* 26, no. 02 (2010): 103.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

Le Boeuf also goes into detail on information surrounding the aesthetics and construction of the *über-marionette* he has found during his research at the Edward Gordon Craig Collection. Craig would not reveal information about his *über-marionette*, nor would he allow people to write about it, and for the most part his colleagues listened, with the exception of Michael Carmichael Carr who had worked in Florence with Craig from 1907-1908.⁴⁵ His essay, “The Perfect Drama, without Actor and without Scenery,” was published in 1910 partially as an exploration of what form the *über-marionette* could actually take, within which he writes, “On this, too, he would place, not marionettes, but yet another vision of his brain—the uber-marionette [*sic*]; an actor encased in a sort of armour, so he could make none but graceful, slow, sweeping gestures. The size of the stage would be increased in proportion to the increase of his height over that of the ten-inch marionettes. In its immensity, alone, the thing was soul-stirring.”⁴⁶ Of course, Craig reacted poorly at the betrayal and breach of confidence between himself and Carr and while Carr’s hypotheses were never confirmed, they seemingly align with etchings and lithographs created by Craig for the purpose of showing how the *über-marionette* should appear onstage.

In 1923, Craig published those two works entitled “Über-Marionette” in *Scene*: an etching (*Fig. 1*) from 1907 along with a lithograph (*Fig. 2*), which is said to be the only known lithograph that Craig had ever created. What separated these pieces from the rest of Craig’s drawings and sketches from his “Uber Marions A,” notebook was the stiffness in posture, the dead-looking arms alongside their bodies, and the strange resemblance of

⁴⁵ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 104.

a “Pierrot” (Fig. 3).⁴⁷ According to Le Boeuf, Craig wanted to create a Mask that covered both the actor’s face and entire body, which is greatly supported by the etching and lithograph he published in *Scene*, and while speculation is still vague, many of Craig’s drawings portray a similar characteristic as the works in his 1923 publication. Regardless, gathering what his peers have hypothesized of the *über-marionette* combined with the sketches he provided, Le Boeuf’s theory also stands, as he continues to add more findings from the collection into his work to aid in his ever-growing research of the *über-marionette*.

I will refer back to the passage from the *über-marionette* essay where Craig writes, “many centuries ago these figures had a rhythmical movement and not a jerky one; had no need for wires to support them, nor did they speak through the nose of the hidden manipulator.”⁴⁸ As stated previously, this sentence can align itself with all interpretations of the *über-marionette* theory. However, were the *über-marionette* to be both manipulator and puppet it would not only possess fluidity of movement without wires, but also would be able to speak from the puppet, not the nose of the “hidden manipulator.” One could argue that the manipulator is still hidden. While this is true, the difference is that the manipulator is hidden within, only discoverable once the puppet exits the stage. This interpretation of performer within puppet seems to satisfy all of Craig’s requirements for the *über-marionette*. A passage from the *über-marionette* essay enforces this belief. He writes, “May we not look forward with hope to that day which shall bring back to us once more the figure, or symbolic creature, made also by the cunning of the artist, so that we can gain once more the ‘noble artificiality’ which the old writer speaks

⁴⁷ Ibid., 110.

⁴⁸ Craig, *Craig on Theatre*, 87.

of? Then shall we no longer be under the cruel influence of the emotional confessions of weakness which are nightly witnessed by people and which in their turn create in the beholders the very weaknesses which are exhibited.”⁴⁹ The important detail in this passage is that the “figure, or symbolic creature” is made by the “cunning of the artist.” By crafting a puppet, the forces of puppet and performer combine to create the “noble artificiality” that Craig looks for in his essay. He continues stating, “To that end we must study to remake these images- no longer content with a puppet, we must create an Über-marionette. The Über-marionette will not compete with life- rather will it go beyond it. Its ideal will not be the flesh and blood but rather the body in trance- it will aim to clothe itself with a death-like beauty while exhaling a living spirit.”⁵⁰ What is first important to note is that Craig himself says that the puppet must be remade into an *über-marionette*. The puppet is the inspiration, but the *über-marionette* is the end goal. While we can go in many directions with the meaning of that sentence, he continues saying that it will not compete with life but go beyond it. A performer within a puppet is alive, but is encased within a puppet, therefore creating a completely other being a “body in trance” where both puppet and performer manipulate each other. Finally, the “death-like” beauty can be seen as referring to the neutrality of the puppet, while the exhalation of a “living spirit” the essence of the human within the puppet. Le Boeuf’s interpretation seems to combine all theories into one and is seemingly backed by a confessional letter from Craig. It is also the most realistic of the interpretations since Craig couldn’t seem to agree with one form of the *über-marionette* himself as evidenced in his many writings about his dream creation. However, this interpretation, while I believe to be the most accurate, was never

⁴⁹ Craig, *Craig on Theatre*, 86.

⁵⁰ Craig, *Craig on Theatre*, 86.

confirmed by Craig, leaving us once again lying amongst multiple possibilities of what the *über-marionette* could be.

Craig's *über-marionette* theory is not easily dissected, classified, or understood. There are many interpretations of what Craig's final *über-marionette* was, what Craig himself desired, and what his ultimate goals for the Theatre looked like. Because he writes in metaphors and contradictions, it is difficult to pin Craig to a single theory. Therefore, we are now left with a plethora of opinions, ideas, and interpretations from Craig's writings or secondary sources without any proof or knowledge of his actual intent. But, while the *über-marionette* shape-shifts amongst a cacophony of beliefs and interpretations, the beauty of Jim Henson's work is that it aligns itself with not just one, but multiple interpretations of Craig's theory. While the amount of evidence supporting each of these separate beliefs is mind boggling, one thing remains the same: that Craig's overall objective was to bring back a respect for puppetry as a treasured art form. While his *über-marionette* might have had more flexibility in form, Craig's admiration of puppetry was solid and unwavering. Knowing this, a comparison between belief and practice becomes simpler with the understanding that both Craig and Henson believed that puppets were admirable, resilient, and deserved more respect as an artform.

III. Putting Theory into Practice: The path from Craig to Henson.

While Europe was very interested in puppets and the art of puppetry, allowing Craig more room to experiment, Henson was born into a different place with different tools, and yet somehow wound up making the whole world smile with a frog originally made out of an old, green coat and some ping-pong balls.⁵¹ An accidental career choice, it was Henson's personality combined with his imagination that made him a successful artist and puppeteer in the eyes of the public and his peers. That being said, Jim Henson was a beloved icon in life and in death. His personality combined with a love for silliness and the unusual made him both respected and admired. There is no comparison to the way Jim Henson had the United States falling in love with puppets, and with good reason. The qualities his puppets possess, mixing old style traditions with new, is what gave his creatures so much appeal, allowing his audiences to believe in his fantasy worlds whilst they lived their day-to-day realities from the comforts of their couches. What made him most successful was the way he presented himself and interacted with others behind the scenes as an artist and businessman. Most people are introduced to Henson through his works and creatures, but it is the man behind *The Muppets* that was the magic behind it all.

Knowing Henson's practices is crucial to understanding the depths of his work as both an artist and person and is imperative in noting his work's parallels with the philosophies of Edward Gordon Craig. What Henson practiced and preached as an artist is valuable in that it solidifies the notion that he believed in both puppets and people. The

⁵¹ CBS News. "Original Kermit the Frog Hops to Smithsonian." Cbsnews.com. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/original-kermit-the-frog-hops-to-smithsonian/>. (accessed April 11, 2019).

goodness of humanity is a common theme in Henson's worlds. It is also important in understanding his advancement into the digital age and reach towards creating a puppet with similar traits of the *über-marionette*. While understanding the *über-marionette's* mechanics is very important, what is equally crucial to note in both Craig and Henson's work is how their desire for evolution in their artistic fields was the driving point of most of their practices, philosophies, and performances. Therefore, a more personal comparison is important in aligning Craig's *über-marionette* theory with Henson's *Dark Crystal* puppets. In doing so, we uncover how Henson's practices turn into products and how Craig's theories turned into testaments of his character. Though both Craig and Henson's temperaments are very different, their artistic integrity is about the same. Henson's tour-de-force imagination and Craig's steadfast admiration both contributed to the field of puppetry studies and will most likely continue to impact the field for a long time.

Henson always knew he wanted to work in television, but never knew he would be a puppeteer. His first television was one of the most crucial parts of his childhood growing up. It was through television that he was introduced to infamous puppeteers and ventriloquists who very much paved the way for Henson such as Edgar Bergen (*Fig. 4*), Burr Tillstrom, and Bil and Cora Baird.⁵² In 1954 he had found an opportunity to work for WTOP-TV and started making puppets for a children's show entitled, *The Junior Morning Show*. But it was when he enrolled at the University of Maryland, College Park that a hobby turned into a passion. As a child, Henson drew attention for many reasons, his height, clothes, and quirky attitude, but most importantly, his personality. In fact,

⁵² Blau, Eleanor. "Jim Henson, Puppeteer, Dies; The Muppets' Creator Was 53." *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/05/17/obituaries/jim-henson-puppeteer-dies-the-muppets-creator-was-53.html> (accessed April 10, 2019).

fellow puppeteer and frequent collaborator Jane Nebel said that upon the arrival of Henson, he just “took over the class.”⁵³ His quirky demeanor and genuine kindness was what drew people in, and he used that ability to create a puppetry practice that ultimately enabled his puppets to withstand the tests of time.

In his freshman year, Henson had created a show called *Sam and Friends*, (Fig. 5) for WRC-TV that sparked inspiration for his future *Muppets*. It was here that Henson began to develop the techniques that would shape the way film and television viewed puppetry including creating a first draft of Kermit the Frog. Live, staged puppetry is very different from puppetry on film. In a 1979 interview, Henson noted this saying, "Burr Tillstrom (Fig. 6) and the Bairds (Fig. 7) had more to do with the beginning of puppets on television than we [Henson and Nebel] did...but they had developed their art and style to a certain extent before hitting television. Baird had done marionette shows long before he came to television. Burr Tillstrom's puppets were basically the standard hand-puppet characters that went back to Punch and Judy. But from the beginning, we worked watching a television monitor, which is very different from working in a puppet theater."⁵⁴ In *Sam and Friends*, Henson utilized the camera frame so that the performer could work off-camera, making the puppets more life-like and real. This technique is what truly drew people in, as previous puppeteers and ventriloquists had to be seen alongside the puppets or behind a “puppet stage” with a curtain as Burr Tillstrom had done on *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*.⁵⁵

By blending puppet techniques Henson began crafting his brand of stylization. Originally, marionettes and most puppets were crafted from wood and manipulated by

⁵³ Jones, *Jim Henson*, 40.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Jones, *Jim Henson*, 48.

strings. Henson combined the techniques of a marionette with rod-style puppetry so that the puppeteer remained invisible and the puppet itself was the focus. By remaining offstage, Henson also had more freedom of vocal flexibility, adding to the life-like aesthetic of the puppets.

After graduating from the University of Maryland, Henson's work finally manifested into what is now the infamous "Muppets." The creation of this name was a good description of Henson's blending styles of puppetry. The word "Muppets" was a combination of the words "marionette" and "puppet" to encapsulate the blending of these two styles into something new.⁵⁶ Adults and children alike quickly fell in love with Henson's multi-colored, hilarious, yet knowledgeable characters. From there, the rest is history. Soon after came *Sesame Street*, *The Muppets*, *Fraggle Rock*, and *The Dark Crystal*. Henson's success was equally a result of his innovative mind combined with a businessman's mindset.

Craig and Henson both understood the importance of balancing business decisions with artistic integrity. In the *über-marionette* essay, one of Craig's biggest complaints is that the modern-day puppet had become lackluster and that the once respected art of puppetry was no longer important but more so a joke that had passed into "fat or vulgar hands."⁵⁷ It is his talent of balancing art with business that kept Henson's puppet quality up to par while keeping him financially stable. One example of this balancing act would be Henson's decision to end *The Muppet Show*. In its prime, *The Muppet Show* was one of the most popular shows on television, however it only lasted for five seasons. In 1981, Henson decided to gently end the Muppet series, knowing that if he continued to produce

⁵⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁷ Craig, *Craig on Theatre*, 86.

the show it would no longer possess the same magic quality as it had in its prime.⁵⁸

Henson was never influenced by what was “hot” or trends in society. He never produced what people wanted, instead he knew that his work was well liked, and he ran with that, trusting his instincts and offering whatever idea that happened to be floating around in his head. So, in order to end on a high note, Henson decided to move onto new works so that his puppets would continue to be cherished, remembered, and respected.

Apart from business and integrity, Henson enjoyed combining puppet craft with technology on occasion, but only just the right amount. Henson is one of the groundbreaking innovators that first blended mechanics with traditional materials, but the technology was never the forefront. Henson would often create a puppet three to four times before he was content with the outcome. He was hyper-focused on the ease of manipulation, so once again, the puppets were not the sole focus but instead the integration between the puppet and the performer.

Perhaps, this is where Craig and Henson might have disagreed, but again, that is up to which interpretation of the essay is being referenced. An easy assumption is that Craig loathed actors. But though he was rather picky, he wasn't unrealistic. Like Henson, he was a businessman, and a trying director. He wanted to make what he wanted and make it well. Craig was dissatisfied with the actors and lacked the communication skills to describe what he wanted. The difference between the two is less of a philosophy or process difference but more so a difference in temperament. Henson is continuously described as a gentle giant whereas Craig more so an angry man. That doesn't mean their visions weren't equally as brilliant, but the lack of execution and production is clear in Craig's history of performances. According to LeBoeuf, Craig didn't ever produce the

⁵⁸ Jones, *Jim Henson*, 312.

über-marionette post essay, saying, “Craig left no technical design or instruction specific enough for us to imagine how his invention was meant to work.”⁵⁹ Whether Craig’s lack of construction was due to finances or temperament is unclear, but by showing the parallels between the practices of Craig and Henson, had he been supplemented with the right tools, perhaps the *über-marionette* would already be found. But, for now, we are left with a handful of interpretations and a plethora of fantasy creatures that when combined give off the appearance of something perhaps Craig would consider to be a tiny glimpse (or at least an interpretation) of a kind of “digital *über-marionette*.”

⁵⁹ Le Bœuf, *On the Nature*, 113.

IV. Connecting the Cables: The rise of the “Digital Über-marionette.”

“Another world, Another Time...In the Age of Wonder. A thousand years ago, this land was green and good, until the Crystal cracked. For a single piece was lost; a shard of the Crystal. Then strife began, and two new races appeared: the cruel Skeksis...the gentle Mystics.”

-The Dark Crystal

The year is 1978, Jim Henson and his daughter Cheryl are stuck in a blizzard at JFK waiting for take-off clearance for their flight to England. It is here in the ice and snow that Henson begins sketching and devising a new kind of world separate from the cheerful Muppets.⁶⁰ The story and art that emerged from Henson’s mind came as a surprise to some but was a long-time dream for Henson. He wanted to be recognized as an artist, not just an entertainer and wanted to show that he could do something different.⁶¹ At JFK he began to create a whole new world of good versus evil and the place where the two met. Not only that, but there were untouched techniques he wanted to explore, but weren’t appropriate to utilize when performing with the Muppets. He wanted them to move in a way he hadn’t made possible before and according to Cheryl, he was a man who “wanted to keep trying new things.”⁶² If something was “impossible” Henson would make it possible, going the distance, sometimes even going underwater if it brought the puppet to life.⁶³ The outline of *The Dark Crystal* was born that day. Joining forces with the talented minds of illustrator Brian Froud, sculptor Wendy Midener Froud and fellow puppeteer Frank Oz, together they would bring Henson’s new world to life.

The Dark Crystal is a fantasy film set in a planet called Thra where a battle between good and evil is unfolding. The Skeksis (*Fig. 8*) and the urRu, otherwise known

⁶⁰ *Jim Henson*. Directed by Films Media Group and Public Broadcasting Service (U.S.). Public Broadcasting Service (U.S.), 2016. Online Video. Accessed March 31, 2019.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

as The Mystics (Fig. 9), were originally combined as one, until the Crystal of Truth cracked, and they were left divided into two separate species, one good and one evil. As tensions rise, it is up to the last two surviving Gelflings, Jen and Kira, (Fig. 10) to restore the crystal and make peace throughout the land.⁶⁴ Of all Henson's worlds, *The Dark Crystal* is the first of his films that blends multiple different styles of puppetry within one environment. In doing so, he escapes a kind of repetitive aesthetic and truly mirrors reality with each species of puppet possessing unique qualities that allow them to stand on their own but also blend with their world. By unpacking the manipulation and puppet creation techniques utilized by the design and performance team of *The Dark Crystal* we can see where the scholars referenced in this essay's interpretations align with the wild creatures of *The Dark Crystal*. This chapter is divided into five sections with one section focusing on establishing the environment, three sections for each *über-marionette* interpretation, and a final section that briefly explores the idea of a "digital *über-marionette*," what that would mean, and how a digital puppet fits into the technology-filled worlds of today.

Wondrous Worlds

Before exploring interpretations, it is important to set the scene for both Craig and Henson's works...literally. Both Edward Gordon Craig and Jim Henson weren't fans of realism or normalcy which is clearly reflected in Henson's films and Craig's philosophies. Henson wanted to make *The Dark Crystal* because he wanted creatures that were entirely separate from the creatures in *The Muppets* universe.⁶⁵ The goal of *The Dark Crystal* was

⁶⁴ Gideon Haberkorn, "Interpreting the Various Species in *The Dark Crystal* and *Fraggle Rock*". *The Wider Worlds of Jim Henson*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2012), 73.

⁶⁵ Caseen Gaines, Cheryl Henson, Brian Froud, and Wendy Froud. *Jim Henson's the Dark Crystal: The Ultimate Visual History*, (San Rafael, California, Insight Editions, 2017) 36.

to create an entirely new world that he had not previously explored, therefore the use of live actors or environments with any remote relation to realism were both out of the question. Henson's ultimate goal was to create "the first full-length live-action motion picture where the stars were all creatures" so that the world and its inhabitants would look "as congruous as possible."⁶⁶ Henson and *The Dark Crystal* team collectively came to the decision that no human actors would be cast alongside the other creatures in the film, in fact, even the puppeteers would never be visible. Henson believed that if human actors were incorporated into the world of Thra, then the fantasy and imaginative freedom would be lost, stating, "As soon as you put an actor in this kind of landscape, you've established a scale that is too reminiscent of the real world. I've always felt that this is where other fantasy films in the past have gone wrong. I wanted creatures with four arms and all different shapes and sizes. We had to break free of the human form to achieve that. I wanted to be totally submerged in another world."⁶⁷

Henson's request for a creature-only film is similar to Craig's desire to change the way plays and Theatre were performed. Craig's biggest complaint about the Theatre were the actors and their inability to create anything original. In the *über-marionette* essay, Craig notes, "As I have written elsewhere, the theatre will continue its growth and actors will continue for some years to hinder its development... Today the actor impersonates a certain being. He cries to the audience, 'Watch me; I am now pretending to be so and so, and I am exactly as possibly, that which he has announced he will *indicate*."⁶⁸

Fortunately for Henson, the neutrality and inanimacy of the puppets didn't allow room

⁶⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁸ Craig, *Craig on Theatre*, 84.

for any display of egotism. But there was another aspect of his modern-day-theatre that Craig couldn't stand. Craig wanted the focus of a play to be more so on the essence of the performance rather than a showcase of individuality that he believed actors would so often exhibit. "The difference between the child of ten" he writes, "and the artist is that the artist is he who by drawing certain signs and shapes creates the impression of a donkey: and the greater artist is he who creates the impression of the whole genus of donkey, the *spirit* of the thing."⁶⁹ Craig didn't want a recreation of false emotion, he wanted an original, organic creation, just as Henson didn't want to fall into the same traps that fantasy films before his own had done. According to scholar Charles R. Lyons, Craig's *über-marionette* theory "confirmed his exile from the modern theatre," as he essentially rejects it and everything it represents.⁷⁰ On the subject of realism and "Nature" Craig writes, "The actor looks upon life as a photo-machine looks upon life; and he attempts to make a picture to rival a photograph. He never dreams of his art as being an art such for instance as music. He tries to reproduce Nature; he seldom thinks to invent with the aid of Nature, and he never dreams of *creating*."⁷¹ The recreation of life was boring to Craig. He envisioned a theatre based solely off organic creation instead of a repetition of actions in sequence. Lyons interprets Craig's "artistic judgements" as, "based upon a principle which is fundamental to his theory: that the objective of the theatre is neither intellectual nor emotional but is the evocation of aesthetic pleasure derived from the presence of imaginative beauty."⁷² Instead of hyper-focusing on the theatre of "real life," Craig sought to showcase the beauty of imagination. He generally

⁶⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁷⁰ Lyons, Charles R. "Gordon Craig's Concept of the Actor." *Educational Theatre Journal* 16, no. 3 (1964), 258.

⁷¹ Craig, *Craig on Theatre*, 84.

⁷² Lyons, *Gordon Craig's Concept*, 258.

preferred Symbolism and was more interested in the aesthetic of a production as a whole, which is a goal Henson had in mind as well.

It would be an understatement to say Henson was a huge fan of imagination and his passion for exploration is apparent in *The Dark Crystal*. Not only was he breaking away from realism, but he wanted *The Dark Crystal* to portray a darker side of puppetry completely different than the comical, happy Muppets. That kind of aesthetic relates back to Craig's opinions on the evolution of puppetry from a respected art form to a base character no more than a walking joke. He recalls that the once majestic beauty of the puppets was lost when people began to think of them a child-like object, saying "The marionette appears to me to be the last echo of some noble and beautiful art of a past civilization. But as with all art which has passed into fat or vulgar hands, the puppet has become a reproach. All puppets are now but low comedians."⁷³

There was hardly anything comical about the characters or storyline of *The Dark Crystal*. From reptile-like evil bird puppets, to beetle creatures whose sole purpose is to fulfill these evil character's bidding, there isn't a lot of room for comfort. While there are moments of lighthearted humor, most of *The Dark Crystal* is about the adventure of two small child-like creatures who are subject to terrors beyond imagination. The intricacy of the puppets and the understanding of consistency in the puppet world of Thra is what makes the film completely fantastical. Henson was known to be a perfectionist and carefully crafted the world of Thra while rigorously organizing a crew of dedicated performers.⁷⁴ Watching *The Dark Crystal* is indeed like stepping into a whole new world.

⁷³ Craig, *Craig on Theatre*, 86.

⁷⁴ *Henson's Place: The Man Behind the Muppets*. Directed by Henson Associates and Films Incorporated. Films Inc., Distributor, 1989. DVD.

Perfect Performers

As mentioned previously, scholars Denis Bablet and Christopher Innes believed Craig's *über-marionette* served as a metaphor for the perfect performer. Bablet argued that Craig's desire was to train actors as he saw fit and that the focus of Craig's essay was less about the removal of the actor but rather a critique of how the actor functions and performs onstage. Innes argued a similar point, that other scholars needed to examine the qualities of the puppets that Craig praised in order to see that his goal wasn't simply the erasure of the actor from the stage. He mentions the "noble artificiality" of puppets which allowed for greater focus on performing emotion rather than just watching separate journeys of individual growth from each character. Craig also understood the downfalls of the puppet and their lack of fluidity in movement as compared to a human actor. Therefore, Innes also believed that Craig's goal was to train actors to possess the qualities and traits of puppets while still utilizing their own natural movement in order to create "the perfect performer."

If Craig was searching for perfect performers, he would surely find them in puppeteers. Puppeteers are performers that do twice the work. They use their fluidity in movement and expression to manipulate, breathing life into the inanimate in order to create the world of a play or film. One can argue that puppeteers aren't actors since they are often hiding behind a puppet and aren't the audience's sole focus. But I would argue that puppeteers do just the same amount of work as actors if not more. They understand

fluidity of movement more than the average actor as they have an understanding of exaggeration, used to make simple movements more lifelike in the manipulation of puppets. They also understand emotion on a deeper level as puppets often have neutral faces, so the task of expressing emotion in puppets is up to the extension and will of the puppeteer. A puppet whose face has already been molded into a frown or a smile will always have the same temperament because of its pre-calculated facial expression, therefore a neutral expression is always preferred when constructing creatures. In that sense, puppet manipulation techniques are similar to neutral mask work. Jacques Lecoq refers to the neutral mask as leaning toward a “fulcrum point which doesn’t exist,” meaning actors must lose themselves to become “neutral” and unbiased.⁷⁵ The puppets in *The Dark Crystal* all have neutral faces, so the manipulation and personality of each puppet was created by a puppeteer. Working with puppets gives these performers a grasp of understanding movement and emotion not only as an individual but as an ensemble, a community, and part of the world of the performance. Puppetry is a two-person job acted out by one performer. There is a dual focus a puppeteer must possess that doesn’t leave much room for the individuality and egotism that Craig despised. The art of puppetry in general is the focus on the entirety of what is going on in the world around two performers, so that the focus is less the journey the puppeteer is on, but more so the transference of energy and integrity in showing the connection between puppet and person.

The best reflection of puppeteers as perfect performers (actors) is seen in the manipulation of the two Gelfling characters, Jen and Kira (*Fig. 11*). *The Dark Crystal*

⁷⁵ Eldredge, Sears A, and Hollis W Huston. "Actor Training in the Neutral Mask." *The Drama Review: Tdr* 22, no. 4 (1978), 19.

uses multiple styles of puppetry all in one world. The performers had to be extremely flexible when manipulating these characters. In the film, the Gelflings are some of the smallest puppets used, but ended up being the most difficult to craft. The design team was tasked to make them easily manipulatable but also had to keep them aesthetically pleasing so that they fit into Henson's vision for the world of Thra. Puppetry is a practice in patience. Both Jim Henson and Brian Froud built a myriad of mock-ups for the Gelflings that didn't possess the right aesthetic they both were attempting to create. Doll-maker Wendy Midener Froud was responsible for crafting the creatures over and over again, and though the process was exhausting, both Henson and Froud were eventually satisfied, and Jen and Kira were brought to life.⁷⁶

As far as puppetry is concerned, the Gelflings are the closest to the "traditional" marionette of any of the puppets in the film. They were made out of foam latex in order to ensure the puppeteer's movements would not distort the puppet's face, which was an addition that Cheryl Henson believed to be the most crucial throughout the entire construction process. "When people talk about technology on *The Dark Crystal*, they tend to think of cable and radio controls," she said, "They forget that probably the most important technical innovation was the foam latex. We had to create material that was elastic enough to be able to handle the folds of the mouth without ripping, and that was a challenge for Jen and Kira in particular."⁷⁷ Though on the surface they appear to be traditional rod puppets, the Gelfling's heads were hollow and filled with cable controls that were able to manipulate the facial expressions and eye movements of Jen and Kira.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Gaines et al., *Jim Henson's the Dark Crystal: The Ultimate Visual History*, 70.

⁷⁷Ibid., 70.

⁷⁸Ibid., 70-71.

But, while the audience only saw the Gelflings running across the screen, the real work was in the manipulation of their small bodies. Both Jim Henson and *Muppet Show* performer Kathryn Mullen were cast to play Jen and Kira respectively. When it came time to manipulate the Gelflings, difficulties began to arise. Kathryn Mullen recalls, “The first puppet I had was a little practice version of Kira, which was really easy to move and fun to use. I was working really hard on all kinds of movements for her.”⁷⁹ When the design was changed, something that often happens in puppet design and construction, she recounts, “There was this wad of cabling going from the head down the back of her neck, through the body, and out the other end to another puppeteer. I knew that this version of the puppet was coming, but I had no idea that with her very small, little teeny head, her movement would be so restricted. It was frustrating and upsetting. I could not make her move the way I had worked so hard to do.”⁸⁰ Granted, the Gelfling puppet manipulation was hard for Henson as well as his hands were quite large. Because of movement constraints, Midener Froud realized that, “The shape of Jen’s head and face was dictated not only by how the character needed to look, but how we could fit Jim’s hand in there to make the puppet work, remembering that the head also needed to accommodate the mechanics and still be light enough to make puppeteering possible... These were both very small heads to contain so much stuff.”⁸¹

This balancing act between puppet and performer, is what makes puppeteers stand out amongst the rest. Henson and Mullen both had a difficult time manipulating the Gelfling puppets. Henson himself said, “Jen was murder... For the first third of filming, I was terribly unhappy with my performance. I was constantly frustrated by what I felt

⁷⁹Ibid., 75.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁸¹ Ibid., 75.

were the character's shortcomings." Both Henson and Mullen had to practice individually and with each other over and over again, in order to find the right fluidity of movement and expression. Fortunately, radio control designer Faz Fazakas was commissioned to adjust the Jen and Kira heads, and he wound up building "two robot heads with full controls for the ears, eyelids, everything." By the end of construction, the Gelfling puppets were a three-person job with Henson and Mullen moving their mouths and bodies and Midener Froud manipulating their eyes by remote control. Each performer had to master their movement and expression in order to capture the essence of the Gelflings. Although it was a three-person job, each member of the puppet team had to work in unison to bring life to the character. Therefore, not only was the manipulation an ensemble effort, but everyone had to understand their own bodies and emotions to make the puppets appear alive.

What is important to note, is the originality that the art of puppetry possesses. One of Craig's biggest irritations with the actor was their inability to come up with anything original, saying that they "look upon life as a photo-machine looks upon life."⁸² It is hard to recreate expression and emotion in puppetry as each puppeteer is different. A puppet could move the same way, but whatever made the puppeteer unique was what would be conveyed through the performance. Though their performances are hidden, puppeteers have to do twice the work, and by understanding the movements and expressions of two people, they remove their individuality and ego, ultimately becoming the perfect performer and creates a unique new world as performer and puppet combined.

Colossal Creatures

⁸² Craig, *Craig on Theatre*, 84.

The second interpretation of Craig's *über-marionette* theory is the idea of an oversized "super puppet." Irène Eynat-Confino's believed that all of Craig's inspirations and sources inspired an oversized marionette with an updated movement structure that would be his solution to the problem of the "fallen idol who had become a Punch and Judy." She insists that the size of the *über-marionette* is what would make it different from other forms of puppetry as it establishes an immediate physical and emotional impact.

Henson definitely wanted a fantasy world that encompassed multiple kinds of creatures of all sizes. While the small Gelflings are the heroes of the story, the villains are the towering Skeksis, which were some of the largest and most intricate puppets to construct and manipulate. If you ever wondered what a "reptilian character dressed up in fine clothes" looked like you'd only have to watch the Skeksis in *The Dark Crystal* to find out.⁸³ The concept of the Skeksis was for them to be a blend of "reptile, bird, and predatory fish" (*Fig. 12*). Creator Brian Froud, who had brought the Skeksis to life realized, "clothing is very important for a puppet...It hides a lot, and yet it has another function—to illuminate the nature of the character. I knew the costumes of the Skeksis had to reflect their moral decay. They are corrupt, but they're also physically dying, and I wanted all their costumes to show that. It was fun to juxtapose their designs with the Mystics as we were working on them."⁸⁴ It isn't hard to believe that the Skeksis' outsides reflect how they are on the inside as they snarl and hiss at anyone who gets in their way (*Fig 13*).

⁸³ Gaines et al., *Jim Henson's the Dark Crystal: The Ultimate Visual History*, 78.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

Most of the Skeksis did not stand by themselves. In actuality both the Skeksis and Mystics had actors inside of them. But, staying inside a dark and heavy puppet is a difficult task, and the performers had to take breaks, sometimes even exiting the set. The lead Skeksis, skekSil the Chamberlain (*Fig. 14*) was actually given the opportunity to stand alone without the puppeteer underneath. In the film, skekSil the Chamberlain fights for the throne after the old emperor passes but is challenged by skekUng (*Fig. 15*) for supremacy. After trial by stone, a challenge of who can break a large stone with their sword first (*Fig. 16*), skekSil loses the battle and as punishment he is disrobed revealing his decaying, brittle body and then exiled from the Skeksis' castle. (*Fig. 17*) In the film, skekSil is a sinister creature who loves to manipulate words and people in order to get what he wants, swaying gently from side to side and occasionally making strange remarking noises. But, once again, it was not an easy feat to create. skekSil is the only Skeksis that was shown without its' multiple robes of clothing. The Henson team therefore had to craft a special skekSil puppet without robes for his scenes outside the castle that stood three and a half feet tall, but on screen appeared enormous when placed alongside the Gelflings. (*Fig. 18*) skekSil's body was built entirely out of foam latex in order to create a "fleshy look." Unlike the other Skeksis, the naked Chamberlain's eyes were manipulated by animatronics and his arms were attached to rods like Henson's traditional Muppet puppets. Of all the Skeksis' the Chamberlain was the most difficult to manipulate, so much so that his lead puppeteer, Frank Oz often compared his Skeksis scenes as "trying to navigate through New York's Grand Central Station."⁸⁵

The Skeksis are some of the most memorable puppets of *The Dark Crystal* universe. It is probably their character and overarching objective that makes them stand

⁸⁵ Ibid. 85.

out over the rest of the puppets in Thra. One of the most eye-catching scenes in the film is the Skeksis' dinner scene where the audience gets to see the differences and character development of each Skeksis while they eat their dinner. But, outside their personalities, their construction is strikingly similar to the construction of the über-marionette compiled from the notes and findings of Eynat-Confino. When asked to describe how an *über-marionette* would function onstage, Eynat-Confino writes "The *über-marionette* was round, made of wood, and padded... Craig intended the range of movement of the über-marionette to be greater than that of the conventional articulated puppet. This is how he described the movements of one figure: "[It] *revolves, ducks, hides face with mantle*, etc. (and in this revolving the [über-marionette]. Shows his or her dexterity)."

Though the Skeksis were not made of wood, they were certainly padded by multiple layers of flesh and robes and also perform all the movements Craig would have wanted them to do in the film. More importantly, the puppets are enormous and aided in adding to a plot that both Henson and Craig would agree on. Eynat-Confino notes that "the big figure has always had a stronger physical and emotional impact on its beholder than the smaller figure."⁸⁶ The Skeksis are bigger than both the Gelflings and real people, and so to have a daunting reptile-bird loom over you from a screen is no laughing matter. Though the rest of the puppets were just as big and believable, what separates the Skeksis from the rest of the film is their overbearing presence and size. Perhaps, an aesthetic that Craig would have loved to incorporate into his work.

Hidden Handymen

⁸⁶ Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask*, 92.

The final *über-marionette* interpretation used is the belief that the *über-marionette* is a “full-body puppet.” Le Boeuf’s findings are backed by evidence compiled from the Edward Gordon Craig Collection that would suggest Craig sought performers that were half actors, half manipulators combined. With this information, LeBoeuf came to the conclusion that the *über-marionette* is in fact an actor within a puppet. In *The Dark Crystal*, no puppets are more intricate than the ones that were manipulated with the performers actually inside the puppets. Henson, Froud, and Oz were able to create a team of artists that had both the physical and emotional stability to portray these larger than life characters. The Skeksis, uuRu (the Mystics), Landstriders, and Garthim were all manipulated by performers inside the puppets, which created the effect of puppets moving around their own environments without strings. But the magic wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for the help of Swiss mime, Jean-Pierre Amiel.

Sherry Amott, a member of the design team of *The Dark Crystal*, was tasked with finding a group of performers who could “transcend the physical limitations to create convincing characters.” By chance, she walked into the London International Mime Festival and although she wasn’t a fan of mime, she assumed that the artists in the show would understand movement as their entire career involves “telling stories with their bodies.” Amiel’s one man show that proved both “physically demanding” as well as “beautiful” captured her eye, and within a couple of days he was hired.⁸⁷

At first, Amiel was only the lead puppeteer for urUtt the Weaver, a member of the Mystics. Soon his services extended to coming up with movement ideas for the Landstriders and Garthim two opposing creatures of the world of Thra. Amiel was a master of movement and manipulation of his own body. Cheryl Henson recalls that, “he

⁸⁷ Gaines et al., *Jim Henson's the Dark Crystal: The Ultimate Visual History*, 94.

would take the seemingly impossible positions that he expected of the performers and make them look easy... He had to train the body performers for many months to build up the muscles necessary to hold the Mystic heads out in front of their bodies while sitting on their haunches and walking forward” (*Fig. 19*)⁸⁸ The Mystic puppets were difficult constructions. Amiel had to find puppeteers that were both flexible and expressive for not just the Mystics, but other puppets he was tasked to figure out. Jim Henson himself could only hold a Mystic position within the puppet for ten or fifteen seconds, and the body positions the puppeteers had to hold were quite daunting.⁸⁹

With the goal of finding the ultimate puppeteers in mind, the production team posted auditions on a British show business trade publication, *The Stage*, which was seen by circus performer and future Landstrider puppeteer, Robbie Barnet.⁹⁰ It was the “rigorous” ten-day audition process that drew him in. He recalls, “It was a totally magical experience from the moment I went to audition, like nothing I could ever have dreamed of...I was so pleased and impressed at how much care was put into the selection process of the body performers. We went through various stages. The first night was at the studio, where we had to do various exercises. Frank and Jim were there, showing us how to do stuff. Then we were called back for ten days of auditions and exercises before they decided who would be in the core team of body puppeteers.”⁹¹

The collaborative audition process led to creative explorations and realizations that answered many questions about how the Mystics were manipulated and portrayed

⁸⁸ Ibid., 95.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 96.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 95.

⁹¹ Ibid., 95.

with Amiel leading the troupe.⁹² Barnett recalls that Amiel, though unorthodox in his practices, truly understood what it took to fully embody a character, saying, “He was focused on this idea that the only way to portray these characters, who were rigid and pushed to the limits of what the human body could do, was to enter the spiritual being of the character. The complexity of the efforts that are required to get your body to behave in a way that isn’t recognizably human is so complex that it’s almost impossible to do. But Amiel, and myself, and many of the other body puppeteers believed that we would be able to manage if we could enter the character so deeply that all the physical movements became subconscious and we would not notice the physical discomfort.”⁹³

Amiel’s lessons were a practice in expression and physicality so that by learning how their own body moves, the puppeteers could learn how to manipulate another body to its fullest capacity. At one point, Amiel took the troupe to Hapstead Heath, handing each performer a rock, and instructed them to hurl the rock as far as they possibly could. When a puppeteer was tasked with throwing one of the heaviest rocks, Barnett recalls, “The more effort you put into throwing the stone, the less far it seemed to go. He was showing us that, somehow, if you imagine the stone as part of yourself and its travel through the air as an extension of yourself, it really would go further.”⁹⁴ This was an important lesson in object connectivity and the transference of energy between puppet and puppeteer that would enable these performers to fully take on the life of the character they were inhabiting.

With the first stage of performer preparation complete it was finally time to become one with the puppets. Sherry Amott and the design team worked on creating

⁹² Ibid., 96.

⁹³ Ibid., 96.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 97.

“user-friendly puppets” that were difficult, but not impossible. While the Skeksis puppets had special harnesses to distribute the puppets’ weight across the performer, The Mystics were a tighter fit and had more capabilities with the addition of extra manipulatable arms.⁹⁵ Oftentimes, the puppeteers had to double up with one performer operating the head and the other the body. It was important to Henson and Froud that the larger characters were manipulated by performers inside the costumes. Brian Froud once commented that, “We [Froud and Henson] knew pretty quickly that the Mystics would have to be quite large...To do that, we needed somebody inside the costume, and they would have to be hunched over and walk slowly. I started to design shapes and forms that could go over the human body and convey the sense of movement we wanted for the characters. Designing a creature like that requires that you hide humanity, the person underneath, to help the performer transform into the character.”⁹⁶

Almost more intricate than the Skeksis and Mystics were the Landstriders and Garthim. The Landstriders are one of the most creatively manipulated puppets on the set of *The Dark Crystal*. When the design team ran into trouble coming up with ideas for the puppets, Amiel and the rest of the performance troupe were tasked with brainstorming ways the puppets could be manipulated. The only reference material Amiel and the others had was that the Landstriders had the capabilities of “moving at the speed of wind.”⁹⁷ After spending some time in the Creature Shop, the troupe wrestled with coming up with ideas for how the Landstriders would function and perform. It was here that Robbie Barnett harnessed his knowledge and understanding of circus performance and incorporated stilt walking into the manipulation. Both he and Paul Goddard, who stilt

⁹⁵ Ibid., 91.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 90.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 99.

walked professionally in theatre, asked the design team to create “hand stilts.” (*Fig.20*).⁹⁸

The resulting performance went as follows:

Then, with Goddard’s help, Barnett demonstrated how a six-legged creature with long legs could look. With stilts on each hand and leg, he adopted the stance of a tall quadruped, while his colleague followed behind closely with shorter stilts attached only to his legs. The result was the basic form of a creature with long front and middle appendages, and shorter ones in the back. The effect was convincing, so the two experimented with increasingly longer stilts, until the tallest of their creature creations reached ten feet high... The design team brought in a roll of muslin and stretched it over their bodies, completely obscuring Barnett and Goddard’s extensions. When they walked forward, the movement underneath the muslin gave the illusion of tendons and a musculature structure.⁹⁹

Instead of the performer having to adjust their body to the puppet, the Landstriders had the puppets being adjusted around the performers. Robbie Barnett remarked that, “The goal is to enter into a creature and eventually produce something that creates another world for the people watching. Although they weren’t explored to the same depth as some of the other characters in the film, the Landstriders have emotions and feelings, which comes across” (*Fig.21 and 22*). The Landstriders’ opposition, the Garthim, also needed to be manipulated carefully, but perhaps with not the same amount of gentle care. These “beetle-like” creatures that followed the order of the Skeksis (*Fig.23*) were possibly the heaviest of all the puppets built for the production, built from “fiberglass and steel rod fabrication” that weighed a whopping eighty pounds at least.¹⁰⁰

But the troupe never complained. Instead, they entered the puppets by mounting the legs and the undercarriage directly onto them with a harness which according to one of the performers, Brian Meehl, it felt somewhat like carrying a “dinghy boat on your back.” Each performer head was then fit into the Garthim’s helmet-like structure which was covered with a black scrim so that the performer had full visibility without ruining

⁹⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 99-100.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 103.

the aesthetic of the puppets themselves. Their eyes and claws were manipulated by radio control by a separate puppeteer. On performing the Garthim, Meehl continued saying, “Once you were in that, they would put these two claws on you, and you’d reach your arms into those things. Those things were strapped and attached to the outer piece of the shell. They were huge, probably four, five, or maybe even six feet long, if you extended them...What makes the Garthim scary is that the audience can see its weight...You have to create the illusion that they are four times heavier than they are. That’s true mime, creating illusion. If we move too fast, the suits look merely like the lightweight fiberglass that they are.”¹⁰¹

Regardless, The Garthim manipulation ended up being quite a success and performed well on camera. Cheryl Henson noted, “The movement of the full body characters was an essential part of creating the life of those characters...The movement of the Garthim was particularly excellent. They could have looked like men in costumes, but they never did. That was the magic that Amiel brought to the production.”¹⁰²

Most of the main puppets in *The Dark Crystal* had people inside of them, which Le Boeuf argues would have been Craig’s ideal *über-marionette*. According to his ex-collaborator, Carr, (who Craig believed had betrayed him in his publishing of a piece of writing on his *über-marionette*) Craig envisioned a larger theatre “with screens on casters” with two stages, movable screens, and fixed pillars.”¹⁰³ Though Craig publicly rejected Carr and his musings, he later wrote to another American collaborator, Samuel James Hume, to see whether or not he could advise him on how to stop Carr from spreading

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 104

¹⁰² Ibid., 105.

¹⁰³ Le Bœuf, "On the Nature of Edward Gordon Craig's Über-Marionette." 104.

rumors about his work.¹⁰⁴ He writes, “I have lately received a copy of a journal Kansas City in which [Carr] or his wife spins out a full page yarn about ‘The Perfect Theatre’ letting out the secrets of my work...Surely this does not entitle him to the right of spreading my brains before the public in newspapers.” This letter to Hume revealed that Carr’s hypothesis on the *über-marionette* was true, it was an actor “encased” within a puppet.

Craig also wanted to train his puppeteers. In his notebooks, he speaks of either “finding” or “collecting” his *über-marionettes* or in other words, “hiring staff.” In his second “Uber-Marions” notebook, Craig details the training process before the actors even begin rehearsing inside the puppets, saying, “It will take at least two months of my time to find these U.M, two months more to train them before they can begin to work at the plays. It *needs two years* in reality but I shall be all right with two clear months previous to the rehearsals.”¹⁰⁵ Both, Craig and Henson stressed the importance of training the body so that the performer could fully embody the character and Henson’s world and process are strikingly similar to what Craig’s desired theatre would look like.

The art of transformation and connection is an important theme in Craig’s *über-marionette* and Henson’s *Dark Crystal*. While Craig wasn’t as straightforward about his practices as Henson (he rather enjoyed leaving behind trails of clues for us to muse over today) the most important thing to note in this comparison is the unique connection that people make with puppets. Whether or not someone is manipulating or watching a puppet, there is a transference of energy, which is what makes puppet plays more unique than other forms of theatre. Craig complained about the actor because the actor was already

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 104.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 105.

filled with preconceived emotions and values and was forcefully trying to enact other states of mind through repetition of what he had already seen others do. Whereas the neutral puppet, while still portraying a character, is more accepting of other people's current dispositions because it has nothing else to work from, and nothing to lose. What Henson and Craig both loved about puppetry, was its' ability to connect to both performers and people and the transference of energy that came with it. But, today, we have a third form of connection in this world of puppets and performers, which comes in many forms, but has brought the entire world into a new age of technology and interpretation for better or for worse.

A “*Digital Über-marionette.*”

The biggest differences between Craig and Henson are time and technology. Of course, there is no way Craig could have foreseen the impact technology would have on the art of puppetry when he realized his *über-marionette*. However, it is an important topic of debate today in the realms of puppetry studies and performance as the more digital the world becomes, the more traditional art forms incorporate this new technology into their work. Animatronics, radio control, and CGI are considered to be part of the vast art of puppetry by some, and another category in itself to others. It could easily be assumed that *The Dark Crystal* is a traditional puppet film, however some scholars would disagree. Some believe that this “digital” form of puppetry should be categorized into a different style of art entirely. However, in his essay, “The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production,” Dr. Steve Tillis challenges this notion that traditional puppetry and modern-day technology should be separated into two different kinds of art.

Tillis argues that while CGI, Animatronics, and other forms of digital puppetry give off the look of being related to puppets, it is the “newness of the medium in which they exist” that gives others the impression that they aren’t traditional enough to be accepted as puppets.¹⁰⁶ While his essay focuses mainly on the art of CGI, Tillis brings up a valuable point, that many forms of puppetry, even those slightly associated with technology, are met with the same reception by people who oppose digital puppetry. However, according to Tillis, the “implied definition” of puppetry is that “if the signification of life can be created by people, then the site of that signification is to be considered a puppet.”¹⁰⁷ Creating digital puppets still requires people generating a “site of signification.” Tillis uses the example of movement generated through motion-capture, which he argues, “can be quite like puppet movement in that it is generated, in real-time through the bodily exertions of a living being.” He notes that there are more similarities between the digital and the traditional than simply the “implied definition” of puppetry. Computer graphic figures and puppet creation for example involve “the construction of a figure imbued with articulation points that is then given for manipulation (of one sort or another) by people” which are still “sites of signification.”¹⁰⁸

Digitally produced or no, it is the art of manipulation that is the most important when it comes to defining what is and what is not a puppet, which leads Tillis into introducing the ultimate “puppet paradox.” A manipulator or person operating a puppet is the traditional approach to puppeteering where one body is controlling the movement of a puppet, but their movements are not the same. Watching someone handle a traditional

¹⁰⁶ Tillis, Steve. "The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production." *TDR/the Drama Review* 43, no. 3 (1999), 189.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

marionette for example would immediately be considered a form of puppeteering. However, in virtual or digital puppetry, the puppeteers are not seen. Tillis writes, “Computers have, one might say, freed the puppet from its dependence on conventional puppeteers. But computers have not, of course, freed the puppet from the necessity of human control of one sort or another—only from the real-time control of the puppeteer.”¹⁰⁹ However, there are still those who would look at CGI, Animatronics, etc. and would never consider it a form of manipulation similar to puppetry, regardless of the similar traits both traditional and digital technology share.

Tillis’s solution is to classify puppets into three different categories: “Tangible puppets (tangible objects that are tangibly moved), virtual puppets (intangible objects that are tangibly moved) and stop action puppets (tangible objects that are intangibly moved).”¹¹⁰ He proposes that puppets “as we have known them” are tangible and that digital puppets are “virtual puppets,” but that all in all they fall under the art of puppetry and should be respected as such.¹¹¹ The only designated differences that should be pointed out between the traditional and the digital are in the art of puppet construction, rather than the kind of puppet itself.¹¹² At the end of his essay, Tillis concludes, “I do not think that media puppetry spells the end of puppetry as we have known it. There is a pleasure still to be found in the live performance of a tangible puppet—the direct confrontation between an audience and a “living” object—that is distinct from the particular pleasures of media puppets. I foresee a future in which tangible puppets and

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 190.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 192.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 189.

¹¹² Ibid., 191

media puppets can coexist, each stimulating and challenging the other.”¹¹³ While a great suggestion by Tillis, and one I agree with, I believe in order to do just that, we as artists must first focus on what we consider to be “living.”

In terms of the *über-marionette*, there is no way of telling what Craig would have done with the overwhelming amount of technology that exists today. However, what is important to note is that regardless of whether the puppet is manipulated on or off screen, that the transference of energy and the art of control are still large factors at play. The art of puppetry should not be recognized based off the style or look of the puppet (in this case, traditional or digital), but by the relationship and connection between human and object. In Martin Heidegger’s “The Thing” he suggests that life consists of the objects around us, our humanness and actions, and the combination of the two working independently of each other.¹¹⁴ But, the main theme of Heidegger’s essay is the art of the “between.” Humans depend on things like things depend on humans, and life is a series of humans being given things and things encountering humans. A thing becomes usable, when humans act upon it and give it a characteristic or use. This is the origin of almost every object that surrounds us today. But the question is, what happens to the *human* when the object, *the thing*, establishes a concrete connection itself?

The art of puppetry and manipulation is the act of being “between.” There is always a nearness or closeness between us, and other people or objects depending on whether we’re thinking of distance in the metaphorical or literal sense. To Heidegger, the “thingness” of something can be found within its void, the space within a thing. He gives

¹¹³ Ibid., 193.

¹¹⁴ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. 1st ed. His Works. New York: Harper & Row, 1971, 163-166.

the example of a jug. It is not the outside of the jug that is important, but the thing *within* the jug, the space that holds water, that is created by a person, a sculptor, and ultimately contains the *essence* of the jug. Like puppetry construction, most things are shaped and given borders by people. But, when it comes time to interact and grasp the object, this thing, a puppeteer and a puppet's interaction is special, because no matter what stylization technique is being used, there is a direct connection between the puppet's essence and our own.

What makes puppetry so special is that it blends the lines of the "between." While there is still a separation between human and puppet, the connection between the two is intricate and transferable. Puppets and puppeteers manipulate the space with not just one, but two energies. One can say that inanimate objects, are not "living" because they cannot stand alone onstage. But that is not what constitutes the act of "living." Who is to say, that the puppeteers aren't the ones being manipulated? As seen in this last chapter, the art of puppetry construction and performance is a balancing act between the constraints of a puppet and the constraints of a person. Regardless of form, when the two come together in a space where both puppet and puppeteer can function in unison, that is when the essence and energy of both performers are equally shared, that is when the magic happens. Perhaps Craig saw this in the puppets he saw dancing across Europe, or maybe Henson took note of it in his Home Economics class as he played with his projects. Regardless of why or what got these two men excited about puppets, one thing is certain, that they both saw how the art of puppetry can bring so much happiness to an audience.

V. Conclusion: Finding our “ancient joy.”

At the end of “The Actor and the *Über-marionette*,” after thorough critique of his modern-day theatre we see a glimpse of Craig’s heart. For the first time in the essay he expresses his love and adoration for the art of puppetry as he writes, “I pray earnestly for the return of the image- the über-marionette to the Theatre; and when he comes again and is but seen, he will be loved so well that once more will it be possible for the people to return to their ancient joy.” All theories and interpretations aside, no matter what Craig thought the *über-marionette* should be, there is a deeper message in his writing that is often overlooked. To say that Craig was simply hyper analyzing what he wanted the theatre to look like is just the surface, the tip of the iceberg. At the end of his essay we see that Craig, above all else, wants his audience to feel “ancient joy.”

The term “ancient joy” is almost as mysterious as the *über-marionette* itself. But, while we do not know what Craig was referencing, one thing is certain, he wanted us to feel joy. Irène Eynat-Confino writes, “Craig’s belief in the power of the über-marionette went hand in hand with his belief in his own power to materialize his vision of the theatre in a lasting and durable artistic form and to restore Belief to the world.”¹¹⁵ We can assume that Craig ultimately wanted the world to be a better place, and that he truly believed with the coming of the *über-marionette* that people could be happy once more. Therefore, the question is not what an *über-marionette* is, but how it would make us *feel*. Whether it be a perfect actor, an oversized puppet, or a combination of the two, Craig’s ultimate goal was to spark joy, an *ancient* joy, that in his mind we had lost somewhere along the way and desperately needed to find again.

¹¹⁵ Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask*, 89.

How strange it is, that 53 years after Craig's death in 1966 we are all still searching for this "ancient joy." Like the definition of the *über-marionette*, no one person's happiness is the same, and we aren't always sure what it is exactly that will truly make us happy. Would the *über-marionette* save us all? Again, while we still have no clue of what makes an *über-marionette*, there is no doubt that puppetry not only offers a place of escape, but also establishes a direct line to what it is like to get lost in pure joy. Jim Henson showed us what he imagined a better world would look like and created multiple universes so that nobody was ever left out. Whether it was dancing puppets in *The Muppet Show*, a walk down *Sesame Street*, or a trial by stone in *The Dark Crystal* there was a place for everybody in Henson's imagination. To this day, the Jim Henson Foundation continues to modify and improve its content so that everyone is included. In fact, in 2017 *Sesame Street* welcomed its first special needs puppet, Julia, who has autism (Fig.24). The Foundation hoped that children with autism could feel welcomed and loved like all the rest of the children and puppets in *Sesame Street*.¹¹⁶ According to Harry Belafonte, children who grew up in war-torn countries or poverty especially needed Henson's creations, saying, "Unless you've seen from these places the looks on the faces of small children as they watched *Sesame Street* or the Muppets, you'll never really understand what Jim and his colleagues have done for millions of children all over the world, children who would have never smiled, nor dared to dream, had it not been for Jim Henson."¹¹⁷ We can only wonder what The Jim Henson Company will bring us next.

¹¹⁶ France, Lisa Respers. "Meet' Sesame Street's' Muppet with Autism." CNN. March 20, 2017. Accessed April 10, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/20/entertainment/sesame-street-julia-autism/index.html>.

¹¹⁷ Finch, Christopher. *Jim Henson: The Works: The Art, the Magic, the Imagination*. (New York, Random House, 1993), 11.

From Henson's mind came a plethora of inspired puppeteers, especially those within his own family. Lisa and Cheryl Henson now run the Jim Henson Company, Heather Henson serves on the board and creates works to this day with her own company, IBEX Puppetry, Brian Henson just produced a Muppet-style feature film called "The Happytime Murders," and we lovingly remember John Henson whose dedication to his father's work and his own work was cherished by many. Many puppeteers outside the Henson family are also releasing their artistry to the world. Julie Taymor's puppets twirl in *The Lion King* on Broadway, Basil Twist's dementors spook millions around the world in the *Harry Potter* series, and numerous companies are emerging with new ideas and increased confidence. While many of these puppeteers were around before Henson's time, he truly paved the way and sparked a puppet fever in the United States. From shows on Broadway to feature films in Hollywood, puppets have risen once again with the dream of taking America by storm.

In 1986, only four years before Jim Henson would leave us, he had been asked to write some notes for a book that was never published. These notes were later found and placed perfectly at the end of a book of his works, beautifully pieced and woven together by author Christopher Finch. In these notes, we see Henson reveal his ultimate goals in life and the world he dreamed of creating. Like Craig, Henson also longed for a joy filled world. His work wasn't about the fame, it was about the faces of adults and children alike that would light up when his characters would appear on the screen. He writes,

At some point in my life I decided, rightly or wrongly, that there are many situations in this life that I can't do much about-acts of terrorism, feelings of nationalistic prejudice, cold war, etc. – so what I should do is concentrate on the situations that my energy can affect. I believe that we can use television and film to be an influence for good; that we can help to shape the thoughts of children and adults in a positive way. As it has turned out, I'm very proud of some of the work we've done, and I think we can do many more good things. When I was young, my ambition was to be one of the people who made a

difference in this world. *My hope still is to leave the world a little bit better for my having been here.*¹¹⁸

A lot has changed since 1907 when Craig believed the *über-marionette* to be the cure for all our sorrows, and yet perhaps we're just looking in all the wrong places. There are many things that we do not know. We may never know what an *über-marionette* is, or what ancient joy feels like. But we *do* know how it feels to laugh when Big Bird tells a joke or smile from ear to ear when Cookie Monster slyly convinces Kermit to give him a cookie. Jim Henson, like Edward Gordon Craig, wanted the world to be a better place and thought that puppetry was the solution to bringing back joy. Puppets have a lot of power. We make them smile by pulling a string, but then they make us smile, with no strings attached. Maybe one day we'll find the *über-marionette*, but until then, as Kermit the Frog would say, let's "Keep believing, keep pretending."

¹¹⁸ Finch, *Jim Henson: The Works: The Art, the Magic, the Imagination*, 242.

APPENDIX

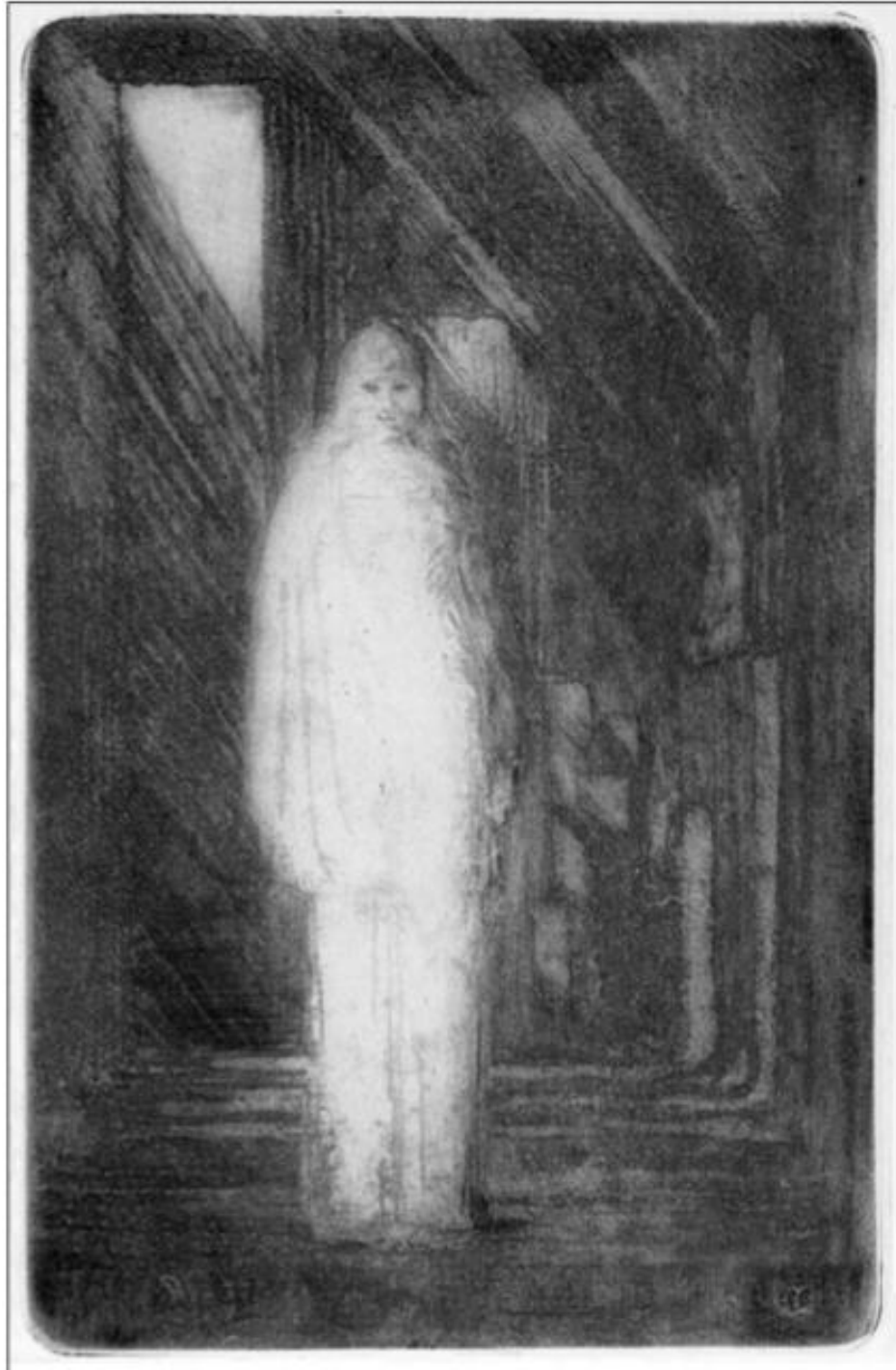


Fig. 1. Edward Gordon Craig, *Über-Marionette*, 1907. BnF ASP, Maq 10962.



Fig. 2. Edward Gordon Craig, *Über-Marionette*, 1907. BnF ASP, EGC ICO 764 (31).



Fig. 3. Adrien Tournachon, *Pierrot Laughing*, 1855. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1998.57/> (accessed on April 10, 2019).



Fig. 4. *Edgar Bergen.* UNIMA: The World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts. <https://wepa.unima.org/en/edgar-bergen/> (accessed on April 10, 2019).



Fig. 5. Richard Strauss, Cast of *Sam and Friends*. The Smithsonian Museum of American History. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/kermit-the-frog-and-friends-join-american-history-museums-collections-506415/> (accessed on April 10, 2019)



Fig. 6. *Burr Tillstrom*. UNIMA: The World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts. <https://wepa.unima.org/en/burr-tillstrom/> (accessed on April 10, 2019).



Fig. 7. *Bil and Cora Baird.* The Jewish Women's Archive. <https://jwa.org/people/baird-cora> (accessed on April 10, 2019).



Fig. 8. *skekSil the Chamberlain*. http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_skeksis.php (accessed on March 5, 2019). © The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 9. *urrUt the Weaver with an urRu instrument.*
http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_urru.php (accessed on March 5, 2019).
© The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 10. *Jen, Kira, and Fizzgig in front of the Wall of Destiny.*
http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_jen-kira.php
(accessed on March 5, 2019) © The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 11. *Henson and Kathy Mullen perform Jen and Kira in The Dark Crystal. Murray Close, 1981. The Stranger. <https://www.thestranger.com/art-and-performance-fall-2017/2017/09/06/25388361/the-genius-and-generosity-of-jim-hensons-work> (accessed on April 8, 2019) © The Jim Henson Company*



Fig. 12. *skekEkt the Ornamentalist..* http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_skeksis.php
(accessed on March 5, 2019) © The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 13. *skekSo the Emperor*. http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_skeksis.php
(accessed on March 5, 2019) © The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 14. *skekSil the Chamberlain*. http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_skeksis.php
(accessed on March 5, 2019) © The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 15. *skekUng the Garthim Master*. http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_skeksis.php
(accessed on March 5, 2019) © The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 16. *skekUng the Garthim Master and skekSil the Chamberlain engage in a Trial by Stone.* http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_skeksis.php (accessed on March 5, 2019) © The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 17. *The Chamberlain approaches Jen at the House of the Old Ones.*

http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_skeksis.php

(accessed on March 5, 2019) © The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 18. *The Fallen Chamberlain and the Captured Kira.*
http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_kira.php
(accessed on March 5, 2019) © The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 19. *urRu encircle the Crystal.* http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_crystal.php
(accessed on March 5, 2019) © The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 20. *Puppeteer Hugh Spight practices using prototype Landstrider gear. Gaines, Caseen, Cheryl Henson, Brian Froud, and Wendy Froud. Jim Henson's the Dark Crystal: The Ultimate Visual History. © The Jim Henson Company*



Fig. 21. *Kira with Fizzgig riding atop a Landstrider.*
http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_thra-creatures.php (accessed on March 5, 2019) ©
The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 22. *Jen riding atop a Landstrider during a battle with Garthim soldiers.*
http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_thra-creatures.php
(accessed on March 5, 2019) © The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 23. *Garthim*. http://www.darkcrystal.com/galleries_dark-creatures.php
(accessed on March 5, 2019) © The Jim Henson Company



Fig. 24. *Sesame Street to introduce Julia in April.*
<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-sesame-street-muppet-autism-20170319-story.html> (accessed April 9, 2019)

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