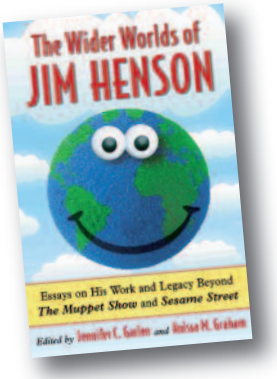

A review of

The Wider Worlds of Jim Henson: Essays on His Work and Legacy Beyond The Muppet Show and Sesame Street

John Patrick Pazdziora

Following the success of their first anthology, *Kermit Culture*, Jennifer Garlen and Anissa Graham have assembled another engaging academic anthology on the works of Jim Henson and of the studio that bears his name. While those looking for academic discussion of the Muppets should consult their first book, this second anthology is sure to delight Henson scholars and fans alike. (This reviewer was at one time slated to contribute a chapter to the anthology.)

Dedicated enthusiasts will enjoy reading thoughtful discussion of Henson's more obscure works. Readers who have enjoyed only a few of Henson's works will certainly discover through these chapters other Henson shows and films to whet their interest. The collection readily makes apparent the sheer breadth and audacity of Henson's work. Even after eighteen full essays, the reader closes the book with a sense that scholarship has only begun to gesture towards the immense fecundity of Henson's imagination.

Studying popular culture is a tricky task. When addressing past ages, the role of the critic is primarily one of reconstruction, assembling texts and references like Neanderthal bone fragments to recreate lost coherences, historical and literary. But when, as with Henson, the subject of study worked in recent memory, the critic's role is almost wholly inverted. Text and idea are wrapped together in the morass of memory. Genius and prejudice, substance and ephemera, have yet to be sundered by 'the knife of demon Time the vivisector', to borrow Muir's resonant line. The critic, to some extent, must anticipate Time's work, and dissect a credible narrative of one's own time. This requires an almost superhuman feat of objectivity. Such studies are thus almost never definitive, and it is to *The Wider Worlds of Jim Henson*'s credit that it makes no pretence at offering an elusive 'final word' on Henson.

Henson poses particular difficulties for today's critics. On the one hand, he can and perhaps should be regarded as a consummate auteur, with an oeuvre working towards a clear, unified vision. Many essays in the anthology presume this view to a greater or lesser degree: Andrew Leal, for instance, in his discussion of the dubbed editions of *Fraggle Rock* (1983-7), or Thomas Holste, in his impressive thematic guide to *Labyrinth* (1986), or Anthony F. Strand's fascinating analysis of a nearly forgotten series, *The Jim Henson Hour* (1989). On the other hand, Henson can be seen as one of a mighty company of artistic talent, each of whose contributions deserve consideration in their own light. Catriona McAra's fluent essay on Brian Froud's designs for *The Dark Crystal* (1982) is particularly important in this regard, and may well prove an enduring contribution to critical understanding of both Henson and Froud.

However, there is a third iteration of Henson's work: the ongoing productions of The Jim Henson Company. The fourth and final section of the book is largely concerned with the studio's output, with Jennifer Stoessner writing on *Dinosaurs* (1991-5), Sherry Ginn on *Farscape* (1999-2003), and contributions by the editors on the 2011 movie *The Muppets* and the Muppet YouTube channel. While these are curious topics in their own right, it is not self-evident that they contribute to meaningful understanding of Henson himself, or that they should be taken as indicative of what Henson – and for that matter, The Jim Henson Studio – would be producing were he still alive.

So, Henson can be considered as an auteur, a collaborator, and a brand. And it is somewhat a pity that the anthology leaves these distinctions largely to the reader, rather than actively interrogating them and their implicit assumptions about authorship and filmmaking.

In a way, Henson's work and legacy parallels that of his distinguished predecessor, Walt Disney – a parity the Disney and Henson studios have long recognised, and legally formalised. Disney, too, is auteur, collaborator, and brand, with a powerful public *mythos* surrounding the man and his work, and a studio with a vested interest in keeping that *mythos* alive and unsullied. Although, puzzlingly, Walt Disney himself receives no mention in *The Wider World of Jim Henson*, the Maestro's long shadow is felt throughout the book.

This, perhaps, indicates the anthology's chief weakness: Henson and The Jim Henson Studio are dealt with almost in isolation, with other artists, such as Froud, receiving mention only insofar as they came within Henson's orbit as an auteur. Here the threads may have been pulled too finely; there is no clear sense of Henson within the warp and woof of his own time. To choose a trivial example: Holste mentions that Henson recruited Terry Jones 'to aid him in adding humor to *Labyrinth*' (119). But in 1981 Jones had distinguished himself with a collection of new fairy tales; it seems unlikely that his proficiency as a mythic arts writer played no part in Henson's decision to recruit him for the 1986 fantasy. Nor is Jones's fellow Python Terry Gilliam mentioned, despite being Henson's direct contemporary and his precursor in weird, intensely detailed fantasy films.

One could, of course, quibble endlessly about such matters – why are the Jungian and psychoanalytic theories so prevalent in Henson's own day not discussed? What about his relation to other avant-garde puppeteers such as Jan Švankmajer? – but the opportunity for quibbling is precisely the appeal of this anthology. As a catalyst for further research and a primer for lively debate among Henson fans, *The Wider World of Jim Henson* is a welcome book.

In the end, the anthology dwells almost wholly in the 'wider worlds'. Henson himself remains elusive. The public persona which Henson himself cultivated, and which his studio is careful to maintain – an avuncular aging hippy and benevolent dreamer, a screen magician like Walt Disney, a Willy Wonka of puppetry – is the version of Henson that informs the anthology. The critical interpretations of his art on offer seldom progress beyond his own, often deliberately ambiguous, statements. Perhaps that is as it should be. A true evaluation of Henson's oeuvre – in its own right, distinct from the Henson brand – must wait for demon Time to do its work.

Editors: Jennifer C. Garlen and Anissa M. Graham.
McFarland (2013), 267pp.

. . . . . .

John Patrick Pazdziora