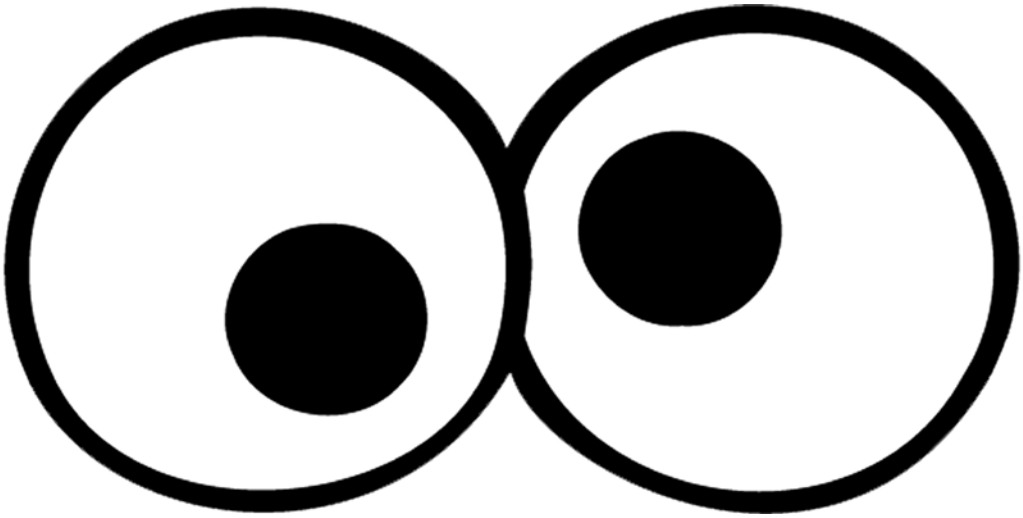

The author of this bulletin wishes to thank Sherrie Westin of Sesame Workshop for her generous gifts of time, guidance, and books; as well as the many friends who suggested relevant *Sesame Street* clips while she was researching the piece.

I. THE PLEASURE OF THE TEXT

"I invited a friend of mine over for dinner," says the man ruefully. The gray-faced, middle-aged fellow is a squiggly animation, made of skinny, put-upon lines that form sluggish shapes. His dinner guest is nothing like him. The little friend who bounces through the French doors is the letter M, angular and robust. M has googly eyes at the tops of his twin peaks, which extend downward to become super-springy legs and dancing feet that also serve as his hands. M hops into his host's outstretched palm, then rubs against his jowls like a cat. The gray man, beleaguered by these shows of affection, trudges toward a grand table piled with a colorful smorgasbord, plus candelabra. He slumps in his seat and invites the bug-eyed M to dig in. "Mmmmm, marvelous!" the M cries. "Meat! Munch! Magnificent!" M's center of gravity is his mouth; a rib-eye steak, a loaf of bread, a glass of wine vanish into the V-shaped dip. The bottom point of this center "V" is also a straw, slurping up a glass of milk in one go. "Milk!" he says. The two upside-down Vs on either side of M's mouth are pincers, chomping instantaneously through an entire melon. "Mmm-melon!" he says.

"You're just about the greediest, rudest letter I ever saw," says the gray man. "You ate up everything! I'll tell you one thing, never invite a letter M to your house for dinner." The gray man is unmoved by M's apologetic kisses. M is unmoved by the gray man's complaints, and proceeds to eat his tablecloth.

Victor Hugo once wrote, "All letters were originally signs, and all signs were once images." The Hungry Letter M is still an origin, not an abstraction, or not quite. His sound is that of achieving satiety—*Mmmmm*—and he is built to achieve it. His body is mostly mouth. His limbs are cutlery. He wreaks havoc as a guest, but his design is eminently rational. He is what he represents. He brokers a festive accord between *signifié* and *signifiant*, then gobbles up all the canapés at the after-party as proof of the reconciliation.

Created by animators John and Faith Hubley, the Hungry Letter M guest-starred on a 1971 episode of *Sesame Street*, the long-running children's educational program. *Sesame Street* also featured Cookie Monster,

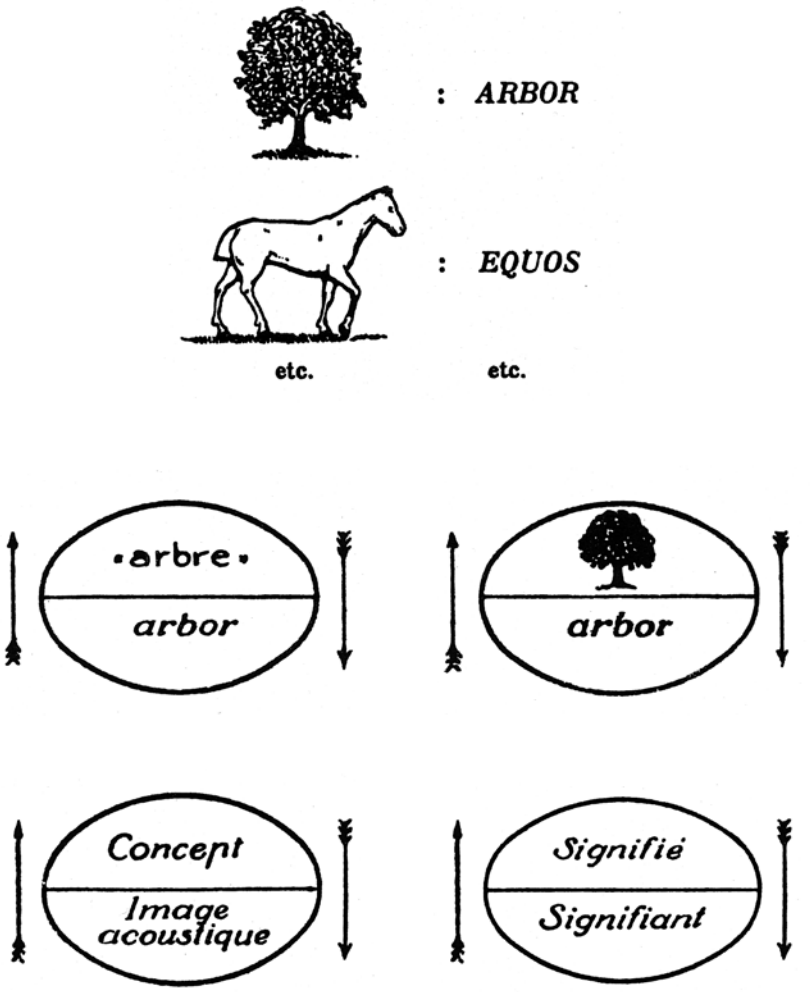

Fig. A. from Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 1916

who, like the Hungry Letter M, was a master of spectacular semiotic collisions, as when he would eat the dessert section of a cookbook because it so powerfully symbolized Dessert, or when he would eat the letter C because it so powerfully symbolized Cookie.

The instinct to personify letters, to allow the M to say "I am what I do," was central to the pedagogical mission of *Sesame Street*, which first aired on November 10, 1969. In the first animated segment ever produced for the program, "a character named Joe danced a jig with a June bug in a jar, went before a judge, and so on," as Edward Palmer and Shalom Fisch write in *"G" is for Growing: Thirty Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street*. But in this animation, the all-important letter J hung static in an upper corner of the screen. Kids in focus groups ignored the loitering letter; they made no connection between J and the J-related action below it. "The key," the researchers concluded, "was to treat the featured letter as a character on the show." The final produced segment calls out all the J-words as Joe is condemned by judge and jury for his mistreatment of the June bug—he even serves a brief jail term, which suggests that for this particular animation team, J was for Jainism.

In terms of form matching function, not all letters were created equal, as *Sesame Street* shows us. When a reporter for *The Letter-on-the-Street Interview Show* quizzes N, the letter can only blurt out relevant words ("Nose, nickel, number, nut …") until the displeased interviewer excuses himself. ("26 letters in the alphabet and I've gotta get N," he grumbles.) Poor J does not readily shape-shift into a judge, jury, or June bug—as one of the boys in the animation points out, J "looks like a fish hook," not a J-word. The noise of the J is a stuttering fragment, not a complete thought, unlike the satisfied exhalation of the M or, to take another example, the appropriately wheezing, heaving sound of H. In another animated spot that aired on *Sesame Street*, Howard—a petite, gravel-voiced dandy in pink top coat and tails—struggles under the weight of the jumbo-sized eighth letter. "Hey, heavy!" he exclaims, alarmed. "Huge … *hh, hh,* hard, *hh hh hh,* hop"—he pants and lunges, struggling to stay upright—"hurts, *hh hh hh hh*—hopeless! Help!" Howard eventually collapses and is pinned beneath the H, whereupon his giant friend Harold congratulates him on his selfless expression of H's many utilities.

Likewise, consider Cookie Monster's beloved C, which is a chomping mouth in profile. Or V, which in one *Sesame Street* segment is represented by a V-shaped mouth of a volcano and a Valentine's Day construction-paper heart that morphs easily into a bright red V. Or I, which in another Hubley animation is subject of a dispute between a boy and a rambunctious dog who insists the I is in fact a bone for him to gnaw, albeit a bone that tastes like the letter I.

. . .

I was the letter I remember most. This was because of the wordless short film that appeared frequently on *Sesame Street* called "I-beam," which followed a white-hot, serif-font slab of I-shaped molten metal down the conveyor belt of a steel mill. No voiceover, no establishing shots, no words on the screen, just images steaming up from some industrial hell and a galloping, *clank-clank* orchestral soundtrack out of a Fritz Lang anxiety dream. I must have watched the I-beam dozens of times as a child. Aptly, or inevitably, I left a brand upon my brain.

In the years before starting kindergarten, the three- and four-year-old me watched *Sesame Street* three times a day, in what my mother called the "family room." This would have been 1980 and 1981, just outside Buffalo, New York. The family room had a red couch and white walls and a white rug. There was a cluster of four framed birth announcements in one corner of the room; otherwise, the white walls were unoccupied. The small television set sat on the white rug, between a pair of white-curtained windows, and I would sit cross-legged in front of it. My sister, 15 years older and therefore glamorous and perfect and remote, was at college. My two brothers were 10 and 12 years ahead of me at school, shaggy-haired princes of unknowable tall-kid countries. My mother was in another room. My father would be home by six.

There were meals, and there was *Sesame Street*, and there was the time in-between meals and *Sesame Street*. I remember *Emergency!* reruns in the white room and I remember bowls of Cream of Wheat and vanilla ice cream in the white room. Coaxing my memory outside the white room is hard, though I can summon the patient clerk at Bell's Grocery who would let me put plastic fruit through the check-out scanner, and a blond girl

down the street with a temper and a plastic Big Wheel tricycle. Mostly, though, I remember *Sesame Street*.

Bright in my memory are the colorful numbers vrooming and pinballing around to ladies' voices (Grace Slick and the Pointer Sisters, respectively, as I later learned.) So is Snuffleupagus, the woolly mammoth whom only Big Bird could see—I worried about Snuffy, so lonely and unwieldy. I envied Bert his bottle cap collection, and sometimes felt that Ernie gave him too hard a time, though I also thought how nice it would be to have a roommate. I would watch every last second of the end credits, even holding my breath, willing Barkley the dog to amble just a little longer through the park before the in-between time resumed. I loved Grover so fiercely as to transform him into a real person whom I'd miss even when he was on the television screen—his image was like a mere memory of Grover, a poor pre-recorded substitute for the real flesh-and-blood Grover whom, I gradually realized, I'd never meet.

But somehow the I-beam glows a little brighter than anything else. Anecdotal evidence indicates that lots of people around my age remember it vividly, though it taught us little about the letter I. In fact, the clip is confusing—for a long moment the I is turned over on the belt, becoming a slightly attenuated H. The I was weird, and a little scary, and it could come chugging out of nowhere, untethered to any context or purpose. I suppose a lot of things in childhood come chugging toward us that way.

II. ADDICTION STUDIES

20 years later, while a graduate student studying film semiotics in London, I watched structuralist filmmaker Hollis Frampton's 60-minute *Zorns Lemma* for the first time (see www.ubu.com). The film centers on the Puritan children's textbook the *Bay State Primer*, an educational tool that shares with "I-beam" an unsettling power and dubious pedagogical merit. The *Bay State Primer* uses a mnemonic arrangement of startling sentences to teach the alphabet; for example, "Idle fools are whipped at school" for I, "Time cuts down all both great and small" for T, "Xerxes the great did die and so must you and I" for X, and so on. Frampton uses the *Bay State Primer* as the voiceover prologue to *Zorns Lemma*, which links words in alphabetical order taken from urban signage, advertising logos, and magazine display type, thereby piecing together strange little koans and tone poems: "Paddle–Quality–Radio–Saint," "Jade–Keep–Lady–Madonna," and the morbidly comforting "Nectar–Of–Pain–Quick."

Frampton finished his film in 1970, the first full year that *Sesame Street* was on the air. For Generation X viewers who might have caught up with *Zorns Lemma* in the 1990s or 2000s, the result is like an extended-play *Sesame Street* segment as crafted by the staff of Manhattan avant-garde mecca Anthology Film Archives. What's more extraordinary, though, is that one could lift any minute-long sequence of *Zorns Lemma* and drop it into an early episode of *Sesame Street*, and it's possible not a single seam would show. But where Frampton's film was cool and aggressive, resisting interpretation, *Sesame Street*—its exact contemporary, emerging in the same year and from the same city—was light, inviting, and built for a purpose.

The show and its production company, the not-for-profit Children's Television Workshop (later renamed Sesame Workshop), did not invent children's educational television—my older sister would have had *Captain Kangaroo* and *Romper Room* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* to choose from, and many would argue for the subtextual educational merits of *Looney Tunes*. But for some kids, the commercials between the shows were the biggest draw. In 1966, a three-year-old girl named Sarah Morrisett would station herself in front of her family's television

set in Irvington, New York, each morning at 6:30 AM, keeping a vigil over the test pattern until cartoons came on at 7. By age four, Sarah "had memorized an entire repertoire of TV jingles," Michael Davis writes in his book *Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street*. "The simple melodies, mostly written in bright major keys, were no harder to sing than a nursery rhyme. The more Sarah heard them, the better she was at repeating them, word for word."

At a dinner party at the home of television producer Joan Ganz Cooney in 1967, Sarah's father, Lloyd Morrisett, Jr., talked about Sarah's fascination with cartoons and jingles. Morrisett was a vice president at the Carnegie Corporation, which had turned its attentions to supporting pre-school curricula that could help bridge the enrichment gap between poor students and their middle-class peers. The historical moment seemed ripe for progressive initiatives. The civil rights movement was in full flower, and President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty had resulted in the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (establishing Head Start, a health and education program for low-income pre-school children and their families, and Job Corp, a vocational training service for teens and young adults), as well as the Social Security Act of 1965, which provided federal health insurance for the poor and elderly.

At the time, Cooney was a producer for what is now the New York public television station WNET, where she worked on progressive programming such as *A Chance at the Beginning*, about reading programs for children, teens, and adults in Harlem, and *Poverty, Anti-Poverty and the World*, which used a teach-in style format to bring together low-income people and War on Poverty-affiliated government officials. Though *Poverty* won a regional Emmy, Cooney knew that the audience for such socially engaged television was limited at best.[1]

Cooney began to wonder if, instead of simply calling attention to poverty and educational shortfalls in the inner city, television could itself address and ameliorate those issues directly while reaching far more viewers. By the mid 1960s, 97 percent of American households had a television set. Children were watching an average of 27 hours of television per week. President Johnson had urged more funding for noncommercial television in his 1966 State of the Union address. In November 1967, an act of

Congress established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to fund and promote not-for-profit radio and television programming; within a few years, the CPB had helped launch the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR).

At that fateful dinner party, Cooney got a hunch that the right group of writers and performers could co-opt the attention-grabbing properties of cartoons and advertising—the snappy concision, the hypnotic visual flair, the earworm song hooks—to teach letters and numbers to children. If Sarah Morrisett could voluntarily memorize promotional jingles, then surely educational TV could ape those same alluring advertising techniques. Hence the conceit that each episode of *Sesame Street* would have sponsor letters and numbers—the debut episode was "brought to you by the letters W, S, and E, and the numbers 2 and 3."

The pitch was that television could become a mass delivery system of educational entertainment, with the potential to reach even the poorest and most culturally deprived kids. In her 1968 paper "Television for Preschool Children: A Proposal," Cooney argued for a season-long televised "experiment," albeit one which had to be "slickly and expensively produced." In the next year, Cooney and her allies raised $8 million to found the Children's Television Workshop, with money from the CPB, the U.S. Department of Education, Carnegie, and the Ford Foundation. The Workshop's flagship show, *Sesame Street*, assigned itself the mission of teaching basic alphabetical and numerical concepts to three- to five-year-old children.

Which is all to say it's possible we may never have had Sherlock Hemlock's suspenseful "X Marks the Spot," Cookie Monster's immortal "C Is for Cookie," the propulsive Pointer Sisters ditty that can only be known as "One-Two-Three-FOUR-Five, Six-Seven-Eight-NINE-Ten, *Eleven-Twelve*" (I guarantee you that four out of five Americans born in the 1970s can belt out this last tune on cue), or any of the other songs promoting *Sesame Street*'s sponsor letters were it not for the early-morning habits of a television-addicted three-year-old named Sarah Morrisett.

Before its premiere, *Sesame Street* was developed and honed through

endless seminars and brainstorming sessions in the late 1960s, gathering everyone from pediatric physicians to game show producers to Head Start officials. After early episodes entered production, Children's Television Workshop staffers exhaustively road-tested them with children, as Louise A. Gikow writes in *Sesame Street: A Celebration—40 Years of Life on the Street*. The staff would typically set up a television screen showing *Sesame Street* and a slide projector next to it that flashed a new image every eight seconds, in order to gauge how easily the kids could be distracted from the main event.

Sesame Street's setting, a grimy, scarred but cheerful brownstone block created on a Manhattan sound stage, evoked the rough-and-ready ideal that urban theorist Jane Jacobs laid out in works such as her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*: a dense, low-rise, mixed-use, culturally diverse, working-class neighborhood. With black children as the target audience, the de facto mother and father in the early years of *Sesame Street* were Susan and Gordon, a beautiful African American couple. Caucasians were always a minority; in 1972, Hispanic couple Maria and Luis arrived to run the fix-it shop and took up residence in 123 Sesame Street, the worse-for-wear brownstone where Ernie and Bert shared the basement apartment. The adults were unfailingly patient and kind toward their Muppet neighbors, such as Oscar the Grouch, the irascible hobo-hoarder who lived in his own filth, and the ungainly, ever-flustered Big Bird. "You need a Mister Bumbler on your program," developmental psychologist Sheldon White says of Big Bird in *Street Gang*. "Somebody who makes mistakes, who gets flustered and is like a four-year-old, but picks himself up and dusts himself off and keeps going. He provides other people with a whole lot of opportunities to be helpful because he needs a lot of help. Four-year-olds can identify with that."

The first *New York Times* review of the program referred to Big Bird's milieu as "slums," which may say more about the class orientations of the Gray Lady circa 1969, and less about *Sesame Street*'s actual provenance, which was a composite of blocks in Harlem, the Bronx, and most prominently, the Upper West Side; production designer Charles Rosen modeled 123 Sesame Street after a brownstone on Columbus Avenue.[2] But if Children's Television Workshop felt that the toddlers of 1969 could handle these gritty urban realities, Sesame Workshop disagreed on

behalf of the toddlers of 2007: "These early *Sesame Street* episodes are intended for grown-ups," read the disclaimer on the DVD reissue of the first two seasons, "and may not suit the needs of today's preschool child." One might think of *Zorns Lemma* as *Sesame Street* for adults, but it turns out that early *Sesame Street* is actually *Sesame Street* for adults.

When Virginia Heffernan of the *New York Times* asked executive producer Carol-Lynn Parente about the reasons behind the disclaimer, Parente replied that Alistair Cookie, the *Monsterpiece Theatre* host played by Cookie Monster, both smoked his pipe and ate it, which "modeled the wrong behavior," and that *Sesame Street* "might not be able to create a character like Oscar now," due to the Grouch's sloth, aggression, and depressive cycles. Around the same time, Cookie Monster was being made to temper his feelings toward cookies—to concede they were "a sometimes food." This betrayal led American satirist Stephen Colbert to confront Cookie Monster on a 2008 episode of *The Colbert Report*, declaring, "You're not a Cookie Monster. You're just a monster."

III. ENTER THE DRAGON

While *Sesame Street* was still in its development stage, several collaborators came aboard whose influence would be felt well into the show's fifth decade. One was Christopher Cerf, son of Random House co-founder Bennett Cerf, who joined as a consultant, "helping the show finance itself by making books and toys in its image, as well as writing much of its music," in the words of a 1994 *New York Times* profile. He remained associated with the program for decades, contributing song parodies including "Rebel L" (which tweaked Billy Idol's "Rebel Yell"), "Born to Add" (Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run"), and "Letter B" (which rewrote the Beatles' "Let It Be:" "When I find I can't remember what comes after A and before C / My mother always whispers, 'Letter B'"). And at a mathematics workshop convened at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York City, a gaunt, bearded mystery man dropped in and sat silently at the back—alarming Cooney, who instantly suspected he was part of the radical leftist organization the Weather Underground. He turned out to be the young puppeteer Jim Henson.

When *Sesame Street* started, Henson and his Muppets had been earning most of their living through advertising for some time. Henson had first reached the national airwaves via the NBC television affiliate in Washington, D.C., which showed Henson's five-minute *Sam and Friends* twice a day from 1955–1961. The titular Sam, whom Muppet Wiki calls a "humanoid," never spoke, and resembled Wallace of the classic British stop-motion-animated *Wallace and Gromit* films. It's hard to imagine what a child of the late 1950s would have made of *Sam and Friends*; for children born later, the clips can only look like druggy sonogram glimpses of future *Sesame Street* and *Muppet Show* spots. In one segment, the saturnine, purplish Yorick, who (true to his Shakespearian name) consisted of just a head and a human hand, narrates his own midnight snack of celery and crackers in a sulfurous purr. It's a bizarre window onto somebody else's compulsions, nearly Warholian in its focused banality. Yorick is a photo negative of the equally compulsive and far more exuberant Cookie Monster.

In another segment, an early-draft Kermit (not yet a frog) and the bespectacled Harry the Hipster (whose scuffed-up voice and jazzy piano style

may have provided DNA for *The Muppet Show*'s Dr. Teeth) make literal the concept of "visual thinking." Kermit says "X," and an X appears above his head. Same with "Q."

"Man, you're just a beginner," scoffs Harry. To prove his superior skills, he makes a pun: "I'm an old hand at this stuff—watch!" A watch appears above his head. "Hey, a real watch!" Kermit exclaims. "With moving parts and all that," says Harry.

The lesson goes awry when Harry the Hipster visually-think-sings some jazz scat, which renders itself as twisting, looping free-form doodles.

"Jazz tends to linger and you can't get away from it," Harry explains. The pair of friends are eventually obviated and erased by all that scat, Kermit yelping "Help!" as visual thoughts swallow him like quicksand.

Henson's series of ten-second black-and-white promos for Wilkins Coffee, made between 1957–61, had a similar taste for annihilating whimsy. A faintly reptilian Muppet with the voice of Kermit the Frog subjected a peer to endless tortures: he was punched, shot, electrocuted, beaten with a hammer, run over by a bandwagon, obliterated by a cannon, and pitched out of a plane, all to punish his lack of enthusiasm for the brand. Rowlf the Dog, later a star of Henson's *Muppet Show*, was a gruff pitchman in 1962 for Purina Dog Chow. In 1966, Nutty Bird, a direct ancestor of Big Bird, did manic, soda-guzzling spots for Royal Crown Cola, while Cookie Monster played the role of the Wheel Stealer in a test ad for the snack-food triumvirate Wheels, Flutes, and Crowns. (Wheels, Henson murmured in voiceover, were "wheel-shaped, cheese-flavored snacks that taste so—*mmm*, cheese-flavored.") The Wheel Stealer ads never aired, although the following year, this proto-Cookie Monster devoured a coffeemaker in a training film for IBM.

One can imagine Don Draper, the alpha ad executive of the 1960s-set TV drama *Mad Men*, encountering the young Jim Henson during this era, dragging contemptuously on his cigarette, and repeating a line he once used on his punning copywriters: "There has to be advertising for people who don't have a sense of humor." But for Henson, humor wasn't an optional element of advertising; it was the vehicle itself. The La Choy

dragon, an eight-foot-tall creature in a too-small chef's hat, stumbled through supermarket aisles and crouched in kitchen pantries, breathing fire on canned noodles and knocking over pots, pans, and stacks of tinned goods with his thick, slapping tail. He targeted housewives—or, in one case, a "wifeless husband"—who felt intimidated by the dinner hour. ("What do you feed 12 hungry cub scouts?") These weren't Draper-like aspirational figures but flailing types, shortcut-takers. The atmosphere of semi-incompetence and surreal chaos was perhaps something to which a busy homemaker could relate, just as kids could later relate to Big Bird.

Thus Henson's advertisements did not burnish the brand; they weren't elegant or even particularly informative, and they did not foster positive associations. What his promos did instead was conjure striking images through sight gags, slapstick, and repetition. The products were granted personhood thanks to the toothy, ravenous Wheel Stealer or the growly, blundering La Choy dragon. They had sharp corners and rough edges and real teeth, all of which could make a lasting impression. *Sesame Street* would prove that artists could personify letters of the alphabet as unforgettably as Henson could personify chicken chow mein. It would also prove that a background in television advertisements could be the perfect blueprint for creative success in advertisement-free children's television.

Sesame Street was virtually pro bono work for Henson and his puppeteer compatriots, including Frank Oz, who played Cookie Monster opposite Henson's Kermit and fretful Bert opposite Henson's carefree Ernie. The characters were trademarked and controlled by the Children's Television Workshop, but Henson owned them outright; careful merchandising of the characters has helped fill the Henson estate's coffers and helped keep afloat *Sesame Street* and its many international editions as well as sister shows such as *The Electric Company* and *3-2-1 Contact*. According to a January 2012 piece in the online magazine *Slate*, Sesame Workshop earned about one-third of its 2010 revenues from *Sesame Street* merchandising, or about $45 million in total; the rest came from charitable and private donations and a dollop of funding and quasi-loans from PBS.

One budgetary item that *Sesame Street* has never needed to worry about is fees for its many celebrity guest stars. In her original proposal for *Sesame Street*, Cooney hypothesized that famous faces would be a

key attraction—not necessarily so much for kids but for their parents, whom Cooney and her collaborators wanted to keep in the room as much as possible. (Indeed, a small child could have wandered out of the room at any point during Stevie Wonder's astonishing live performance on a 1973 episode—a six-and-a-half-minute romp through "Superstition"—and her mesmerized parents might never have noticed.) Actor James Earl Jones and comedienne Carol Burnett were the first celebrities to tape segments during the debut season; baseball legend Jackie Robinson, blues singer Lou Rawls, and actor-comedian Bill Cosby followed soon after. The strong showing by African American stars underscored the show's early aspiration to reach lower-income black communities. "When I saw James Earl Jones and the children," Cosby says in *Sesame Street: A Celebration*, "I knew that this was going to make contact educationally, and I wanted to volunteer."

Strangely enough, Jones' famous intonation of the alphabet in his basso-profundo Darth Vader voice may not have reached television screens if Cooney had listened to certain members of her advisory team. "This great bald head fills the screen doing nothing but reciting the alphabet, with dramatic expression," Cooney explains in *Sesame Street: A Celebration*. "Adults warned us that kids would be scared out of their wits, but instead they loved it and shouted the letters along with him."

Given the roster of celebrities who have appeared on the show over the last 40 years—it would be easier to draw up a list of noteworthy individuals who haven't appeared on *Sesame Street* than a list of those who have—the actress and *30 Rock* creator Tina Fey may have spoken for a majority of the rich and famous when she told *Parents* magazine, "Having grown up watching the show, you don't think twice. If they call and ask if you want to be on *Sesame Street*—'Absolutely! When and where?'" Essayist Chuck Klosterman concurs. "No one is going to say no to this," he is quoted as saying in *Sesame Street: A Celebration*. Even the heavy metal band Slayer "would go on *Sesame Street*," Klosterman adds. "And Slayer would smile, and they would be nice, and they would do a funny version of 'Raining Blood.'"

IV. DEATH AND TAXES

Though it receives little in the way of taxpayer money, one could almost think of *Sesame Street* and Sesame Workshop as a modern-day Works Progress Administration (WPA), enlisting filmmakers, writers, actors, musicians, songwriters, and other artists to build a creative public utility. And it really was a utility, nearly as ubiquitous as electricity or public schools. In 1978, 95 percent of households in East Harlem and Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy with children between the ages of two and five watched *Sesame Street*. That figure was slightly higher across Washington, D.C.; nationwide it held at 80 percent even.[3] By 1979, after a decade on the air, nine million American children under the age of six were watching it daily.

When one takes into account the resonances with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Depression-era America of the 1930s, the wellspring of Hollywood celebrity guest stars, and the statistical unlikelihood of its intended audience of urban black children growing up to be loyal Republican voters, it becomes somewhat clearer why a show designed to teach children letters and numbers has become a bogeyman for certain elements of the contemporary American conservative movement.

In a fascinating Sean Hannity-hosted Fox News segment titled "Big Bird Bias" that aired in June 2011, radio host Ben Shapiro, author of a book called *Primetime Propaganda*, said that a Children's Television Workshop veteran had told him, "The whole purpose of *Sesame Street* was to cater to black and Hispanic youths who quote-unquote 'did not have reading literature in the house.'" Shapiro reports this conversation as if it were not a matter of public record but an investigative-journalism coup, and adds, "There's kind of this soft bigotry of low expectations that's automatically associated with *Sesame Street*." (Moments later, the panel has somehow moved on to discussing an openly gay teenager who was named prom queen of his high school, proof of an ongoing "direct assault on this country's moral foundation." The link to *Sesame Street* is ambiguous but implied.)

In December of the same year, Fox News aired a segment on Lily, a new *Sesame Street* character who doesn't always have enough to eat, with this introduction: "A 'food insecure' Muppet is helping to promote a

national 'Food for Thought' campaign that teaches poor families to seek out nutritious food and to eat on the taxpayers' tab." Fox host Eric Bolling asked, "Why are we singling out a poverty-stricken little girl? Does my son need to see that, my little boy need to see, that's going on? You don't single out other groups, you don't single out the little gay Muppet, or the little black Muppet, or the little Hispanic puppet, do you? They're all intertwined in the ensemble." Bolling added, "I'm waiting for them to come out and have like this evil Republican or tea partier that they are going to blame Lily's poverty on." Bolling's guest, Republican strategist Cheri Jacobus, replied, "Well, I think so, and if you don't speak out against their political agenda that's probably what will happen." That's an odd statement, given that *Sesame Street* has never featured a character that one could fairly describe as "evil" or a villain, unless of course you count the I-beam.

For a handy measure of the distance between the right wing as it existed at the dawn of *Sesame Street* 40 years ago and the right wing of today, just compare the following two statements:

The many children and families now benefitting from *Sesame Street* are participants in one of the most promising experiments in the history of that medium. The Children's Television Workshop certainly deserves the high praise it has been getting from young and old alike in every corner of the nation. The administration is enthusiastically committed to opening up opportunities for every youngster, particularly during his first five years of life, and is pleased to be among the sponsors of your distinguished program.

– President Richard Nixon in a letter to Joan Ganz Cooney, dated January 28, 1970

We're not going to kill Big Bird. But Big Bird is going to have advertisements, all right?

– Presidential candidate Mitt Romney to a group of supporters in Iowa on December 28, 2011

At the time of writing, Romney, the vastly wealthy former Massachusetts governor has all but clinched the Republican presidential nomination. While he has never enjoyed the most felicitous way with words, this outburst seemed particularly befuddling. What crimes had Big Bird committed? Were they crimes against advertising? And who were "we"—a jury of

Big Bird's peers? The sound bite presumed guilt, hinted at violence, promised mercy, flopped into anticlimax, while the accused dithered yellowly in the distance, anxious feathers quivering in the air.

Part of the confusion was that Romney was mistaken: *Sesame Street* already has advertisements, as we know, although the pool of clients is limited to 26 letters of the alphabet and even fewer numbers. Romney was presumably objecting not to *Sesame Street*'s lack of advertisers but to its lack of advertising revenues and, by extension, lack of business sense: none of these letters or numbers turn profits sufficient to pay for placement on *Sesame Street*, despite enviable exposure to millions of impressionable consumers. He was also objecting to its receipt of taxpayer dollars through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. But Romney missed the mark by singling out Big Bird, who is in fact an exemplary businessman, expanding his brand through toys, videos, books, and ice shows.

A letter of an alphabet, by contrast, has no value. It generates no profit. Whatever its advertising strategy, it can only sell itself for free.

In 1952, Marcel Duchamp told the New York State Chess Association that "chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts, and these thoughts, although making a visual design on the chessboard, express their beauty abstractly, like a poem." Chess, Duchamp said, "has all the beauty of art, and much more. It cannot be commercialized. Chess is much purer than art in its social position."

Letters of the alphabet express their beauty abstractly, so *Sesame Street* concretized them. Letters of the alphabet cannot be commercialized, so *Sesame Street* quasi-commercialized them, with the help of a highly successful maker of commercials. Letters of the alphabet are purer than art, so *Sesame Street* made impure art of them. This is the genius of both its satire and its pedagogy.

V. FROM BAUHAUS TO BERT'S HOUSE

In the 1925 book *Painting. Photography. Film.*, Bauhaus polymath László Moholy-Nagy coined the term "typophoto" to describe an ideal marriage between typography and photography—what he called "the visually most exact rendering of communication." The following year, Czech artist and writer Karel Teige and dancer Milca Mayarová took up Moholy-Nagy's challenge by creating a photomontage alphabet design for Víteslav Nezval's poem sequence *Abeceda*, featuring photographs of Mayarová in poses she imagined for each letter.[4] The intent, Teige said, was to invent a new "optical language, a system of signs capable of embodying words in graphic figures." This was also the essential, ancestral language of *Sesame Street*.

For some letters, Mayarová—lean and muscular, yet feminine in her bathing cap, shiny track-and-field togs, and Mary Janes—provides a stroke-by-stroke transcription. For V, she places her upper back on the floor and kicks out her legs; for T, she holds out both arms at right angles to the straight lines of her legs and torso. (Not content to simply stand straight up for I, she instead leans into a backward-cursive I, writing her body slant like Michael Jackson in the "Smooth Criminal" video.) But for letters that the body can't trace so literally, she suggests and interprets. For R, she runs in place. For D, she points one leg forward and leans away from it, as if instead of trying to trace the letter's straight back and curving stomach, she were bisecting the D with her body. For G, she strikes a modified warrior pose and looks calmly exultant, as if an imminent battle has already been won.

Mayarová gives the alphabet musculature, and turns *typophoto* into an athletic event. Milca Mayarová is each letter, and each letter is Milca Mayarová.

Obviously, while a Mayarová can gracefully shape her body to the mold of a letter, a letter cannot adapt its meaning to correspond to a particular shape. There's nothing J can do to manufacture significance out of its resemblance to a fish hook. There is no real reason why, say, the letter H looks or sounds like it does, or why a word that starts with H couldn't start with any other letter. When Harry the Hipster from *Sam and*

Friends visually-think-sings jazz scat, the looping lines and blobs aren't—can't be—a transcription of the music, but at least that failed transcription mimics the essential randomness of transcribing thoughts via symbols.

Complicating matters further is the fact that some letters are constructed out of the same constituent parts as other letters. In "I-Beam," the I rotates 90 degrees and becomes an H. When Kermit presents a lecture on B ("The B sort of looks like a fat man with his belt too tight, you know?"), Cookie Monster takes a series of bites out of the letter, whittling it down to an R, then a P, then an F, to Kermit's mounting frustration. Once Cookie Monster has chomped the B all the way down to its load-bearing wall, Kermit delivers the aggrieved punch line: "OK, that's a 1, or an I, or a small L, or a line—or dessert."

Regardless of its pictographic origins, a letter of the alphabet has a more or less arbitrary form. (Unless you are Cookie Monster, in which case each letter of the alphabet is the sign for food, and letters spelling out F-O-O-D are dinner, to be salted and peppered.) What's more, those more or less arbitrary forms are placed in a fixed but arbitrary order. (Unless you are Cookie Monster, in which case the I or the small L comes last, as dessert.) It's a lot for a three-year-old to take in.

It was a lot for the French novelist and filmmaker Georges Perec to take in, too. "I have several times asked myself what logic was applied in the distribution of the six vowels and twenty consonants of our alphabet," Perec wrote in 1985. "Why start with A, then B, then C, etc.? The fact that there is obviously no answer to this question is initially reassuring: the order of the alphabet is arbitrary, impressive, and therefore neutral … But the mere fact that there is an order no doubt means that, sooner or later and more or less, each element in the series becomes the insidious bearer of a qualitative coefficient." Thus we think in terms of grade-A meat, B-movie starlets, gentlemen's C's, and so on, even though the order of the alphabet has none of the quantitative logic of sequential numbers. (In a 1976 appearance on *Sesame Street*, the stand-up comic Richard Pryor demonstrated that the "qualitative coefficient" of letters is indeed intuitive and subjective by annotating the alphabet: "Nobody care about no C," Pryor declared. "And ain't nobody interested in D, right? 'Cause E's got it all covered.")

In her ink-and-pencil work *How to Spell the Alphabet* (2005), artist Tauba Auerbach teases out the randomness of alphabetic rankings by spelling out each letter phonetically in a red-on-white typographic stack ("EY · BEE · CEE · DEE" etc.). In the process, she obviates four letters: G (DJEE) does not need itself to spell itself, nor does any other letter need an assist from G; the same can be said of Q (KIEW) and U (YEW). Auerbach's alphabet is not, strictly speaking, in alphabetical order—if it were, I (AI) would come first, followed by R (AR) and B (BEE), and W (DUBBLYEW) would precede E (EE). A child learning the Auerbach method would grow up to think in terms of grade-I meat and R-movie starlets.

What holds the system together isn't the internal logic of the system itself but the simple fact that we memorized this random system as children. That's why it's remarkable that researchers involved in the early development of *Sesame Street* differed on the relative value of drilling kids on ABCs. "Some educators argued that simply memorizing the A-to-Z sequence was a useless recitation skill that didn't really help children learn to read," Gikow writes in *Sesame Street: A Celebration*. "Others cited valid reasons to teach the alphabet—not the least of which was the sense of accomplishment it gave children to recite it, generating feelings of pride that motivated further learning."

This ambivalence may have informed one of Big Bird's most memorable early appearances, in which he mistakes the alphabetic sequence for a single word—*Abka-deffghee-jeckyl-m'nopick'r-stooove-wytzizz*—and improbably builds a catchy jingle around it. "It might be a kind of an elephant / Or a funny kind of kazoo / Or a strange exotic turtle that you'd never see in a zoo," he sings. Big Bird's playful onomatopoeia is the good guesswork of a kid using his imagination to write a logical story about the dauntingly illogical world around him—to impose order on chaos, even when chaos is presented to him as an ordered system. As Big Bird reminds us, it's easy to forget that "Easy as ABC" wasn't necessarily easy at all.

On *Sesame Street*, order and chaos are a Möbius strip, and nothing encapsulates the show's unique thermodynamics better than the border-line-Dada skit in which Bert and Ernie's television set goes on the fritz.

Instead of Bert's favorite program, *The Wonderful World of Pigeons*, a pulsating letter "H"—one of the sponsors of that episode—fills the screen as a man's voice intones "H … H … H …" over and over amid a hum of spacey distortion.

Ever helpful, Ernie takes a look inside the TV. "Whoa-ha, ah, here!" Ernie says. "Here's your problem, Bert. Here's a problem. You had a hat in there, Bert. This is a hat, Bert." Ernie pulls a fedora out of the TV and places it on Bert's head as the word "Hat" appears on the screen.

"Now a hat is an H word, Bert. And so that's where the H was coming from. From the hat."

It does make sense. Yet Bert is dazed, outraged, mewling with disbelief. He looks to the audience in supplication as Ernie matter-of-factly sets about emptying the television of H words: a hammer, a horn, a miniature house, and a hamburger, which Ernie eats. And a hamster. "Henry the hamster. And hamster is a good H word, Bert."

In the *Sesame Street* universe, it's both perfectly logical and perfectly absurd that a TV that says "H" is full of things that start with H.

"I don't understand this," Bert says. "Ernie, what you're doing, you can't do." And yet there is the verifiable hamster, so sweet and pettable, and he starts with H.

Sesame Street blurs the difference between the abstract and the concrete, between signifier and signified, and suggests that the alphabet itself performs the same scrambling. It also blurs the difference between reality and fantasy for an impressionable audience that isn't yet fully aware that there's a difference to be blurred. It fosters a fruitful confusion, a comfort with strangeness—a boon for any child navigating a world that is new and perplexing to him. After Ernie fails to fix the television set, the pulsing H is replaced by a pulsing I, and Bert settles in contentedly to watch it. The show makes a home there in the strange.

Or at least it did for me. For me, *Sesame Street* was the hands of the clock. It flickered in a white, still room outside any known transaction or

commerce. A place where M is a mouth, and has a mouth, and mouth starts with M. I am I, and I is molten steel, and the letter I is a bone that tastes like the letter I, and I am watching Bert watch I on TV. Grover is here and he is not.

All of these things are somewhat clearer to me now. But I still entertain the possibility that some far-off bureau of my unconscious has not yet received the bulletin that M is not a dinner guest and Grover is neither here nor there. When we speak or write down our love of forms—graphic design, painting, film, animation, music, photography—I wonder if some of us are composing those love letters on a palimpsest, and *Sesame Street* was the ur-text. I think I am.

*

1. Cooney's producing background in not-for-profit TV is summarized in Peter Hellman's "Street Smart," which appeared in the Nov. 23, 1987 issue of *New York* magazine.

2. Rosen's geographical influences are mapped in Tim Murphy's "How We Got to 'Sesame Street,'" which appeared in the Nov. 1, 2009 issue of *New York* magazine.

3. These viewership numbers are borrowed from Virginia Heffernan's "Sweeping the Clouds Away," from the Nov. 18, 2007 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*.

4. The design is reproduced in full in Julian Rothenstein & Mel Gooding, eds., *ABZ More Alphabets and Other Signs* (London: Redstone, 2003).