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The Art and Engineering of Empathy in Jim Henson's *The Dark Crystal*

During a scene in Jim Henson's cult-classic *The Dark Crystal* (1982), the film's young protagonist Jen meets another of his gelfling race for the first time. His new friend, Kira, shows him their kind's ability to dreamfast with one another—the act of psychically, instantly sharing memories with one another. Within seconds, Jen has witnessed, experienced even, Kira's past life of joys and traumas. Through their ability to dreamfast, the gelflings enact and promote empathy, which ultimately gives them the power them to heal their fractured universe.

In my paper, I will use *The Dark Crystal* as a lens through which to more broadly explore the work of Henson's puppetry in producing a culture of empathy. Through elaborate construction, dazzling spectacle, and sophisticated engineering, Henson's creations manage to reveal the mechanics of the human condition itself, with *The Dark Crystal* serving as a representative text.

This paper is part of a new research project I am undertaking since moving to Atlanta and forming a professional partnership with the city's Center for Puppetry Arts, the largest American organization dedicated to the art form. I plan to use the resources and materials from the CPA's current *The Dark Crystal* exhibition, as well as items from their Henson archival collection, in order to show how Henson makes visible a distinct, powerful rhetoric of *human* empathy through the artistry of his highly crafted, expertly devised puppets.