

## INTRODUCTION

### A MISSED ENCOUNTER WITH THE REEL

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has never taken place ... at least not for me. And I'm tempted to say not for anyone. That the movie continues to circulate ceaselessly and to shimmer across screens around the world is indisputable of course, and stage revivals and adaptations (including the Broadway production from 2000) continue periodically to arise phoenix-like from Tim Curry's absent ashes. However, although I've seen the movie many times, I can't help but feel that the 'eventness' of the event, the mythical *communitas* and personal fulfilment that adoring fans stridently maintain magically comes into being during each performance, never *quite* materialises. Like Frank-N-Furter's monster, the object of desire continually escapes and always seems to end up with someone else. So I do the Time Warp again ... and again and again in the ritualistic attempt to summon into being the promise that the movie extends to its audience – to conjure up that which I lack, and which the other always has – and in the end I always walk away exhilarated, but not quite satisfied. The experience inevitably slightly misses the mark which, ironically, may in fact be precisely how it hits it.

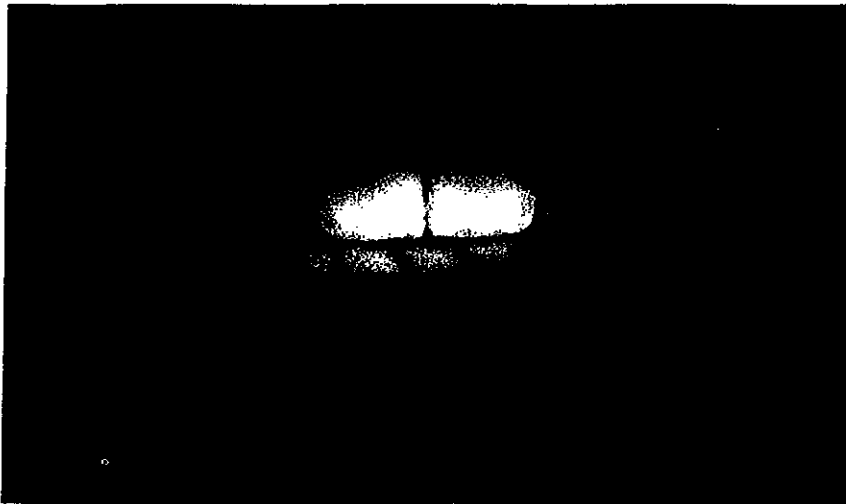
I was born in 1970 in Washington, DC. And although I flatter myself that at the time of this writing I am still a young man, hale, hardy and relatively 'hip' (as hip perhaps as writing an academic appraisal of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* allows), the uncontrollable circumstances of my birth unavoidably make a dinosaur of me in several respects. I have in mind here not so much having lived through the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the USSR as that I am part of the last generation of humankind to be born into a world without personal computers, the Internet, cable television, MTV, VCRs and iPods. My frame of reference differs markedly from that of those born in the 1980s and after – what else can one expect from someone trained to locate library books using the card catalogue, who learned to type on an electric typewriter and who not all that long ago reluctantly performed last rites over a 40-pound behemoth of a top-loading VCR that was purchased after carefully weighing the pros and cons of VHS vs. BETA? My lived, felt experience of the world, my strategies for obtaining, organising and valuing knowledge and making sense of things, and my relationships to technology and media have developed out of that complicated mix of nature and nurture, genes and circumstances.

My awareness of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* dates back to sometime in the early 1980s in the back of a shopping mall novelty store. As a young teen, the mall for me was one of the first places that I and my friends were allowed to explore unsupervised. On rainy afternoons, we would petition to be dropped off there to go to the movies, lunch at the food court, or simply walk around. In connection with this was the delirium of participating in capitalist exchange – the cultural validation that spending money to acquire unnecessary goods visits upon one (I spend therefore I am). And, of course, shopping malls *pulse* with libidinal energy as generic anorexic mannequins modelling risqué undergarments

become screens for projected fantasy; beauty products and clothing advertisements pledge to transform awkward diffidence into irresistible allure; and the density of people feeds the fantasy of romantic fulfilment – the idea of ‘picking up girls’ was always the explicit or implicit objective of my friends’ and my trip to the mall.

Given the way that shopping malls triangulate desire for the other by mediating it through consumerism, it seems especially appropriate that my first exposure to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* occurred in the rear section of a novelty shop called Spenser’s. Our local Spenser’s specialised in gag gifts, smoking paraphernalia and off-colour greeting cards. I always felt rather daring and embarrassed as I moved quickly past the rows of boxes of ‘personal massagers’ featuring tastefully nude women lovingly holding white phallic missiles against their cheeks and comic cards adorned with monkeys and statuesque models with big hair towards the back of the store which housed lava lamps, neon signs and racks of posters. And it was here, in among posters of flaming Led Zeppelin dirigibles, Farrah Fawcett’s swimsuit-clad body and feathered hair, psychedelic black light posters of Jimi Hendrix and skulls adorned with cannabis leaves that I came across an image of a gigantic set of luscious red lips against a black background, underneath of which was printed in a cherry-red, blood-dripping horror movie font, ‘The Rocky Horror Picture Show’, followed by the slogan, ‘a different set of jaws’.

Having never at that point heard of *Rocky Horror*, I felt both provoked and mystified by this comparatively minimalist image. The glistening lips themselves, floating in darkness, detached from face and form, with white teeth ever so gently biting the bottom lip, were both sensual and forbidding, simultaneously vamp and vampire – a *vagina dentata*, although I’m sure my 13-year-old self wouldn’t have thought in such terms. The text anchoring this free-floating signifier accentuated the



A different set of jaws

vampiric connotations – the cherry-red colour and ‘dripping’ form of the letters suggesting blood, combined with the title itself containing the word ‘horror’, conveyed to me that this was a promotional poster for a movie about a sensual female vampire (‘He is!’ *Rocky Horror* fans might shout out). This assumption was reinforced by the playful allusion in the slogan, ‘a different set of jaws’, to Steven Spielberg’s horror blockbuster, *Jaws* (1975), a movie that was released the same year as *Rocky Horror*.<sup>1</sup>

This image of a teenage boy first encountering *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* – my *Rocky Horror* primal scene, if you will – is a powerful one foregrounding both the film’s and my own historical embeddedness within the context of late twentieth-century consumer capitalism and one that nicely condenses and materialises a network of amorphous structuring forces responsible for the production of meaning in relation to cinematic texts more generally. My initial discovery of the film’s existence and first associations with it were informed and influenced by developing senses of both my own autonomy from my parents and my power as a consumer;

pubescent male hormones and as-yet inchoate libidinal urges; transgressive curiosity (I knew my parents wouldn't want me wandering among sex toys and bongs, even if I wasn't quite sure for what purpose all the objects were used); the micro-context of the other 'cool' posters of scantily-clad women and rock stars; the intermediate contexts of the store selling what I recognised to be often tasteless or coarse objects, itself within the context of a shopping mall catering primarily to white suburbanites; and the macro-context of early 1980s America.

That my first engagement with the film should have been with a poster for it in the back of a novelty store also highlights the ways in which the significance of a particular cinematic text extends beyond the parameters of its viewing and is shaped by the film's political economy – the systems of production, distribution and consumption that extend the reach of the film and shape its reception and appreciation. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is much more than simply the movie itself: it also consists of its trailers; its marketing tie-ins such as posters, soundtracks, T-shirts and bumper stickers; ancillary texts that circulate around the movie such as websites, fanzines, parodies and academic analyses such as this one; and even communicated narratives and personal testimonies about *Rocky Horror* experiences that shape subsequent encounters for future viewers and viewings.

In my case, at the moment that I responded to the poster's hail and stood before it, titillated, I was constructed as a potential consumer of both the poster and the film. I didn't buy the poster – I wasn't quite ready at that point for dorm-room displays of subcultural capital built around intimations of sexual perversity. However, that a young white teenager from an affluent family in the Washington, DC suburbs could buy a poster from a store that was part of a chain in order to advertise his subversive relation to cultural norms or subcultural

affiliation raises fundamental questions regarding the presumed transgressive status of *Rocky Horror* and, indeed, any nationally distributed film. It is worth observing the parodic intertextuality and misdirection of the poster itself – both of which are also important narrative strategies of the film as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

My first impressions about *Rocky Horror* were wrong because, not having seen the film itself, I read the poster ‘straight’ – that is, as advertising a movie similar to *Jaws*. The signification of the poster changes dramatically of course once one has seen the film or at least knows more about it. First and foremost, although it includes scenes of murder and cannibalism, *Rocky Horror* is not in fact a horror movie and, despite Tim Curry’s make-up and vamping for the camera, there is no actual vampire. And then there are those luscious red lips – the lips that the audience summons into being with its ritualistic incantation as the lights dim and then which fade away as the film itself starts. Whose lips are they and what role do they play? The film works vigorously to denaturalise any easy connection between painted lips and femininity by placing a transvestite at its centre but the lips aren’t even Tim Curry’s. Rather, they are Patricia Quinn’s (Magenta) but, even more confusingly, they sing with Richard O’Brien’s (Riff Raff) voice. Regardless of whether one wishes to consider this curious conjunction of voice and body as another form of transvestism or as a form of shared identity connected to the seemingly incestuous brother/sister dyad Magenta and Riff Raff, any easy equation between painted lips and female sexuality is rendered problematic from the very start.

After my first run-in with *Rocky Horror* in the early 1980s, I’m sure that I must have encountered the lips and assorted *Rocky Horror* paraphernalia in a variety of places. However, although I blush to say it, I first saw the movie – or rather, parts of it – during my junior year of high school in 1987 on,

dare I say it, videocassette in the basement of a friend during a party. By 1987 *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* already had been absorbed so completely into American popular culture that even those who hadn't seen the film knew at least a handful of facts about it, most notably that audience participation plays an important role in the *Rocky Horror* experience and, at 17, my friends and I weren't ignorant of this fact. So, as we began to watch the movie, the one member of our group who had seen the film tried to explain the spectator/screen dynamic to us and provided as many examples as she could remember. However, whereas sanctioned communal shout-outs during the context of a cinematic screening may be entertaining, one person shouting at an 18-inch television screen is just annoying and I quickly lost interest in what I found to be, frankly, a movie that became boring after Dr Frank-N-Furter's entrance and Eddie's (Meatloaf) unfortunate exit. While I watched part of the movie, the movie did not 'take place' for me. Borrowing Columbia's (Little Nell) line from 'Rose Tint My World', 'It was great when it all began' but I did not at that point become a 'regular Frankie fan'.<sup>3</sup>

My first experience of actually seeing the film in the theatre finally occurred during my freshman year of college in Philadelphia in 1988. My new peer group – black-garbed theatre aficionados aghast at my lack of *Rocky Horror* experience – took the first opportunity that presented itself to spirit me off to the Roxy on Samson Street for a late-night screening, thereby overcoding the movie with a new set of associations. I remember distinctly being nervous – knowing that I was supposed to dress up but not exactly sure how. I was told I needed to find a watergun, but had trouble locating one in West Philadelphia in mid-November. I remember being crowded into a taxi with what must have been an illegal number of people on a frigid night and emerging in downtown Philadelphia. None of these details is inconsequential. Indeed, the

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'midnight movie' phenomenon owes at least part of its success precisely to its temporal parameters – seeing a movie at 7pm is conventionally regarded as mundane; seeing a movie at midnight, on the other hand, marks one as rebellious and constructs a certain transgressive aura around the film.

My recollection of this particular viewing of the film is significant both for what did and what did not happen. After huddling together in line outside the theatre with those in costume and those in street clothes, we were ushered into the warmth of the theatre sometime around quarter to midnight. I remember that props were available for purchase – white paper bags containing newspaper, toast, rice and a small roll of toilet paper (no squirt guns or flashlights) – and I remember feeling sympathy for whoever had to clean up the theatre the next morning.<sup>4</sup> I remember an announcement strictly forbidding the use of lighters. And I remember conflicting feelings of relief and regret that no 'de-virginising' ceremony took place.

Ironically, what I remember least of all about going to see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* at the theatre is the movie itself. Rather, what stands out in my mind is a sense of bewilderment as I simultaneously attempted to follow the movie, watch the not especially polished shadow cast, listen to and participate in the shout-outs, dance the 'Time Warp' correctly, use my props at the correct moments, and, all the while, pretend that none of this was new to me and that I knew exactly what I was doing. Part of what makes the *Rocky Horror* experience unique is precisely these unusual demands that the event makes upon the spectator. For first-time viewers, making sense of *Rocky Horror* can be rather challenging because poorly-timed shout-outs often obscure dialogue, thereby making it difficult to know exactly what is happening during the film or even to what comments audience interjections relate. Clever shout-outs and appropriate use of props in contrast all communicate one's pop culture capital to other



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viewers as the film itself becomes the master prop used in a performance spectators put on for other spectators. Much of the repetitive viewing of the film, I will argue in chapter two, is connected to the enjoyment derived from demonstrating publicly one's mastery of the cinematic text and the conventions of spectatorship.

Emerging from the movie a little before 2am back out into the frosty Philadelphia night air, I remember feeling tired as my adrenaline high faded, somewhat depressed by the unexpectedly dark ending of the film, damp and generally bemused by the whole experience. So this was *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. I had thrown my rice, toast and toilet paper; danced the 'Time Warp'; insulted Brad, Janet, No-Neck and the rest of them *ad infinitum*; and somewhere in the midst of the chaos, tried to watch the film. The experience had been enjoyable and I was pleased no longer to be a *Rocky Horror* quasi-virgin, but the occasion had hardly been the sort of cohesive, epiphanic communal event promised by my friends or portrayed in *Fame* (1980). Somehow, again, for a second time, *Rocky Horror* did not take place for me.

Since that initial theatrical viewing of the film in 1988, I have continued to accumulate experiences of *Rocky Horror* and to put the film to different uses. As an active nightclub DJ – in an act that cultural theorist Henry Jenkins would refer to as 'textual poaching' – I occasionally appropriate songs from the movie and introduce the 'Time Warp' and 'Hot Patootie' into my sets, usually to the delight of the crowd that enjoys demonstrating its own pop cultural capital by exhibiting (or simulating) knowledge and appreciation of a cinematic text that still retains an aura of transgressiveness. And while the filmic print – the *Rocky Horror* substrate, so to speak – remains stable, each time I see the film, it becomes increasingly sedimented and overcoded with associations that alter its meaning for me.

Which brings us to this book. The latest turn that my personal relationship with *Rocky Horror* has taken is that the film has become an object of critical speculation for me. In my capacity as professor of American literature and culture, I have become increasingly interested in both what cultural texts like *Rocky Horror* mean to viewers and the cultures of which they are a part and the ways in which they become meaningful for different populations. Before turning to that analysis, I'd like to take a moment here to clarify a handful of important assumptions that underlie this study. First, I take *Rocky Horror* seriously – that is, I assume that it merits close and careful consideration. Any social text that commands as sizable a viewership and demonstrates such prolonged staying power as *Rocky Horror* clearly has social import that warrants attention. Second, while I obviously feel that *Rocky Horror* is worth discussing and will endeavour in the rest of this book to convince the reader of the same, this will not be an uncritical celebration of the film. I am interested in how the film is put together and how and why audiences respond in the ways that they do. Taking my own powerful affective attachment to the film as a starting point, I am interested in how meaning is constructed and the conditions under which an object becomes meaningful.<sup>5</sup>

With this in mind, this examination of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* will move fairly freely between four levels of analysis: an 'aesthetic level' highlighting the construction of the text; a 'thematic' level in which meanings are forged; and 'historical' and 'contemporary' levels, the former situating the meaningful text in light of the historical events and circumstances of its production and immediate reception, and the latter situating the film in today's socio-political context. The important point here is that the process of deriving meaning from a cinematic text like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a complicated one. Cinematic texts themselves are inherently

polysemic – characterised by a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities. Socially situated viewers bring to bear their own pre-suppositions, experiences, preferences and viewing practices upon the text in order to realise certain potential meanings and exclude others. In some cases, the interpretation arrived at may be exactly that which the film's producers intended (what Stuart Hall calls the dominant-hegemonic position (1980: 136)); in some cases, viewers may arrive at wholly opposite conclusions (Hall's oppositional position (1980: 138)); in many cases, viewers accept some premises of the text, but question others (Hall's negotiated position (1980: 137)).

This book will explore several key issues that have emerged as central to the discussion of the social, historical and cinematic significance of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Chapter one provides a summary of the film's plot and of its production history, and offers a series of 'micro-histories' embedded in the film – small details of the movie that puncture the illusion of a hermetic seal around the movie and demonstrate the ways in which it is not just a product of its historical moment but is a tapestry composed of different historical threads. In chapter two, I will examine the origins of the *Rocky* cult and its implications for cinematic viewership more generally. In chapter three, I will attend to *Rocky Horror's* representations of sexuality, situate them in relation to 1970s British and American culture and consider what conclusions can be drawn from such depictions. In chapter four, I will consider *Rocky Horror's* relation to cinematic genre. Here, I will assert that what *Rocky Horror's* persistent references to other films accomplishes is a sort of 'queering' of cinematic history that reveals the underlying sexual subtexts of classic Hollywood films and B-movies. The conclusion then will round out the conversation by attending to the broader implications of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the response to it for film studies and cultural criticism.