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Christopher Mohr

Arcadia University, cmohr@arcadia.edu

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Fandom and Cult Cinema: Audience Responses to *Rocky Horror Picture Show*

Chris Mohr

Professor Dwyer

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A few months ago I was invited, along with a group of my friends, to my school's midnight screening of the cult classic, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Having no previous exposure to the film, I was completely taken back from the lavish dress and behaviors of the audience throughout the film. I found myself feeling as if I was transported to a foreign culture, whose customs and norms were so vastly different from my own. Although I did enjoy the film, I still did not understand the spectacular, often campy, behaviors of the audience throughout its screening. What distinguished my reading of the film from that of my peers was the fact that they were "fans" of the film. Though in a basic sense, deriving pleasure from a text- this being the film- could constitute one as a fan, this definition goes much deeper in that in order to distinguish who is and is not needs a greater level of introspection that analyzes audience reception and perception of the film. Therefore, by understanding the elements of fandom, one can begin to understand why this film, and others like it, gather such a niche audience and subsequently, explains their peculiar behavior.

Scholar Lawrence Grossberg's essay "Is There a Fan in the House?" examines the essential characteristics that set the fan apart from mass consumers of specific texts. According to his theory, fans do not simply consume works to derive pleasure- as this is too reductive of an analysis. Rather, they interact with the text in a variety of emotional ways that not only fulfill their need for engagement, but also help define their place within the world. Because of the "active and productive" relationship an audience has with popular texts, audiences must assign meaning to the text that aligns it with their own needs and desires and life and experiences (Grossberg 459). Therefore, a text's meaning is extrinsic to itself as it can only be found in the audience's contextual understandings

and experiences. For the fans of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the film was a gender-bending tour-de-force that shattered all traditional norms of Western gender roles; whereas my reading was simply that of a light-hearted B-movie with a somewhat odd and hard-to-follow plot line. This is not to say that the transsexual and campy atmosphere of the film unnerved me. In fact, I found it quite revolutionary given the time period in which it was made was much more culturally averse to such topics. However, my own life experiences and needs did not make this topic as pertinent to me as it was to other filmgoers.

According to Grossberg, the relationship that brings cultural forms and audiences together is called “sensibility” (460). By producing a “structure of pleasure” for the consumer, sensibilities work as complex phenomena that afford the consumer a proverbial “spiritual rebellion,” in which they can not only produce their own meaning, but also act in response to the text in any way they want. For the fans of this cult film, this includes the dressing as characters of the film, dancing in the aisles, screaming obscenities at the screen when prompted to, etc. In a way, the sensibility the film evokes in its fan base synthesizes a new culture that rejects the customs and norms of that of mass-produced theater culture.

While sensibility is one aspect that helps seek out the fan from the rest of the spectators, it is not the only measure that does so. One can further analyze the behavior and reception practices of the fan by examining his or her affect or mood. According to Grossberg, this is a “feeling of life” that is “a socially constructed domain of cultural effects” (461). In a sense, our relationship to a text transforms as our affective relationship to it changes. One way in which this concept can be distinguished is by

looking at it from both a qualitative and quantitative view. In the latter sense, affect is defined by the variable level of energy fans feel at a particular moment in their lives (461). Therefore, the levels of investment fans have in a text directly correlate with the strength of their “particular experiences, practices, identities, meanings, and pleasures” (461). This is also expressed in their behaviors during the screening. For instance, one of my close friends I accompanied that night had recently encountered a situation in which one of his best friend was a victim of a hate crime due to his transsexual identity. Needless to say this setting was quite an appropriate one to express his revolt against such behavior- he being one of the most energetic and passionate in his dancing and vocalizations during the screening. Furthermore, affect is also measured in a qualitative sense in that the “inflection of the particular investment” is a way that makes the text matter to the viewer.

The last way fans distinguish themselves, Grossberg notes, is by dividing the “cultural world into Us and Them” through the authoritative investment in a variety of apparatuses- spaces in which dominant power relations can be challenged, resisted, evaded, or ignored (462). Fans of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* not only separate themselves from the rest of the cinema going world through their customs at screenings, but also challenge the traditional norms of Western culture in which gender roles are socially enforced through heteronormative dominance. The shock-value of this film is an apparatus of empowerment that uses camp as a way to allow fans to adhere to a new culture that fully rejects this rigidly structured gender-conscious society.

One of the most notable aspects of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*- and cult films in general- is the drastic shift of authorship of the text. Professor Elena Gorfinkel, author of

the essay “Cult Film or Cinephilia by Any Other Name,” notes how cult films allow for the “(re)birth of the audience,” in which meaning is assigned by those who engage with the text rather than by those who made it. As a “spectacle of postcountercultural protest,” cult filmmaking made the performances of the audience during this film that of “repetition and reenactment” that legitimized the authority of audience members as authors of their own text. This, however, was not the only drastic change cult film offered. Furthermore, the authority given to audience members was also a direct protest against the domination of Hollywood capitalists, whose control over the meaning of films allowed for little to no audience participation (Gorfinkel). While audiences of mainstream films were given a formulaic message to read, cult film allowed for fans to create their own meaning- each legitimized as the meaning of it can only be found in the audience members’ responses.

What the case of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*- and all cult films for that matter- shows is that fandom is found solely in the experiences and behaviors of the fan. While we all can appreciate certain texts for their artistic or entertainment value, it is the level of investment given by the fan that defines his or her relationship to the text. Therefore, regardless of our individual opinions about certain texts, we cannot dismiss them as obsolete as their subjectivity simply does not afford such a reductive luxury.

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