READING *ROCKY HORROR*

The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Popular Culture

Edited by
Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock

Reading *Rocky Horror*

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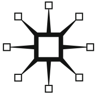

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Introduction

It's Just a Jump to the Left

The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Popular Culture

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock

It's Astounding

Seldom are genres—cinematic, literary, musical, or otherwise—defined by a *single* text. When discussing science fiction, for example, one is hard-pressed to point to a single film and say, "*That's* the one! *That's* the essence of science fiction." One could debate the question, of course—something both film scholars and cinema fans enjoy doing. Sticking with science fiction for a moment, is the definitive film something heady like *2001*? An immense commercial success like *Star Wars* or *Alien*? Perhaps a throwback to times gone by such as (to take just two titles referenced by *Rocky Horror* itself): *The Day the Earth Stood Still* or *Forbidden Planet*? Each film—and certainly many others—likely would find its proponents, and if one put their fans in a room together and let them hash it out, perhaps a consensus would emerge as to which film *is* science fiction in its essence—but I wouldn't bet on it!

Cult film, however, is a different animal. In broaching the topic of "cult," one hastens to acknowledge at the outset that not all critics and theoreticians agree on what exactly makes a cult film a cult film. In attempting to grapple with this question, film critics have lingered reverently over *Casablanca* and *Citizen Kane*, wandered through the landscape of *El Topo*,

shuddered at *Night of the Living Dead*, and self-referentially scrutinized their own guilty pleasures at enjoying John Waters' decided decadence. However, although not all critics agree on what constitutes the nature of the cult film, like Justice Potter Stewart defining pornography, they seem to know it when they see it because there is general agreement that, whatever a cult film is, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is it. *Rocky Horror* is almost universally hailed, as Danny Peary puts it in his book *Cult Movies*, as "The undisputed king . . . no . . . *queen* of the Midnight Movie circuit," and as "the very definition of the term 'cult picture'" (302).[1] Among the most astounding features, then, of *Rocky Horror* is the astonishing fact that a diverse group of scholars and critics *agree* as to its unrivaled status as preeminent cult film—and when was the last time a group of academics and critics agreed on anything?

However, beyond the fact of critical agreement concerning the generic affinities of the movie and its iconic status as cult film, one must also reckon with its unrivaled longevity and commercial popularity. In these respects, *Rocky Horror* is also unique. Completed for approximately $1.5 million and released in September 1975 (where it did well in Los Angeles, but bombed throughout most of the rest of the United States), the film today—over 30 years later—remains a fixture of the Midnight Movie circuit and still draws crowds on a regular basis that come to participate in the *Rocky Horror* experience. In addition to playing weekly in many large cities, college campuses routinely screen the film, and in 2000, Broadway mounted a revival of the stage version of *Rocky Horror* that starred Dick Cavett, Tom Hewitt, Alice Ripley, and rocker Joan Jett and that ran for fifteen months.

Rocky Horror, it must be acknowledged, is the oddest of things: a relatively low-budget gender-bending mish-mash of genres that somehow manages to provoke a response—famously from its audience, which dances, talks back to the film, and acts out the action along with the characters—but also from the critics and from American culture in general. *Rocky Horror* has wormed its way into America's collective unconscious. It's a movie virtually everyone has heard of and from which many can quote or sing songs, even if they haven't seen it. It's a movie that inspired its own newsletter—*The Transylvanian*—and one that is referenced by *other* movies, notably *Fame* (1980), in which the main characters take in a showing. It's an infamous addition to the resumes of Tim Curry, Susan Sarandon, and Barry Bostwick—one that Curry at least has tried his hardest to omit, but that no one will let him forget.[2] Finally, it remains the only movie that inspires its fans to pack an eclectic suitcase full of props (including toilet paper, rice, newspaper, squirt guns, and lighters or flashlights) to take along to each presentation.

For these reasons—the film's iconic cult status and continued prominence in American popular culture—as well as for its general importance to the history of cinema, its subversive position in relation to dominant culture mores, and its generic transgressions, the film that Tim Curry hates to acknowledge demands discussion—indeed, almost begs for analysis—and this collection of essays aims to redress *Rocky Horror*'s neglect by film and cultural critics. Surprisingly, *Rocky Horror* has received only a limited amount of scrutiny from scholars and film critics, who in a handful of isolated articles (and one doctoral dissertation) have focused mainly on the film's status as a cult movie, on its audience, and on its gender politics. These are all important topics that will concern this volume as well, and the authors included here are indebted to the astute observations of J. Hoberman, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Robert Wood, Barry Keith Grant, James Twitchell, Timothy Corrigan, J. P. Telotte, and others. However, given *Rocky Horror*'s unique status in American and British culture, it's time now, over thirty years after the initial release of the film, to consider it more closely and to expand the parameters of the investigation.

Let's Go See the Man Who Began It

Before turning to specific analyses of *Rocky Horror*, some background into the history of the film may be helpful.[3] The brainchild behind *Rocky Horror* was English performer Richard O'Brien (who plays Riff Raff in the movie). Hoberman and Rosenbaum report that O'Brien had already appeared in British productions of *Hair* with future *Rocky Horror* performer Tim Curry and been dismissed from a production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* directed by Jim Sharman (who would direct the *Rocky Horror* movie) when he decided in 1972 to create a rock musical originally entitled *They Came from Denton High* (4). *Denton High* subsequently became *The Rock Horroar Show* and then *The Rocky Horror Show*. O'Brien was able to attract the attention of British producer Michael White, whose extensive list of stage credits included *Oh! Calcutta* and *Sleuth* (Henkins 19), and director Jim Sharman and a stage production of *Rocky Horror* premiered in June 1973 at the Royal Court's experimental Theatre Upstairs—a sixty-three-seat venue in London's Chelsea, where O'Brien had previously played an extraterrestrial in Sam Shepherd's *The Unseen Hand* (Hoberman 6).

The original stage version of *The Rocky Horror Show*, which featured Tim Curry as Dr. Frank-N-Furter, as well as Richard O'Brien himself (Riff Raff), Patricia Quinn (Magenta), and Little Nell (Columbia), proved to be such a hit that it was relocated in London twice in quick succession, first to a converted movie house seating 270 on King's Road, and then to

the five-hundred-seat King's Road Theatre—where it would play for seven years. In 1973, the production was named "best musical" by the *London Evening Standard*, and Curry was singled out for his "Jagger-like performance" (Samuels 128).[4] By 1974, the show was "a genuine London phenomenon" (Hoberman 8) that attracted popular culture luminaries including Mick Jagger himself, as well as David Bowie, Lou Reed, and Tennessee Williams (Samuels 128). Samuels reports that there were even *Rocky Horror* weekend travel packages from Paris to London (129).

Actress Britt Ekland, who saw the London production multiple times, apparently enjoyed the production so much that she convinced her beau, American film and music producer Lou Adler, to accompany her to a performance and he reached an agreement with Michael White to produce an American production at his Los Angeles rock club, The Roxy, less than two days after taking in the performance in October 1973 (Hoberman 6). Adler brought over part of the London cast, including O'Brien, Curry, and Meatloaf (Meatloaf played both Eddie and Dr. Scott in the stage production) and premiered *Rocky Horror* in America at The Roxy on March 21, 1974, where it sold out for nine straight months (Samuels 130). Encouraged by the success of the American stage production, Adler invited Twentieth Century Fox executive Gordon Stulbert—and his children—to see the show, and Stulbert was impressed enough to agree to invest one million dollars on a film version. After a ten-month run at The Roxy, Adler closed the show in early 1975 to allow Curry to return to London to work on the film production. Filming was completed in eight weeks, primarily at Bray Studies—the one-time home of the Hammer horror films—and to a lesser extent at a nineteenth-century château used as a hideout by Charles de Gaulle during World War II (Hoberman 9; Samuels 131). For the film version, Meatloaf retained the role of Eddie, and Jonathan Adams, who had played the role of the Narrator in the original London cast, assumed the role of Dr. Scott. Charles Gray, famous for playing the evil Blofeld in the James Bond film *Diamonds Are Forever*, was added as the Narrator and, most notably, two Americans—Barry Bostwick, who had played the part of Danny Zuko in *Grease* on Broadway for two years, and actress Susan Sarandon—were added as Brad and Janet. Adler's plan was to bring the stage show to Broadway before the release of the film version. It was anticipated that the Broadway production would be as big a hit as *Grease* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* and therefore would serve as a major publicity vehicle for the film (Samuels 131). As soon as Curry and O'Brien had completed filming in London, they were brought to New York to work on the stage production, which was mounted at the Belasco Theater. For the Broadway production, the theater's usual orchestra seating was removed, and the space was reconfigured with 120 café tables.

The Rocky Horror Show opened on Broadway on March 10, 1975, and was an unmitigated critical and popular disaster. Reviews were savage (Rex Reed called it "trash" [Samuels 132]), the play was hissed and booed, and it lost four thousand dollars. The play ran for fifty performances before closing, and Twentieth Century Fox executives became nervous about the impending film release (Samuels 132).[5] Anxious executives were not soothed when the film version of *Rocky Horror*, entitled *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, previewed to poor response in Santa Barbara, California, in July 1975. The film was released on September 26, 1975, in Los Angeles and seven other American cities. In Los Angeles, it drew capacity crowds to the United Artists Westwood Theater; however, its performance elsewhere was dismal. The film grossed less than $400,000 in its first three weeks (Samuels 133) and was withdrawn by Fox before its planned New York City Halloween opening. In considering the Los Angeles success of the film and its dreadful performance elsewhere, Lou Adler and Tim Deegan, the publicist assigned by Fox to the film, discovered that many of the Los Angeles fans of the film were seeing it *repeatedly*. In consultation with Bill Quigley, a young publicist who worked for the New York–based Walter Reade theater chain, Deegan considered new ways to promote the film and was persuaded by Quigley to open *Rocky Horror* as a Midnight Movie at New York's Waverly Theater in Greenwich Village. *Rocky Horror* premiered at the Waverly at midnight on April Fool's Day (although technically, because it was midnight, it was April 2) in 1976, where it ran for a record-setting ninety-five weeks.[6] During this time, it opened as a Midnight Movie elsewhere, including Austin, Philadelphia, Toronto, Boston, and Tulsa. By the middle of 1978, *Rocky Horror* was playing at midnight on Fridays and Saturdays at over fifty locations around the United States (Samuels 134), and by end of the 1970s, Fox had two hundred prints of the film in constant circulation. The film reportedly grossed over $5 million a year (Hoberman 13). According to Samuels, "RHPS became the first motion picture to become a twice-weekly national institution. It spawned fan clubs, paraphernalia, posters, bumper stickers, record albums, videocassettes, pins, magazines, conventions, birthday parties, look-alike contests. A fan club for the film! The record album sold over one million copies. The RHPS phenomenon was born" (137).

Madness Takes Control

What makes *Rocky Horror* unique is the participatory nature of the audience response. As opposed to conventional viewing practices in which audience members sit quietly and absorb the presentation, attendees at

Rocky Horror shout remarks at the screen, dance along with the characters in the film, and vicariously participate in the onscreen action through the use of props—for instance (as all *Rocky* aficionados know), when it rains in the film, audience members shoot squirt guns in the air. Famously, many showings of *Rocky Horror* feature a simultaneous live performance referred to as the floor show or shadow cast, in which actors dressed as the film's characters lip sync the lines and mimic the motions of the onscreen characters. The film is, in Danny Peary's assessment, "the ultimate audience participation film" (302), and Wood has gone so far as to assert that the behavior of the *Rocky Horror* audience has "arguably altered the norms of behavior of a whole generation of filmgoers" (157). The origins of these practices are difficult to pin down and, among *Rocky Horror* devotees, are the stuff of legend. Although Henkin contends that "No one knows for certain how talking to the screen developed" and suggests that the practice may have started in several different places independently (102), Hoberman and Rosenbaum trace the convention of talking back to the screen back to Labor Day weekend in 1976, when five months into the *Rocky Horror* run at the Waverly in Greenwich Village, New York, schoolteacher Louis Farese, Jr., "felt compelled to talk back to the movie," and his quips were picked up by other *Rocky Horror* aficionados (176).[7]

Hoberman and Rosenbaum also locate the phenomenon of audience members dressing up as film characters as originating at the Waverly in 1976. They write that, independent of Farese's retorts, masqueraders taking great pains to duplicate the appearances of the film's characters began to show up a few weeks after the talking-back phenomenon began. This practice lead to a special Halloween costume party showing of the film at which fans got out of their seats, mimicked the on-screen action, and lip-synched the lines (177). This form of audience participation developed into the *Rocky Horror* floor show. These initial violations of conventional viewing practices seem to have liberated *Rocky Horror* fans, stimulating them to dream up "ingenious stunts involving diverse props that they would unexpectedly spring on fellow cult members during the movie" (Hoberman 179). Hoberman and Rosenbaum write, "The lineage was almost biblical, the way that rice begat candles begat water pistols begat newspapers, cards, and hot dogs aplenty" (181).[8] What this suggests is that part of the initial cult phenomenon of the film was the unusual—if not unique—opportunity it allowed for creative expression on the part of the audience, as well as the sense of community that developed out of not just the shared viewing experiences of audience members but their participation in the development of what film theorists J. P. Telotte and Barry Keith Grant have discussed as "supertext"—the combination of a film's text and reception and the "industrial practices" surrounding the film.[9] Audience members had

the opportunity not just to absorb or even participate with the on-screen action but actually to originate new conventions of spectatorship.

Shivering with Antici . . . pation

Given *Rocky Horror*'s unique place in cinematic history, a volume such as this one is long overdue. Essays included here have been organized into three sections that attend to what have emerged as the three most important topics for consideration of *Rocky Horror*: the film's appropriation and manipulation of various generic conventions, the "cultic" nature of the film and the viewership practices of its fans, and the film's representations of gender and sexuality. The first section of *Reading Rocky Horror* on genre groups together essays that situate *Rocky Horror* within the broader contexts of musical, theatrical, and cinematic genres, thus highlighting the ways in which *Rocky Horror* was a product of its historical moment that developed out of and manipulated the conventions of established forms and traditions. Sue Matheson, in "'Drinking Those Moments When': The Use (and Abuse) of Late-Night Double Feature Science Fiction and Hollywood Icons in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*," carefully scrutinizes the ways in which *Rocky Horror* incorporates, appropriates, and cannibalizes elements of the cinematic science fiction tradition. *Rocky Horror*, in Matheson's assessment, is an invasion film indebted to 1950s science fiction. However, instead of expelling the alien threat at the end and reestablishing the social order, Matheson proposes that what *Rocky Horror* reveals is that "we are what we fear most."

Julian Cornell, in "*Rocky Horror* Glam Rock," rather than exploring *Rocky Horror*'s cinematic appropriations, attends to the film's musical indebtedness. Cornell situates the influence of glam rock on *Rocky Horror* within the broader context of the 1970s camp and pop aesthetics to which this musical style owes a significant debt, with the intention of demonstrating how the film is more than just a parody, a pastiche, or an instance of cult spectatorship—instead being a "polysemic text that reflexively addresses the issue of desire in mass culture."

In the same way that Matheson examines *Rocky Horror* in light of how it draws on and manipulates the cinematic science fiction tradition, and Cornell situates *Rocky Horror* within the context of 1970s glam rock and camp, Sarah Artt, in "Reflections on the Self-Reflexive Musical: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the Classic Hollywood Musical," explores the ways in which the film both borrows and self-consciously departs from the conventions of the standard Hollywood musical. In Artt's assessment, *Rocky Horror* uses a conventional format to tell an unconventional story and

thereby paved the way for more recent unconventional cinematic musicals, including *Chicago* and *Moulin Rouge*.

In section two, which focuses on the *Rocky* cult, the attention of contributors shifts from looking at the film in its historical context to focusing on what makes the *Rocky Horror* experience unique—the reactions of the film's audience. These observations are important not just for understanding *Rocky Horror* but for film studies more generally.[10] Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, in "Heavy, Black, and Pendulous: Unsuturing *Rocky Horror*," explores how *Rocky Horror* viewership practices are antithetical to conventional psychological film criticism predicated on spectatorial identification. For Weinstock, what *Rocky Horror* audience response demonstrates is a fetishization of interruption, rather than "suture." In the quest for mastery of the filmic text, *Rocky Horror* fans quite consciously break the diegetic flow, foregrounding both its rigidity and the failure of dialogue. Weinstock argues that evident in the playful, loving mockery of the film exhibited by fans is a more general but inevitably frustrated desire to *be* the movie. This failure to be the movie in turn stimulates a sadistic desire to master or control the film.

Heather C. Levy and Matthew A. Levy, in their "Mocking the Mirror: Film Spectatorship as Hyperreal Simulation," similarly assert that audience behavior during *Rocky Horror* calls into question psychoanalytic theories of viewership predicated on spectatorial "(mis)recognition." In place of this, Levy and Levy propose a new theory of viewership developed out of French postmodernist Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and description of the "postmodern hyperreal." The Levys conclude that what audience reaction to *Rocky Horror* demonstrates is the need for a psychosocial model that emphasizes the active nature of spectatorship—a model that they feel Baudrillard's theory of hyperreal simulation provides.

In "Wild and Untamed Thing: The Exotic, Erotic, and Neurotic *Rocky Horror* Performance Cult," Michael M. Chemers approaches the *Rocky Horror* cult by exploring the ways in which the film's eroticism generates audience response. Chemers here is attending to that most difficult of questions: Why *Rocky Horror*? What is it about *this* film that impels the audience to violate conventional viewing practices and provokes such allegiance? Chemers's answer is both simple and elegant: the "sincerity of its lust." However, in keeping with Kevin Bozelka's meditations in the sexuality section on the ease with which capitalism can absorb queer energies, this sincerity of erotic transgression is always on the verge of going out of existence, of being compromised by market forces. For Chemers, it is the "fragility" of the film's sincerity that galvanizes its adherents to rally around the film and preserve it for themselves.

Also preparing us for the analyses of *Rocky Horror*'s representations of queer sexuality introduced in the third section, Nicole Seymour in her contribution "'What We Are Watching' Does Not Present 'Us with a Struggle': *Rocky Horror*, Queer Viewers, and the Alternative Cinematic Spectacle," situates the *Rocky Horror* viewing event as a queer experience that allows for and encourages what she characterizes as "radical viewing." According to Seymour, viewing practices developed by *Rocky Horror* fans "suggest productive ways for queer and marginalized viewers to approach and read the average, mainstream film text" and "indicate that film-going need not always be a passive, rote experience, nor a solely analytical one devoid of personal enjoyment." Adopting an anthropological approach to fan response, Liz Locke, in her "'Don't Dream It, Be It': Cultural Performance and Communitas at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*," turns to the work of anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner on liminality, communitas, and "interperformance" to explain the unique group dynamic that characterizes the *Rocky Horror* audience reaction. What *Rocky Horror* allows, according to Locke, is for a collectively experienced "sense of liminality" during which conventional subject positions can be briefly shed, producing a sense of liberatory exuberance. Rounding out the viewership practices section, in "The Cult and Its Virgin Sacrifice: Rites of Defloration in and at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*," Kristina Watkins-Mormino situates the *Rocky* cult and its behavior within the broader social context of contemporary understandings of virginity. With interesting connections to Locke's analysis of liminality and *Rocky Horror* viewership, Watkins-Mormino makes the fascinating observation that perhaps the only widespread communal observance of the loss of virginity in America takes place at midnight screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* at which first-time viewers—"virgins"—are identified and subjected to certain rituals of initiation. Using this observation as the basis for her analysis, she scrutinizes the social understandings and implications of virginity that the film and its audience construct.

The third section of *Reading Rocky Horror* introduces essays that attend to *Rocky Horror*'s sexual politics. Leading off this section, Ben Hixon emphasizes the subversive potential of *Rocky Horror* in his "In Search of the Authentic Queer Epiphany: Normativity and Representations of the Queer Disabled Body in *Rocky Horror*." Here Hixon explores the film in terms of the ways in which its representations of disabled bodies subverts both heteronormative expectations and conventional attitudes toward corporal difference. Hixon maintains that although the film does manifest a tendency toward solidifying social norms, this conservative inclination is unable to offset the radical potential offered by its subversion of conventional mores

and therefore offers a potentially liberating message and transformative experience for the viewer.

Taking as his starting point Judith Butler's meditations on gender performativity and Michel Foucault's analysis of the production of sexed bodies, Zachery Lamm complicates Hixon's analysis with "The Queer Pedagogy of Dr. Frank-N-Furter." In his contribution, Lamm considers the radical implications of *Rocky Horror*'s subversive approach to gender and sexual preference. Important for Lamm, *Rocky Horror* is in fact a film concerned with pedagogy—with teaching—and Curry's Dr. Frank-N-Furter occupies the privileged role in this respect as instructor offering courses in both queer science and queer sexuality. At the end of the movie, not only Brad and Janet but also the audience graduate from Frank's queer classroom and emerge with an understanding of alternative sexual possibilities.

Reading Rocky Horror contributors Thomas G. Endres and Kevin John Bozelka are both far less sanguine concerning the radical potential of *Rocky Horror*'s representations of gender expectations and sexual orientation. In "'Be Just and Fear Not': Warring Visions of Righteous Decadence and Pragmatic Justice in *Rocky Horror*," Endres introduces symbolic convergence theory as a methodological tool to analyze the competing progressive and conservative messages communicated by *Rocky Horror*. As Endres explains, symbolic convergence theory provides a coherent and useful theoretical model for thematic analysis—one that leads him to conclude that the film ultimately forecloses the radical possibilities for social reorganization it seems to offer and instead reifies the status quo. In "'Your Lifestyle's Too Extreme': *Rocky Horror*, *Shock Treatment*, and Late Capitalism," Bozelka counters the critical emphasis on the film's "Dionysian" excesses and its celebration of counterhegemonic sexual practices by asserting that the film offers a critique of the "polymorphously perverse sexual politics of the counterculture," a critique that Bozelka reads as articulating a historically situated brand of 1970s cynicism. In opposition to those who focus on *Rocky Horror*'s subversive potential, Bozelka asserts that what *Rocky Horror*—and its less successful sequel, *Shock Treatment*—dramatize is the ease with which capitalism can absorb and co-opt the radical potential of counterhegemonic identity formations.

Taken together, the essays collected here offer the long overdue concerted attention to and analysis of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* that the film, as one of the most important phenomena of twentieth-century cinema, deserves. Although they focus on what have emerged as the main issues in relation to the film, clearly other approaches are possible, and it is my hope that this volume will lay the groundwork for future such analyses. With that said, I would like, if I may, to take you on a strange journey . . .

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Notes

1. This assessment is echoed by Wood, who characterizes *Rocky Horror* as "a paradigmatic cult film" (156); Kilgore, who asserts that the film has "risen to a position of preeminence among America's 'cult films'" (151); Samuels, who writes that *Rocky Horror* is "the king of the midnight cult films" (126); and Kinkade and Katovich, who contend that "Perhaps among all 'cult films,' *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is the definitive exemplar" (198).
2. For example, in advertising a 2005 interview with Curry that aired on National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* program, the *Rocky Horror* song "Sweet Transvestite" was played and Curry was identified as "the star of *Rocky Horror* and other films."
3. A very thorough overview of *Rocky Horror*'s history is offered in Hoberman and Rosenbaum's excellent *Midnight Movies*. Helpful background is also provided in both Samuels and Henkin, and a rather muddled but at times entertaining discussion of the history of *Rocky Horror* is available in Michaels and Evans.
4. One of the most interesting features of the critical literature on *Rocky Horror* is the heights of rhetorical exuberance to which critics soar in attempting to characterize Curry's performance. For example, according to Michaels and Evans, Curry is a "*cross* between a megalomaniac boarding-school matron and a deranged circus ringmaster" (167); Prouty describes him as "half Auntie Mame, half Bela Lugosi, a hybrid Sophie Tucker and Mick Jagger, a cross between Greer Garson and Steve Reeves, and part David Bowie, part Joan Crawford, part Basil Rathbone" (qtd. in Minor 86); for Robbins and Myrick, he is "the spectacle of Dracula and Mae West" (5); for Kilgore, Frank is Pygmalion, Narcissus, and Percy Shelley "rolled into one" (156); Hoberman and Rosenbaum characterize Curry's Frank as an amalgam of Elvis Presley, Mick Jagger, and David Bowie (177–78).
5. In his history of *Rocky Horror*, Samuels considers reasons for the complete failure of the New York City stage production. In his estimation, the cabaret-style seating arrangement was primarily at fault because it prevented audience members from sharing the "make-believe world of RHS." In addition, the cabaret arrangement was at odds with the "flashy, expensive, . . . overstaged" musical parody (132). Lou Adler reflects succinctly that New York "thought it was too L.A." (Hoberman 12).

6. Hoberman and Rosenbaum report that the promotional budget for the film's opening at the Waverly was four hundred dollars—"somewhere between one five-thousandth and one fifty-thousandth the amount customarily spent on a New York opening" (13).
7. Hoberman and Rosenbaum provide the detail that Farese's first *bon mot* was in response to Janet's shielding herself to the rain with a newspaper on the way to the Frank-N-Furter castle: "Buy an umbrella, you cheap bitch!" (176) and state that "Whenever the repartee went over well, it would be repeated the following Friday or Saturday [and] become absorbed within the general text" (176).
8. Hoberman and Rosenbaum provide an excellent overview of the development of the *Rocky Horror* cult, as well as its regional variations (see especially 176–88).
9. See Grant, "Second Thoughts," and Telotte.
10. The bulk of the surprisingly minimal academic attention paid to *Rocky Horror* has focused on the "cultic" nature of the film and its audience, as film theorists and critics alike have sought to analyze audience reactions and to isolate just what it is in the film that elicits such fervent audience response. For analyses of *Rocky Horror* as cult film, see Austin, Corrigan, Day, Grant, Hoberman and Rosenbaum, Kawin, Kinkade, Minor, Siegel, and Wood.

Part I

Rocky Horror and Genre

1

"Drinking Those Moments When"

The Use (and Abuse) of Late-Night Double Feature Science Fiction and Hollywood Icons in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

Sue Matheson

As Phillip Strick in *Science Fiction Movies* notes, science fiction invasion films found at the late-night double feature in the 1950s and '60s showcased things noticeably absent in the everyday lives of suburban teenage boys. The formula of these movies is simple: As any teenage boy would have known, "the aliens (or you could call them foreigners) are after our women and control of the world, whichever comes first. It would be unpatriotic to imagine otherwise" (Strick 9). Not only emblematic of problems faced by Americans during World War II, these aliens also functioned as metaphors of the "social ills" that American servicemen faced on returning home: among the lumbering, tentacled monsters signifying the calamities of fascism and communism, one also finds manifestations of the American family man's concerns with gender hierarchy and social status resulting from women reluctant to leave the workplace, as well as the rock and roll youth culture. In part, these movies—among them *Red Planet Mars* (1952), *She Devil* (1957), *The Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958), *The Wild Women of*

Wongo (1959), *Teenage Monster* (1958), *Teenage Zombies* (1960), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), *Gigantis the Fire Monster* (1959), *The Leech Woman* (1960), and *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957)—showcased the state of anxiety in which average Americans were functioning throughout this period.[1] Underlying the political fear mongering, xenophobia, and gynophobia found in such movies, one finds the recurring nightmare of natural forces running amok as a result of scientific tinkering. Since the detonation of the A-bomb, the old problem of scientific megalomania, strongly voiced in the nineteenth century by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, was understandably an overriding preoccupation for Americans in the 1950s. As Americans, and the rest of the world, grappled with the implications of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, movies like *Invasion of the Hell Creatures* (1957), in which "little green Martians with needle-like nails" inject alcohol into their victims, and *Invasion of the Star Creatures* (1962), during which the Earth is attacked by "strapping wenches armed with monster vegetables," offered their audiences reassurance that in the end, Middle American norms and forms—in particular, patriarchy and reason—could be restored to a world temporarily gone insane (Strick 10).

Accordingly, visitors from other planets in late night science fiction movies were diametrically opposed to the crewcut heroism of the Atomic Age: Exotic, flamboyant, and often leaking unpleasant bodily fluids, examples of these extraterrestrials include a fifty-foot woman squeezing her cheating husband to death and a poison-dripping, tentacle-lashing triffid chasing Janette Scott. In 1975, however, visitors from outer space even more outrageous than their predecessors appeared in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. These aliens challenged not only the prowess of the patriotic American male but also the puritanical social codes of Middle America: Richard O'Brien's Transylvanians wanted our men as well as our women.

An updated version of the midnight double feature, *Rocky Horror* parodies the science fiction genre established in the 1930s by movies like *Dr. X* (1932), *The Invisible Man* (1933), *King Kong* (1933), and *Flash Gordon* (1936). At the beginning of this movie, a pair of disembodied lips (known as Lips or the Usherette), floating in the vacuum of outer space, carefully prepares its viewers' expectations by reminding the audience that *Rocky Horror* follows directly in the footsteps of the following late night classics: *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *It Came From Outer Space* (1953), *Forbidden Planet* (1956), *Tarantula* (1955), *The Day of the Triffids* (1963), *Curse of the Demon* (1957), and *When Worlds Collide* (1951). For members of the audience who are not familiar with this genre—at times an uneasy blend of Gothic sensibility and hard science—Lips outlines its standard elements. Designed for the teenage imagination, the message from outer space contained in such pictures runs accordingly: A mad scientist—a

Dr. X—will "build a creature," and there will be "androids fighting." The viewer should expect to "get hot" when the alien monster is finally killed, and "some terrible thrills" will happen throughout the movie. True to this rather rudimentary formula, *Rocky Horror*'s Dr. Frank-N-Furter does build a creature, and Brad and Janet, who become like androids after experiencing the medusa ray, engage in a series of lovers' spats. By the time Riff Raff kills Frank-N-Furter, the latter draped across Rocky, who is climbing an unmistakably phallic RKO radio tower, the audience should be "hot," having witnessed two seductions and an orgy. In addition, there certainly are some terrible thrills—among them, Eddie the ex–delivery boy's untimely and bloody demise as he is ice picked to death, Riff Raff's dripping candelabra torture of the hapless Rocky, and Eddie's return as a mutilated corpse beneath Frank-N-Furter's dinner table.

To date, *Rocky Horror* has elicited a number of thoughtful examinations regarding its treatment of gender—its excessiveness, its celebration of transgressive sexuality, its playful treatment of Freudian dynamics, and its Gothic preoccupations.[2] Little critical attention, however, has been given to this film as a science fiction movie parody. It is the purpose of this chapter to do so, but oddly enough, to begin such an inquiry, it is necessary first to consider the significance of the past rather than the future—that is, Richard Nixon's resignation speech, which marks the beginning of Brad and Janet's farewell to American norms and forms.

Nixon's speech, which actually aired on the evening of August 8, 1974, has two functions at the beginning of *Rocky Horror*. First, because the "normal" young couple's adventure takes place not in August but during a dark November evening, Nixon's resignation suggests to viewers that Brad and Janet are in a time warp. Second, and arguably more important, Tricky Dick's assertion while quitting that he has "never been a quitter" points the viewer toward the movie's unrelenting deconstruction of Americana via elements of the science fiction movie. The significance of this Cold War Republican president's resignation lies in Nixon's strong identification with conservative, middle-class Americans. Many moviegoers in 1975 would have been initiated into their culture by way of the conservative, often paranoid, and generally politically reactionary medium of 1950s matinees and drive-in double features—arguably, the late-night double feature drive-in was the place where many of Nixon's middle-class voters, who later supported their government's policies in Vietnam, found their parents' social and religious attitudes reinforced.

In *Rocky Horror*, one finds Brad and Janet, leftovers from the '50s, beginning their night out in a mid-1970s version of a Woody Wagon listening to Nixon resign. Embodiments of Middle America, Brad and Janet are modern versions of the American Gothics found on Denton's Episcopalian