

Review:

**Weinstock, Jeffrey: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.
London: Wallflower Press (2007) Cultographies: Series
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Abstract

The Rocky Horror Picture Show, the first volume in the *Cultographies* series from Wallflower Press, is a short, punchy book which outlines the transformation of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* from an 'oddball musical' to a 'celebrated cinematic experience'. The book aims to analyse the film on four separate levels: the *aesthetic* level, highlighting the construction of the text; the *thematic* level, focusing on how meanings are formed; the *historical* level, situating the text in the historic circumstances of its production and immediate reception; and finally on a *contemporary* level, looking at the film in the current socio-economic context.

Originally a stage play written by Richard O'Brien, *The Rocky Horror Show* debuted at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London in 1973. The film version *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was released two years later and the following year started to show at late night screenings in the States. Within months, the film became an event with audiences actively participating in the experience, firstly by shouting back at the screen and throwing missiles at random. This gradually developed into a more structured 'scripted' response replete with props, the audience dressed in costume and a dedicated fan base.

The strength of Weinstock's book lies in the sheer detail of his research into the filmic text. The book is packed full of detail about the film's history, the transformation from stage production to film and the text itself, including what Weinstein refers to as 'micro-histories' (the Nixon speech, Frank's tattoos, the pink triangle on Frank's hospital scrubs, and Eddie's leather jacket), which are analysed in depth. The textual analysis is thorough and well researched, but the flirtation with an anti-semiotic reading of the film is left undeveloped, which

I found frustrating. There are excellent inter textual connections made, intricately unpicking the myriad references made in the film to the B movie, the horror film, science fiction and the musical. It is argued that the film effectively 'queered' cinema: "It is not just 'the movies', but the movies in drag, demonstrating the ways in which gender is always itself a type of performance." (p82)

The history and the nature of the audience participation are also well covered: with suggestions as to how the initial creative responses to the film unfolded into a much more ossified secondary script which Weinstock claims effectively 'debases' the original primary script. He advances the idea that most of the fan behaviour is ironic, but the irony can only be in relation to the primary *text*. But for this reader, the book would have benefited from a discussion about the irony, or lack of it, in relation to the *event*. There is an interesting debate about the fans/audience having a sense of belonging, which it is suggested is not a simple sense of community, but rather a hierarchy based on knowledge of the primary text. There is also a mention of some of the other media products related to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, particularly the famous 'lip' poster of the film and the meaning(s) attached to the 'partial object'. Weinstock's discussion would have benefited from more analysis of the various websites that have emerged in support of the film, particularly those sites which give instructions on the secondary script: how to behave as a member of the audience. Although Weinstock draws attention to the ways the secondary script is 'conformist' and 'regressive', some exploration of the possible variations in that script, drawn from research into actual audience members, would have been fascinating.

Three 'categories' of spectator are identified; the *regulars*, the oxymoronic sounding *occasional cultist*, and the *virgin*. Defining audiences solely in terms of the regularity of their attendance is overly simplistic and there has been no attempt to research actual audiences, or the reasons why some people will move from *virgin* to *regular*, whilst most do not. The theoretical positioning of the book is somewhat ambiguous. There is a claim to polysemy and a reference to Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model with a dominant, oppositional and negotiated reading potential(1.) This is, however, never really utilised in the discussion apart from a personal (and very interesting) history of the author's relationship to the film and the way meanings have shifted for him over time. The overall stance of the book is Lacanian, although this is never made explicit in the main text. Thus, in spite of the author conceding that textual interpretation may well have a personal/social component the reader is given an expectation of a multi-accentual analysis which is never realised. Ultimately, the reasons for repeated viewing and participation in the film screening appear to boil down to a choice of two basic motivations: the desire by the members of the audience to either 'be the film' or to control the film. Whilst not denying that for some participants these psychoanalytical explanations may well hold true, halting the analysis at this level is an abstraction too far. The

most glaring omission in the book is the total lack of engagement with the use fetishists make of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* screening. By privileging the text over the event, the book overlooks the possibility that some members of the audience may see it as a rare safe space in which to 'free-dress' and behave in an exhibitionist manner. Whether this is a progressive space or not is a reflection of the text itself. As Baudrillard argued,

“What superficially appears to be an incident that may undermine the credibility of the ... system, becomes a pseudo-event that reinforces the system by providing the false impression that such moral lapses are the exception rather than the rule.” (1983: 2)

Overall the book is a good introduction to the textual meaning and the socio-historical context of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. It is concise, well written and well researched. What it fails to do is see beyond the text to the event. There is no engagement with the people who make *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* more than just a film and they are surely the people who can supply fresh insight into what drives the desire to see (and perform) it over and over again.

References

Hall, Stuart (1980) 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse' in Stuart Hall (ed.) *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Hutchinson 128-38

Baudrillard, J. (1983) *Simulations*. New York: Semiotexte

Biographical Note

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