ABSTRACT
This article examines the continuing reach and influence of The Rocky Horror Picture Show (Sharman 1975) on cult film and popular culture. The Rocky Horror Picture Show has proven itself to be a unique example within cinema history for its longstanding appeal. Traditionally described as a cult film, the influence of The Rocky Horror Picture Show has shaped popular culture from its release in 1975 until the present with periodic stage show revivals and anniversary edition DVD releases. Recent programs such as Glee (Murphy 2010) and The Perks of Being a Wallflower (Chbosky 2012) have again brought The Rocky Horror Picture Show back into popular public consciousness. The performative aspects of The Rocky Horror Picture Show recall the idea of ‘cinematic spectacle’. Seymour (2008) suggests that this element of performance empowers marginalized audiences and thus explains the film’s devoted following amongst queer audiences. This article will therefore consider the ongoing fascination with The Rocky Horror Picture Show not only within the context of cult film and popular culture, but also as a product of marginalized fan cultures. Screenings of this film have established standards for organizing cult film events as well as ritualized audience participation. In turn, the established fan cultures that surround The Rocky Horror Picture Show heavily influence the reception of new texts such as Glee and The Perks of Being a Wallflower that utilize the original. Drawing on these findings, this article contextualizes fandom of The Rocky Horror Picture Show within a broader history of the changing perceptions of fans.
Millions of devoted fans worldwide. Theatrical screenings spanning 39 years. Regular stage revivals around the globe. Without question, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman 1975) has earned its place as: ‘… the quintessential cult film’ (McCarthy 2003: 150). In light of this assertion, Weinstock (2007: 32) believes: ‘What may in fact be most remarkable about *Rocky Horror* is the observation that both academics and laypeople seem to agree that it is [as Peary, 1980 states] the “… very definition of the term cult”.

The case study of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is indicative of organized fandom within cult film audiences, yet it is distinctive in terms of its reach and influence on popular culture. This article analyses how cult film screenings such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* have established standards for organizing cult film events and ritualized audience participation. In addition to frequent theatre revivals and anniversary edition DVD releases, recent programs such as *Glee* (2009) and films such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky 2012) have once again brought *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* back into wider popular consciousness. These popular articulations of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* highlight the conflict inherent in appropriating a text with a long history of significance to queer audiences in terms of ownership and identity.

The historical reception of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is inextricably linked with perceptions of audiences and fandom. The publication of *Textual Poachers* by Henry Jenkins in 1992 represented a turning point in how fandom is understood. In opposition to previously held stereotypes of the ‘crazed fan’, Jenkins suggests that ‘[f]andom functions as an alternative social community. … Yet fandom also provides a space within which fans may articulate their specific concerns’ (1992: 280-3). While Jenkins’ work has successfully displaced the pejorative images of fans as dysfunctional loners, to some extent this depiction is still upheld to differentiate cult film fans from other fans. In terms of cult film fandom, Telotte acknowledges that:

… there is indeed something strange, even beyond reason in the relation between the cult film in its various manifestations and its nearly worshipful audience. In that movement beyond reason, the cultist embraces a comfortable difference … cultists might well be said to love such differences, for to them they suggest something unusual, noteworthy and valuable not just about the movies, but about their own characters as well … (original emphasis, 1991: 5-6)

One could surmise from Telotte’s characterization that cult film fans actually welcome the negative discourses that surround their fandom, as by embracing this identity, cult film
fans mark themselves as belonging to a separate, and in their view superior, taste culture. In this way, the emergence of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a cult film showcases the strong and passionate nature of fans’ commitment to their text of choice, and their desire to connect with other fans sharing this passion. Seymour notes that, ‘[c]oming from a disenfranchised and under represented vantage point, the queer viewer may be particularly inclined toward, or even well-versed in, this kind of cultural reinterpretation’ (2008: 126). By participating in the cinematic spectacle of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the community that developed around the text, queer viewers have a ‘… unique and public opportunity to write their personal experience into a film that may have otherwise lacked familiar representations’ (Seymour 2008: 126). These discussions of marginalized fan groups begin to explain how queer fans of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* have received popular culture interpretations of the film which have deviated from the intent of the original.

The evolution of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* from flop to crowd darling is significant because it illustrates the devoted nature of fans worldwide and the lengths to which they will go in order to promote their favoured cult texts. Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1983) offer a detailed account of the emergence of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a cult film favourite, with a focus on the activities of those fans in New York who were instrumental in initiating audience interaction with the film. This interaction remains one of the primary attractions of the film as an event today – no matter where in the world it is screened.

In his oft cited article ‘Portrait of a Cult Film Audience: The Rocky Horror Picture Show’, Austin (1981: 46) notes that ‘[d]uring the preparation and early marketing of *Rocky Horror* in 1975, the word “cult” reportedly never came up’. However, publicist Tim Deegan, who had been assigned to promote the film, observed a strange pattern emerging in relation to the film; although few people were going to see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, those who did expressed extreme enthusiasm and were coming back again and again. Despite the enthusiasm with which the film was received in Los Angeles, the film received scant attention elsewhere, and after complaints about lack of attendance nationwide, Fox removed the film from theatres (Sullivan, 2013, 189). Recognizing the tendency for a small but committed audience to attend *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* screenings repeatedly, Deegan decided that it should be trialled as a ‘midnight movie’ to try to build a fan base. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* opened at midnight at the Waverly Theatre in Greenwich Village, New York on April 1, 1976 where it would run continuously until early 1978, setting a house record of 95 weeks (Weinstock, 2007: 19).
The Rocky Horror Picture Show screenings at the Waverly were a beacon for marginalized viewers – Michaels and Evans (2002: 9) observed that screenings were frequented by ‘…gays, students and punks’. Reflecting on the composition of the audience, Seymour states that attendance had:

…less to do with Rocky Horror’s specifically homosexual content than with the radical ‘viewing/survival’ strategies that viewers typically deploy during the movies screenings. These strategies developed out of and continue to speak to the outsider status of the audience members… [T]hese strategies also suggest productive ways for queer and marginalized viewers to approach and read the average, mainstream film text; the innovation, creativity, and spontaneity they exemplify indicate that film going need not always be a passive, rote experience, nor a solely analytical one devoid of personal enjoyment. (2008: 125)

For Seymour, the most visible example of these ‘viewing/survival’ strategies is the ritualization of the counterpoint, or audience ‘call-back’ dialogue, which remains a central part of screenings. Audience members also began to attend screenings in costume in addition to performing the text under the screen as a ‘shadow’ or ‘floor show’ cast. The camp aesthetic of The Rocky Horror Picture Show established in its theatrical incarnation is immediately identifiable in the continued performance of dressing in costume and wielding props at screenings. The diversification of props used in tandem with the film (such as ringing bells, throwing rice and wearing newspapers over heads) as well as the routine of welcoming of ‘virgins’ and informing them of the ‘rules’ can also be traced back to the initial audience at the Waverly (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1981).

New York was not the only centre of The Rocky Horror Picture Show cult in the 1970s, although it may have been the most organized. Midnight screenings of the film were attracting an increasing number of fans in most major cities across the United States, including Austin, Philadelphia and Boston (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1983: 13). In 1978, attention surrounding the film began to reach new heights. The national weekly magazine Newsweek (Foote 1978) published a short piece about the phenomenon of The Rocky Horror Picture Show experience, and two conventions with almost all of the lead actors had been held in Long Island, New York in 1977 and 1978 (The Rocky Horror Picture Show Official Fan Site 2009).

In addition to national publicity provided by Newsweek, fan participation at The Rocky Horror Picture Show began to grow in prominence outside of the film. The film’s reputation as a chance to express oneself was reinforced when the unique experience of
attending a screening featured in the hugely popular 1980 film *Fame* (Parker). Two of the characters, Doris and Ralph, attend a screening of the film and this is presented as a ‘rite of passage’ of being young and living in Manhattan. The portrayal of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and its audience participation culture in the press and in *Fame* introduced an even wider audience to the film. By now the film had begun to cross over from cult pleasure to popular culture.

Australia quickly caught on to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* phenomenon with organized screenings featuring audience participation operating in Sydney since the late 1970s. The first season of screenings showed at the Hoyts Entertainment Centre on George St in Sydney, and ran from 1979 until 1984. Screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* returned in May 1989 with a dedicated floor cast and reinvigorated audience participation, lasting until their conclusion in 2008, which organizers attributed to dwindling attendance.

In 1999, to celebrate twenty years of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in Sydney, the floor cast and fans marched for the fourth consecutive year in one of the city’s biggest events – the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* Official Fan Site 2009). This suggests that the film’s representation of sexual freedom and individual identity still resonates despite the many years since its release. In 2010, a screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was organized at the Chauvel Cinema as an event during the Mardi Gras Film Festival, reflecting the ongoing reputation of the film. After a few sporadic screenings in 2013, regular screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* have ceased. Given the lack of alternative screening venues in Sydney, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* experience in cinemas may now be relegated to the ‘one-off special event’.

Chemers (2008) attributes the decline in regular theatrical screenings of the film since the late 1980s to several factors. These include the:

…renewed attempts by Twentieth Century Fox to ‘officialise’ the event with the hosting of a Twentieth Anniversary Convention in [1995] and a two DVD set in 2000 offering an ‘official’ recording of audience participation, and an onscreen participation prompter. (Chemers 2008:117)

In contrast to Chemers’ views, I attribute the decline in regular screenings, at least within Australia, to the lack of venues in which midnight or alternative screenings may occur; despite the release of these ‘special edition’ DVDs, watching the film at the cinema has always been a vital part of the cult appeal of the film. As ‘virgins’ are told at their first screening: ‘Seeing it on home video (Blu-ray, DVD, VHS, Netflix Instant etc.) or on TV doesn’t count!’ (Norman 2013).
Seymour (2008) also reflects on participation during screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* by highlighting the contrasting reception to the Sing-a-Long-a versions of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *The Sound of Music* (1965). She states that there was:

…uproar over Sing-a-Long-a’s acquisition of the rights to show *Rocky Horror* on a limited-run basis in the United Kingdom. *Rocky Horror* fans and floor show cast members have publicly stated that this move undermines the entire viewing culture that has grown up around the film and also threatens individual theatres' and floor show casts’ rights to exhibit the film as they choose, as they have long done. (Seymour 2008:134)

The outrage of fans of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* at the appropriation of their beloved film is linked to the audience's feeling of 'ownership' over the text, which is threatened by the mainstream assumption of their rituals. This feeling of ownership is felt acutely by marginalized fan groups - in this case the queer audience. The innovation of Sing-a-Long-a represents another example of business adopting an organic fan activity in order to generate profit. The subsequent uproar amongst fans of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* raises overlapping issues in cult film theory regarding ownership of texts and hierarchies of fandom. The feeling of ownership held by fans of all types over their venerated texts seems to be heightened when it comes to cult objects (see Mathijs and Mendik 2008: 4), particularly when they have such an expansive history.

In terms of the recent visibility of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, a new generation of audiences has been introduced to the film because of its appearance in two modern texts: the tribute episode *The Rocky Horror Glee Show* (2010) and the novel and film adaptation of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999/2012). More controversial in nature was the episode of *Glee* (2010) entitled *The Rocky Horror Glee Show*, which was screened as a Halloween episode in October 2010. The reviews of the program were extremely diverse, ranging from those by gushing fans of the program, who were by their own admission largely unfamiliar with the original text, to those by commentators who had seen the original and were critical of attempts to ‘sanitize’ the film for television consumption (including the portrayal of Frank-N-Furter by a female character, thus nullifying the threat of his transvestism). The negative comments from fans of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* online centred largely upon issues of authenticity – it seemed implausible that teachers at a conservative high school in Ohio (the setting for *Glee*) would suggest a performance of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, given its overtly sexual nature. This apparent dichotomy mirrors the contrast within the film between the ‘uptight’ values of Brad and Janet’s town, Denton, with those of Frank-N-Furter and his
Transylvanians - perhaps the producers of *Glee* were intentionally mimicking this contrast as a nod to the original.

Several other media reviews centred around cynicism towards the timing of the episode (which coincided with Fox’s release of a 35 year anniversary edition of the film) to more serious accusations regarding the omission of the word ‘transsexual’ from the performance. In his critique of the episode, Blaze (2010) states that:

In a show ostensibly about accepting people who are different, about outsiders coming together to celebrate their experiences it adds insult to injury that through several of its main characters, the message is that boys wearing girls’ clothing is just not appropriate for teenagers, and they think slurs against transgender people [the use of the word ‘tranny’] are completely appropriate in a show that co opts a play/movie about the world’s favourite fictional transvestite. (1)

Blaze’s concerns about this omission are validated when considered in tandem with the speech given in the episode by the head teacher of the Glee club in which he states:

I was wrong. *Rocky Horror* isn’t about pushing boundaries or making an audience accept a rebellious point of view. You know when I was younger and they started midnight shows of *Rocky Horror* it wasn’t for envelope-pushers. It was for outcasts, people on the fringes who had no place left to go but were searching for some place, any place where they felt like they belonged. (*The Rocky Horror Glee Show* 2010)

This dialogue overlooks the history of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, where in fact, as Staiger (2000) notes, the gay audience were the first to embrace midnight screenings of the film in New York. *Glee*’s removal of this important aspect of the film’s history is troubling for its apparent desire to erase sexuality from the text and could be considered disrespectful to the original fans. The intense feelings brought up by this omission speak to the issue of fan ownership over texts; a film such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, by virtue of its long and colourful history is bound to evoke the passionate response that Blaze expounds. Indeed, perhaps the producers of *Glee* underestimated the care that would be required in dealing with a text so close to the hearts of fans from multiple generations.

In contrast to this reception, Stephen Chbosky’s novel, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, which was released in 1999 before being adapted for screen in 2012, did not elicit this type of criticism. A major part of this coming of age story revolves around the protagonist attending a screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the feeling of belonging that he associates with that moment of attending the film screening with a likeminded group. This depiction of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was met without
significant fanfare – I believe that it was accepted as more authentic in presenting the experience of attending a screening as an outsider and feeling part of a community. In addition, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* shows the characters actually attending a screening of the film, in contrast to *Glee*, which attempts to rewrite the original. Chbosky also admitted to being a fan of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and his book was based on personal experiences – in fact, the scene in which the characters watch *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was filmed in the cinema where he had first seen the film, The Hollywood Cinema in Pittsburgh. The attention garnered by the film in the local press also assisted the current Pittsburgh Rocky Horror fan group in their fundraising drive to digitize the cinema, ensuring they have a permanent venue for future screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Despite the acute difference in the receptions of these programs, both *Glee* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* utilize *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a device to depict the feeling of community when those who perceive themselves as outsiders come together for a communal experience. Despite the differing perceptions of the incorporation of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* into these new texts, it seems that both of the recent texts have attempted to transmit the original message of embracing difference. The use of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in these modern texts also ensures that the original remains visible and is able to reach a new generation of fans. Certainly the *Glee* episode had at least a short term impact on the visibility of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, as the day following the screening of the *Glee* episode, *The Rocky Horror Glee Show* EP was at #2 on the Billboard Chart, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* film soundtrack album was at #13 on the iTunes Chart. Further, Ryan Murphy, creator of *Glee*, has been reportedly approached to remake *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Eisenberg 2010)– a decision fraught with numerous issues, particularly given the potentially hostile reception by fans of the original.

An examination of the long and varied history of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* reveals a great deal about the contribution of marginalized fans to the longevity of the film phenomenon. Few films produced in the 1970s have gained regular public screenings and almost none have inspired the types of fervent worship of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The ongoing popularity of the film has managed to withstand attempts to appropriate its popularity for commercial use, as can be seen with the example of Sing-a-Long-a, where the innovations of fans and floor casts of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (such as sing-a-longs, counter dialogue and the use of props and costumes) have been incorporated into the feature. As Seymour (2008: 128) has explained, these performative aspects (verbal and physical as well as the external mise-en-scene of audience costuming) have allowed queer viewers to
incorporate themselves into the text. Threats to authentic fan activity have thus bred a fiercely protective tendency amongst fans of the film in order to police the boundaries of the text against the peril of further destabilization of the original. The need to protect the integrity of their treasured text heavily influences fans’ reception of modern interpretations of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, such as in *Glee* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. By interrogating fan activity in this way, it is possible to locate *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* within the broader context of the shifting perceptions of fandom. Whether the recent appearance of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in *Glee* or *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* will have any long term influence remains to be seen; however, with its impending 40th anniversary in 2015, it is clear that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has crossed over from cult film to popular culture icon because of the performance and devotion of its fans.

REFERENCES


O’Brien, Richard (2010), *The Rocky Horror Glee Show* [TV soundtrack], Columbia Records/20th Century Fox TV.


**CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Renee Middlemost is an early career researcher and casual academic at The University of Wollongong. Her recently completed Ph.D. thesis was entitled ‘Amongst Friends: The Australian Cult Film Experience’ and examined the audience participation practices of cult film fans in Australia. In addition to cult film, her research interests include Australian film, film and television studies, fandom, audiences, cultural studies and popular culture.

Contact: rmm12@uowmail.edu.au

**SUGGESTED CITATION**