

"Don't Dream It, Be It": *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as Cultural Performance

[Liz Locke](#)

Liminality, marginality, and structural inferiority are conditions in which are generated myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems, and works of art. These cultural forms provide men with a set of templates or models which are, at one level, periodical reclassifications of reality and man's relationship to society, nature, and culture. But they are more than classifications, since they incite men to action as well as to thought.

Victor Turner

[1969:128]

As a popular form of religious life, movies do what we have always asked of popular religion, namely, that they provide us with archetypal forms of humanity - heroic figures - and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society. As we watch the characters and follow the drama on the screen, we are instructed in the values and myths of our culture and given models on which to pattern our lives.

Darrol Bryant

[1982:106]

Preface

Milton Singer's phrase, "cultural performance," adopted by anthropologists and folklorists to refer to a unit of analysis to circumscribe "Plays, concerts, and lectures ... but also prayers, ritual readings and recitations, rites and ceremonies, festivals, and all those things we usually classify under religion and ritual rather than with the cultural and artistic" (Singer 1972:71), can be productively applied to many of the quasi-cultic creations and re-creations enjoyed by young Americans here at the end of the 20th century.

From skate-boarding to eroticized trust games, from goth costuming to on-line gaming, from *Myst* to *Doom*, the current generation of adolescents and post-adolescents have devised/discovered myriad forms of performative self-expression and group identification that have left their elders wondering, and now more than ever, worrying. Many parents--rather than swooning in appreciation that their almost-adult charges are not strung out on black tar heroin, not incarcerated under a three strikes law, not suffering from HIV disease--are worried about ... the effects of cartoon violence on TV.

Time and Newsweek, just to mention two sources of current parenting inspiration, have put out the call: "Talk to your kids before it's too late! Find out who they are!" But the advice they offer mostly rings hollow when you think of your kids as cultural agents in their own milieu. It's time to realize that our own kids--maturing in the age e of AIDS, heroic survivors of '90's American high schools, street-savvy or not--understand a great deal more about being in the world than we give them credit for.

Singer's search for a unit of analysis ended when his Indian friends suggested that if he wanted to understand them, to know "who we are," he should attend performative events, ones in which "who we are" is on display for all to see, participants, spectators, and anthropologists alike (Bauman 1991). When I used the performative event The Rocky Horror Picture Show (RHPS hereafter) to illustrate Singer's notion of cultural performance for a class of undergraduate college students in 1995, however, I met two distinct reactions. The more surprising to me was a kind of puritan refusal to allow that sexuality has any existence and/or value whatever outside of heterosexual marriage. In other words, the majority of my students made my own concerned rock 'n'-roll-hating parents look like Hunter Thompson in league with Neon Flux. But for the minority, for those who spent every other weekend playing dress-up in Midwestern s&m parlors or at bass-and-drum raves experimenting with various designer combinations of ergotamines and methamphetamines, RHPS was *passe`*, too tame even to mention, an artifact left by a generation of mere wanna-be subversives.

However, like many strategies providing evidence of "who we are," RHPS viewed as a cultural performance affords us a bridge connecting the success of Woodstock 1969 with the failure of Littleton, a vantage of continuity from which we can adequately recall that each generation must express itself anew, and that each generation must define itself not only by "who we are," but always by instantiating the liminal category "who we are not."

Rocky Horror Picture Show

By 1991 RHPS, was sixteen years old and had spawned a participatory cult involving about 30,000 people (Piro 1991). Even now, on a weekly basis, in theaters across the United States and Europe (Khan 1985: 77; <http://www.rockyhorror.com>), people gather up their props, put on stage make-up, outfit themselves (often in drag) and attend a film at which they shout instructions, comments, requests, mockeries, rhetorical questions, and appreciative catcalls. Some of these people have seen the film more than 1,000 times (Piro 1990; Sharman 1990). Many of the showings are prefaced by "pre-shows," usually involving the initiation of "virgins," and frequently involving costume competitions, trivia bowls, parodies of beauty contests, or skits incorporating material from other movie cults.

When the evening is over, the heightened sense of community provoked by the event and the intensity of the audience's unabashed confidence and joy in themselves and in the vivid world of *Rocky Horror* will dissipate. Most of the participants will re-enter their ordinary contexts and assume their conventional roles as high school students, librarians, shopkeepers, accountants, and countless others in mundane professions. They have experienced a temporary transformation but will show no outward signs of any permanent change in their lives. They've simply, in the words of *RHPS's* narrator, had a "night out they will remember for a long, long time." But for others the event will become a weekly ritual; the pre-shows, weekly ceremonials; the movie, a platform for long-lasting personal and social transformation.

RHPS performances are characterized by individual and collective transformation and embodiment and are marked by a high degree of reflexivity on all levels of the event, from the content of the film to the weekly creation of the participatory theater event. The phenomenon is especially well accounted for by Victor Turner's work on liminality and *communitas*. In fact, Richard Schechner, a leading performance theorist, describes a performer's transformative process as "strictly analogous to what Arnold van Gennep and Turner describe as the ritual process" (1982:66).

Following a brief anecdotal introduction and a sketch of Turner's

contribution, I will draw upon Julia Kristeva's term, "intertextuality" (Kristeva 1969) and discuss the relevant eight (of eleven) elements constituting what Lee Haring, borrowing from Kristeva, calls "interperformance" (Haring 1988). Haring's checklist, written for application to folkloric performance events, will serve as a frame for discussion of the intertextual content of *RHPS* and the interperformances created by its audiences and audience-casts ("floor shows") who duplicate the film's action line-for-line and gesture-for-gesture in front of the movie screen. Following an interpretive analysis of *RHPS* with an emphasis on its religious themes and motifs, I will return to Turner's work on *communitas*, amplified by the words of participants in the *RHPS* phenomenon as I taped them speaking on the phone and at the Prospect Theater in Mount Prospect, Illinois on March 30, 1991.

Liminality and the Liminoid

Following van Gennep, Victor Turner notes three stages in what have come to be known as rites of passage, those "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age" (Turner 1969:94) that occur in any given society. It was Turner's particular contribution to anthropology to closely investigate what van Gennep identified as the middle phase of these processes, the liminal or threshold stage. Liminality may not be productively divorced from the structural phases which precede and follow it, namely separation and reintegration (or schism), however, the intervening "anti-structural" period in which "the characteristics of the ritual subject ... are ambiguous" (1969:94) will serve as the initial route for understanding the cultural value of *RHPS*.

Communitas ("moments in and out of time" (Turner 1969:96)) is Turner's term for the collective spatial and temporal dimension occupied by liminal personae. His characterization of *communitas* fits well with reports of what people experience at *RHPS* performances, and his description of liminal entities holds for virtually every agent typically or necessarily associated with them

... since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of clas-sifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. ...[T]heir ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols... [L]iminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, ... [N]eophytes in initiation or puberty rites... may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked... [they may possess] nothing that may distin-guish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands. Their behavior is normally passive or humble; they may obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without comment. [1969:95]

Turner writes, "The kind of *communitas* desired... is a transformative experience that goes to the root of each person's being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared" (1969:138) and "*communitas* emerges where social structure is not" (126). What Turner calls "normative *communitas*... which falls within the domain of structure" (132) will figure tentatively in this analysis, and then decisively, both for the film and for *RHPS* performances, however, it is "existential or spontaneous *communitas*" (132) that will concern us at the outset.

Although Turner's focus as an anthropologist was on traditional societies, he wrote that "the collective dimensions, *communitas* and structure, are found at all stages and levels of culture and society" (113).

Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath

structure, in inferior-ity. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or "holy," possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency. [128]

After writing that "[T]he distinction between structure and *communitas* is not simply the familiar one between 'secular' and 'sacred'," Turner attempts to make a special case for liminality and its collective dimension, *communitas*, in secular societies. He introduces the adjective "liminoid" to handle the fuzzy area posed to analysis when the liminal is voluntary rather than enforced, entertaining rather than purely obligatory. Schechner

uses the term to indicate Turner's typification of "the arts and some other leisures of modern society..." (1982:66). Ronald Grimes helps to clarify the distinction in Turner's terminology between "liminal" and "liminoid," but, like me, seems unpersuaded that this subtle distinction is necessary.

He knew that there were important distinctions between preindustrial, small-scale societies and complex large-scale ones. One of the most important ones, he noted, is that whereas liminality is focused in the former, it is diffused (and thus renamed the "liminoid") in the latter. Thus Turner almost inverted Durkheim. No longer is liminality contained, rather it is scattered; its remnants are everywhere - in the arts, politics, advertising and so on. Turner admitted that liminoid phenomena can be quite secularized, but his character-izations of the liminoid often sounded like descriptions of the sacred: intense feeling, a dismantling of hierarchy, etc. In other words, the liminoid is sacred to members of a secular society. Religious, [then]... means something like... "evocative of *communitas*, provocative of change, and nurturant of transition and transformation." [Grimes 1990:145]

The Rocky Horror Picture Show phenomenon is a manifestation of collective liminality in late 20th-century western society. It embodies textual and performative elements that can, given Grimes' definition, only be called religious. It is "diffused" insofar as it has the potential to arise wherever and whenever the film is viewed; however, it is also "contained." Viewing of the film and the audience participation that accompanies it is bounded physically and temporally. The *communitas* that arises in the carnival atmosphere of the theater is maintained on the street at a lower pitch by certain audience members, but the groups that form outside the theater to talk or go out for breakfast afterwards are small. We have here another case, despite what we've been told, in which, non-traditional post-industrial societies use what they've learned from those home grown culture bearers who walked, talked, and ritualized in groups before them.

The Late-Night Double-Feature Picture Show

In 1979, my friend Richard Moorman insisted that I attend *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. It had been playing in Boulder, Colorado since 1977 but I has thus far kept well clear of it. The long lines of teenagers dressed in corsets and fishnets, fright wigs and sequined jackets that I'd seen waiting for the Friday and Saturday midnight shows at The Flick on Pearl Street had been mildly amusing, but mildly intimidating as well. I was 21, employed full time at a publishing house, and liked my movies quiet and preferably foreign. This display of childish street theatrics left me righteously cold.

But Richard agreed to bring the "props" and assured me that my usual all-black-and-bereted attire would be acceptable. I finally took a seat on the aisle near the rear of the theater. I sat uncomprehending through the Master of Ceremonies' speech about using flashlights instead of cigarette lighters and not touching the screen or throwing hot dogs at it. There had been

complaints from the management. There were people older than me in the near-capacity crowd, but they were giggling and dancing in the aisles to the theater sound system along with the rest and did nothing to assuage my feelings of being utterly out of place. The couple next to me had a large paper bag on the floor between them out of which jutted today's edition of the Daily Camera and a spray bottle.

I sat with my arms tightly folded across my breasts and a scowl on my face - too sophisticated and serious for all this juvenile nonsense and too hip to admit to my curiosity about what was going on around me. The crowd stating yelling "Lips! Lips!" and "Let there be Lips!" Apparently, now that it was after midnight, what Richard had insufficiently prepared me for (and then failed to arrive for himself!) was finally about to get under way.

Inter-, Meta-, and Hyper-Performance

A huge pair of heavily lipsticked red lips zooms from a central point on the darkened screen and finally fills it. The audience goes wild. Its performative utterance, its command for the creation of red lips out of the void, had been obeyed. The enormous mouth (Susan Sarandon's) sings (with Richard O'Brien's voice):

Michael Rennie was ill
The day the earth stood still
But he told us where we stand
And Flash Gordon was there
In silver underwear
Claude Rains was the invisible man
Then something went wrong
For Fay Wray and King Kong
(the audience yells: "She went apeshit!")
They got caught in a celluloid jam
Then at a deadly pace
It came from outer space
And this is how the message ran...

As the message, the chorus of "Science Fiction/Double Feature," which interweaves the story we are about to see into its text, is sung over the now frame-frozen, X-ray skeletal mouth, the audience stops singing the lyrics to yell out the first names of the actors who play the film's characters as they appear on the screen. They're on a first-name basis and the crowd has made them its own.

The first of Haring's elements of interperformance to lend itself to this analysis is "transmodalization," his term for the form of variation which denotes a shift in genre from one performer to another (1988:371). The audience and cast members have shifted the performances of the on-screen actors to themselves and the generic frame of the event from cinema to drama, and from film-as-object to film-as-relationship. Haring discusses "transvalorization" - a "change in the value explicitly or implicitly attributed to an action or set of action" - as one of its forms. The most readily noticeable shift of value is in the speech of the audience: experientially, it provokes the lips to appear; it engages in dialogue with a filmed image; it evokes the creators of that image by calling their names; and most importantly, the convention that keeps theater-goers together in passivity and silence is smashed by it. These two interwoven elements of Haring's model are the pivot for the *RHPS* experience.

Intertextuality, in the strictest sense of the word, serves as *RHPS*'s primary framing device on all levels of the experience. Originally, the initial sequence was scripted not with lips but with a montage of scenes from the ten classic science fiction films mentioned in the opening song (Henkin 1979:194).

What is it that is going on here? What kind of rampant intertextuality is this?

Umberto Eco makes a case for *Casablanca*, arguably one of the most enduring cult films of all time, that "it is not *one* movie. It is *movies*" (Eco 1984:208). He posits that a cult film "must display certain textual features, in the sense that, [...] it becomes a sort of textual syllabus, a living example of living textuality" (199), i.e., cannibalistically intertextual in the extreme. Like *Casablanca*, *RHPS* swallows everything its makers could lay their cognition on, borrowing not only from the science fiction and horror genres, but enlisting motifs and conventions from Mae West and Elvis Presley movies, Roger Corman's biker flicks, gothic romances, Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, strip-tease and cabaret shows, the Roman myth of Psyche and Amor, 1960's-style happenings, and daytime soap operas. In tacit agreement with Eco's understanding of *Casablanca* as bricolage, Irene Oppenheim writes:

Taken in disparate parts, it's all too contrived and too familiar; but stuck together, *Rocky*, while not altogether different, emerges with something of its own. There's a clumsy good-natured innocence about this stew that (in the right circumstances) can seem redeeming. [1991:28]

Rolf Eichler discusses the intertextual elements in Shelly's *Frankenstein*, which he identifies as the template for all subsequent literary and cinematic treatments of the Promethean theme of "man's desire to perfect himself through others" (1987:99). But he goes further than most critics to point out "the effect of intertextuality on a work's reception." In the case of *Frankenstein*, Shelly's contemporary readers were in an excellent position to understand the social and moral conventions that held sway in the novel's narrative present. Hence they were also in an excellent position to grasp why and when these norms were being challenged and undermined.

The more time that elapses between creation and reading, the more texts will have interposed themselves between work and reader - a fact that becomes the more significant for *RHPS* since so many texts, plays, and films have now erected a background that is bound to give a new appearance to the author's subject matter. [1987:99-100]

This interposition of texts is not limited to those directly concerned in a comparative discussion of *RHPS* and Shelly's monster, nor even to those genres mentioned above. The makers of *RHPS* extended "intertextual space" {Kristeva 1969:225} to include a wide variety of icons from "elite" culture. They give us Wood's *American Gothic*, first reproduced in tableau (in the wedding scene), then as a reproduction of the painting (next to the mummy case), and finally parodied in tableau (Riff Raff beside Magenta with a three-pronged laser gun). The Criminologist's scrapbook contains a "Whistler's Mother" signed by Meatloaf and a reproduction of Da Vinci's *Last Supper*. The *Mona Lisa* and *David* appear, first facing right and then left, making us hyper-aware of their reproducibility (Eichler 1987:112) and hence their incorporability into mainstream culture. *The Awakening of Adam*, signed by Michelangelo, is painted on the bottom of Frank N. Furter's swimming pool.

But the audience has taken all this yet further. Having no fear of transgressing even the shattered generic conventions exploited by its creators, *RHPS* fans drag in literally everything they can think of. If a remark is covered by "Grice's four maxims of conversation: be relevant, informative, brief, and truthful," and Day's fifth: "Be witty" (Day 1983:217-218), a remark will work; it will probably be repeated; it may even be incorporated into *RHPS* liturgy (see Piro 1990; Henkin 1979; Day 1983; Duranti 1986). Obviously, the creators were fully conscious of their *own* intertextual manipulations, but they could not have anticipated what their audiences

would do with the result. In the eight-minute preface to the 1990 video edition, Richard O'Brien, who wrote the play, music, and lyrics, says to the camera:

People come over and say to me, "Hey, have you seen what they're doing with your movie?" Well, I finally went to see it. It was the best piece of theater I've ever seen. It encapsulated live action with filmed image with audience participation. And three out of three... ain't bad. (Sharman 1990)

Furthermore, Haring's element of interperformance identified as "allusion" is in play. Citing Susan Stewart (1979), he writes:

In folktale as in literature, an allusion is a brief reference to something the interpretive community will recognize from its existing knowledge. Few situations in life, in fact, do not make use of allusion in that sense. (Haring 1988:366)

Regarding only the preparations for Frank's "last supper," the audience responses I remember hearing in 1979 are, for the most part, still formulaic:

Magenta stands holding a huge gong and says, in an exaggerated southern accent, "Dinnah is served!" The audience, alluding to a 1970's commercial for Shake-'n-Bake, yells, "And I helped!"

When Riff Raff hurls the roast onto the dining table, the audience groans, "Oh, no, Meatloaf again?", referring to the actor/rock star who played Eddie until Frank mercy-butchered him in the freezer with an ice pick. ("You sure know how to pick your friends!")

When Frank reaches for an electric knife to carve the roast at dinner, the audience cheerfully supplies, "Always reach for a Hamilton Beech!"

In these few examples the audience utilizes intertextuality to create interperformance. However in the process of remarking on audience responses and behaviors, it also creates "meta-performances," performances that comment on earlier performances, and ensure a high standard for responses in much the same way as folklore storytellers "ensure excellence in folktales" (Haring 1988:368) by using the operation Alan Dundes called "metafolklore" - "folkloristic statements about folklore" (Dundes 1966). For example, when overenthusiastic audience members use their spray bottles before the on-screen Brad and Janet actually step into the rain, veterans shout, "It doesn't rain in cars, assholes!"

Haring's element of "tradition" is also relevant in this regard. He writes:

What is most relevant to the notion of interperformance is that the rules for narrative performance are "traditionalized." Thus if a narrator is perceived as conforming to the rules, he can imitate or even parody a predecessor. [1988:366]

RHPS casts, practiced performance groups, fully made-up and costumed, comprised of fans who parallel the action of the film in front of it, have taken the participatory aspect of the event further than any midnight movie cult has ever gone (Hoberman 1991:19). The concept of "hypertextuality" as developed by Gerard Genette refers to "the transformations which changes one story into another, for instance when a prose narrative is versified" (Haring 1988:369). Haring suggests that "[F]olklorists will want to give to literary hypertextuality the folkloristic name of variation" (369), however I will extend the term to include the concept of "hyperperformance" to describe what is happening at an *RHPS* event. Over the years, Double Feature, San Francisco's Strand Theater cast, The Celluloid Jam of the Oriental Theater

in Milwaukee, Voyeuristic Intention of the Rialto in South Pasadena, the Eighth Street Players of the Eighth Street Playhouse in New York and countless other casts (see Piro 1990) formally and informally constituted, have transformed a film into a live performance event, a movie into a celebratory festival, film buffs into drag queens, theater aisles into dance floors, and cinema houses into unrestrained (and messy), yet safe and (usually) sober, late-night parties. In other words, "hyperperformance" as executed by the audience and casts of *RHPS* parallels Haring's interrelated notions of "situation" and "tradition." Citing Richard Bauman's (1977) and Dell Hymes' (1975) work in folklore studies, Haring writes:

...the specific conditions in which stories are told actually constitute the *event* as the meaningful context for artistic communication...

When societies adopt borrowed plots and characters, they bring to them certain "pre-existing cultural emphases" which determine how the borrowed stories are adapted into a new setting. Responding to specific situations, storytellers demonstrate their creativity.

[1988:366]

The fact that an audience for a film demonstrates *any* creativity is in itself noteworthy, but that an audience would go to such lengths to actively bring its "pre-existing cultural emphases" into the open and into dialogue with a film is virtually fantastic.

The last element of Haring's interperformance model I will consider here is what he calls "quotation." This is obviously related to what I have called *RHPS*'s primary framing device, intertextuality; it is also connected to the notion of meta-performance insofar as the audience is repeatedly engaged in quotation of its own previous response lines. I have already noted the *Mona Lisa* and *David* as examples of intersemiotic quotation, however, the most famous visual quotation occurs when Rocky carries Frank, dead without having satisfied his wish to be dressed like Fay Wray, draped across his tanned, muscled back up a model of the RKO Radio Tower, shaking his fists and growling over his shoulder at his attacker. But it is also possible to discuss recognizable entextualized quotations from spoken discourse.

Frank N. Furter has told us that he's "making a man with blonde hair and a tan." Thrilled with his creation, he sings, "In just seven days, I can make you a man." The paraphrase is too famous to warrant citation.

A lesser known and more direct quotation is spoken as the ultimate call to "absolute pleasure" and serves as the cathartic mainspring of the movie. "Don't dream it. Be it," was an advertising slogan for Frederick's of Hollywood lingerie (Corliss 1985:23).

On the other hand, *RHPS* performance is the source of one-liners that occasionally crop up in conversations far removed from the original context of utterance. I've heard more than one fan express a divergent opinion by saying, "I didn't make him for *you*!" "And what charming underclothes you both have," is a remark I heard from a friend watching MTV. Oppenheim cites several examples:

This week, for instance, I received a potpourri catalogue from the Midwest that featured loungewear emblazoned with "Creature of the Night," a memorable phrase in the *Rocky* song, "Touch-a Touch-a Touch-a Touch Me." The line, "Don't Dream It. Be It," has rhythmically entered the language in places as far afield as the sign language text *Survival Sign*, with its cover quote: "Don't say it. Sign it." ...[I] created a T-shirt with my own favorite *Rocky* quote:

"Madness takes its toll." I still like that one. [1991:29]

"Don't Dream It, Be It": (Page 2)

[Liz Locke](#)

Over at the Frankenstein Place

Having said that the liminal is, according to Turner, "almost everywhere held to be sacred," it is my intention now to show that *RHPS* is no exception. Oppenheim makes the connection:

I'm surprised theologians haven't paid more attention to *Rocky*. For there are, I think, religious implications in both the film and its rituals. Certainly among the reasons *Rocky* has endured is that beneath its surface silliness the film tells a tale about initiation into a dangerous world; about surviving lost innocence; about deviance and acceptance; about creation, forgiveness, death, and regeneration. [1988:29]

Referring to Turner's characteristics of threshold people, we find death and the womb (the wedding-funeral), darkness and sexuality, and the wilderness (Frank's castle is "in the middle of nowhere"). But the range of liminal attributes encapsulated in *RHPS*'s star, Tim Curry as Frank N. Furter, is impressive. Like Victor Frankenstein, his literary near-namesake, Frank is a scientist who creates life in a laboratory. Lou Adler, *RHPS*'s producer, explains the resonance of the archetype:

You need not have seen *King Kong* to recognize the ape in *Rocky Horror*'s final climb. You need not have heard of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelly or seen Boris Karloff's monster to know the legend of Frankenstein. Certain themes and cinematic images have become part of us. [Henkin 1979:131]

The reversals of convention in *RHPS* are compiled from life as they were for Shelley, but also from Shelly's story itself. O'Brien's scientist is no recluse. His castle is the site of revelry, a convention and party for his guests from home, the planet Transsexual in the galaxy of Transylvania. And Frank is a little strange in other ways too. The normative image of the scientist is still our most cherished projection of unblemished, inviolate, objective masculinity. Even when our scientists are female, they are caricatured as sexless and dispassionate and hence likely, because their wits are not clouded with desire, to uncover important truths. Frank is not only "a sweet transvestite" from another planet, he's bisexual, narcissistic, exhibitionistic, rapacious, rude, and hot as hell. He struts around in a black corset with fishnet stockings, sometimes covered with a green lab coat, and then he sports a pink triangle, but still wears stiletto heels and pearls. He obviously spends hours on his make-up, but isn't at all concerned when he smears it for effect. In short, he is what every repressed, sexually anxious, outcast intellectual male or female sees as a self-reflection in her or his wildest dionysiac nightmares. Frank is

...the underbelly, the dark side of creation; and it should come as no surprise to us when he suffers satanic ruin... He is the richly characterized magus who dies for our imagined sins, and redeems our

fantasies as he lives out our hidden dreams. [Henkin 1979:53-55]

Bill Henkin describes the cult audience of *RHPS* as people who see themselves as outsiders to begin with, "outré potentates like Frank or convert henchmen like Riff-Raff... but there are lots of Brads and Janets in the audience too" (1979:36).

Early critics of Tim Curry's portrayal invariably described it in terms of combined personae: "...half Auntie Mame, half Bela Lugosi," "...a cross between Greer Garson and Steve Reeves," and "...part David Bowie, part Joan Crawford, part Basil Rathbone" (Henkin 1979:133). Frank has "ambiguous and indeterminate attributes" but he is indisputably male. He succeeds in winning our hearts to such an extent that, even when he whips his "faithful handyman" until he cries for mercy, abuses Janet, shoves Brad to the ground, and kills Eddie, the audience and his on-screen groupies not only forgive him, but emulate him. More than we ever emulated Clint Eastwood or John Wayne. They never really knew us like Frank does.

Gaylyn Studlar gets it, but is obviously not a fan:

Dr. Fran-N-Furter represents a gender transformation that borrows from perverse possibilities but safely recuperates the revolutionary promise of homoerotic hedonism through the sexual politics of masculine aggression. [1989:8]

Frank, whose sexual generativity appears to reside only in the lab, makes himself a man. The reflexive is deliberate. Although he can entertain his homoeroticism with Rocky Horror, he has complete, and completely masculine, power over him. "I made you and I can break you just as easily." He accomplishes his act of creation through asexual (scientific) means, but by accident, the same route taken by Brad and Janet to reach his castle and, thereby, their own sexual awakening. Frank's creation speech may be interpreted on both levels:

...Paradise is to be mine! It was strange in the way it happened.
Suddenly you get a break. All the pieces seem to fit together. What a sucker you've been! What a fool! The answer was there all the time.
It took a small accident to make it happen. An accident! And that's how I discovered the secret, that elusive ingredient, that spark that is the breath of life.

Janet and Brad have already shared a song about that spark. In "Over at the Frankenstein Place," Janet tells us that it's "burning bright... in the velvet darkness of the blackest night... guiding... no matter who or what you are." But Riff-Raff's earlier invitation for redemptive light to "come streaming into my life" gained ambiguity and force when he grabbed his sister to dance "The Time Warp," summoning sexual fantasy with his memory of "how the blackness would hit me." The invitation to licentious sexuality is not straightforward nor unencumbered. Riff tells us that "It's the pelvic thrust that really drives you insane," but he's also told us that "madness takes its toll." The darkly ecstatic dance of sex implodes into the dark night of the soul, all the while keeping a wiggle in its walk and a come-hither sneer on its face.

Like the god of Abraham, in the beginning, even before Frank was, he... well... was. As the lips closed back into the central point on the screen, they were overlain by a Celtic cross on the top of a church steeple. The doors of the church open and a wedding party pours out onto the steps. Frank, in his guise as God's celebrating minister, stands in front of the church doors flanked by the custodial Riff Raff and Magenta in *American Gothic* mode. After a photo is taken of "just the close family," Frank is gone from the scene. Brad and Janet move from the graveyard into the church to celebrate their engagement. The custodial staff spin the wedding bouquets on the

pews to reveal funereal blooms. Just as Brad suggests that he and Janet should "visit the man who began it," ostensibly meaning Dr. Everett Scott, the staff carries in a coffin. The camera moves from the coffin backgrounded by an American flag, to Brad and Janet on their knees in naive bliss, to a stained-glass cross.

The coffin, attended by the same personnel who will later attend Rocky's birth, parallels the birth vat in which the skeletal outline of Rocky's body is glimpsed before he comes to life. As Eichler points out, the confusion people experience in thinking about Victor's *Doppelganger* is so extreme that they give Frankenstein's name to his monster (1987:101). We're not explicitly told if Frank or Rocky is in the coffin. And it doesn't matter anyway, if we employ the Freudian model. (The most remarkable essay I encountered in the course of my research suggests that Richard O'Brien wrote *RHPS* "with tongue in cheek and a copy of the collected works of Freud in hand." The writer goes on to say that the film "does a superb job of unveiling the hidden dynamics of the committee of the unconscious mind," and tells us which characters represent the id, ego, superego, and conscious mind (Ruble 1986:161-63). Probably not a fan either.)

Frank presides lasciviously over a seasonal ritual, the "Annual Transylvanian Convention," draped blasphemously pieta-like over a throne, paralleling his ministerial presidency over the Happschatt wedding.

But instances of role and status reversal take us well beyond Frank's persona into the saturated plot. The "infant" playmate, Rocky, speaks immediately upon showing his face - to sing about the dread of immanent death. He runs to escape the "loving embrace" of his mother/father/lover/exploiter and seeks the kindness of strangers, the alien conventionists, who all the while meet his distress with elated dancing and choruses of "That ain't no crime!" Eddie, the presumably frozen donor of half of Rocky's cerebral tissue, comes roaring out of the walk-in freezer on a motorcycle. His saxophone-drenched rendition of "Whatever Happened to Saturday Night" is proof that you can have more fun than anybody in the movie with only half a brain. But not for very long. Janet reverses her position on muscles during the rest of Frank's tribute to his creation (and to his own genius) while Brad holds Eddie's gleaming totem, his saxophone, looking at her in moral outrage.

Frank's divinity is camp but efficient. Brad carries the emblem of Eddie's free spirit. Janet, coy with one male character after another, under the spell of Frank's unbridled lustiness, confesses her fascination aloud. The power of redemptive sexuality and its concomitant costs are implicit before Frank touches Janet or Brad. He "offers" to initiate them into their own sensuality by telling them that he'll "remove the cause, but not the symptom."

The movies cater to our secret needs, to desires we may not be aware of yet. They give us not what we say we want when we think some righteous parent-figure might be listening, but what the primitive within us *really* wants, in its carnivorous heart-of-hearts. The movies welcome us with open arms, just as we are, with no ulterior motives of education or improvement. [Chute 1983:12]

Having been predictably betrayed as an alien, murdering, egomaniacal user who "chews people up and spits them out," Frank declares that "it's not easy having a good time." He has utilized the utterly absurd "sonic transducer" to immobilize his ungrateful house guests and the "medusa ray" to ossify them, rendering them "art" in the manner of the *Dauids* that ornament the lab. For the floor show, Frank decorates each character with identical make-up, corsets, fishnets, feather boas, and stiletto pumps. He, however, wears his usual costume and is not masked. Of masking, Turner says:

Rituals of status reversal... mask the weak in strength and demand of the strong that they be passive and patiently endure the symbolic and even real aggression shown against them by structural inferiors. [1969:177]

What Frank "patiently endures" is listening to his "creations" (a term used by fashion designers of their clothing) say what they really think about him and about themselves. Columbia admits she was only able to fulfill her role as "a regular Frankie fan" by using drugs. Rocky Horror tells us that he suffers from a lack of trust in anything but his own libidinous satisfaction. Brad and Janet admit, in this trance-like chorus line, that they have been transformed. Brad is still shaky about it and, paraphrasing Christ in Gethsemane, asks his Mommy to "take this dream away from me," but Janet is "released." Her "confidence has increased," her "mind has been expanded." She is unequivocally grateful to have undergone initiation.

Raymond Ruble, who might have done well to have read Turner's work in anthropology, tells us that "Brad refuses to recognize that he has dynamic sexual desires, and at the film's conclusion is a ruined person obviously in need of psychoanalytic therapy" (1986:165). If this is the case, how does he explain why young men dress up as Brad to have crowds of strangers yell "Asshole!" at them once a week? An alternative, and I think more correct interpretation of Brad's value, is offered by Henkin:

From his first appearance... it is obvious that Brad is a young fool. And every move he makes, every line he speaks, every note he sings makes his idiotic position more secure and more sincere. Brad is entirely laughable, but deep down we know that we are more like Brad than we are like Frank, and that is Brad's saving grace for us. [1979:68]

When Riff and Magenta move in to clear the way for take-off back to the galaxy of Transylvania, it is Brad who says, "You mean you're going to kill him? What's his crime?"

The final "awakening" during the floor show is confirmed in the pool. Frank invites his fiends to join him, to "swim the warm waters of sins of the flesh." We know it's all over because Frank is lying in a life-saver emblazoned "USS Titanic." (The audience response to this vision is "Come look! There's a transvestite in my toilet bowl!") But the song, "Don't Dream It, Be It," is a call to participate in Frank's pleasure, no longer a command to be dominated by it. The masks disappear into the water while the now authenticated initiands lovingly touch Frank and one another, paralleling God touching Adam on the bottom of the pool. The ritual change in status is celebrated by all five participants, now on equal footing, in a chorus-line song and dance, "Wild and Untamed Thing" (musically, the continuation of the floor show confessions, "Rose Tint My World").

Cognitively, nothing underlines regularity so well as absurdity or paradox. Emotionally, nothing satisfies as much as extravagant or temporarily permitted illicit behavior. Rituals of status reversal accommodate both aspects. By making the low high and the high low, they reaffirm the hierarchical principle. By making the low mimic (often to the point of caricature) the behavior of the high, and by restraining the initiatives of the proud, they underline the reasonableness of everyday culturally predictable behavior between the various estates of society. [Turner 1969:176]

Riff and Magenta step in to "restrain the initiatives of the proud" and to restore "predictable behavior between the various estates of society." Riff, dressed in full gold lamé space gear, tells Frank, "It's all over. Your mission

is a failure, your lifestyle's too extreme." After Frank sings his Judy Garland swan song, Riff tells him he's been "presumptuous" in assuming that he will accompany Magenta and himself back to Transsexual. (The title of the original stage production of Mary Shelley's book in 1823 was *Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein*.) As the simpering Dr. Scott tells Brad, "Society must be protected."

Of course, even the dead-below-the-waist Scott has been influenced by Frank's generosity: his paralysis disappears and his own fish-netted legs appear from beneath his invalid's wheelchair blanket. But Dr. Scott is ultimately an establishment toady, a structure freak who will forgive anything and accept anything as long as he is promised a return to the status quo. Even when the authority he submits to is as paranoid and duplicitous as Riff Raff, "insolent in his lack of power, cruel when he holds it" (Henkin 1979:61). "Absolute pleasure" is not a maxim that society can tolerate for very long. The audience knows it. They will respond as warmly to Riff Raff and Magenta at the next showing as they did at the last one because they know that Frank will be back; he will traipse off that elevator into their lives and fill them with delightfully subversive pleasure again next week. If there is no crucifixion, there can be no resurrection. But in the meantime, order is re-established; the liminal is displaced by familiar hierarchical principles in order that it may re-emerge another day.

The film moves from a raucous celebration of sexuality, through a lament for its dangers and confusions, to a final, sporting admission of the need to control it. Far from prompting rebellious sensuality, its ultimate balance and reconciliation of opposites leads in just the opposite direction - toward psychic detachment and an amiable acceptance of the need for compromise. [Kilgore 1983:159]

Community and Communitas

Turner quotes from Martin Buber in his attempt to describe what he means by *communitas*. He tells us, "Community is where community happens" (Turner 1969:127). The audiences of *RHPS* agree. A crowd of strangers come together in an urban theater at midnight, ready to participate in a communal ritual: to express their collective outsider status together as a group. It makes them feel better. In fact, it makes them feel great. "What makes it so infectious is the feeling of family and community within the theaters..." (Piro 1980:i). Many, but not all of them, are young. Many feel constrained by what Turner calls "structure," felt to be more painful and overbearing for low-status persons like insecure teenagers, intellectual or overweight adolescent women, skinny or nearsighted adolescent men. The anti-intellectual cults of beauty and physical fitness in our culture are even more pronounced in the 1990's than when I first attended *RHPS* in the 1970's. The reasons for participation have not changed. Like some other forms of ritualistic expression, it's not for everybody, but some hardcore fans call it "going to church."

...like religious services, the midnight *Rocky* showings communally demarcate the end of a given week. There may, moreover, be an ingrained need or longing for some such gathering together: a voluntary event that reliably occurs like a pulse against time... [there is] something comforting and stabilizing about ritualized repetition. But while ritual can provide a sense of containment in lives that are chaotic, it can also or even simultaneously provide a place for scheduled chaos in lives that are otherwise constrained. The latter, for example, occurred in the mad dancing of the Shakers, or in the ecstatic movement of dervishes. In *Rocky* too, the wildness and play-acting may happen because the film offers itself and the structure of its showings offer a ritual-like reassurance of a beginning

and an end, [Oppenheim 1991:29]

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"Don't Dream It, Be It": (Page 3)

[Liz Locke](#)

Fieldwork: Community and Communitas

I talked with Sal Piro, the president of the International *Rocky Horror Picture Show* Fan Club, on the phone from his home in New York City on March 29, 1991.

Liz: What's really interesting to me... I never dressed up, but I attended seven or eight shows in Boulder and... you know what happens in the theater... actually is like... well, it's the development of a community... for the time that the film is showing... and for some people it happens for... like, the whole week...

Sal: Right.

Liz: So really... I mean, you're the head of a community...

Sal: Mmm hmm.

Liz: Do they identify for other reasons beyond the characterizations? I mean, do you find that people make friendships?

Sal: Well sure! One of the things I love the most... the thing that turns me on is the whole community in the theater. When I was 26 and I first started this... we would go out afterwards and hang out... you know in coffee shops, not in bars or anything, you know... and just talk about everything until 4, 4:30 in the morning... we'd go to the movies together during the week...

Liz: You went to the movies together?

Sal: Yeah, yeah... and just spent... worked on the fan club together and did all kinds of things together. And that's what's happening to my cast and my people today...

Liz: Uh huh.

Sal: Now they're all 19 and I'm 40 so I find myself not hanging out with them so much... But... I mean, I'm expecting two of them right now to come over and help me with the fan club... It's not the seven-day-a-week thing 'cause I just have a different lifestyle now, but... They go out after the movie and see each other all week long... I mean, it's still there... definitely... I mean, there are the jealousies and the in-fighting that happens in any community...

What Turner calls "normative communitas" doesn't only occur at the end of *RHPS* with the death of Frank, the reimposition of order, the departure of the aliens, and the freeing of Brad, Janet, and Dr. Scott to resume their lives in Denton, "The Home of Happiness." It also happens in *RHPS* communities. The cast members see themselves as more devoted than regular audience members. Their community is held together by fellow

thespian aspiration as well as by love of the film. The costume contest I witnessed was a very serious affair for the two "Franks," the out-of-town "Eddie," the "Magenta," and the "Columbia" who vied for audience approval. The jealousies and in-fighting were not trivial; these people knew each other, as friends or by reputation, and their animosities worked to reveal the depths of their community loyalties. Sal Piro insisted that the losers be given a round of applause: "They *all* worked really hard on their costumes and we don't do this to make *anyone* feel bad!" But there is a *RHPS* hierarchy. It was obvious from the way in which everyone deferred to him that Sal is at the top. I asked him why people play in floor-show casts.

Sal: ...some people just have a desire to perform... like any kind of struggling actor. So it becomes a role for them... But this role has a lot more emotional investment because it's such a cult film and it's something that they really love to do. Some do it for the attention; some to make out...

Liz: Uh huh.

Sal: I mean it's really funny the romances that have occurred over the years. But I think it's the character identification that seems to...

Liz: Yeah, so do I... But in the video... you know, the ten-year anniversary thing? It's a woman playing Frank...

Sal: Yeah, Barbara. I had five Franks on the stage that night and three of them were women. Dori Hartley, she was the first... She so loved Frank and all that... she wanted to be part of it...

We talked about the eight-minute prologue to the video edition of the film. Sal agreed that "[It] educates the uninitiated on *Rocky Horror* ritual" (Flynn 1990:10).

Liz: So what do you think the effect of the video will be on performances? Do you think it's going to increase it? Or do you think that in some weird way people are going to settle for this video...

Sal: No no no... Most people... because of the book and the prelude to the video... all the... We have a book coming out in a month or so called *The Official Audience Participation Guide*... and because of all that... I get millions of calls from people who are dying to see it in a theater... And actually, theater attendance has picked up.

Liz: Has it really?

Sal: Oh yeah. Oh definitely. I mean... we've had theaters with it opening... some closing. There are some cities that are strong for a while... I'm going to Chicago tomorrow 'cause one of the suburban theaters is closing *Rocky* and I'm going to host a show there tomorrow night...

Liz: Tomorrow...

Sal: Yeah, I think it's called the Prospect...

When I got to the theater, I walked around with a memo pad and a camera talking to people. I never had to ask twice if I could take a picture or conduct a taped interview. Teenagers and middle-aged people alike loved talking about their experiences with *RHPS*.

Joe Gillan of Milwaukee's Celluloid Jam is an aspiring actor and has been an *RHPS* choreographer and "Frank" for five years. He started attending shows when he was 14, whenever his mother would let him, "just attending the film like everyone else." Once he had friends with cars, he went more often. He

played Riff Raff for a while until the cast needed a "Frank," but until then he'd just worn "Frank make-up" in the crowd. When he moved to Chicago from a small town in Indiana, he became the cast choreographer for the Music Box Theater there. When it closed in 1986, he started driving to Milwaukee every weekend. He didn't have to audition for the part of Frank because the Celluloid Jam already knew him by reputation. Joe won the Prospect costume contest in spite of a leg cast: he'd slipped in his five-inch heels.

Bob is a cast member at Lakehurst, Illinois and has also been playing Frank every Saturday night for five years. Like Joe, he was "just a regular audience member" until he'd seen the movie "maybe 40 times or so..." He played Rocky in San Diego for two months, but has been "Frank" ever since. When I asked him if he hangs out with other *RHPS* people, he said, "Well... one of the strange things about me... see... well, I've been in the Navy for six years... so... a lot of my friends don't know..." I asked what his commanding officer's reaction might be if he found out about it. His friend beside him started laughing uproariously. The first time he got "cheers and applause and all that stuff" was when he threw his cape open to reveal his corsetted body: "It was a rush, an absolute rush. And I still get that rush every time I perform."

"Eddie" and "Rocky" were 17-year-old Mount Prospect men. We talked about performing in front of crowds, how it got started, why they kept coming, and what it meant to them.

Eddie: People can come here and express themselves any way they want to... dressed as their favorite character... they can come not dressed. Be vocal, not vocal; it doesn't matter. Everybody likes everybody else for whatever they're doing. No matter who or what you are. You're going to be accepted... and the cast... we take care of each other...

Rocky: Yeah. It's like a family kinda...

Eddie: Yeah, we hang out together... and if I've got a problem, the first people I'll call will be cast members.

Liz: And you're tolerant of other people's eccentricities? Does that generalize to other people?

Rocky: Yeah... 'cause I usta think... gay people were... really weird. But ya know, some of the people in this cast are gay... and it's like... they're normal people... all really cool. They don't go around hitting on me or anybody else...

Eddie: You really learn to accept people for who they are... I was 12 when I started coming to *Rocky Horror*. I was in junior high school... your typical kid. It was like... wow, weird. I saw all these weird people. But you stick around and you notice that... no one else seems to notice... that anyone else is weird... No matter what they wore in...

Liz: Did you feel like a weirdo when you were 12?

Eddie: Yeah, I did as a matter of fact... I did things that... not other kids did... I got into things that not other kids did...

Liz: Like what?

Eddie: Like reading. I like to read! I'd read Shakespeare. I'd read Moliere... everything... and no one else...

Liz: So you were a nerd?

Eddie: Well... yeah, basically.

Liz: So what's the attraction to Eddie, say, rather than Brad?

Eddie: Well...

Liz: Does it make sense that I'd ask...

Eddie: Yeah, absolutely. I've changed since then. Basically... well, I do own a Harley... I mean, I'm not a Hell's Angel. I work. I pay my bills. And "Eddie"... he's just like the opposite of all that... Totally free... I feel like for the two or three hours that I'm in here, I'm just like that... You can see it in my attitude when I'm in here... I'm "Eddie" totally. All the frustrations from the week... I'm somebody else... They all just go out the door...

Liz: And what does being Rocky do for you?

Rocky: Well, I usually don't run around my house in women's underwear... And that's good... I mean, I don't usually have a lot of... It gives me confidence. A lot of confidence. Because I figure... if I can do this, there's not much else you could do in a theater or in life that could make you... I mean... that could make you feel really bad. If you can run through the audience in gold lamé underwear with gold gym shoes on... (laughing)... there's not much else that you really have to do... I mean, the only other thing that could be possibly worse, or more difficult, is performing naked. And I'm not really gonna go out and do that...

Conclusion

The way Victor Turner tells it,

In complex industrialized societies, we still find traces in the liturgies of churches and other religious organizations of institutionalized attempts to prepare for the coming of spontaneous communitas. This modality of relationship, however, appears to flourish best in spontaneously liminal situations - phases betwixt and between states where social-structural role-playing is dominant, and especially between status equals. [Turner 1969:138]

The way Sal Piro tells it, Louis Farese, a kindergarten teacher from Staten Island, was the first person to talk back to the screen at Manhattan's Waverly Theater on Labor Day weekend in 1976. The costuming started on Halloween that year. The floor shows started when Bill O'Brien and a few regulars lip synched the record as it played before showtime (Piro 1990:1-2 <http://www.rockyhorror.com>). The audience loved it. They picked it up. Twenty-four years later, there's a new generation of people talking back to the screen. The pre-shows have become elaborate and regular ceremonies. "Virgins" are initiated, as were about 30 the night I was in Mount Prospect, by coming voluntarily in front of the crowd to be called "Assholes!" and "Sluts!", the terms of endearment reserved for Brad and Janet. One young man was told that he had to be singled out especially for group abuse because Sal had been told it was the virgin's birthday. Besides, Sal told him, he'd also been told that he really was an asshole. In front of 300 people, this easy-going teenager pulled down his pants and shot us the moon. If he wants them, he has friends for life.

With luck and desire we find one another. The non-athletes, the readers, the musicians, the goths, the skate rats, the gamers, the geeks, the metal-heads, the ravers, the stoners, the net-heads, the writers, the outcasts, the refugees, we find a way to create communities, and sometimes they last.

Performative expression, even--perhaps especially--for embattled teenagers in 1999, is not limited to planting bombs and wielding a loaded TEC-9. Sure, talk with your kids. Find out if they're happy. Find out how they've decided to take their own "revenge" against the inanities and humiliations of their daily lives. And then tell them again why and how and for how long and under what circumstances you will continue to love them. Maybe they'll take you out to a show.

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Bibliography

- ["Don't Dream It, Be It":
The Rocky Horror Picture Show as Cultural Performance](#)(article)
- [Something Rich and Strange:
Technologies of the Sacred in *Glassie* and *Greenaway*](#) (article)

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