

“Tonight, My Unconventional Conventionists, You Are to Witness a New Breakthrough”: How Shadow Casts of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* Remind Us to Break Genre Conventions

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You might think that genres are rigid—that there are specific conventions to each genre that should be followed in order to have something recognized as that particular genre. However, sometimes genre conventions are meant to be bent or even broken. In this article, Cassandra Karn demonstrates that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* exists as a prime example of how breaking genre conventions can be exactly what a text needs.

Introduction

Every October, an assortment of queer people, theatre people, and horror fans don fishnets and red lipstick—regardless of their gender—and flock to the local theatre or cinema to partake in a beloved tradition: *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* shadow casts. I should know; I am a proud member of all three groups. I’m genderqueer and bisexual, two complicated and fluid queer identities, so I and many other queer people find ourselves represented in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which doesn’t put particular labels on the genders or sexualities of the characters, leaving them complicated, fluid, and open for interpretation. I’ve been involved in theatre for over eight years now, so I appreciate the theatrical origins of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, as well as the return to theatrical practices with the development of the shadow cast. I’m also an avid fan of the horror genre, particularly monster movies, which are much of the inspiration for the schlocky style of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

I cannot count the number of times I’ve fled into a theatre dressed as one character or another. I’ve also been on the other side of the shadow cast

event, performing on stage with other *Rocky Horror* fanatics. The energy in the theatre space used for a shadow cast of *Rocky Horror* is electric, always alive and active. It's never the same show twice. You never know what might be shouted out from the audience next, what new callout someone might have come up with this year. More than anything else, the sense of community involved in these shadow casts is what keeps me coming back year after year. Before the Internet gave us the ability to find people with similar interests, *Rocky Horror* shadow casts were a way for these groups of people to find each other and share their love for the bizarre, the schlocky, the deviant. *Rocky Horror* shadow casts were, and still are, a place where everyone could celebrate their oddness, instead of being shunned for it. For a few hours, the rules of the outside world no longer apply; we, the unconventional conventionists, can party without fear of judgment. It should be no surprise, then, that shadow casts of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* quickly became a beloved tradition for many—usually a Halloween tradition if not a year-round one.

Let's back up for a moment. I've spent all this time talking about shadow casts, but I haven't really explained what they are. **Shadow casts** are a style of performance where a film is shown on a screen while actors dressed as the characters mime the actions in front of the screen. A crucial component of shadow casts is audience participation; audiences often dress up, shout phrases—known as **callouts**—on cue, and perform various actions, such as holding newspapers over their heads when a character does so on screen. Shadow casts were created from the breaking of genre conventions, and by examining how they developed, we can consider how, sometimes, breaking genre conventions can be more useful than adhering to them.

What Is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*?—"It's Probably Some Kind of Hunting Lodge for Rich Weirdos"

The Rocky Horror Picture Show is a film musical that follows the misadventure of Brad and Janet, a young, white, heterosexual couple who are newly engaged. Their car breaks down during a storm outside a spooky castle, where they go to find shelter from the storm and make a phone call. They are instead pulled into a party celebrating the birth of Rocky, a man created to satiate the sexual desires of the mad scientist Dr. Frank N. Furter—a queer man who also dresses like a woman. In fact, almost all the characters that Brad and Janet encounter in this castle are queer, monstrous, and sexually active, and it isn't long before Brad and Janet give in to their own sexual desires for various characters. Mix in plenty of science fiction and horror tropes, and you have the movie that quickly became a **cult classic**—a film that doesn't

do well in the box office but later develops a passionate and devoted fan base.

“I Can Make You a Man”: How Are Genres Created and Sustained over Time?

Part of what makes *The Rocky Horror Show* (as the original stage show was titled) stand out is how many times it was remediated into new genres. **Genre** is a type of production—such as a movie, a résumé, or even a street sign—that can be identified by its conventions, or its standard practices and features (ISU Writing Program). The conventions of a genre are what make a production recognizable as that specific genre, so it is helpful to follow those conventions when producing a text within a particular genre. However, there are times when breaking genre conventions can make a text stand out. For example, breaking the fourth wall—when characters directly address the audience—originally broke the genre convention of keeping the action onstage (or on-screen) separated from the audience, but it is now a beloved comedic genre convention, appearing in films such as *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* and *Deadpool*. A creator must be careful not to break *too* many genre conventions, though, as it will make that text unrecognizable as a part of that genre. Instead, creators must decide on a case-by-case basis which genre conventions they will adhere to, which conventions they will bend, and which conventions they will break, all based on what will best suit that particular production.

The Rocky Horror Show was remediated twice: first from a stage musical to a film, and then from a film to a shadow cast. These remediations were made possible through a range of **literate activity**—all the activities that are part of creating or consuming a text. Literate activity is what fuels ISU’s **pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory** (P-CHAT), an approach to texts that focuses on literate activity grounded in cultural and historical contexts (ISU Writing Program). There are a few terms used in P-CHAT that are particularly useful in looking at how *Rocky Horror* broke genre conventions with great success: reception, distribution, and socialization. In the case of *The Rocky Horror Show*, the **reception** of the audience—how the text was taken up by the audience and repurposed—fueled the multiple remediations of the text. Because of the reception of the text, the **distribution** of the text—when, where, and how the text can be accessed—was changed as well. Finally, the second remediation, from film to shadow cast, created a setting for complex **socialization**—the interactions between the people involved in the creating or consuming of a text (ISU Writing Program). The socialization that occurs during shadow casts is an

example of how the lines between the performers and the audience blur, creating a double role for the audience as both creator and consumer.

“It Was a Night Out They Were Going to Remember for a Very Long Time”: A Brief History of *The Rocky Horror Show*

In 1972, Richard O’Brien began to write *The Rocky Horror Show*, inspired by science fiction and horror **B movies**—low-budget movies made within a particular genre, such as horror and science fiction—and rock ‘n’ roll,

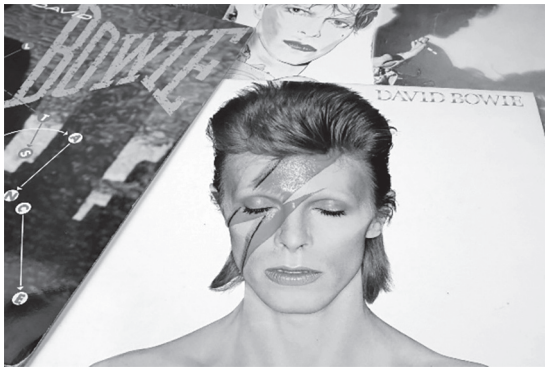


Figure 1: An example of the glam rock aesthetic (“Close up”).

particularly punk rock and the emerging **glam rock**, a subgenre of rock ‘n’ roll characterized by flashy clothing and gender nonconformity (Thompson 37; see Figure 1). The glam rock musical stylings of *Rocky Horror* were quite the departure from the usual show tunes used in musical theatre. While *Rocky Horror* was not the first rock musical to push back against the genre conventions of musical theatre, it was certainly one of the landmark musicals to do so.

The musical stylings were not the only genre conventions broken by *The Rocky Horror Show*. The show was only performed during late-night showings, as the music was so loud that it would disrupt the shows on the other floors of the building. Instead of having a regular staff to take care of tickets and seating, cast members of the show dressed up as ushers and did the work (Thompson 91). The cast members broke the conventions of normal usher duties by purposely mis-seating people, separating people who were attending the show together, and creating chaos and confusion in a variety of other ways. The theatre space itself even transgressed conventions when it was transformed to look like a run-down cinema, including torn-up cinema seats instead of the regular seating, dirty floors, cobwebs, and to top it all off, a sign that apologized for the inconvenience, explaining that the cinema was undergoing renovations (Thompson 92). Breaking the conventions of the theatre space itself was quite the risk; it could have been off-putting to the audience, causing people to leave poor reviews, which could shut down the show early. However, this breaking of genre conventions contributed heavily to the musical’s success; the show received glowing reviews upon opening. By the end of opening week, the cast had become stars, and people were lining up to get into the tiny theatre to watch *The Rocky Horror Show* (Thompson 94).

“It’s Just a Jump to the Left”: Remediating *Rocky Horror* from Stage to Screen

Multiple changes had to be made to *The Rocky Horror Show* when adapting it for the big screen (Figure 2), the most surface-level being the addition of “Picture” to the title to denote that it was indeed a “picture show” now, as opposed to its earlier form as a stage show. The pacing of the show was slowed down, as the film had no need to keep a nonstop pace. Many explicit sexual jokes were removed from

the script as well, toning down the still very sexual and queer story for a wider audience. The grimmer punk aesthetics were softened, and the shiny, glittery glam rock aesthetics were more heavily emphasized. In these ways, the remediation of *Rocky Horror* from stage musical to film was fairly standard; these changes were made in order to adhere to the



Figure 2: A screenshot from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

conventions of the film genre—particularly the wider audience. Theatre as a medium is usually viewed by a smaller, more eclectic audience who would be more open to a grimmer, queerer, and more explicit show. Film, on the other hand, is usually for a wider audience—due in part to its accessibility. When adapted to film, potentially alienating aspects of the show—the grimy punk aesthetics, the explicit queer and sexual content—were toned down to appeal to a wider audience. By following the conventions of the new genre it was inhabiting, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* should have been set for success when it opened in cinemas.

This was not the case. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* premiered in cinemas in 1975, and the reception was lukewarm at best, both in the United Kingdom and the United States (Thompson 169). *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was turning out to be a failure. However, the head of advertising noticed that the few people who *were* watching the movie were dedicated; the same people would attend the film time after time, usually in costume, sometimes singing along (Thompson 171). The head of advertising then made the decision to move the film from the usual big showings to midnight matinees, usually reserved for low-budget films (Thompson 173). The film, despite its adherence to genre conventions, could not thrive in a mainstream, highly commercialized environment. It was better suited for something

underground, where it could develop a fan following. The reception of the film, both in its failure in the mainstream and in its fan following during the midnight matinees, changed the distribution of the film. Without the permutations of this interconnected activity system, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* might have been a flop that was soon forgotten. Instead, it became a cult classic that would spawn its own new genre.

“We Are Ready for the Floor Show”: The Creation of Shadow Casts

Attending midnight matinees of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* became a routine outing for fans of the film, often going to see the film on a weekly basis. Fans would dress up as the characters and sing along with the songs, but not much more. However, one night a member of the audience at one of the showings yelled at the screen: “Buy an umbrella, you cheap bitch!” in response to Janet putting a newspaper over her head during the storm (Thompson 175–6). Yelling during a movie is a blatant break with the conventions of the literate activity of watching a film. However, this breaking of convention spawned a new way to interact with the film, one that is a beloved tradition that continues to this day. Soon after the first instance, interjections became commonplace in cinemas across the country. Callouts are now a regular part of viewing *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, with a combination of standard callouts—calling Brad an “asshole” and Janet a “slut”—and local variations on others. One of my personal favorites is to yell, “What’s for dinner?” during the dinner scene, and when the dead body of Eddie—played by the musician Meat Loaf—is revealed, to groan, “Meatloaf again?!”

It didn’t stop with callouts, either. Eventually, viewing *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* turned into shadow casts, a new genre of performance combining the film with theatrical performance and audience participation. Shadow casts merge the film performance with a theatrical performance by having a local cast onstage in front of the film, dressed as the characters, miming the on-screen actions, as you would in a theatrical performance (Figure 3). However, the film provides the entirety of the audio, with the actors only lip-syncing to the dialogue, which keeps the shadow cast from being solely a theatrical performance. An additional performance aspect is added when the audience yells callouts at the screen and live actors, often riffing off each other. The audience also participates in more physical ways, such as throwing rice during the weddings, holding a newspaper over their heads when it is raining on-screen, and dancing along to the “Time Warp.” Additionally, the audience dresses up as their favorite characters, further blurring the lines

between the actors on the screen, the actors on the stage, and the audience. The shadow cast, then, is a merging of genres and performance styles, blending the film performance with the theatrical performance and the audience performance.

I’ve been participating in shadow casts of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* for six years now in three different cities, and it is one of my most beloved traditions. No matter how many I’ve been a part of, I’ve never been to a shadow cast that was the same as the one before it. Every year brings a new cast who make new choices in their performances, as well as new audience members who

shout new callouts, either of their own creation or borrowed from their own local tradition. The text of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is constantly being transformed in little ways through the socialization that occurs during the show. Sometimes, audience members even riff off each other, responding to the callouts of other audience members. The organic nature of socialization means that every performance is unique and reliant on the audience to help in its creation.



Figure 3: Augustana College’s 2019 shadow cast of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Murrin).

“Wild and Untamed Thing”: Maybe We Should Be Breaking Conventions More Often

All of these beloved traditions were originally transgressions of conventions. Instead of adhering to the genre conventions of *just* film or *just* theatre, fans decided to merge both, creating a new genre from the melding of the two. Additionally, the conventions of the literate activity of watching a film were discarded entirely. Audience members are rowdy, loud, and physically active during the film, instead of sitting quietly. When watching a film conventionally, it is easy to think that watching a film is the activity of an isolated individual. Shadow casts demonstrate how watching a movie *is* a social activity; it is part of the network of activity that is essential to any text’s existence. The reception of the audience—the way dedicated fans watched the film time after time and repurposed it into an outing of dressing up,

singing along, shouting, and throwing items about—created a whole new genre. In this new genre of shadow casts, socialization occurs between the performers and the audience, creating a space where the audience is also performing, where both performers and audience-performers are reshaping the text night after night. This example of breaking conventions shows us just how much can be gained when we don't strictly adhere to genre conventions. Sometimes rules are better off broken, and from that destruction, we can create something extraordinary.

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Notes

