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# ***Portrait of a Cult Film Audience: The Rocky Horror Picture Show***

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*Journal of Communication*, Volume 31, Issue 2, 1 June 1981, Pages 43–54,  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1981.tb01227.x>

**Published:** 07 February 2006

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# *Portrait of a Cult Film Audience:* The Rocky Horror Picture Show

by Bruce A. Austin

*The preparation, the waiting, and the active participation  
in the viewing of the film itself appear to be part  
of a group ritual which characterizes the cult film as an event.*

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and its generation of a cult phenomenon have received attention in the national popular press, but its particular characteristics and components have not been studied in detail. Because of the continuing popularity of the film and especially because of the participation of the audience in the "event," the film provides a unique opportunity for a case-study investigation of the cult phenomenon.

Cult films are the "private genre" of "the privileged children of the middle class," according to Monaco (8, p. 66; see also 2). He traces the beginning of the cult film phenomenon to "the late sixties as camp interest developed in Roger Corman's various monster and motorcycle movies" (8, p. 66). He cursorily identifies several attributes as constituent elements of the cult film. The films are "generally offered at Friday and Saturday midnight screenings in college towns across the U.S." to a young audience. A "general trend [of the film content] has been toward what we might call a trash esthetic in cult" laced with a "vivid element" of sadomasochism (p. 66). The films also are populated by "egregiously eccentric characters" (p. 276), are inexpensively produced using on-location settings (p. 167), and are given poor ("dumped") distribution by their studios (p. 163). Monaco is probably correct, although this cannot be readily verified, in stating that the cult film phenomenon began in the 1960s. Distribution and exhibition practices (e.g., vertical integration) prior to this time would most likely

Bruce A. Austin is an Assistant Professor at Rochester Institute of Technology. He gratefully acknowledges the assistance with data collection and processing provided by Daniel W. Hebert, and the cooperation of Nick Ritota, manager of the theater where *Rocky Horror* was playing at the time of this study. The author is indebted to Robert E. Golden for his detailed comments on an earlier draft of this article. A longer version of this article detailing other aspects of the study is available from the author.

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Online ISSN 1460-2466

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