

The Absolute Pleasure of Discipline: Rocky Horror Fandom and Foucault

In their collection *Fandom*, Jonathan Gray and the other editors assert that we can learn much from studying fan cultures and fan audiences. In particular, studying fan audiences helps us understand how we relate to one another, how—in our ever-mediated world—we form identities and communities. In a way, they are echoing second-wave fan theorists' views that fan cultures are microcosms of societies, complete with the social hierarchies that exist within them. On the other hand, in *Textual Poachers*, one of the seminal texts of first-wave fan studies, Henry Jenkins puts forth an optimistic view of fandom, saying that fandom has the power to enfranchise the socially disenfranchised by the creation of communities that cater specifically to those who may otherwise be low in the social hierarchy of the norm. While I agree somewhat with Henry Jenkins that there is an empowering aspect to fandom, at the same time, I agree with the second-wave fan studies theorists who saw fandoms as miniature societies with norms within the fandom. In the fan artifact presentations on slash vids, Lauren Rile-Smith provided a helpful sheet with instructions on how to read fan vids. While it may not be necessary for enjoyment, it is part of the social norms understood by fans who watch slash vids.

In this paper, I would like to explore the disciplining of fans. Using Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* as a framework, I would like to examine what it means to be part of a fandom through knowledge of the social rules of that fandom. I will focus primarily on the fandom surrounding the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. If studying fan audiences allows us to further understand how we ourselves interact in a mediated world, then Rocky Horror fandom is an excellent way of understanding discipline in our own world, which is mediated through signs and signals rather than direct reprimands. Therefore, in the philosophy put forth by the editors of *Fandom*, I will use several key

concepts of Foucault's work that relate to disciplining societies and discuss aspects of Rocky Horror fandom in relation to them.

Discipline and Punish is an analysis of the modern prison system, and by extent, modern disciplining practices. One of his main arguments is that in punishment, the focus has shifted away from the body and onto the soul. In the Foucaultian sense, the soul is the part of the subject on which knowledge and discipline are inscribed: "It is the element in which are articulated the effects of a certain type of power and the reference of a certain type of knowledge, the machinery by which the power relations give rise to a possible corpus of knowledge, and knowledge extends and reinforces the effects of this power." (29) The soul, then, is a disciplined and disciplinary force: because of the knowledge inscribed upon it, including societal norms (disciplined), the subject thus knows the "correct" way to behave (disciplinary). I chose to focus on the callbacks in the Rocky Horror Picture Show because it is a very visible way of seeing how bodies and souls are disciplined in a society according to societal norms. I am not trying to imply that Rocky Horror fans (or fans in general) are simply docile subjects; I believe, as Henry Jenkins does, that there is something subversive about fan cultures and part of the fun of Rocky Horror fandom, according to the three people I interviewed, is that there is a lot of spontaneity—fans are not interested in everyone doing the exact same thing at the same time.

However, while discipline, as a way in which power acts on the body and soul, can be an establishment of a very particular rhythm on the body which replicates itself (such as factory work), it can also be more discreet than that, and I believe that this is the kind of discipline that operates on Rocky Horror fans: "Power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it'; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them...[these relations] do not merely reproduce, at the level of individuals, bodies, gestures and behaviour... although there is continuity (they are indeed articulated on this form through a whole series of complex mechanisms), there is neither analogy nor homology, *but a specificity of mechanism and modality*." (27, my emphasis)

Therefore, while it is important to note that Rocky Horror fans enjoy the spontaneity of new callback lines, the new actions and words are performed within the norms of Rocky Horror fandom. So, while fans eschew having an exact script and only being allowed to say certain lines, the new lines exist in an implicit understanding of what is and is not acceptable in the Rocky Horror community.

Foucault's power/knowledge complex also operates on Rocky Horror fans. Power produces knowledge and knowledge produces power; they are dialectical with one another. This notion is interesting when seen in the perspective of Rocky Horror fandom. The three people I interviewed talked about how they learned what to do at Rocky Horror showings and how to act. The majority of that knowledge had come from Rocky Horror fans that had been going to screenings for a long time. Their extensive knowledge of the text of the movie, as well as the trivia surrounding it, made them more powerful in that particular theater. According to a book written by the president of the official Rocky Horror fan club, the more times someone has seen the film, the higher up in rank they are. Also, while not mentioned in the book, the better one knows the movie, the easier it is for them to make up their own callbacks because they know the exact moment in which something will happen, they can either foreshadow or respond to the film. They have the power to create a new verse in the canon of Rocky Horror callbacks if people respond positively. There is another interesting dimension to the power/knowledge complex in terms of the viewing experience of Rocky Horror. The people I interviewed all mentioned a sense of power they get when they say something to the screen that is about to happen. Although they know logically that the actors cannot hear them, there is a sense that they made the action onscreen occur. This speaks very well to the power/knowledge complex because the audience *knows* what will happen while the actors do not.

However, aside from this somewhat organic organization of power relations, there are more explicit ways of disciplining Rocky Horror fans. These come from the producers of Rocky Horror. On the DVD version of the film, there are three different ways to learn

how to participate in Rocky Horror screenings. One is the “Participation Prompter,” which tells the viewer the appropriate places to do the certain actions, such as throw rice, snap rubber gloves, and put newspapers on the head. These show up infrequently, but they do show up. Interestingly, this relates to Foucault’s discussion of the docile body, because these instructions are for *actions*, kinetic motions that get ingrained in one’s memory. Foucault’s docile body has been subjected to this kind of disciplining as well, learning the appropriate times to perform certain actions. In terms of callbacks, there is not subtitle track for that, but there is an audio track where you hear an audio track of some of the “finest fans” do callbacks. The “finest fans” refer to those who have seen the movie multiple times and know it by heart, thus establishing them as higher than the current viewer. There is also a multi-view watcher, which enables the viewer, at certain points in the movie, to watch the floor show with the movie in the background. When I asked the people I interviewed what they thought about having such features on the DVD, none of them were very pleased. To them, it felt like they were learning what to do in this way that would standardize the Rocky Horror experience.

There are also disciplining practices that come from fans that take place outside of the theater. There are scripts available online for those who have never been to Rocky Horror that have the callbacks in them. There are different versions for different cities. More important, though, are the etiquette rules put out by the Official Rocky Horror Picture Show Fan Club. On the Fan Club website, there is a section entitled “Participation” with various links, such as “Prop List,” “Rocky Horror Etiquette,” “A Virgin’s Guide,” and “How to do the Time Warp.” It is important to note that these links, which all have instructions on how to do various things, are put out by the *official* fan club, thus linking these practices to the movie. The *official* fan club is the closest a fan can get to the producers because they are associated with the production company. The Etiquette page is particularly interesting because it is an explicit rulebook on how to act at a screening. The page opens with “The difference between a *true RHPS fan* and someone just out for a rowdy

time can be seen in their manners and etiquette. Here are some guidelines that *should be deemed necessary by anyone looking to perpetuate our experiences of absolute pleasure.*" (my emphasis) This quotation establishes different modes of being as viewers: those who are true fans and those who are looking for a crazy night. There is a hierarchy of viewership. By using the word "just," the reader knows that the latter group is not a worthy group. In order to be a good fan—or, in the words of the website, "anyone looking to perpetuate our experiences of absolute pleasure"—there are "necessary" rules to follow. The rules of etiquette relate very nicely to Foucault's idea of the gentle way of punishing. Here is one of the etiquette guidelines: "Respect the wishes of the theater and its management. Vandalism and the breaking of rules might not only lead to your ejection, but to the closing of the film. *This would only be spoiling it for everyone.*" (my emphasis) This is an excellent example of punishment of the soul and the gentle way of disciplining. The gentle way focuses on the soul rather than the body, and emphasizes the exclusion from normal society. Like Foucault's analysis of the modern punishment system, the society of the fandom is of the utmost importance, and the fitting into that society is what the viewer must strive for. Therefore, to break rules is to knowingly select oneself out of the fandom, similar to what Foucault's analysis says about criminals and normal society.

There are, of course, aspects of *Discipline and Punish* that are not applicable to the callbacks in Rocky Horror, but they are to fandom in general. One is Foucault's insistence that the modern age is so intent on disciplining the body because when the body becomes more productive, more capital can be gained. This does not apply to the callbacks, but it does to other aspects of fandom, such as fan clubs. As we saw in *Otaku No Video*, everyone has a specific task that they can do, and there is even one man who sleeps during the day so he can stay up at night and be productive while everyone else sleeps. While it may not be to gain capital in *Otaku No Video*, it is in order to make the mini society of the fan club be more productive.

This paper, due to its length, is merely a brief overview of the possibilities of studying the disciplining practices in fandoms. Foucault's idea of power is that it is not necessarily hierarchical, but acts in networks and webs through which people are affected. Often times, then, power is acted on us without us realizing; it becomes part of our accepted norms. However, although the authorities in our society might not be visible, it is important to keep in mind who they are in our society versus who they are in fan cultures. In general, fan cultures are self-selected societies where people interact with one another based on a common interest and goal, unlike general society, in which we are all placed without real choice. With that said, within the norms of the self-selected society, fans are disciplined.

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