

## The Hidden Truth of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* by Amelia Kinsinger

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Saturday night: *Rocky Horror*. The weekly showing was always jotted on my calendar; no questions asked. My best friend Jo and I slammed the doors on the over-bumper-stickered car shut after arriving at the Lakewood Theater for our weekly ritual. We stood in line behind drag queens and goths who made our combat boots and ripped jeans look like children’s clothes. We lugged our toilet paper and confetti-filled purses into the old, dark theater. Each Saturday was as exciting as the last. Once the clock struck midnight, our lives transformed for 100 minutes. The energy in the musty old theater was intoxicating, and we escaped into a world with no limits. We could laugh and yell alongside strangers as we watched our favorite film serve as the backdrop for live performance. Now, a year later, the enchanting theater’s doors are permanently closed – closed to us freaks who deleted the concept of “normal” from our repertoires for those 100 minutes each week.

I reached out to Jo recently about our love for *Rocky Horror*, wondering if the film’s status and impact was all it was cracked up to be – all we had cracked it up to be. And, via text message, I got my answer: No. *Rocky Horror* is, in fact, *not* all that we praised it for. In the same swift, shocking way our Saturday night tradition was shut down, so was my idealization of it. Jo replied:

Although I’ll always love *Rocky Horror* and know all the words by heart, it’s just that like drag culture can be pretty misogynistic and transphobic. The whole “this is a show and entertainment” can take away validity and seemingly mock trans people unless it’s done super carefully, ya know? And the misogynistic part is that a lot of times it’s cisgender men dressing up as women and creating a caricature that mocks women, as a lot of times it’s supposed to be humorous by making fun of women. And there’s the whole they get to dress “slutty” and it’s funny/cool and empowering but when women/trans women/nonbinary people dress like that, they get mocked or like brutalized. (Swartz-Larson)

I stared at my phone screen, going through the four stages of grief in a span of five minutes.



*Performers dressed as Dr. Frank N Furter and Magenta from The Rocky Horror Picture Show.*

1. Denial: "No," I thought, "*Rocky Horror* defined a huge portion of my teenage years. There's no way it could be so easily dismissed. I can't accept it. I won't accept it."

2. Depression: "But what if Jo is right? Did I really waste my life worshiping this misogynistic and transphobic film?"

3. Anger: "How could I do this? I am the worst. No, *Rocky Horror* is the worst."

4. Acceptance: "Oh shit. I get it. But I still kinda love it."

Once I hit acceptance, I had realization after realization about the film and its implications. Yes, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* critiques conventional gender models, mocks heteronormativity, and promotes gender fluidity, but buried beneath the catchy musical numbers and flashy costumes, Jo's assessment rings true. Although the film breaks down norms, it does so in a reckless way—a way that underhandedly allows heteronormativity to succeed. It perpetuates common stereotypes, and casts a negative light on women and transgender people. And yes, that totally and utterly sucks, but it's even more unfortunate that I can't stop loving this film.

### Let There Be Lips!

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* premiered on stage in 1973, and was greeted with mixed reviews when released on film two years later. It's not your typical grab-a-bowl-of-popcorn-and-unwind film, but instead a throw-popcorn-at-the-screen-alongside-a-bunch-of-weirdos experience. The typical audience doesn't care about the identical sounding songs, cheesy lines, or low production quality; what matters is that they aren't just viewing—they are participating. Audience members yelling prearranged lines during pauses in dialogue, wearing eccentric outfits, and chucking various props characterizes the experience. Definitely not normal. But then again, nothing is particularly "normal" about this film.

To understand *Rocky Horror*'s madness, you need to first know the characters:

- *Dr. Frank N. Furter* (Tim Curry): a mad scientist, head of the castle, and self-proclaimed "sweet transvestite from Transsexual, Transylvania."

- *Brad Majors* (Barry Bostwick) and *Janet Weiss* (Susan Sarandon): a nauseating, freshly-engaged, and overly-traditional couple.

- *Rocky Horror* (Peter Hinwood): Frank's blond, muscular, sparingly-dressed creation.

- *Riff Raff* (Richard O'Brien), *Magenta* (Patricia Quinn), and *Columbia* (Nell Campbell): Frank's unconventional minions.

- *Eddie* (Meat Loaf): ex-delivery boy, stereotypical bad boy, and dinner's main course.

- *Dr. Everett V. Scott* (Jonathan Adams): a rival scientist, Eddie's unconcerned uncle, and Brad and Janet's poorly chosen mentor.

- *The Criminologist* (Charles Gray): the serious (excepting his performance in the "Time Warp") narrator.

The film starts by introducing Brad and Janet, who have become hastily engaged, and are just as hastily on their way to deliver the news to Dr. Scott. After finding themselves off course in a forest, the couples' search for a telephone leads them to a spooky castle doorstep. They knock, and a mess ensues upon their entry. Frank's grand entrance involves fishnet stockings, lipstick, song and dance, and a wide-eyed Brad and Janet. After his performance, Frank leads the couple to his lab, where he brings Rocky to life. Eddie emerges, breaks into a musical number, and (naturally) Frank kills him. Next, Brad and Janet are shown to separate rooms, where Frank seduces them individually. Jealous of Brad, Janet becomes intimate with Rocky. Dr. Scott then arrives at the castle looking for Eddie. The group shares dinner, which happens to be Eddie's disfigured remains. (I guess they cast Meat Loaf for a reason). After Janet freaks out about their meal, everyone meets in the lab where Frank turns them into stone, dresses them in cabaret

costumes, and then turns them back into humans. Janet, Brad, Dr. Scott, Rocky, and Columbia perform a cabaret show with Frank as the leader. Riff Raff and Magenta interrupt to reveal themselves as aliens; kill Columbia, Rocky, and Frank; release Brad, Janet, and Dr. Scott; and return to their home planet (*Rocky*). And that concludes the perfect chaos.

*Rocky Horror* appeared in theatres as the glam-rock era drew to a close. Think David Bowie – specifically, Bowie’s heavy makeup, low-cut tops, and platform boots. Bowie embodied the defining features of glam rock: music, glamour (obviously), and stretching sexual boundaries. So, while *Rocky Horror* was still a what-the-hell-is-happening performance, it was not the first or the only gender-destroying, groundbreaking art form in popular culture. Gender fluidity was not discussed much during the late ‘70s. Sexual experimentation was obviously happening, but it didn’t necessarily make it easy to define or label oneself as a certain gender and sexuality. Dr. Frank N. Furter’s only expressed label was “transvestite.” Genetics researcher and queer/trans advocacy volunteer, Mari Brighe, explains:

When the film was originally released in 1975, “transvestite” was the common terminology used for a cross dresser, and the term “transsexual” was hardly known outside of medical and LGBT circles. In the context of the culture of 1975, both Frank N. Furter and the film as a whole were incredibly subversive for their portrayals of flexible gender and non-heterosexual sex. (Brighe)

So, while shows like *RuPaul’s Drag Race* have conventionalized drag culture and cross dressing in our own time, Frank’s character was still shocking and revolutionary in the context of the film’s release.

### **Which One? Which Gender? Which Species?**

Part of what makes *Rocky Horror* successful is the film’s satire of heteronormativity and

common traditional gender roles. When either Janet or Brad is on-screen, the audience’s exclamations of “Slut!” and “Asshole!” confirm its understanding that the film is ridiculing the couple. The film introduces the couple as steadfast heteronormative disciples with values that are effortlessly mocked once they meet opposition in Dr. Frank N. Furter’s castle. Before entering the castle, Brad and Janet’s rushed engagement has revealed their heteronormative standards. Janet catches the bride’s bouquet at a wedding, triggering Brad’s immediate proposal, to which she bewilderingly agrees. Amitai F. Aviram, Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature, explains how the engagement reinforces “the conception of marriage not as a celebration of love but as the fulfillment of rigid social norms” (187). The couple’s admiration for heteronormativity turns their lifestyle into a joke. Victoria Tickle, a marketing executive and *Film International* author, explains Brad and Janet’s gendered attitudes: “an acceptable reasoning behind why Brad and Janet (within the film’s structured society) are so fixed in their gender roles is to be recognized by that society as normal” (148). The couple’s frantic grasp for normalcy reveals their need to appear as society’s ideal couple... but they are far from it.

After understanding Brad and Janet’s socially constructed goals and ideals, we can see how easily the castle challenges these goals. The couple originally views themselves as normal, and the castle’s community as outcasts. Brad and Janet’s prioritization of social norms above their individuality is underlined when they meet Dr. Frank N. Furter – a (very) stark opposition to everything they view as ordinary. Brad and Janet desperately cling to their constructed roles when they enter this queer society. Janet is frenzied, weak, and stereotypically feminine, while Brad’s the opposite:

**Janet:** Brad, please, let’s get out of here. (*Slut!*)

**Brad:** For God’s sake keep a grip on yourself Janet! (*Asshole!*)

Frustration grows when Frank sardonically recognizes and disregards Brad's masculinity:

**Frank:** How forceful you are, Brad. Such a perfect specimen of manhood. So... dominant. You must be awfully proud of him, Janet. (*Brad, your dominance is showing!*)

Brad and Frank immediately clash, and "... there is a larger, more overtly political, gay side to the conflict between Frank and Brad – the general theme of the disruption of heterosexuality" (Aviram 186). Brad's shock and disgust for the castle's culture underlines the disruption of heterosexuality he and Janet experience: "The assault on heterosexuality-as-an-institution takes place on several fronts" (Aviram 187), and persists until, ironically, they both conform to nonconformity. This change occurs when Frank's minions assign Brad and Janet separate rooms to supposedly maintain their pre-marital chastity. (Honestly, do they think this place supports customary virtues?) As a conventional heterosexual couple, they are each distraught when Frank sleeps with them, but find comfort when Frank promises to keep the affair secret from their partner. Their relief reveals the onset of their change, "The parallelism of these two scenes, and the mutual shock when the two view each other's seduction on closed-circuit TV, can only further undermine the opposition of sex roles associated with heterosexual, ideological reproduction" (Aviram 188). The ease with which Brad and Janet's initially strong views disintegrate mocks the couple's heteronormative ideals, and their inconsistent attitude defines them as "typical" people:

Typical people who adapt to atypical situations are powerful subversives of middle American values. As pure representatives of conventional and traditional culture, their speedy acquiescence to deviance indicates this idealized culture's fragility. Brad and Janet, apparent conservatives in

Frankenfurter's horrific and radical world, are stripped, literally and figuratively, of their exterior middle American identity documents. (Kinkade and Katovich 200)

The couple's innocence is shed, and their adaptation to the new society serves as a look into heteronormative society's arbitrariness. Brad and Janet follow particular ideals for no reason other than to blend in, and the film acknowledges this trait within our culture and mocks it.

Going hand-in-hand with its rejection of heteronormativity, the film endorses gender fluidity. Frank's character makes it unmistakably clear that gender, sexuality, and appearance do not need to align: "Dr. Frank-N-Furter, and indeed all transsexuals and transgendered people, illustrate the difference between anatomical sex, gendered identity and gender performativity" (Tickle 148). Frank rejects conformity while maintaining his position as a leader, and this dominating role marks gender fluidity as the castle's standard. He is assertive and dominant (and looks pretty fierce in fishnets), and therefore respected, not only as the authority figure and role model, but also for his standards. In their reading of *Rocky Horror*, Texas Christian University professors Patrick Kinkade and Michael Katovich explain how Frank "is the deviant god, leading his people astray while celebrating the right to do so . . . . As with other camp heroes of post-1960s genre films, Frankenfurter appeals to qualities that mainstream conservative culture disdains" (200). Frank, along with the other castle residents, establishes his own definition of normal – a definition uninfluenced by the outside world's ideas. His encouragement to reject common views inspires other characters, including Brad and Janet, whose swift adherence to the castle's norms clarifies this new standard of gender fluidity while underscoring the disruption of social norms. Frank's rejection of what the audience defines as conventional ultimately encourages viewers to redefine their view of "normal" (at

least for a couple of hours).

### **You Call That a Man?**

One of *Rocky Horror's* many intriguing aspects is its ability to maintain a heteronormative audience. Yes, people transform into nonconformists for an evening (somewhat imitating Brad and Janet's transformation), but the audience is predominantly heteronormative. *Rocky Horror's* ability to maintain a mainstream audience partially depends upon presenting not an exclusively queer society, but a queer society hidden within a heteronormative world. Dr. Everett V. Scott is the "normal person" archetype. Scott is "meant to be the physical embodiment of queer culture oppression," and "members of the audience with the same view as Dr. Scott may find some comfort in the fact that societal norms in the film remain a carbon copy of the societal norms which they embrace" (Tickle 150). The film uses Dr. Scott as a tool to hint at heteronormativity:

**Dr. Scott:** "You saw what became of Eddie. Society must be protected."

Dr. Scott serves as a reminder that the queer culture cannot fully exist. One reading of *Rocky Horror* highlights this point:

*Rocky Horror* is more than a crisis film. Its basis is a paradox - the celebration of deviance to verify society. The destruction of Frankenfurter's world and Brad and Janet's escape from it (presumably to wed) reaffirm the necessity of a heterosexual procreating society . . . . Thus, a conservative ideology contains *Rocky Horror's* outrageous appearances – traditional norms are validated; Frankenfurter is merely a distraction. (Kinkade and Katovich 200)

The castle's society draws us away from heteronormativity, yet this diversion from our daily mainstream society is short-lived and incessantly disrupted by characters such as Dr. Scott and the Criminologist. Consequently, the heteronormative society – though not constantly shown – can always be felt. A staunchly

heteronormative audience finds reassurance in the fact that, while conventional standards will always dominate, places with queer culture can be demolished and never considered again (ironic considering my favorite theater's destruction). It is demolished when the castle members reveal their true identities as aliens, kill Frank, and swiftly return to their world. To tie it up nicely for the audience: the queer society literally dehumanizes themselves by revealing they are aliens, and Frank – the supposed epitome of gender fluidity – dies. Just like that, this outlandish culture disappears so the heteronormative culture can resurface and live on.

*The Rocky Horror Show's* principal symbol of queer culture – Frank – exhibits a concerning portrayal when in drag: he oppresses women and transgender people, and he uses power and dominance as tools for oppression and alienation. His "entire camp personality from the beginning, as the raging drag queen" (Aviram 185) mocks trans people and women (as does drag-culture in the real world). Frank helped revolutionize gender nonconformity during the '70s, but in today's context, he is merely a bisexual drag-queen. His character illuminates drag-culture's main crisis – it ultimately allows cisgender men to dress up and create a parody that mocks women. Charlotte Coles explains that "The humour expressed in many mainstream drag acts (Dame Edna Everage, RuPaul, Lily Savage) is conservative and presents an image of women which is stereotypical to the point of insult" (9). Drag culture builds off of women's negative stereotypes, and as shown through Frank's portrayal, it's easier for films and other media to cast light on uncommonly represented people if they perpetuate a narrow stereotype. Results of a study of how transgender people experience the media suggest that the media "routinely confuses cross dressing, transsexualism and homosexuality, which leads to people feeling misrepresented, and may potentially compound prejudiced attitudes in society" ("How" 10). This confusion contributes to the negative image of trans people and women.

Why can we praise and respect Frank in his glittery corset while we mock and brutalize trans women for wearing the same thing? Although *Rocky Horror* advocated for fluidity on the surface, Frank's character was another rewrite of the commonly stereotyped and misrepresented woman. Frank's alleged fluidity is finally trumped by the negative stereotypes his character maintains and perpetuates.

### **Bye, Lips! Bubbye!**

I'm reminded of the discomfort surrounding my first *Rocky Horror* showing, from the "V" smudged on my forehead with lipstick as a symbol for my *Rocky Horror* virginity to the live-action Frank sitting on my lap singing, "Don't Dream it, Be it." I'm uncomfortable again. I know it wasn't *Rocky Horror's* intention to perpetuate negative stereotypes and underhandedly promote heteronormativity. I mean, the movie came out more than 40 years ago, when it served as a stepping stone to inclusion. While the film isn't perfect, it gave conversations surrounding gender and sexuality a (high-heeled) kick into gear. Heteronormative audiences had a safe space to drop their cool, throw away their standards, and explore difference and diversity. The negatives that lie underneath *Rocky Horror's* surface must be acknowledged and serve as a reminder to look at the full context before drawing conclusions. It's uncomfortable, but after all, I'd rather be uncomfortable than unaware.

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