A
tblack sequined corset, long black gloves, black panties and garters, pearls, and glistening red lipstick. He puts his hands on his hips, and you know he means business. The whole outfit screams femme fatale, but it is no woman clothed in this sexual and sequined black ensemble; it is actually Tim Curry as the fabulous transvestite, Frank-N-Furter. When he throws off his cape, you are immediately shocked—perhaps by Curry on-screen, perhaps by the man in matching drag standing onstage below the screen, getting cat-called by the audience members. But Frank-N-Furter immediately reminds us not to “get strung out by the way I look. Don’t judge a book by its cover. I’m not much of a man by the light of day, but by night I’m one hell of a lover. I’m just a sweet transvestite, from transexual Transylvania” (Rocky Horror). He tries to soothe our discomfort, but of course, all this is said sarcastically with a smug grin growing across his face.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show (henceforth Rocky Horror) is a cult classic that has been deemed culturally significant enough to make it into the Library of Congress’s National Film Registry. Released in 1975, it is the longest running movie in theaters and can still be seen at midnight showings nationwide. Rocky Horror follows a newly engaged couple—Janet Weiss and Brad Majors—as they spend an evening in a castle filled with strange characters after their car breaks down nearby. It is a satire of Frankenstein: a scientist creates life inside his dreary castle during a terrible thunderstorm, but the scientist is gay and is creating the man to be his lover. The film is often accompanied by a live, performing shadow cast. They act out the movie below the screen as a raucous audience shouts specific lines throughout the movie. It seems to be a camp musical only enjoyable for the viewing experience, but if you dig further, you can see that it is trying to comment on society, particularly on gender and sexuality. This embrace of the bizarre and unusual turns our attention to alternative subcultures and non-heterosexual relationships.
So “[i]f you want something visual, that’s not too abysmal,” you might want to turn on *Rocky Horror* instead of “an old Steve Reeves movie” (*Rocky Horror*). Since its release in the 70s, many people have acclaimed *Rocky Horror* for its critique of heterotypical gender and sexuality, but is this just the reading that comes most easily? Does *Rocky Horror* challenge or reinforce traditional stereotypes of gender, sex, and sexuality?

*Rocky Horror* came out in the midst of the sexual revolution of the 70s, and is a product of the era’s sexual inquisitiveness. During the 70s, it became more common for women to openly engage in premarital sex and to express their sexual agency while more gay, lesbian, transsexual, and transgendered individuals came out publicly and began working for equal rights. One of these transsexual individuals who came out during this break from sexual secrecy was Richard O’Brien, the writer of the original play and the screenwriter and creative force behind the movie. Even so, as Carol A.B. Warren discusses in her article “Sex and Gender in the 1970s,” the stigma surrounding homosexuality persisted as the secrecy shrouding the gay community was removed (502). It was widely believed that sexuality was a choice and that homosexuals were trying to lure others into their “deviant” lifestyle. That belief created a phobia of befriending gays for fear that one would be seen as gay by association (499, 504). *Rocky Horror* tries to challenge these assumptions. Frank-N-Furter exudes confidence, encouraging us viewers to be proud of our sexuality, even if it is considered “deviant.” Janet enjoys sex so much that she fools around with any guy in the castle. Sex is presented as fun and experimental, something that shouldn’t be taken too seriously. These extreme portrayals of sexuality and sex seemed to embody the sexual revolution of the 70s.

*Rocky Horror* wanted to challenge the stereotype of the “happy couple” often featured in contemporary movies such as *Love Story*, released in 1970. *Love Story* portrays the “perfect couple”—two young, intelligent, and attractive students; the girl, Jenny, from a modest background, the boy, Oliver, from a wealthy family. Their love overcomes all obstacles. When Oliver renounces his inheritance to stay with Jenny, his decision doesn’t impact them for long. Oliver ultimately graduates law school and takes a position at a renowned law firm, allowing the couple to live out all of their desires. In *Rocky Horror*, love must struggle to survive in its surroundings. The freakish
events of the castle tear Janet and Brad apart and they both succumb to outside seduction. In this sense, Rocky Horror challenges the prevailing trope that love will outlast any situation. But even Love Story displays the influence of the ongoing sexual revolution. Jenny, like Janet, has had premarital sex, demonstrating female sexual independence. Similarly, Jenny decides that she also enjoys sex and that her pleasure is more important than chastity. But Jenny has sex with the man she marries, while Janet has sex with two other men besides Brad. Rocky Horror takes the idea of premarital sex one step further than Love Story, which addresses similar issues in a way that fits within the conservative standards that Rocky Horror mocks.

One way that Rocky Horror challenges conservative relationships and standardized sexuality is through the use of bricolage. Dick Hebdige, in his ethnography “Subculture: The Meaning of Style,” defined “bricolage” as the appropriation and usage of old signs in a contemporary context: the reclaiming of such signs challenges their original meanings and also gives them new meanings (135). Hebdige applies the concept of bricolage to the punk movement’s usage of clothing to convey its anti-establishment message. Although Hebdige discusses style, his analytical method is based in semiotics (the study of signs) and can thus be applied to film as well, especially considering that Rocky Horror came out during the evolution of punk and had a major influence on the punk movement. Punk culture and Rocky Horror go hand and hand and promote similarly subversive value systems. Just as punks assign a new meaning to safety pins by deliberately pinning them on clothing that is falling apart, Rocky Horror assigns a new meaning to red lipstick by putting it on Frank-N-Furter. Punks’ use of the safety pin forces us to confront material poverty by forming a visual parallel to the lives “falling apart” due to poverty (138). The male use of lipstick and other forms of feminine adornment in Rocky Horror forces us to reconsider gender stereotypes by reversing them.

Rocky Horror also frequently uses cultural appropriation, which is similar to bricolage in that the appropriator takes a well-known subject and places it in a different context, thereby challenging our preconceptions about its meaning. The movie itself is a cultural appropriation of Frankenstein, focusing on a homosexual undertone that O’Brien saw in the original. There are also three instances in Rocky Horror in which Grant Wood’s painting,
American Gothic, is appropriated. It is modeled each time by siblings in an incestuous relationship, Magenta and Riff-Raff. American Gothic is commonly seen as portraying a married couple, even though in actuality Woods intended for the painting to portray a father and a daughter. This misinterpretation makes the work serve as a portrait of stereotypical gender roles in labor and marriage (Fineman). The man is holding the pitchfork—a sign that he is responsible for the manual labor and hard work, while the pot of flowers behind the woman’s left shoulder signifies domesticity and classic femininity. This interpretation casts the man as the provider, and the woman as the caregiver. Rocky Horror questions such roles through the gay relationship of Frank-N-Furter and Rocky, and the straight relationship of Brad and Janet. Both Janet and the effeminate Frank-N-Furter control their respective relationships. Frank-N-Furter determines everything for Rocky, and gets upset when the latter disobeys. Janet decides to remain in the castle and explore her sexual curiosity, against the misgivings of Brad. The references to American Gothic subtly enhance O’Brien’s reversal of stereotypical gender roles.

While many believe that Rocky Horror challenges sexual norms and dominant culture, the movie reverses the roles of “weird” and “normal,” paradoxically reinforcing the dominant ideology and cultural norms it supposedly dismantles. Traditionally “atypical” expressions of gender and sexuality are normative in the castle, where minority and majority values are reversed. In the castle, the “freaks” become the dominant majority and the “normal people” (Brad and Janet) become the ostracized minority. In the end, everything that happens within the castle must conform to the freaks’ ideology, and to that of Frank-N-Furter himself. By the end of the movie, Janet succumbs to the dominant ideology of the freak group by putting her sexual pleasure above social stigmas. The relationships within the castle are all homosexual, polyamorous, or incestuous, so a “normal” heterosexual, monogamous, or non-incestuous relationship threatens the homology of the group. Those who do not fit within the dominant ideology, such as Eddy and Columbia—the film’s only characters in a “normal” heterosexual and non-incestuous relationship—are challenged. Frank-N-Furter kills Eddie with an ice pick and, at the end of the movie, when Columbia speaks out about the relationship, Frank-N-Furter treats her just as he had treated Brad and Janet initially. By destroying the one “normal” relationship in his domain, Frank-N-Furter
upholds the castle’s dominant ideology. In an interview, O’Brien referred to the movie’s “fairytale essence,” in the sense that “Brad and Janet are Adam and Eve. The serpent is Frank-N-Furter” (Doyle). Frank-N-Furter destroys the innocence of Brad and Janet through temptation, altering them and forcing everyone in his path to accept his ideology. Most audience members do not immediately see Frank-N-Furter as the villain. They embrace him as more of a hero, whereas even O’Brien recognizes Frank-N-Furter’s ideology as a poor influence. As in any society, the freaks of the castle must uphold their dominant ideology to maintain their group identity and culture.

Members of a group express their ideology through physical symbols, adhering to codes and conventions of appearance that create a group identity. Hebdige explains how “[t]he punk subculture, then, signified chaos at every level, but this was only possible because the style itself was so thoroughly ordered. The chaos cohered as a meaningful whole” (113). Despite claiming to stand for disorder, punk culture had conventions of ideology and dress, such as the safety pin. If style had not been adopted as a uniform, no one would have recognized the connotations of the safety pin. Punks too are homologous—they may look different from the average person, but taken as a group, all punks look similar. The dynamic within the castle of Rocky Horror works in a similar way: the freaks superficially appear very different from the outside world and seem to challenge our concept of normalcy, but they seem normal when compared to one another. When everyone is strange, each person’s individual strangeness stands out less. Sequined corsets and white face makeup are popular and function as a sort of dress code amongst the main freaks. And to be a freak, one must dress like a freak, so Frank-N-Furter dresses everyone for the floor show just as he dresses. The show would lose its meaning as a freak initiation if there weren’t a conventional style of dress adopted by so many of the freaks and then imposed on Janet, Brad, Columbia, and Dr. Scott, all outsiders. Sexual “deviancy” such as homosexuality, transsexuality, promiscuity, and premarital sex becomes sexual convention within the castle, serving as the code of sexual conduct. Group culture is always structured by certain codes and conventions; ultimately, all groups look and act similarly, just as everyone ends up looking and acting like Frank-N-Furter by the end of Rocky Horror.
The one exception is Rocky, Frank-N-Furter’s creation, who looks and acts in accordance with dominant society’s stereotype of the desirable and attractive man. During the song “Sweet Transvestite,” Rocky is described as having “blonde hair and a tan,” reinforcing the “desirability” of his appearance (Rocky Horror). Rocky looks strong, yet loving and innocent. Frank-N-Furter’s first gift to him, a set of weights, ensures that he can—and will—remain in shape. This portrayal of Rocky upholds the myth that the most desirable people are the stereotypically beautiful, and that sex, and perhaps even love, are dependent on one’s physical appearance. Rocky Horror’s only rendition of desirable physical appearance reinforces the dominant popular ideology of mass culture.

In his article, “Freakery, Cult Films, and the Problem of Ambivalence,” David Church discusses how cult films enforce the notion that people with disabilities are freakish. Though Frank-N-Furter’s homosexuality and transsexuality cannot be classed as disabilities, they might still be regarded as predetermined conditions, manifesting themselves in his physical appearance as a transsexual. Frank-N-Furter can thus be compared to those whom Church calls, however unfairly, disabled bodies (3). Church argues that cult fans see such disabilities as deviations from the norm, and that shamelessly viewing freaks on the movie screen seems to “abject the borders between self/other and normal/abnormal” (11). As cult films themselves are viewed as “abnormal”—or so Church argues—they do not “challenge social inequalities that engender those prejudices” of the physically different (15). Even if homosexuality and transsexuality are understood as inborn, Rocky Horror still does not foster acceptance of them. By portraying them as abnormal, it encourages a judgment of them as abnormal.

As you dig past the camp, you’ll find that Rocky Horror simultaneously challenges and surprisingly reinforces the dominant ideology regarding the norms of gender, sex, and sexuality. This ambiguous approach forces the audience to question the gender binary and to see gender and sexuality as a spectrum. As a “non-normative” person, Richard O’Brien also forces us to question the gender binary through his non-cisgender identification. O’Brien has said that he felt “30% female” when he began taking estrogen pills, but he has chosen not to undergo gender reassignment surgery (Fidgen). Perhaps then, Rocky Horror is meant to question the entire concept of gender and
sexuality. Hebdige concludes in his analysis of punk culture that “[t]he punk ensembles . . . did not so much magically resolve experienced contradictions as represent the experience of contradiction itself in the form of visual puns” (141). Rocky Horror does the same: it shocks us through visual puns that draw our attention to traditional concepts of gender and sexuality, resulting in a movie that seems paradoxically to uphold dominant values. Through the visual contradiction we experience in Rocky Horror, we see the contradictions in gender and sexuality. Rocky Horror itself is a contradiction: it enforces gender and sexuality stereotypes 30% of the time, challenges them 70% of the time, but it completely shatters the entire concept of heteronormative gender and sexuality 100% of the time.

WORKS CITED


