



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Giving Yourself Over to Absolute Pleasure

- a study on the cult of The Rocky Horror Picture Show

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir

Maí 2010

Háskóli Íslands

Hugvísindasvið

Enska

Giving Yourself Over to Absolute Pleasure

- a study on the cult of The Rocky Horror Picture Show

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Hildur Ásgeirsdóttir

Kt.: 051287-2669

Leiðbeinandi: Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir

Mái 2010

Summary:

In this thesis I intend to discover what makes a movie acquire cult status and what that title means. I want to know if there is a certain standard a movie has to meet to become a cult movie and find out if the cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* meets that standard. This movie tells the story of two “ordinary” people who happen to knock on the door of Frank-N-Furter, an alien who wants to create the perfect man. This movie has become one of the best known cult movies of all time and can even be called “the ultimate cult movie.” It has one of the steadiest fan bases ever known and the fans have created their own mini-society based on the movie and a ritual has evolved around watching it at the cinema. By reviewing the behaviour of cult fans I will find out what sets them apart from “normal” fans and why they are often frowned upon by those outside of the cult society. I will look into the cult elements that can be found in this movie and find out if it is justifiable to call the movie one of the best known cult films today. I will as well as take a look at the concept “camp” and its characteristics and see how that term affects the movie and where it can be found in the plot, characters and setting. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* will be compared to other cult and camp movies in the intent of finding out what sets this movie apart from others and why it is “the best”.

LIST OF CONTENTS

1 Introduction	1
2 <i>The Rocky Horror Picture Show</i>	2
3 <i>The Rocky Horror Picture Show</i> as a cult-phenomenon	4
4 <i>The Rocky Horror Picture Show</i> and its camp value	17
5 Conclusion	23

1 Introduction

Culture is something that has always been an important part of our civilization. Culture has followed mankind through the ages and the history books tell us of how we went from living in caves and discovering fire to flying around the world in airplanes. But culture does not consist only of the scientific progress the human race has made. Culture is something that makes up each individual society of every country and town in the world and gives each nation its characteristic.

The Colosseum in Rome and the paintings in the Sistine Chapel are part of Italian culture, just like sheep, fishing and the good old wool sweater are some of the things that make up Icelandic culture. One of the oldest cultures in the world is that of the British people. British culture consists of many things, such as the monarchy, literature, language and music. For centuries, it has been one of the most influential cultures in the world, bringing us revolutions such as the great author William Shakespeare and more recently, rock sensations like The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. When it comes to new revolutions in popular culture, the British have often served as pioneers, not only when it comes to music, but also other forms of entertainment, such as comedy and humor. British comedians such as the Monty Python group showed the world so-called “black humor”, which includes blatant jokes about sex and sketches in which religion is made fun of.

During the 1970s, the men of Monty Python were not the only ones practicing the way of expressing their opinions through humor and commenting on the society of the time. In 1973, Richard O’Brien premiered his play *The Rocky Horror Show* along with director Jim Sharman.¹ This play included crude sexual encounters and behavior that shocked many but at the same time it was so successful that in 1975 it was made

¹ Interview with Richard O’Brien

into a feature film. The movie was a hit in its native England but seemed to be a box office flop in the United States. But suddenly the fans started to flock to the movie theaters and in a couple of months the movie became a national hit in America. It soon became clear that the movie had a steady and limited fan base and soon it was regarded as one of the cult classics our time. What makes *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* a cult movie, and what is it about this movie that seems to be so hard to resist?

2 The Rocky Horror Picture Show

As the original play, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was written by Richard O'Brien and directed by Jim Sharman. It tells the story of two young people, Brad Majors and Janet Weiss, who have recently gotten engaged at their friends' wedding and are on their way to tell their old college professor, Dr. Scott, the good news. On the way to visit Dr. Scott, they drive through heavy rain and a bumpy country road and suffer a flat tire. Brad laments the fact that he did not fix the spare tire and Janet suggests that they go to a castle they saw near by to call for help. Upon their arrival at the castle, Brad and Janet find that very strange people inhabit it. A hunchbacked butler who appears to have blood on his clothes greets them along with a wild maid named Magenta. Brad and Janet are told by the butler, who is named Riff Raff, that they have arrived on a special night; it is one of the master's events. There are also other guests present and they seem very excited about the evening and the master's arrival. When the master of the house finally appears, Brad and Janet are shocked to find that he is a transvestite and far too busy to take any heed regarding their request to use the phone.

After meeting the master of the castle, Frank-N-Furter, Brad and Janet (along with the other guests) are taken to the laboratory where Frank reveals his newest creation, a beautiful and muscular man. Frank intends to keep this creation, called

Rocky, as his mate. The guests cheer wildly until a man comes out of the freezer on a motorcycle. A member of the household, Columbia, greets the man as her lover but Frank is furious and kills the motorcyclist, who is named Eddie. During the following night the other guests leave, but Brad and Janet spend the night. Frank seduces them both while Riff Raff and Magenta harass Rocky, resulting in his running away. Janet, who is filled with remorse after her stint with Frank, wanders around the castle and finds Rocky. She is overcome with lust and has sex with Rocky. Meanwhile, Riff Raff sees on the castle's monitors that Dr. Scott has arrived at the castle. Brad and Frank greet him in the laboratory, where they also discover Janet and Rocky. Frank is furious over Rocky's betrayal but is interrupted by Magenta, announcing that dinner is ready. All the characters assemble in the dining room, where Dr. Scott tells them that he arrived at the castle looking for Eddie, who was his cousin. Dr. Scott fears that something horrible has happened to him. Frank then reveals Eddie's dismembered body hidden in the table. Janet screams and runs into Rocky's arms, sending Frank into a furious rage, which results in Brad, Janet and Dr. Scott being turned into statues. Columbia addresses Frank, scolding him for being heartless and rejecting both her and Eddie for Rocky. Frank then turns his "Medusa Ray" on Columbia and Rocky, turning them into statues as well. He then has a conversation with Riff Raff and Magenta revealing that he used half of Eddie's brain to create Rocky, that Magenta and Riff Raff are siblings and that he, Riff Raff and Magenta are aliens from Transylvania. Frank then sets up a floor show, in which he dances and sings along with the statues, who are one by one turned back into people. As the show draws closer to its end, Riff Raff and Magenta appear in their Transylvanian clothes, telling Frank that the two of them must return to their home planet and intend to kill him. Frank tries to plead with them but is eventually killed by Riff Raff, who also kills

Columbia and Rocky. Brad, Janet and Dr. Scott are allowed to leave before the castle is beamed back to the planet of Transsexual. The three of them lie in the ruins left behind by the castle and wonder what awaits them after their fateful visit to the castle.

3 The Rocky Horror Picture Show as a cult-phenomenon

When it first premiered in London as a play in 1973, *The Rocky Horror Show* was received with great success and was very soon moved into a larger theatre where it continued to be sold out night after night. Soon, an American named Lou Adler saw the show and quickly acquired the cinematic rights.² Less than two years later, *The Rocky Horror Show* had become *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. In the United States, the movie was only popular in one movie theatre in California, where it was sold out every night. Despite its selling out, the show did not have a great following, because it turned out that many of the same people were returning each night to see it over and over again.³ In the rest of the United States, the movie was a flop. During the next four years, the movie gained popularity in Texas and especially in New York. By 1979, there were midnight screenings of the movie in about twenty cinemas in the New York area.⁴

One of the most noticeable things about these screenings was that the audience had begun to participate in various scenes during the show. Fans would dress up like their favorite characters and sing along with the songs, as well as bring props to the cinemas. These props included e.g. playing cards that were to be thrown out among the other audience members during Frank-N-Furter's song "I'm Going Home" and newspapers, water guns and lighters that the fans used during the song "There's a

² RHPS Official Fan Site

³ Hoberman and Rosenbaum, p. 12

⁴ Hoberman and Rosenbaum, p. 13

Light”. Some movie theatres were forced to ban such props during their shows, as they would often make quite a mess or damage the movie screens.⁵

During the screenings of the movie, the audience would participate in two ways. There were performances by groups of actors that would stand on stage during the movie and act out the entire thing. They were in full costume and make-up and these performances were often quite ambitious. Also, the other audience members would add ad lib responses to the movie that the audience would call out during certain scenes.⁶ Some of the most popular ones consist of the audience yelling out “asshole” every time Brad’s name is mentioned and “Who?” when Dr. Scott’s name is uttered. These ad lib responses vary from region to region (e.g. the Californian version may include jokes from their culture that New York fans might not understand), and some groups have developed very complex dialogues that require the audience to learn long scripts.⁷ This would make it impossible for so-called “Rocky Horror virgins” (those who have never seen the movie before) to understand anything that is going on on-screen, because they wouldn’t be able to hear the movie because of the yelling fans. If some audience members utter poorly timed ad lib responses they will quickly find themselves scorned and angrily shouted at by their fellow Rocky Horror fans.⁸ This ad lib phenomenon has become such an important part of the cinematic experience amongst the fans that any “inappropriate” ad lib responses are regarded as disruptive and rude to the other moviegoers.

When this extreme interest in the movie and its characters is considered, it becomes obvious that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has gathered an extensive cult following. Not only are there many people all over the world today that participate in

⁵ Hoberman and Rosenbaum, p. 181

⁶ Hoberman and Rosenbaum, p. 176

⁷ Badmovies.org

⁸ RHPS Official Fan Site

screenings of the film and dress up as their favorite characters, but there are also many who have heard of the movie and know about the characters and the movie's basic characteristics (i.e. transvestites, dancing, singing and the big red lips of the movie's logo) without having seen the movie. When regarding *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a cult film, it is often expected that such a movie would have an enormous amount of fans worldwide and that many have heard about it without actually knowing what it is.

The movie *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a musical that was regarded as very controversial when it premiered in the United States in 1975. Before that time it had been a successful stage musical in England. The creator of the musical, Richard O'Brien, has claimed that he based the atmosphere of the play on the popular culture of the time and found himself inspired by the term "freedom of expression" that was blooming during the 1970's.⁹ Richard O'Brien has even said in a VH1 interview that he found the main slogan for the movie, "Don't dream it – be it", on an advertisement poster he saw on a London street.¹⁰

When visualizing the term "freedom of expression" it is very clear that one of the characters who most obviously embodies that term is the cross-dressing and self-proclaimed scientist Dr. Frank-N-Furter. Frank wears a corset, high heels and fishnet stockings and perhaps it does not seem very surprising that a lead character like that would be a source of controversy, both on stage and on the big screen. Frank-N-Furter does not seem like a typical lead character because of his appearance and his personality. He seduces people for his own enjoyment and does not appear to care for anyone but himself. This can be seen in the movie when Columbia scolds him for first dumping her for Eddie and then Eddie for Rocky. Frank does not seem to be very

⁹ Interview with Richard O'Brien.

¹⁰ Interview with Richard O'Brien.

affected by her speech, he merely seems annoyed and has Magenta turn Columbia into a statue, whereafter he pities himself because “his children have turned on him”.¹¹ Both Frank’s appearance and behavior are what make him appalling to many members of the audience. Meatloaf Aday, who played the role of Dr. Scott in one stage version of the musical and Eddie in the movie, has said that when he first saw the character of Frank-N-Furter on stage his first reaction was to walk out of the theatre, where he refused to partake in the show in any way whatsoever, but was later convinced to keep an open mind and watch the whole show before making a decision.¹²

The shocking appearance of Dr. Frank-N-Furter and his fellow Transylvanians is not the only thing that caused a stir in the audience. There are many other actions in the movie that could upset a sensitive or a conservative soul; such as the corruption and seduction of Brad and Janet, who enter Frank-N-Furter’s castle as a couple of innocent and naïve kids but come out of there having “tasted the forbidden fruit” – as it is put in the movie. On top of that, there is the concept of man playing God (with Frank-N-Furter creating his perfect man), violence and murder. The fact that the movie is filmed in complete B-movie style (with the obviously fake special effects, such as the appearance of Riff Raff’s laser beams and the teleportation of the castle) adds a dominant comedic element to the plot and decreases the effect the violence has on any audience member. It is also made quite obvious in the movie’s opening song, “Science Fiction”, that Richard O’Brien was very much inspired by the old B-movies about alien invaders and mad scientists out to create new life when he wrote this story. As mentioned above, O’Brien has said that he found his inspiration in pop culture, but he also honors the B-movies and science fiction films in the movie.

¹¹ *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)

¹² Interview with Meatloaf Aday.

O'Brien also appeals to the youth of the time, many of whom supported the movement of free love and decadence. An example of this lifestyle can be found in the seduction of Brad and Janet, who enter the castle with conservative minds but at the end of the movie they have let go of their inhibitions, they have experienced physical contact with other characters and danced on stage in corsets and high heels. There is also some encouragement of rebellion by making the authority figure in the movie, the teacher, i.e. Dr. Scott, express his concern for what awaits him if he gives in to the lifestyle practiced at the castle. In a speech he says that they must get out before they are consumed by decadence and he will live his life "for the thrills".¹³ If this is something that does not seem appealing to a teacher, it will probably appeal to many teenagers. It also turns out a few minutes later in the movie that Frank's song is so irresistible that even Dr. Scott is unable to fight it – he gives in at the end and joins the singing and dancing.

For a movie to acquire cult status, it is not enough to simply be popular. A cult movie is a type of movie that would be considered strange or touch upon a subject that is considered taboo by "normal" society. The term "cult" is hard to explain, but Patrick T. Kinkade and Michael A. Katovich have come up with a good definition in their article "Toward a Sociology of Cult Films: Reading *Rocky Horror*". They say that "cult films are secular documents, celebrated as sacred texts by audiences and used as shared foci to collectively create rituals and belief systems. They differ from popular re-releases, fad films, films with cult qualities, and critical cult films in that they involve typical people in atypical situations, sympathetic deviance, challenges to traditional authority, reflections of societal strains, and paradoxical and interpretable

¹³ *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)

resolutions.”¹⁴ All of this is indeed something that could be said about a film such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The movie is celebrated as a sacred document among the most die-hard fans and, as mentioned before, there are many rituals connected to the cinema screenings of the movie. Brad and Janet are indeed “typical people in atypical situations”, being two normal kids who end up in the company of aliens, and there is no resolution in the ending of the movie because the audience does not know what happens to Magenta and Riff Raff when they come back to their home planet or what awaits Brad, Janet and Dr. Scott when they return to their homes.

Cult movies are obviously films that are not to everyone’s taste, which means that they are seldom appreciated by the general public and often have a specific type of fans. These kinds of movies are admittedly often of a poorer quality than the blockbuster films that come out of Hollywood and their plots and messages are often not meant to appeal to the general public, but rather the underground film enthusiasts or fans of a certain director. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a great example of this kind of movie. As Richard O’Brien has himself said, the story is something he wanted to create based on what was going on in the society around him at the time. It so happened that the movie appealed to audience members that identified with his way of portraying the decadent lifestyle of the 70s, which included free love and sexual liberation. The cross-dressing and special humor of the story only add to the camp appeal of the show, which will be explained later.

This plot is related to science-fiction movies, with its demented scientist (the name Frank-N-Furter alone reminds the audience of Dr. Frankenstein) and aliens. The plot, along with the acting, musical performances and sexual innuendo has helped turn the film into a cult movie. Along with the cult status comes a certain reputation, one

¹⁴ Kinkade and Katovich, p. 191

that makes many people wary and judgmental when it comes to the movie and its fans. This is because a cult film is a film that has a devoted fan base of what appears to be social misfits. Cult followers are stereotypically seen as brainless followers of a certain movie who will do, say and buy anything that the producers of the movie will tell them to and devote their lives to acquiring unimportant knowledge about the movie in question. Some would say that they are not able to tell the difference between what is really important in life, as they are consumed by something as trivial as a movie and that they are unable to lead fulfilling lives with “real” interests and relationships. Also, cult followers are often seen as infantile and immature (they live with their parents or do not have a steady job) and are often very similar to the stereotypical nerd.¹⁵

These people are also often called fanatics. The term “fan” is of course derived from “fanatic” but these two words have acquired different meanings. When calling someone a fan of something, one is simply saying that the person in mention is very fond of e.g. a movie or a singer. Nowadays the term “fanatic” makes most people think of an unhealthy obsession of almost a religious devotion, but when it was first used in the 19th century it was not demeaning, it was simply used for e.g. sport enthusiasts.¹⁶ Today many cult followers could very easily be categorized as religious followers of their favorite movie, there are even some fan clubs that have released religious artifacts connected to their movie of choice. Some followers of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* have published *The Ten Commandments of Rocky Horror*, where they learn, amongst other things, that one should “Honor Thy Transvestite and Transsexual”, “Thou Shalt Not Use Frank’s Name in Vain” and “Thou Shalt Not Miss

¹⁵ Jenkins, p. 10

¹⁶ Jenkins, pp. 12-13

The Rocky Horror Picture Show".¹⁷ This will of course seem highly blasphemous to many people, but this is a good example of how cult followers often disregard the more common views of their society and make up their own mini-societies with their own rules.

As mentioned before, the term "fanatic" has acquired a negative meaning in today's culture. This is not completely unjust, for there have been some disturbed fans over the years who have done some terrible things, such as Charles Manson, who was a Beatles fan and who was the head of a group of people who brutally murdered many innocent people, and Mark David Chapman, who was a huge fan of John Lennon and murdered his hero. These kinds of fanatics have also inspired the culture of today and their disturbing and malicious behavior has led to a new genre of horror movies being made, where the plots revolve around a hero and his or hers battle with an obsessed fan or friend.¹⁸ Movies who fall under that category are e.g. *Misery* (1990), where a crazed fan kidnaps her favorite author and makes him rewrite the ending to his last book while brutally torturing him, and *Fatal Attraction* (1987), in which a woman is obsessed with her lover and threatens to harm him or destroy his life when he tries to leave her. The antagonists of such films are often similar characters; they are loners who seem out of touch with reality in one way or another, often because of a mental problem. This portrayal of the antagonists is coherent with the stereotypical view of the cult follower and the nerd, which leads to many cult films being regarded as strange and taboo by people who have not actually seen them but perhaps only heard of them or their followers. This leads to cult films attaining a reputation of having harmful social effects and the films' followers being regarded as a corruptive

¹⁷ Hoberman and Rosenbaum, p. 174

¹⁸ Jenkins, p. 14

influence on children and therefore culturally undesirable.¹⁹ These prejudices against certain cult followings result in some extreme cases in potential new fans being discouraged from discovering the greatness of a movie and make some fans uncomfortable with publicly speaking about their liking of a particular movie.²⁰

One of the things that make many cult followers come together is the feeling they get when they realize that they are not alone, they are not the only ones who enjoy a certain movie to such an extent that makes them want to watch it repeatedly, quote its lines and dress like its characters. A cult following such as the one *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has attained consists of people of all ages and from all over the world. They unite and come together to watch the movie and bask in the craziness of each other, they do not have to feel ashamed by the fact that perhaps seeing Frank-N-Furter seduce Janet turns them on a little bit or that they know all the lyrics to all the songs and even the whole script of the movie by heart.

In his book *Textual Poachers* (1972), Henry Jenkins talks about the titular poachers as people who dare to step out of the general way of interpreting texts and movies. He claims that in school, children are taught exactly how to read and “correctly” interpret a text and that any attempts to come up with their own interpretation of a poem, story or plot is regarded as incorrect – the personal views of the children are simply not relevant.²¹ The “textual poachers” are those who dare to come up with their own interpretations and are open to the ideas of others. These fans are weak when it comes to spreading their views and influencing others, for they do not have the power or the influence to affect the entertainment industry and can do nothing about the mainstream movies that constantly come out of Hollywood. This is

¹⁹ Jenkins, p. 17

²⁰ Jenkins, p. 19

²¹ Jenkins, p. 24

yet another reason why cult movies and independent films are often regarded as strange or undesired by the general public, and this is one of the main characteristics of cult followers. That is to say, they see something they like, e.g. a movie such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or the TV-series *Star Trek* (1966), which is something that does not appeal to every member of the audiences, with its science-fiction, aliens and special humor. Sal Piro, who is the original die-hard *Rocky Horror* fan and served as chairman of the biggest *Rocky Horror* fan club has commented on the fans who came to see the movie: “I’ve seen changes where it went from college to a little older gay to, like, high-school straight girls. [...] On the whole, though, what you get is these people in high school – the ones who aren’t the athletes, who deal more with things like the drama club. People who lean more towards the arts and the creative expressions that will accept the more outrageous quicker than your athletic, preppy type.”²² This comment from the man who has watched the fans come and go through the years proves that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* does indeed appeal to those who do not conform to the expectations of society and who keep an open mind when experiencing new things. These are the fans that look past the norm and are fascinated by e.g. a certain character and start to mimic that character’s behavior or way of dressing. This results in these fans often being judged by society and marked as nerds or freaks.

It is in fact an interesting subject, looking into how a non-conformist movie such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is received by the public. In their book *Reception Study* (2001), James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein talk about how the public’s reception of a work affects the author. They say that a work can be interpreted in two ways; one is the original intention of the writer and the other is

²² Hoberman and Rosenbaum, p. 190

based on how the readers or audience members react to it or interpret it.²³ They also add that there are many ways in which a work can be critically interpreted but the most traditional scholars prefer not to add any additional meaning to the author's intentions. When it comes to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, it is certain that both of these methods can and have been used by the audience. It is even possible to say that when it comes to the audience's reception of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the reception is a combination of these two methods and therefore the audience's interpretation of the movie and the resulting fan base is not traditional. There are many details in the movie that are meant to capture the viewer, especially at the time when the movie was released. The look of the movie is, as mentioned before, an important part of its appeal. The plot itself, even though it was indeed very appealing to young people of the 70s, is not the only important part of the movie – it is the look of the movie and the characters that attracts the fans. The fans of a book, singer or movie and the critics are an important part of spreading talk about the work in question, and when people start mimicking their icons it is certain that the person has become a success. This can be seen when some singers or actors inspire the youth to start wearing certain items of clothing, as Madonna did in the 80s with her black lace, crucifix jewelry and fingerless gloves.²⁴ One can see that the characters of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* had the same effect on their fans when they started showing up to the cinemas dressed as their favorite characters and it became clear that this was the ultimate symbol of their admiration. The characters of the movie are what inspire the young viewers because they are the icons of the message of the movie, which tells the audience to give themselves over to the “sins of the flesh” and other things related to

²³ Machor and Goldstein, p. ix

²⁴ Fiske, p. 246

the ideals of free love.²⁵ When fans find something that they idolize in such a manner, there must be something more than just what they see on the screen – there must be something in the movie that leaves room for the fans to form their individual opinions about a character or the plot.²⁶ This is quite possible when it comes to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, because there is no obvious moral to be found in the story and the audience knows nothing of the reason for the aliens to be on planet Earth or what happens to Brad, Janet and Dr. Scott after they leave the castle grounds. Each fan can therefore imagine their own background story and future life for each of the characters and the world of the movie becomes an individual playground for each fan.

The character of Frank-N-Furter, played to perfection by Tim Curry, has become one of the most influential and idolized characters of the movie. As Sal Piro said, “[...] *Rocky Horror* is like my way of life. [...] Many, many people handle this as a religion in the early days: Tim Curry is God, Frank-N-Furter is God, that kind of thing.”²⁷ Not only was the movie itself becoming like a religion to many fans, the imitation of Frank-N-Furter had become an art form in a way that those who mastered the costume and behavior of Frank were looked up to by other fans and often became famous among the fans.²⁸ One well-known Frank impersonator was a woman named Dori Hartley, and she said that being Frank was one of her greatest dreams, and she also got to experience the perks of being a mini-celebrity like Sal Piro – they got free tickets to the screenings and were let into the lobby before anyone else.²⁹ Being an icon because of their admiration of other icons (that is to say, the characters from *Rocky Horror*) made people such as Sal Piro and Dori Hartley experience the craze

²⁵ *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)

²⁶ Fiske, p. 247

²⁷ Hoberman and Rosenbaum, p. 178

²⁸ Hoberman and Rosenbaum, p. 179

²⁹ Hoberman and Rosenbaum, p. 191

that forms around cult movie society in the ultimate way, they were in the middle of it and were a part of controlling the mood of the audiences each night – Dori by dressing up, Sal by leading the cheers of the crowd.

As mentioned before, Sal Piro commented on the types of people who frequented the cinemas to watch the show night after night. These people varied from time to time, but in the end it was the “nerds” and not the athletes who were the steadiest fans. According to Piro, the movie promoted open-mindedness among young people because they accepted a character who was in drag and bisexual; someone like that in real life had until then been frowned upon and called names by young men, but the movie made these same young men look up to this character as a hero.³⁰ *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was therefore not only entertainment, it was also a tool to promote equality and abolish prejudice.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show is one of the most well-known cult films of our time, and this is probably because it has been one of the longest running movies of all time. There are many ways in which a movie can acquire cult status, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has many different traits that make it fall into the category. As mentioned before, a cult movie is often something that is considered somewhat sinister and taboo, and it is quite likely that many parents would not allow their children to watch a movie that included bare breasts, sex, violence and jokes related to these subjects. Another thing that has helped movies on their way to cult status is their quality. Some movies have been considered cult classics because of their extremely poor quality. One of the most popular movies of this category is *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (1959) by director Ed Wood. This movie has some of the worst special effects ever seen and audiences would flock to the theatres to revel in the

³⁰ Hoberman and Rosenbaum, p. 204

incompetence of Wood, who has sometimes been called the worst director of all time. The film boasts of a cast of such cult legends as Hungarian actor Bela Lugosi, known for his work in many a vampire-related movie (it also increases his fans' interest in the movie that Lugosi died during filming) and Vampira, a TV-personality from the 50s horror movie late-night TV programming, and these actors were also one of the reasons people were excited to see the movie. *Plan 9 From Outer Space* falls under the cult category "So bad that it's good", meaning that people cannot help but love the movie when they realize how extremely bad it is. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* does not completely escape this classification, because it is, as mentioned above, based on B-movies such as *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. The creation of Rocky Horror himself is admittedly not a triumph of special effects and the acting is often over the top. This was of course Richard O'Brien's way of paying tribute to these films, but he does it in such a convincing manner that his own movie is classified as one of the greatest cult masterpieces ever made.

4 *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and its camp value

The term "cult" often goes hand in hand with the term "camp". Many cult films and other cult phenomena have been associated with camp. The idea of camp is one that has developed over the years. At first it was a kind of gay subculture but now it is something that can be seen in our everyday lives.³¹ In an article from 1995, Gareth Cook tells his readers of an experience he had in a bar where a "Drag Freak Bingo" was taking place. At this event, drag queens dressed in tight sequined dresses would lead a game of bingo, as well as interacting with the players and thus serving as the entertainment. The drag queens drew the numbers in the game of bingo while

³¹ Cook

telling jokes and making a big scene out of every single step they took on stage. The bar where this all took place was decorated with gold drapes on the tables and the theme of the bar was inspired by Spanish artist and well-known eccentric Salvador Dalí. An event like this is something that can definitely be called very camp. Camp is something that is considered outrageously tasteless and “Drag Freak Bingo” would seem to fit into that category. Just like the cult phenomenon, camp is something that is quite hard to explain in plain words, it rather shows itself through various manifestations, such as works of art, decorations, movies and of course drag queens. Cook uses the definition offered in *The American Heritage Dictionary*; "An affectation or appreciation of manners and tastes commonly thought to be outlandish, vulgar, or banal." when trying to define the term “camp”. This is a good definition as camp is something that is very exaggerated and ironic, no one really likes a campy thing because it is good, but because it is so ridiculously bad or even sad. Campy things can be the performances of drag queens dressed as famous songstresses, lip-synching a well-known song or an artwork that is considered extremely bad or even exaggerated and flamboyant characters in movies or TV-shows. This is a part of the magic of camp; everyone knows that you don’t like the particular thing in question; they know that it is just a joke. Cook also says in his article that camp helped bring down the class distinction. Camp is about embracing bad taste and in that way rejects class distinction since everyone from every class can be part of the camp element. Camp can be found in many musicals, as they are often considered to be gay friendly and are indeed popular in the gay community, where camp started. Such musicals are e.g. *Hairspray* (1988) and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. In *Hairspray* the audience follows the life of Tracy Turnblad, who is overweight and struggles to gain the attention of the most popular boy in school, all while singing and dancing. The whole

movie has a 60s theme, the songs, dances and costumes all hail from that period. The transvestite Divine, who is also overweight and wears a lot of make-up as well as flamboyant costumes, plays Tracy's mother. This kind of musical is very camp because it has a drag queen, bright costumes and revolves around an overweight heroine. There are also many camp elements to be found in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Almost everything inside Frank-N-Furter's castle has some camp value to it, from the light pink tiles covering the walls of the laboratory, the bad artwork all over the castle, such as ancient Greek-style statues of naked men wearing nail polish and a taxidermist statue of a leopard fighting a huge snake, to the huge red drapes in the ball room. Even Frank is camp, with the way he dresses in women's clothing and wears very heavy make-up. He wears white powder on his face, heavily colored eye shadow and dark red lipstick – Frank is a drag queen.

The camp movement is also popular in the gay community because it involves going against the stereotypical gender roles.³² Camp is about bringing out the masculine elements in women and the feminine side of men - cross-dressing being one of the more obvious outlets. Almost every cast member of the movie ends up wearing high heels and fishnet stockings, corsets and heavy make-up, which is something that many a drag queen has been seen wearing. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is of course not the only movie that has appealed to the gay community with its "campiness". It is often a fact that musicals are a type of movies that are popular among many gay people. Many must recognize that a stereotypical homosexual man is often portrayed as an effeminate musical-lover. Musical movies are in most cases movies that revolve around a certain main character that has to overcome obstacles and fight a villain who is repressing them in one way or another, often with the help of one or more friends

³² Sontag

that are either otherworldly or different in some way. One of the best and most famous of this kind of musical is *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). It is one of the most popular camp movies in the gay community. It has some of the same appeal as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, i.e. it includes characters that are extreme and over the top, plus the stories revolve around young and naïve people that stumble upon a fantasy world by accident, where they learn to be more open-minded and make new friends that would most likely be scorned by society. The lion in *The Wizard of Oz* is probably one of the best reasons for the film's camp value. He is supposed to be king of the forest and be strong and brave, but he is cowardly and effeminate. The main character of the movie, Dorothy, befriends him and does not judge him. The movie has been extremely popular and since World War II, gay men have often referred to themselves as “friends of Dorothy”, which is most likely a reference to her relationship with the lion.³³

Some similar appeals can be found in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, most likely in Frank-N-Furter himself. He is not afraid to be how he wants to be and always seems to speak his mind and is not ashamed of anything he does; he runs the show around the castle. He is obviously bisexual as he seduces both Brad and Janet and creates Rocky as a mate for himself. His guests (the Transylvanians, Brad and Janet) as well as the people who live with him (Columbia and Eddie, with the exception of Riff Raff and Magenta) seem drawn to him and find him exciting to be around. This is something that many people would like to see in themselves, and it is not strange that people in the gay community, who have had to fight for their acceptance in society, see this kind of confidence and appeal as an inspiration.

³³ Wikipedia – “Friend of Dorothy”

The Rocky Horror Picture Show is indeed a musical that falls under the category “camp”. According to Susan Sontag, camp is recognized mostly by “its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration”.³⁴ It is quite safe to say that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is very much an exaggeration. In the movie, all the characters are exaggerated versions of what they represent, Frank-N-Furter is a completely insane scientist who lives by the rules of free love and is therefore a cross dressing bisexual, Janet is so uptight and conservative that she faints at the sight of Frank-N-Furter and feels ashamed when she lusts after the beautiful Rocky, who is himself the stereotypical beauty, i.e. he is perfect to look at but does not say much of great importance. The exaggeration in the plot can also be found when the audience discovers that Frank-N-Furter and his servants are aliens from another planet. It then becomes obvious how he tried to fit in with the human lifestyle; he made everyone wear birthday hats at the dinner and the table was equipped with various types of knives and forks, as is often the custom at a fancy dinner party. The whole castle is decorated with various familiar works of art, such as the Greek statues in the laboratory and Grant Wood’s painting *American Gothic* hanging in the hallway. Frank seems to have decorated the castle with many different types of artwork and themes, he has the American and Greek works of art as well as a Zen Room, which can briefly be seen when Dr. Scott first enters the castle. At the Transylvanian convention it can be seen that the food being served is from many different countries, there are e.g. Scottish and Italian flags so each entry is decorated with what is presumably the flag of the country from where the dish hails. This is probably Frank’s way of appearing to be a cultural man of the world.

³⁴ Sontag

The audience never learns why Frank, Riff Raff and Magenta have come to Earth, at least there is no particular scene or dialogue where their purpose is revealed. There is a moment during the Floor Show where Frank's reason for coming to Earth might be revealed. He starts his song with the lines "Whatever happened to Fay Wray, that delicate, satin-draped frame? As it clung to her thigh, how I started to cry, 'cause I wanted to be dressed just the same."³⁵ and reveals a woman as his idol. Perhaps Frank saw the actress Fay Wray in one of her movie roles and was filled with an urge to come to Earth to live a life similar to hers or to perhaps meet her. This would not have been possible for Frank as the movie clearly is supposed to take place in the 70s (Richard Nixon's resignation speech can be heard on Brad and Janet's car radio during their drive) and therefore he would not have been able to find his idol in her prime but as an old woman (Fay Wray was an actress most active in the 1930s). This would explain Frank's feminine clothing and make-up as well as his purpose on Earth. On the other hand, the audience does not know how long the three Transylvanians have been living on Earth. At one point in the movie, Magenta exclaims that she has grown wary of this world and wants to return to her home planet. This might indicate that they have in fact been living on Earth for quite some time, perhaps they arrived in the 30s and Frank has been seeking the thrills of old Hollywood glamour and now it is time for them to return. Yet another point that indicated that Frank did not succeed in his mission is that when Riff Raff and Magenta's patience finally comes to an end, Riff Raff tells Frank that his mission was a failure.

There are many other definitions of camp that can be found in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Camp has also been called "the tragically ludicrous", and this is

³⁵ *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, 1975

surely something that can be said about the movie. The movie is, as mentioned before, based on the B-movies, which are movies that were considered to be poorly made and did not include expensive special effects or (in some cases) good actors. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* includes poor special effects, exaggerated acting and extreme characters (this is all done on purpose by Richard O'Brien). Those who value camp appreciate movies and other works of art similar to this – the work of art is so bad that it becomes good. Followers of camp also like their art to be very visual, and the movie is certainly a feast for the eye from beginning to end, with its bright colors and scantily clad characters.

5 Conclusion

When looking at the aforementioned facts about *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, it becomes clear why this movie has been so popular. It embodies so many of the things that were taboo in society at the time when it was released, such as the decadent ways and sexual freedom and the gay lifestyle. It also pays tribute to the B-movies and by including these elements, Richard O'Brien wrote a story that appealed to many, whether they were young or old, British or American, gay or straight. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has almost all the characteristics that make a movie deserve the title "cult film" and this movie has become irresistible to those who watch it, because of its songs, characters and theme. The audience gets to lose themselves in a world where they can be whisked away from their boring everyday lives and brought to a place where Frank-N-Furter rocks their world. This is exactly what a cult film is all about; it is not supposed to be something that is realistic or even relatable, it is about adventure and finding something that captivates the audience and escaping to

a place where one can find people who have that obsession in common with oneself. When watching *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, with all its singing, dancing, moral corruption and carelessness, it becomes impossible not to give in to Frank-N-Furter's beckoning to "give yourself over to absolute pleasure".



Frank-N-Furter with his minions, Columbia, Magenta and Riff Raff



Frank seduces the very conservative Brad and Janet



Some *Rocky Horror* fans, all dressed up and ready to sing along



Rocky and Frank

List of sources

Aday, Meatloaf. Interview. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show DVD Extra Features*.

Cook, Gareth. "The Dark Side of Camp – Analysis of Camp Style and Society."

Washington Monthly Sept. 1995: 7.

Fiske, John. "Madonna". *Reception Study*: 246-258. Ed. James L. Machor and Philip

Goldstein. New York and London: Routledge, 2001.

"Friend of Dorothy." Wikipedia. 2010. 28 Jan. 2010.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friends_Of_Dorothy>.

Hoberman, J., and Jonathan Rosenbaum. *Midnight Movies*. New York: Harper &

Row, c. 1983.

Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers*. New York and London: Routledge, 1972.

Kinkade, Patrick T. and Michael A. Katovich. "Toward a Sociology of Cult Films:

Reading *Rocky Horror*." *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 33: 191-209.

Blackwell Publishing, 1992.

Machor, James L. and Philip Goldstein, ed. *Reception Study*. New York and London:

Routledge, 2001.

O'Brien, Richard. Interview. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show DVD Extra Features*.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Director Jim Sharman. Actors Tim Curry, Susan Sarandon, Barry Bostwick, Richard O'Brien, Patricia Quinn, Nell Campbell, Peter Hinwood and Jonathan Adams. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1975.

"The Rocky Horror Picture Show Audience Participation Script." *Badmovies.org*.

2010. 18 Mar. 2010

<http://www.badmovies.org/movies/rockyhorror/audience/audience_pg01.html>.

"The Rocky Horror Picture Show Cult Following." *Wikipedia*. 2010. 3 Mar. 2010.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rocky_Horror_Picture_Show_cult_following>.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show Official Fan Site. 2009. 14 Mar. 2010.

<<http://www.rockyhorror.com>>.

Sontag, Susan. "Notes on Camp." 1964.