

**‘GIVE YOURSELVES OVER TO ABSOLUTE PLEASURE’:
THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW’S QUEERING OF COUNTERCULTURE FILM**

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Jim Sharman’s *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), the filmic adaptation of the Richard O’Brien musical, stands out among other musical films of the counter-culture. It is remarkable for its excess, its energy, its humor, its mocking of traditional gender codes and its pronounced taste for the “visually abysmal” both in the meaning of camp and its *mise en abyme* of icons of both high and low visual culture—from Michelangelo’s *David* to Charles Atlas ads, and from *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931) to *King Kong* (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1933) to *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939)—in a pastiche and parody of genre films. While it is, itself, a hodge-podge of musical¹ and horror story, a warped romantic comedy and a science fiction farce, it deploys its unique countercultural energy in its Dionysian celebration of its queer main character, Dr. Frank’n’Furter, a transvestite avatar of Dr. Frankenstein, played by Tim Curry. In highlighting how its queering of genres is meshed with the queering of gender, and the hedonistic celebration of “performance,” I will stress how the film’s deliberately provocative visual and narrative techniques, as well as its constant celebration of excess and chaos prompt the audience to warp it in turn and, in a *mise en abyme* of the carnivalesque, to break down the fourth wall in the way fan communities started to do one year after the film’s release, in midnight performances, arguably making it to this day the ultimate cult film of the mid-seventies.

Postmodern pastiche and parody: warping and queering in one move

From the opening credits, *Rocky Horror* presents itself as a provocative seduction of the audience; a huge, disembodied set of lips—known as “Lips” or as “the Usherette”—fills the screen, to sing the opening song, “Science Fiction/Double Feature” as if onstage, in a nod to the

¹ The rock opera is of course one of the forms *par excellence* of 1970s counterculture film, the “anthem” of which remains Milos Forman’s 1979 adaptation of the stage musical *Hair*. Some essential films of the counterculture thus came out even as the disco years were starting (*Hair* is released after John Badham’s *Saturday Night Fever*, 1977). *Rocky Horror*, which, like Brian De Palma’s *Phantom of the Paradise*, foresaw the “vintage” status that 1950s classic rock was acquiring, heralds the latter’s revival in Randal Kleiser’s *Grease* (1978). While De Palma’s film is more clearly a satire of the music world (with a music producer modeled on Phil Spector as arch-nemesis to the innocent idealistic composer), it does share a postmodern citational approach with Sharman’s film, since it is clearly a reinterpretation both of the myth of Faust and of the *Phantom of the Opera*, which had already known countless remakes (the 1925, 1943, and 1962 screen versions are all well known, even if the 1916 German film is “lost”). The trauma that structures De Palma’s film, and its earnest use of melodrama make it closer to Ken Russell’s *Tommy* (1975) but the latter shares with *RH* a pervasive queerness.

film's being born of Richard O'Brien's stage musical, the *Rocky Horror Show*.² The lyrics of the song detail the tradition of popular film this *picture show* derives from—from *King Kong* to *The Invisible Man* (James Whale, 1933) or *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951).³ Richard O'Brien himself, in his role as screenwriter, had chosen a series of clips from these films to adapt his own musical to the screen, but because the copyright fees for these early science-fiction/horror film clips were too expensive (Knapp, 247), they were replaced by these gigantic animated lips, reminiscent of the Rolling Stones logo. The original project is, however, viewable on YouTube.⁴ As the title itself announces, to enter the film is to enter a hybrid work and a "forbidden planet" in which worlds indeed collide: the ultra-repressed young couple Brad and Janet, who are a throwback to the early sixties, and Frank'n'Furter, the "queer transvestite from Transsexual Transylvania." The *celluloid jam* that the song celebrates is the film's own: its pastiche of the history of film—and beyond, of all visual art—and its mixture of satire, sexual innuendo and camp horror. The song plays on all the forms of doubling already present in its title ("Double Feature"): the line between film characters and the actors who perform them is erased ("And then something went wrong/ For Fay Wray and King Kong), heralding the generalized collapse of narrative frames within the film. As for the performance of the song itself, in its mixture of feminine and masculine, in the heavily made up mouth and the high-pitched male voice, it announces the cross-dressing leading character. It is sung by Richard O'Brien, who is thus not merely the creator of the original *Rocky Horror Show*, and the screenwriter for the film, but also the performer who plays/sings the role of Frank's "faithful handyman," the hunchback Riff Raff, a variation on the character known as Igor.⁵

Sung by the creator of both the musical and film, "Double Feature" is thus the performative "birth" song for the film itself, that mirrors "Dr X's" or "Dr. F's" creation of his creature, pulled out of darkness through the magic of theatrical performance and/or projection onto the screen. In a form of infinity mirroring, the song already announces O'Brien's and Frank'n'Furter's creation, the handsome "Rocky" who gives his name to the film—no horror at all, but a luscious muscle man, in golden underwear, in an echo of the line "And Flash Gordon was there in silver underwear." Because Frank'n'Furter will literally "unveil" his creature, whom we first see swathed in surgical cloth like the 1933 *Invisible Man*, the line "Claude Rains was the *Invisible Man*" is also a teaser for what we are about to view. As for the reference to Fay Wray and King Kong, it will prove central to the film's *dénouement*. Thus, although the actual visual pastiche of "vintage" sci-fi and horror films is lost in the opening credits sequence, the gigantic singing lips vividly announce *Rocky Horror's* specific *celluloid jam* of queer eroticism and burlesque horror. The version of the film poster subtitled "Another Set of Jaws"—in an allusion to the horror film (in which innocent swimmers are attacked by a killer shark) that came out that same year—plays on this ambiguity, enhanced by the use of Hammer Studios credits—gothic lettering in deliberate "runny" red—that underline the lyrics "I'm gonna give you some terrible

² For a complete history of the creation of the stage musical and then of the film, see Weinstock 2008.

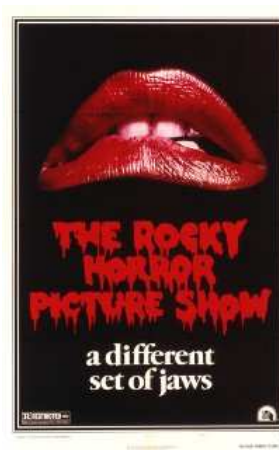
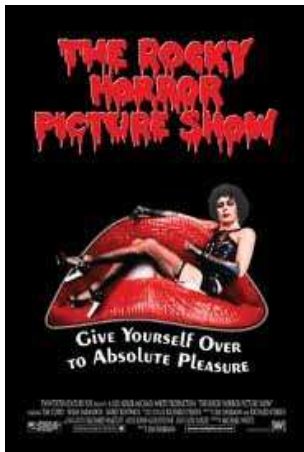
³ See Miller 127-129 for a detailed and commented list of the films referenced by the song.

⁴ To see the version with clips, sung by Richard O'Brien with an acoustic guitar:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8lywvXZSCFI>

⁵ Igor is not one of Mary Shelley's characters; her Dr. Frankenstein has no assistant. He is thus a monstrous addition, who first appears in Rowland V. Lee's *Son of Frankenstein* played by Bela Lugosi (1939). He is unforgettably embodied by the ogle-eyed and leering Marty Feldman in Mel Brooks's countercultural spoof *Young Frankenstein* (1975), which came out the same year as *RH*.

thrills,” reminding us that the horror genre is always simultaneously an eroticization of fear *and* a narrative about (the fear of) sex.⁶



Queering the Straight Story

The story opens on the wedding of Brad’s best friend. The time, we later realize, is August 1974 and the place Denton, Ohio, supposedly “The Home of Happiness” as a billboard proclaims. The fixed 1950s gender roles and unreal ritualization of the marriage scene are mocked, in particular through deliberately inept dialogue: marriage is exhibited as “theater.” As Dika (110-11) points out, this makes the scene one of parody rather than of nostalgia. While Brad and Janet themselves become engaged to comical doggerel lyrics (“Dammit, Janet, I love you”), a couple stepped out of Grant Wood’s celebrated *American Gothic* painting hold a funeral (suggesting a pun on “Marriage is your funeral”). Seemingly unaware of these other presences in the church, Brad and Janet, wishing for the fatherly blessing of the high school science teacher in whose class they met, decide to drive to his town that very instant.

We are forewarned that this is to be a fatal trip by an inset narrator—a.k.a., The Criminologist, as he is named by the opening credits—whom we discover in a wipe in his study, his back to us. When he swivels to face the camera, he proposes to take us on a “*strange* journey,” in a metatextual and sexual pun, of which there will be many, on all that is uncanny, warped, weird, and *queer* in *Rocky Horror*. The narrator’s insistence on the couple’s embodying “normalcy” (“they being normal, healthy kids”) hints that they are in for a transformation: “It was a night out they were going to remember for a *very long time*” (11’20). This inset “host” to the gothic element of the story and his use of dramatic and moralistic voice-over are a parody of Rod Sterling as the *Narrator* of the cult TV show *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964); indeed, Charles Gray’s English accent, his dramatic rolling of his *rs*, his emphatic overtones all participate in the film’s aesthetics of over-acting. The very setting that surrounds him is replete with props that are as “stagy” as the initial marriage scene: rows of old reference books, a globe, a black and white photo album with shots of Brad and Janet from the first scene and a “Denton Police Statement” that we cannot read, but that implies horrific events to come, with red x signs to signal the locations of Denton, Frank’n’Furter’s castle, and Dr. Scott’s home.

⁶ See Kristina Watkins-Mormino for a reading of this aspect. This translates into the viewing ritual, and into the ritualized initiation of “virgin” viewers (i.e., first-time participants in a midnight performance of *RH*).

Mocking authority and previous authors

The wipe back to the diegetic world, effected through the deliberately hammy horror aesthetic of the frame dripping with blood, undermines the *gravitas* of the inset narrator, already announcing how the diegesis will at times seem to suck him in.⁷



Like the Criminologist, all the figures of authority, morality, and of patriarchal power are mocked in the film's "high-camp humor" (Jackson, 40) and aesthetics of hybridity. Glam-rock (and queer) glitter contaminates the gothic in the "Dead End" sign that is the counterpoint to the *Be just, and fear not* sign that was visible in the wedding scene. But this famous line from Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* is also an ironic commentary on the audio track: as Brad and Janet drive into the forest, they are listening to Richard Nixon's August 8, 1974 resignation speech over the radio—a clear jab at the world of "normalcy," "authority" and "morality" embodied by the *crook*, Tricky Dick.⁸

The excessive gothic tropes are underlined within the film itself, in amusement-park mode: the gate to Frank'n'Furter's castle and the sign "Enter at your own risk!!" with its *double* exclamation mark make the sign one of self-parody—and the glitter on the Dead End sign makes this a camp glam-rock joke. Neither Brad nor Janet express any surprise at finding a castle in the middle of Ohio; in fact, they sing "There's a Light Over at the Frankenstein Place" as if they knew nothing of Mary Shelley's novel, nor of the famous filmic versions of Frankenstein starring Boris Karloff, in a form of innocence as to the entire *history* of horror film.⁹

Weirdos, time warp, queering

The entrance into the castle is effected through a wipe back to the Criminologist, this time in the form of a jagged doors motif that serves as an inset "overcoded" warning. Brad's sanguine assertion, as Janet expresses her fear, that "it's probably some kind of hunting lodge for rich weirdos" (18'20) is one of the numerous puns on "queer", as well as a dramatic irony, since he and Janet are the—sexual—prey. The saturation of the set with images of the gothic is

⁷ The Criminologist as well as the deliberate excess that comically warps gothic codes and tropes clearly seem inspired by the Tex Avery cartoon "Who Killed Who?" (1943):

http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2hygd_tex-avery-who-killed-who-1943_fun

⁸ One clearly hears: "I have never been a quitter. To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body" (11'50). The famous quotation from *Henry VIII* is: "Be just, and fear not: / Let all the ends thou aimst at be thy country's / Thy God's, and truth's [...]" (III.2. 1. 524)

⁹ An irony reinforced by the fact that *Rocky Horror* was partly shot at Oakley Court, "a former stately home that had longed served as the set for the Hammer Horror films." (Artt, 62).

deliberately highlighted—the clock strikes midnight, we see Grant Wood’s “American Gothic” painting in the background, and skeletons come out of the closet/coffin/grandfather clock¹⁰:



As music becomes audible in the next room, Riff Raff (whose name of course humorously reflects his status as servant) comments, “It’s one of the master’s affairs” (18’30), introducing the fourth song, “The Time Warp.” A motley crowd of tuxedoed conventioners (men and women alike), who embody marginality from a Hollywood perspective (fat, old, diminutive, and/or nonwhite, all wearing sunglasses and white socks within women’s shoes), dance in a mad chorus line. The line “But it’s the pelvic thrust that really drives me insane/ Let’s do the Time Warp again” in a wink to *Elvis the Pelvis*, announces the libidinal spell that Frank’n’Furter, the master of the castle, is about to cast; the serving of frankfurter sausages to the guests is both a gross sexual parody of cocktail party fare, and a visual “signature” of the as-yet invisible host. The deliberate parody of Broadway musicals in the performance of the song and dance, with a solo tap-dancer in golden glitter, reminiscent of Judy Garland (or Liza Minelli), who deliberately trips on her last step, ends in a literal “grinding to a halt” of the music that causes the synchronized collapse of all the dancers.¹¹

As Janet and Brad carefully back away from the scene, Janet’s celebrated euphemism—“this isn’t the Junior Chamber of Commerce, Brad!”—shows that although she has so far resisted the *Time Warp*’s call to be “flipped out on sensation,” although she lacks the references to read the banner “Transylvanian Convention” (22’30), she does sense that these are not merely “foreigners.” Playing on a fundamental trope of horror (that the monster is always behind the terrified character), the inset stage of the elevator door then opens up to reveal the star of the film and master of the castle, Frank’n’Furter. (If you do not know the film, please watch the video clip here).¹²

Again, in an exaggerated play on gender codes, Janet swoons upon recognizing him as a vampire, in his white makeup and black cape, but as he sings his first song—“Don’t get strung

¹⁰ This coincided with a change from black and white to color. Indeed, as Riley points out, “the first twenty minutes were to be shot in black in white and in Academy Ratio (1:37:1) in a parody of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), with a transition into full color, widescreen (1:33:1)” (Riley, 21) in synch with the “Time Warp” song. I would simply amend “parody” to “homage”, since the end of the film is also very much a camp twist on Dorothy (here, the entire castle and its aliens) being “beamed up” Star-Trek like, and “whizzed” out of rural America as Dorothy was out of Kansas. The rainbow is a wink to the Judy Garland song “Over the Rainbow” and already announces the post-Stonewall LGBT flag that was officially created in 1978.

¹¹ A similar play on intradiegetic music as “powering” the characters plays out during the song “Sweet Transvestite”, when at the end of the song, when the drums literally “command” Janet and Brad’s eye movements, as if they were “puppeteered” by Frank’s song.

¹² “Sweet Transvestite”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bc80tFJpTuo>

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 transsexual Transylvania" (24')—the true nature of the film is revealed: gothic queer and *glam rock* horror (see Cornell 2008). The playfulness of the entire sequence in its punning on everything “trans” emphasizes the *trance* created by Tim Curry's seductive performance. The fact that he is the Master/ Queen of the manor is highlighted by the famous shot in which he reclines on this throne in a picture of stagy and staged decadence:



The dialogue highlights the carnal dimension the film is taking with the puns “Why don't you come up to the lab / See what's on the slab”... and in Frank's ordering his guests clothes to be removed (ostensibly, because they are wet). This of course allows ridicule to be squarely placed on the straight man's underwear, rather than on the transvestite's (Frank, commenting Brad's briefs, quips: “What *charming* underwear!”).

That Brad and Janet are already falling from innocence into decadence is illustrated by Brad's mistakenly introducing his fiancée as Janet *Vice* instead of Janet *Weiss* in the next scene.

The main thread of this lab scene, however, picks up the line from Frank'n'Furter's first song: “If you want something visual / That isn't too abysmal / We could take in a Steve Reeves movie.” Indeed, what will be revealed here is the Steve Reeves-like physique of Rocky,¹³ the “blond man with a tan” that Frank has been building, within a *mise en abyme* of visual and musical references to masculinity as always-already queered.

Making a man with blond hair and a tan

The lab is the first of the inset “stages” that the film sets up to show an inset audience, here that of the other Transylvanians, addressed by Frank as “my unconventional conventionalists” (30'40), in an injunction to the audience to be likewise unconventionally minded.¹⁴ Frank unveils an aquarium in which a mummy, or Invisible Man of sorts, floats. To bring him to life, Frank turns on spigots that allow the colors of the rainbow to drip into the tank, in a parody of other versions of Frankenstein; the saturation of the dialogue with technological

¹³ Steve Reeves played in a number of gladiator films. That the 1976 film starring Sylvester Stallone as eponymous hero bears the name *Rocky* is an involuntary queer irony on the director's part.

¹⁴ In another switch of codes, Frank now appears dressed in a classic 50s skirt suit, complete with overlarge string of pearls, demure except for a “red triangle” combination of the symbol imposed by the Nazi on homosexuals in concentration camps (red for vampire). While this overlapping of queer political discourse and the satirical campiness of bourgeois dress (this persona announces Bree in *Desperate Housewives*) is in abysmally bad taste—this, just after Frank has sung the words “If you want something visual that isn't too abysmal” (24'50)—it is an (as yet rare) allusion to the suppressed history of the persecution of gays that plays like Martin Sherman's *Bent* 1979 were to denounce a few years later. Oakley Court, where the castle scenes were shot was, besides, a De Gaulle hideout during WWII, as Weinstock (2008: 4) points out.

jargon, as Riff Raff is told to throw the switches on the “sonic oscillator” makes for comedy too. As the creature is unwrapped, it becomes apparent that he is no monster¹⁵ but a golden muscle man. The song Frank sings—“In Just Seven Days I Can Make You A Man”—is thus a pun on creation—Frank as the Modern Prometheus, as Mary Shelley called her original Dr. Frankenstein—and on the sexual subtext of sex “making a man” out of a boy.¹⁶ As Scott Miller has noted (125-126), the overt satire of the homoerotic hyper-masculinity of the Charles Atlas ads that were part of these 50s and 60s comic books is at the heart of the song.¹⁷ When Janet says: “I don’t like men with too many muscles,” Frank’s rejoinder “well, I didn’t make him for YOU!” echoes his previous song (“I’ve been making a man/ With blond hair and a tan/ And he’s good for relieving my... tension”). He now adds, in a straight-faced satire of male chiseled bodies: “He carries the Charles Atlas seal of approval” and reveals the “first toys” he has bought for his boy-toy¹⁸: golden weights and a sawhorse that again represents the male... Frankfurter.



The hymn to queerness is rudely interrupted, however, by a brief interlude of “repressed straight masculinity”: a burly rocker called Eddie (played by the real-life rock star Meatloaf) comes roaring out of “Deep Freeze” on his motorbike in a parody of Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and other films.¹⁹ Eddie creates havoc, ripping down the Guggenheim-like stairwell and scattering the conventioners; but the real disruption he brings is that of queerness. His nonsensical retro rock song, that celebrates 1950s rock and his performance of rock with a female partner in a trash version that causes the tuxedoed conventionalists to join in, in a sort of chorus line, is explicitly a celebration of hetero-normativity (see Cornell, 44).²⁰ Frank kills Eddie for this

¹⁵ While bodybuilding does lead to monstrous bodies in the case of extreme competitors (such as Arnold Schwarzenegger), Peter Hinwood, who was a model at the time, is a “hunk” and not a hulk. Chemers’s reading of Rocky’s body as “monstrous” and “grotesque” (109) seems blind to his classical perfection: he is simply physically perfect according to dominant cultural standards.

¹⁶ This also gives the word “specimen” its stronger meaning in Frank’s double-edged flattery about Brad: “Such a *fine* specimen of manhood! So dominant! You must be awfully proud, Janet...” (30’)

¹⁷ The ads themselves are a delight for anyone studying marketing as the rhetoric of the superlative. The actual line “**TU PROVE** in Only **7** Days that I Can Make **YOU** a New Man,” complete with the bold type and block letters, is an authentic ad as this link can prove in turn:

<http://www.sandowplus.co.uk/Competition/Atlas/Adverts/adverts.htm>

“Dynamic tension” which Frank’n’Furter uses as an obviously lubricious metaphor (his performance of the song making the meaning inescapable) was the actual name of Charles Atlas’ patented body-building program. (See Miller 126)

¹⁸ Watkins (160) also uses this anachronism.

¹⁹ For as complete a list as possible of the high culture references collaged, recycled and queered in *RH*, see Dika 118 and Jackson 46-47. I shall be developing this aspect in the last part of this study.

²⁰ Even if the lyrics of the song—“Hot patootie bless my soul/ I really love that rock’n’roll” (41’) border on self-parody. It could also be a parody of Elton John’s 1972 tribute to the time when “rock was young” in “Crocodile Rock”, an ode to small town America and heterosexuality, at a time when the English star had not “come out” yet, although he was widely identified as gay.

transgression, and with the darkly humorous pronouncement “It was a mercy killing,” resumes the song “I can make you a man” (45’). The song’s last words—“But a tri-ceps/ Makes me want to take Charles Atlas/ By the ... *hand*/ In just seven days, baby, I can make you a man” (45’)—segues into the Mendelssohn wedding march played on the electric guitar as Rocky sweeps his creator up into his arms and steps into their wedding chamber, while the conventionalists throw rice, in a queering of the opening wedding ceremony and in applause for this restoration of queer politics and the notion that gay sexual initiation is truly “man-making.”²¹

Voyeurism / Creatures of the Night

To protect the voyeuristic nature of the subsequent scenes (which are merely suggested, since there is no pornography at all in the entire film), but also, to play games with anti-illusionism, Sharman cuts to the Criminologist, who comments that there are those who believe “life is an illusion”, and that if it is so, “Brad and Janet are quite safe.” The shift to the present tense creates the illusion of simultaneous, rather than retrospective unfolding of events. As this inset narrator emphasizes that “Brad and Janet’s feeling of unease grew as they were shown to their separate rooms,” a keyhole opens in the middle of the screen in his face in the “wipe” to the subsequent scene, in a play on the viewer as peeping Tom:



The next scenes, representing the successive seduction of Janet and Brad by Frank’n’Furter, are in fact seen in a *mise en abyme* of voyeurism, since we view them through an inset TV screen, Janet and Brad being under surveillance by the freakish and incestuous couple of servants, Riff Raff and Magenta. The surveillance screen is also used as a gimmick to show that time has passed: blurred images suggest ellipsis.

The comic aspect of the double seduction lies in its absolutely symmetrical repetition, with merely a change of wig for Frank, and of lighting for the scene: hot pink for Janet, blue for Brad, in a joke denouncing gender codes. Frank uses practically the same lines for Janet and Brad, who upon identifying him, in turn echo each other like mechanical toys.



²¹ Knapp foregrounds the way the final lyrics “a man” are sung as a religious “amen.” For excellent close readings of the musical aspects of the songs and their significance, see Knapp 247 and seq.

Frank's entire (and frank) hedonistic philosophy is encapsulated in the rejoinder "There's no crime in giving yourself over to pleasure," which announces the song "Give yourselves over to absolute pleasure" later in the film. First, however, the codes of the traditional romantic comedy must be mocked; Janet, who feels guilty for not having "saved herself" for Brad—an expression mocked by Frank who quips: "surely you're not all *spent*"—later sees him through one of the surveillance monitors sharing a post-sex cigarette with Frank; she finds some consolation, however, upon discovering Rocky, traumatized by Riff Raff's bullying, and by proceeding to "dress" his wounds, as she pointedly says, while obviously *un*-dressing (ripping her petticoat into bandages). Again, in a satire of romantic codes, we cut to the Criminologist who marks this as a moment of "emotion" for Janet, and provides the dictionary's definition of the word, footnote-style. The actual seduction of Janet by Rocky then takes place to the sound of the song "Creature of the Night," sung by Janet while we see, in rapid montage, from her reclining perspective, low angle close-ups of Rocky's face, but also Frank's, Riff Raff's and Magenta's, as if they were all Janet's fantasy/real lovers. The word "creature" might be thought, in this context, to lose its sci-fi overtones; but one could argue that it conversely, albeit grotesquely, calls to the fore the libidinous subtext of classic monster films.

Parody and Pastiche: Thriller, Scifi, Last Supper, and Horror Film

In yet another thumbing of its nose at verisimilitude that characterizes *RH*, a visitor shows up at the castle: the very same Dr. Scott towards whom Brad and Janet were driving, and who just happens to be working for a federal agency that tracks down aliens—a throwback to 1950s anticommunist sci-fi cinema, which also heralds Chris Carter's *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993-2002) some twenty years later. That the castle's inhabitants are indeed aliens is betrayed by Riff Raff's speaking of "earthlings": as we are about to learn, Frank is not merely a gender-bending vampire, but the real meaning of "Transsexual Transylvania" is that he and all of his followers have come from the planet of Transvestite, in the galaxy of Transsexual. This flaunting of artifice—generic hybridity, impossible coincidences, a mishmash of references—is emphasized by the spoof of *Star Trek*'s celebrated tagline "Beam me up, Scotty!" as the disabled Dr. Scott, *aka* "Scotty" is whizzed up three flights of stairs thanks to a "triple power magnet" that draws in his wheelchair—an event that doubles as an inset joke on Frank's *powers of attraction*.

The parody of genre cinema escalates wildly when it is revealed that Dr. Scott has come to the castle to rescue Eddie, who just happens to be his nephew (Eddie had sent an SOS note written in blood). This ridiculing of thriller codes turns into a lampooning of soap opera conventions, when the shock Dr. Scott receives upon finding his two former students in the castle (and vice-versa), as well as the revelation of the various sexual shenanigans, leads each of the characters to exclaim another's name in appalled recognition, in what turns into a comic echoing, in a deliberately ludicrous loop: "Janet! Dr. Scott! Janet! Brad! Rocky!"

Master and Mistress of the House:

Upon realizing that Janet Weiss is a modern-day Eve who has corrupted his Rocky-Adam, Frank reestablishes himself as master of the house, in the song "You'd better watch out, Janet Weiss." Rocky is also warned: "I *made* you and I can *break* you just as easily." But Frank switches to a *mistress*-of-the-house tone: dinner is announced. We then segue into the

“blasphemous”²² Last Supper scene. It is presented as a farce: Riff Raff sloppily pours blood into each guest’s glass, while Frank slices a joint of white meat with an electric knife in a nod to Tobe Hooper’s *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), a knife he revs up at the mention of Eddie’s name, adding, in a significant pun that allows us to guess what the *flesh* being partaken of actually is: “It’s a rather *tender* subject. Another slice, anyone?” (63’). While secular cannibalism is not without high culture precedent, from *Medea* or *Titus Andronicus* to, in the figurative mode, Hamlet’s quip about Polonius being at supper, “Not where he eats, but where he is eaten” (IV, 3, 1.21), the reference here is obviously to the blood of Christ. The pastiche of Leonardo Da Vinci’s famous painting is made clear by our inset teacher/commentator, the Criminologist, who displays it for us, as he pontificates about the symbolic significance of meals in human rituals.

But the scene may also be a satirical queering of Robert Altman’s pastiche of the same painting in another famous counterculture film, the absurdist antiwar comedy *M.A.S.H.* (1970).²³ The meal doubly sacrifices Eddy—first, he is revealed to always have been a “bad boy” as exhibited by what the Criminologist boldly calls his “rock’n’roll porn,” and of course, his criminal record. This increases the parodic effect when Eddie is suddenly recast as the sacrificial/satanic “lamb” when Frank pulls the tablecloth to the ground in a dramatic gesture and reveals the mutilated body his guests have been feeding on. Beyond a performance of *bad taste*, which the entire scene is also a pun on, especially if one remembers that the actor performing Eddie goes by the name of Meatloaf,²⁴ the entire scene is a celebration of the Dionysian displacing the Christian mythology (Peraino, 237), in a quintessentially countercultural move.

Horribly Queer

The horror tropes and the “satanic” red crosses in the scene mentioned above are simply a way of serving up what is truly *horrific* about *Rocky Horror*, its transgressions. Most recent critics see Frank’n’Furter as embodying a celebration of the queer (Lamm, Seymour), of the carnivalesque (Dika 107-112)—and even of the utopian (Dika 112). As Dika puts it:

As a confrontational figure, Frank is a true image of horror when viewed by the heterosexual male viewer Mulvey theorizes, and perhaps to patriarchy itself. Yet to the new subjectivities the film posits—to homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexuals, and even to new kinds of heterosexuals—Tim Curry’s Frank’N’Furter is an image of wild liberation and sexual desire (117).

²² See Dika 113 and Knapp 148 for different interpretations of the “blasphemous” in *RH*.

²³ In the latter, one of the soldiers who, despite being a womanizer suddenly thinks he might be impotent, or—in his eyes, worse—gay, clearly expresses his will to die instead. His buddies pretend to help him commit suicide, and give him a sleeping pill, allowing him to “rise” to sexual resurrection the next day. Although Altman’s irreverent variation on the Gospel and on the Da Vinci painting are both countercultural in their negation of the gap between sacred and secular, high and low culture and in their sexual innuendo, the sexual politics of *M.A.S.H.* are only emancipatory for young heterosexual white men and quite unselfconsciously sexist and homophobic. Sharman might be commenting on this in his own queer rewriting of the scene. To see the scene, and particularly the Da Vinci “remediation” into a *tableau vivant* in film, go to:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVUXPjFWfX4>

²⁴ Indeed, as Liz Locke points out, the audience comments on this in the ritualized midnight performances: “When Riff Raff hurls the roast onto the dining table, the audience groans ‘Oh, no, Meatloaf again?’ referring to the actor/rock star who plays Eddie and whom Frank mercy-butchers with an ice-pick. (‘You sure know how to pick your friends!’ quips the audience).” (Locke, 147)

The deliberate biblical allusions are part of the transgressions of the film, which constantly reverses them into sexual innuendo—for instance, the Criminologist comments, in an intrusion (wipe through a spin at 72’): “Brian and Janet had tasted the forbidden fruit, proof that their host was a man of little morals and some *persuasion*.” That the Criminologist himself is a lecherous voyeur (despite his moralizing tone and arched eyebrows) is revealed in the narrative hook “What further indignities were they to be subjected to?” (73’), that allows the scene to segue into the next phase of Frank’s orgiastic plans. Indeed, in a pastiche of Greek mythology and science fiction, to the song “The sonic transducer will seduce you,” Frank orders the “Medusa” switch to be flipped. In an inset spoof on classic art and on remediation within this film, it transforms all of his (clothed) guests into (naked) classic statues. The emphasis on Frank’s giving directions and being in absolute control of these creations makes him the inset figure of the creator of art forms: from the creation of Rocky to the making of statues, to choreographer of the musical “floor show” he now announces.

The Rocky Horror Show as “Self-Reflexive Musical”

This play on the *mise en abyme* of inset spectacles, culminating in the floor show, makes *Rocky Horror* a “self-reflexive musical: a musical about mounting a musical” as Sarah Artt (55) points out.²⁵ Having re-made all of his guests in his image—yet another blasphemous allusion to the Bible—in black leather bodices, fishnet stockings, stiletto heels, and heavy make-up for male and female alike, he reanimates them thanks to the “De-Medusa” switch, in a continuing spoof on sci-fi technology.²⁶

His “creatures” form a chorus line at the front of the stage, and the curtain opens on the RKO Radio Tower, with Frank surrounded by mist (76’). He then sings a lyrical homage to Fay Wray, dating the beginning of his transgender identity to seeing her in *King Kong*. The song’s lyrics turn to an explicit intra- and extra-diegetic call to be converted by the “sensual daydream” the show *and* film reflect:

Give yourself over to absolute pleasure/
Swim the warm waters of sins of the flesh/
Erotic nightmares beyond any measure/

The “warm waters” are literalized, as Frank dives into the mist and the camera reveals a swimming pool—with a zoom that ensures that the pool then fills the entire frame, in one of the most perfectly aesthetic self-reflexive moments of the film. The orgiastic message “Don’t dream it, be it” unfolds as against the bottom of the pool/backdrop of the film screen is revealed to be

²⁵ Jane Feuer is credited for this definition. Of course, *RH* does not as obviously pertain to this mode as, say, Richard Attenborough’s *A Chorus Line* (1985) or the recent TV series *Smash* (Theresa Rebeck, NBC, 2012-), but again, it is a pastiche of so many genres, that everything it does is hybridized.

²⁶ Mel Brooks’s *Young Frankenstein* (1975) shares this regressive delight in transforming the machinery of gothic and gothic machinery itself into play-toys for boys. It also shares its constant sexual jokes, but in a traditional, heterosexual series of allusions to the monster’s sexual endowment versus his weak brain—we similarly find out in *RH* that a *single* brain was used for Rocky and Eddie.

Michelangelo's painting of the creation of Adam (notice how Frank's hand, in the close-up, clearly "holds" Adam's):



The Sistine Chapel *ceiling* painting turned “*bottom-of-the-pool*” art echoes all the previous references to queer creation; and emphasizes Frank's role as *queer* creator, whose “creatures” now join him in a pan-sexual orgy in the pool—but it also clearly marks the screen itself as the “pool” to swim in. The sole heralding of a reversal to come is the lifebuoy Frank floats on, clearly marked USS Titanic.

The sudden shift into the song “We're a Wild and an Untamed Thing” makes for a grotesque change of tone. The *grand-guignol* aspect of the rock'n'roll song to which the entire inset cast (including Dr. Scott who is also in fishnet stockings and garter) do the French-cancan is explicitly, however, explained as a form of frenzy that keeps melancholia at bay. In the midst of the song, before the “floor show” can come to a close, a revolution occurs: Riff Raff and Magenta, transformed into perfectly clad, androgynous SciFi warriors, announce that they are deposing Frank and have ordered the return to their planet of Transsexual because, sings Riff Raff: “your lifestyle's too extreme.” An apparently devastated Frank then bares his heart in what appears to be a song of queer solitude—“Cards for sorrow, cards for pain / But I've seen blue skies through the tears in my eyes / And I realize I'm going home” (1:24).

Becoming Fay Wray: a Queer Crucifixion?

Just as Frank's redemption into a sensitive martyr-figure seems accomplished, complete with *Jesus Christ Superstar*-like shots of him as haloed in overexposure, and as he sees himself applauded by an audience of old vampires, the inset audience of Transylvanians disappears, and is revealed to have been his fantasy. The extreme close-ups on his runny mascara transform Frank into a figure of pathos. But in a rejection of melodrama—“How sentimental,” quips Magenta—the Judas-like Riff Raff announces that Frank must die. Producing “a laser beam capable of emitting a ray of pure antimatter” (86') in a parody of sci-fi films bordering on the cartoonish, Riff Raff zaps Frank to death; a wailing Rocky romantically takes his master in his arms, and in a pastiche of *King Kong*, ascends the RKO tower despite being zapped repeatedly. Frank's desire to “be” Fay Wray is thus granted in death. The tower collapses into the swimming-pool, and Rocky and Frank drown, as foretold by the Titanic buoy. The castle and its aliens lift off, under a rainbow, in a pastiche of *The Wizard of Oz*, while the humans are left crawling blindly in the mist. As the image starts to spin to indicate their total disorientation—a pun on sexual orientation and on their being “lost” to normalcy forever—we fade into the image of the globe spinning in the Criminologist's study. He concludes that humans (beyond Janet, Brad, and Dr. Scott) are little more than crawling insects “lost in time, lost in space, and bleeding” and in this sudden, brutal

distancing, exits the study, closing the door behind him, and literally leaving us in the dark. The song “Double Feature” returns, with an apparent “moral”—“darkness has swallowed Brad and Janet”—but in a final reversal, the “Time Warp” comes on, suggesting that the entire film starts over (something the live audiences at midnight shows clamor for).

Can There Be A Moral to this Film?

Critics disagree on the ultimate queer politics of the film. Miller (122) emphasizes how the Kinsey Report of 1948 had shattered the idea of sexual “normalcy,” but, like Endres and Bozelka, seems to uphold the idea of *Rocky Horror* as a morality play in which Frank’n’Furter’s debauchery is ultimately punished (Miller 134). Hixon pessimistically reads into the film the “authentic queer epiphany” that ends in normativity killing queerness, while Lamm emphasizes the “pedagogy of sexual subversiveness” (203) that remains. What I would stress is that Riff Raff’s killing both Frank and Rocky is a metatextual irony on the creator—O’Brien, who played Riff Raff and who was simultaneously the author of *RH*—killing his creature: Frank’n’Furter, the product of Richard O’Brien’s imagination, does what Frank has intradigetically threatened to do: “I made you, and I can break you just as easily”.²⁷ The more flippant will simply see the entire film as an illustration of Frank’s celebrated pronouncement: “It’s something that you’ll get used to/A mental mind fuck can be nice.” One *can* of course read the ending in terms of a queer crucifixion, in keeping with the camp, but sincere representations of martyrdom in much of counterculture musical film, from Norman Jewison’s *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), to Brian De Palma’s *Phantom of the Paradise* (1974), Ken Russell’s *Tommy* (1975) or Milos Forman’s *Hair* (1979). All of these film feature male martyrs; Frank is arguably the queer George Berger. Frank’s apotheosis, as Julian Cornell (46) points out, is also an ironic fulfillment of cinematic desire:

The film’s dénouement is an ironic, self-aware, reflexively artificial fulfillment of desire. [...] The film works to give Frank what he wants: he can be both Fay Wray and King Kong. The film acknowledges, through the final sequence and the framing device, that Frank is a fantasy himself—a creation of the cinema, one derived from camp and glam, and an expression of the fluidity of desire that the film is empowered to mobilize.²⁸

Indeed, it is the film constant *mise en abyme* of film and referencing of visual culture, in a process that is “visually abysmal” to quote Frank himself, that I would like to analyze now.

Visually abysmal

From the very first (wedding) scene, there is a *mise en abyme* of visual culture. Indeed, the entire scene is placed under the sign of the Grant Wood painting *American Gothic* (that fans of the series *Desperate Housewives* will recognize from the opening credits pastiche). The painting itself does not initially appear, but is remediated into film, “enacted” by Riff Raff and his sister Magenta and whose clothing, posture and gothic faces turn them into a “living tableau” of

²⁷ There is an element of gender identification as *melancholia* (see Butler 1990) that one can hear starting with Riff Raff’s first song, “Slow Morphia Slow,” which announces Frank’s “I’ve Seen Blue Skies/Through the Tears in My Eyes.” Indeed, Frank seems a stand-in double for O’Brien himself, who reveals in recent interviews that he knew himself to be transgender since the age of 7, making this film not merely a “celluloid jam” but a “transparent” celluloid closet in which he creates, then kills, the “out” queer version of himself.

²⁸ See Cornell 44-47 for a convincing reading of this.

the painting as they stand before the (gothic) church doors. For those spectators who might not have spotted the remediation, it is highlighted retrospectively, when Janet and Brad enter Frank'n'Furtner's castle, and the painting can be seen in the hallway: for those viewers, some of the allegorical fun the film pokes at the history of American gothic (in literature, film, painting, and architecture) through intertextuality and intermediality will be warped chronologically.

When critic Sarah Artt (61-62) writes that: "*Rocky Horror* can be said to engage in 'semiotic warfare' by incorporating into its camp aesthetic both images of classical Western art and its Oakley Court setting for numbers like 'Time Warp'" (61-62), she refers to the fact that the entire film is saturated with parodies of both high culture and pop culture clichés, queering them, but also revealing that they were already *queer*. For instance, Charles Atlas the muscle builder is conflated with the original Atlas of mythology in the stained glass that adorns the room, in a gallery of high-culture/low-culture "visuals" that *abysmally* reconfigures all masculinity as queer or simply exposes the gay subtext of high culture icons. Frank's room is guarded by a double version of an anatomically correct *David* with a feminized face (in the background one sees the stained-glass Atlas). His ballroom is decked with *Mona Lisas* (plural), in a double homage to Da Vinci²⁹ and to Andy Warhol's serigraph of the *double* Mona Lisa. Not only is this a gallery of "queer art", but it echoes, on a visual level, the opening credits' repeated reference to "double features." Another form of "doubling" is effected within the *mise en abyme* of visual culture when Eddie first appears, revving out of Deep Freeze, and the camera shows close-ups of the "LOVE" and "HATE" tattoos on his hands, in a clear reference to Charles Laughton's *The Night of the Hunter* (1955). The fact that *Rocky Horror* exhibits its metafilmic nature is part of what Liz Locke calls its "inter-, meta- and hyper-performance" (144). Because the film exhibits how it "cannibalizes" other genres and cult films (145), and how it "incorporates icons of elite culture" (146) one could argue that it constantly displays its seams, like the monster in the original Frankenstein films. This in turn is an invitation to "unsuture" as Weinstock astutely analyzes it, the entire film, or as he puts it, the audience's double desire to "be" the film and to control it, refusing the suture of the gaze as defined by Christian Metz in Lacanian terms.

The idea that we, as viewers, can imitate Riff Raff, seize control of the "sonic oscillator" and throw switches of our own, to regain mastery of the closed text of the film, informs the dynamic behind the midnight viewings of the film. Audience participation is said to have originated when a gay schoolteacher, Louis Farese Jr., talked back to the screen at the Waverly Film Theater on Labor Day 1976. Very quickly, a secondary text came to be, that the audience chants out between the various cues (see examples from this now "stable" secondary script, in Chemers, 113-116). Thus, although the filmic text is unsutured, it is ritually re-sutured through the collective throwing of the *sonic switch* (ordering the projectionist when to stop the film and when to restart for the in-house performance) and through the quasi-religious devotion of fans (the word "cult" takes on its full meaning).

Nicole Seymour believes that the true queerness of the film lies in its prompting this transgression of viewing codes: "the queerness inheres in a set of transgressive acts both encouraged and allowed for by the spectacle" (124). She invokes Barthes's concept of the "writerly text" (126) to explain how audience participation has been functioning since 1976, and why queer viewers are more likely, as an underrepresented viewpoint, to be more versed in this

²⁹ According to some critics, Mona Lisa was modeled on a young man who was Da Vinci's apprentice and probably his lover over the twenty-some years their relationship lasted. See this link: http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-202_162-7309750.html

type of deconstruction and “unsuturing” of the text. Not only do the audience pretend they are inside the screen world (squirting water, throwing rice, etc) but “shadow casts simultaneously act out the story in front of the screen (after a famous line in the film, these performances are known as “the floor show.”)” (127). Seymour’s point is that the audience is “not just performing songs and dramatic parts but also exposing the fact that everything from normative film viewership to gender is a performance of sorts” (128).

Seymour rightly points out that the film encourages this countercultural form of viewing. The film plays on anti-illusionism from its very start.³⁰ The performance of the “Time Warp” song, for instance, literally “warps” the narrative frame. The stolid Criminologist’s first intrusion, to explain the steps of the Time Warp dance, does not immediately function as an invitation to join in; but in the next cut back to this professorial authority figure, we see he has jumped onto his desk, obviously having been “contaminated” by the dance’s manic energy. This collapse of the border between diegesis and supposedly extra-diegetic narrator also interrogates the fourth wall. The lyrics “in another dimension/ With voyeuristic intention/ Well secluded, I see all” (20’) exposes the audience: we, the viewers, are these secluded voyeurs in another dimension. By breaking down the fourth wall, in the rituals described above, and analyzed by Weinstock, Chemers, Locke and others, the audience simply takes the film’s invitation literally. Frank’s direct camera gaze, in close-up, in his first appearance (he rolls his eyes at us while saying to Brad and Janet they look “pretty groovy,” creating complicity at their expense), and his throwing a glass of water at the camera, in a warning he is going to make us “wet,” all emphasize these dynamics.

What allows the “midnight ritual” to remain countercultural is that the secondary script can be amended by specific audiences in turn. (For instance, in Utah, viewers greet the cue about Brad and Janet being “in the middle of nowhere” with “Hellooooo Utah!”). Seymour highlights that this is precisely what allows it to remain a queer text: “The audience thus renders the film a malleable, living text, one at the mercy of their whims, perspectives, and particular cultural positions.” (126). No doubt nailing down the film’s various meanings, as I have tried to do here, is in itself a heresy against the countercultural text, but that, of course, is the paradox of studying any transgressive text that resists order in its hybridity, satirical excess, and constant morphing from genre to genre and tone to tone, in an illustration of the multiple ironies of Frank’s quip: “It’s not easy, having a good time”.

A conclusion of sorts

All in all, *Rocky Horror* is the consummate *queer* countercultural film, of post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS ebullience. It is a wild celebration of the *freaks* and a satire of “normalcy.” Not only does it pastiche all genre film, from romantic comedy to horror picture or science-fiction film, but it queers these genres through the character of Frank’n’Furter. If, as Judith Butler writes: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (33), Frank reveals both genre and gender to be the artifices that cinema is built on. But as Samantha Riley reminds us, citationality may be a refuge for viewers who resist the film’s queering potential:

³⁰ Not in a Brechtian way, as pointed out by Dika (105-106), but within the desire to “have a good time.” This is an allusion to Frank’s cult cue: “it’s not easy, having a good time.”

Performative citationality operates as a fetish in the queer musicals of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and *Stadt der verlorenen Seelen*. One watches queer musicals, as well as performs alongside queer characters through audience participation, to satisfy a desire to overstep limits of the performance of gender and sexuality, and essentially, our identity, in a sublime way. This desire must be blocked or disavowed, however, in order for one to return to heteronormality, which is done here through the mechanism of citationality. Viewers latch onto citations to disavow the queering that is taking place. This queering is manifested out of the excess that is exhumed from the sublime encounter with the queer performance of the film through aid of the queered citations. At the same time the film queers those viewers watching it, if only momentarily. Still, viewers maintain that they love the musical just for the music.

But then again, transgression or subversion are always fraught with paradoxes. Whether or not the film queers its viewers, it certainly does, with 1970s gusto, queer traditional institutions, as Chemers brilliantly summarizes:

Rocky Horror critics and scholars have already described the many filmic and bourgeois rituals that the film alone is designed to complicate through the employment of such Bakhtinian notions as carnival, grotesquerie and billingsgate, as well as gender role subversion and semiotic reconfiguration. The film contains a wedding, a proposal, an academic lecture, a presidential speech, a formal party, a medical theater, a formal dinner, a floor show, a faith healing, a class revolution, and a picnic. However, the wedding becomes a homosexual one, the speech is Nixon's resignation, the party is part of an alien invasion, the medical theater devolves into a Frankensteinian monster creation, the dinner is cannibalistic, the floor show and faith healing turn out to be the sexual liberation of the film's stodgiest characters, the class revolution is conducted by space aliens, and there is, ultimately, no picnic. (Chemers, note 4, 121).

No picnic, but what a ball!

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