

Rose Enos

Dr. Daniel R. Siakel

Humanities H1CS

14 June 2024

Going Home: How *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* Throws Dr. Frank-N-Furter and the
Audience into Cyclical Queer Fantasy

The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) follows the newly engaged, middle-class couple Brad and Janet into a mansion in the woods, where they encounter the transvestite scientist Dr. Frank-N-Furter and his revelrous followers. Throughout the night, Brad and Janet adopt Frank-N-Furter's pleasure-seeking nature. However, Frank-N-Furter's servants rebel against his decadence, kill him, expel the rest of the cast, and transport the mansion to their alien homeland. Despite the film's initial portrayal of Brad and Janet as its protagonists, the plot and theme of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* are mainly concerned with and driven by Dr. Frank-N-Furter's battle for control over the mansion. A reorientation toward following Frank-N-Furter as a fictional protagonist diverges from most scholarly analysis of the film and motivates deeper investigation of Frank-N-Furter's character. Frank-N-Furter's conservative wedding appearance, decadent mansion appearance, and progressive decline imply that the mansion houses a queer fantasy of Frank-N-Furter's making, while the "Time Warp" musical number suggests that the fantasy uses cyclical logic to keep Frank-N-Furter returning to it to escape real-world repression. Frank-N-Furter teaches the audience to associate with queerness, and his unsatisfying demise therefore urges them to empathize with its repression. However, the brutal erasure of Frank-N-Furter demoralizes the audience, and the disorientating expulsion of the cast and

audience back into the real world throws them, like Frank-N-Furter, into a fantastical loop where they return periodically to the film to escape a reality where queerness is repressed.

FRANK-N-FURTER'S CYCLICAL FANTASY

Frank-N-Furter as the Protagonist. Brad and Janet contribute little to *Rocky Horror*'s narrative, and even less by their own agency. At the start, they feign a narrative exigence by getting engaged. However, almost immediately the plot drastically shifts so as to make this decision inconsequential. When their car breaks down in the woods, they seek help at the nearby mansion. This is where the couple's protagonism ends. Throughout the rest of the film, they at most comment on the state of things as they are dragged through the mansion foyer to Frank-N-Furter's lab, to the dinner table, and eventually, as literal statues, to the final stage. In a mid-movie bout of agency, they each choose to continue sex with Frank-N-Furter and Janet has sex with Rocky. Lamm groups this series of events into the awakening of Brad and Janet to the benefits of queerness (199–201). However, this awakening is consequential only to their characterizations, and not to any other characters. Brad and Janet dance in the finale alongside Columbia, a resident of the mansion who had already come under the queer guiles of Frank-N-Furter. Most importantly, Brad and Janet make no effort to save Frank-N-Furter and Rocky from Riff Raff and Magenta. Nearly the exact same course of events would have occurred throughout the film, from Rocky's creation to Dr. Scott's coincidental arrival to Riff Raff's and Magenta's coup and Frank-N-Furter's death, if Brad and Janet had never stepped foot inside the mansion.

Frank-N-Furter, meanwhile, drives nearly every point of *Rocky Horror*'s plot by not only masterminding the events of the mansion but directly and consequentially involving himself in

their execution. As the mansion's leader, Frank-N-Furter occupies a teleological position. He lands the mansion on Earth, pursues the creation of life, gathers a crowd of guests, and dramatically unveils the creation of Rocky. Certainly, his decisions construct the first half of the film. When Riff Raff, Magenta, and Scott throw a wrench in the night, Frank-N-Furter's participation in enacting his own plans allows him to dynamically continue driving the plot; he not only experiences the narrative, as Brad and Janet do, but *reacts to and affects* its development. He takes Brad's and Janet's presumably unexpected arrival at the mansion in stride, not deviating from his original plan to uncover Rocky. Then he responds specifically to their presences by taking the opportunity to have sex with each of them and, as Lamm notes, indoctrinate them into his existing cult of queerness (199). In response to the signals of his diminishing control over the mansion, namely Janet's having sex with Rocky and Scott's arrival, Frank-N-Furter consolidates power with the Medusa Ray. Finally, even on threat of death by Riff Raff and Magenta, he affects Rocky by climbing the radio tower in an attempt to escape, causing Rocky to follow and die with him.

Brad and Janet trade off with Frank-N-Furter for narrative significance, revealing Frank-N-Furter as the protagonist of the fiction, Brad and Janet as side characters, and Riff Raff and Magenta as antagonists. Thakkar defines fictional protagonism as "the *manner* in which a character leads not only the plot but also the central 'debate' of a film" (86–7). We see that Frank-N-Furter asserts a significantly stronger hold over the plot than Brad or Janet. The predominant "central debate" scholarly conversation about *Rocky Horror* concerns whether the film promotes decadence or conservatism (Reale 138–9). Many scholars consider Frank-N-Furter's murder as the turning point from decadence to conservatism; thus, Frank-N-Furter leads the central debate up to that pivotal moment. Further, the fictional

protagonistic *content* which marks the protagonist is “the behavior, thought, and reaction to change of its main character” (Thakkar 86). Crucially, Brad and Janet lack a “reaction to change” where Frank-N-Furter seizes it with his presence and dynamism: he presents the film’s fictional protagonist content. As Brad and Janet lose their grip on the narrative of *Rocky Horror*, Frank-N-Furter emerges with the title of protagonist.

The Mansion as Fantasy. We can now afford Frank-N-Furter the focus worthy of a protagonist. The film makes explicit the contexts of Brad’s and Janet’s lives outside the mansion, bookended by their engagement and by their escaping the mansion; Frank-N-Furter simply appears and dies. By reformulating the relative importances of the characters, we naturally move to investigate how Frank-N-Furter came to be.

His first appearance, on the steps of the church at which Brad and Janet later get engaged, invokes a conservative man of God. In the Hapschatts’s wedding photo, Frank-N-Furter frowns in marked contrast to the other wedding-goers and to his later hedonistic persona, displaying aversion, or at least indifference, to pleasure. His church garb further justifies this joyless countenance by its association with abstinence from worldly pleasures. When the wedding activities become too rowdy, he turns to face the door of the church, physically shielding himself from witnessing the ensuing happiness. He retreats inside the church at the earliest opportunity, even before the Hapschatts have left the driveway.

However, environmental clues suggest that Frank-N-Furter exists unwillingly bounded by conservatism. For the duration of his screen time outside the church, he stands between the fellow austere observers who will become Riff Raff and Magenta. On either side of him like guards, they physically represent the forcedness and rigidity of his conservative lifestyle. After

Frank-N-Furter enters the church, Riff Raff and Magenta pose outside the door in a parody of Wood's *American Gothic*, a painting associated with "midwesterners out of step with a modernizing world," reinforcing their connection to conservatism ("American Gothic"). Riff Raff's pitchfork gates Frank-N-Furter into the church, signaling a policing of him and therefore a lack of intrinsic willingness by Frank-N-Furter to conform to the conservative lifestyle that Riff Raff and Magenta preach.

Frank-N-Furter's repression at the command of Riff Raff and Magenta gives rise to a utopian fantasy, manifested as the mansion, in which Frank-N-Furter possesses enormous agency and control and pursues pleasure and self-identity unapologetically. The mansion's partygoers, especially Riff Raff and Magenta, worship Frank-N-Furter's coming when Brad and Janet enter from the rain. Frank-N-Furter's first appearance in the mansion contrasts the reserved background role he played at the wedding; he descends from above to begin a musical number centered on himself, claiming power and importance. He becomes godlike in his protagonistic ability to direct the flow of the narrative, putting everyone else aside as he turns the film into a pursuit of his own pleasure, sexually assaulting Brad and Janet and creating Rocky as a sexual object. He leverages his power to get back at Riff Raff and Magenta, kicking and whipping Riff Raff and refusing to return the mansion to Transsexual despite the pair's requests. The world of the wedding scene flips on its head into a veritable utopia for Frank-N-Furter, with the same characters playing opposite roles.

Frank-N-Furter's progressive decline in the second half of the film represents a return from the fantasy to a reality unaccepting of the queerness that he has built within the mansion. The carefully crafted utopia hits snag after snag: Eddie interrupts the showcase, Scott arrives unexpectedly, Riff Raff and Magenta sic the dogs on Rocky, and Janet has sex with Rocky. After

turning everyone into statues, Frank-N-Furter gets things back under control, hosts the final stage, and nearly converts Scott to decadence to symbolize his uncle's acceptance of his queerness. However, Riff Raff and Magenta are no longer conscious projections onto the fantasy—they develop minds of their own. Perhaps they embody a subconscious dread of reality, or communicate the real-life Riff Raff and Magenta interrupting Frank-N-Furter's dream. When they threaten him, he recognizes the impending collapse of the fantasy, singing "I'm Going Home": he is going "home" to reality and the church. Riff Raff and Magenta resume their role as Frank-N-Furter's conservative gatekeepers, shutting down the fantasy by killing the fantastic Frank-N-Furter and literally whisking the mansion away.

Brad's and Janet's motor breakdown forms a limit between reality and the fantasy and allows the introduction of unrealistic logic. Marin defines a "limit . . . an insuperable gap between our world and utopia" that introduces the logic of the utopia (241–2). The limit between the church and the mansion derives its insuperability from its improbability. Brad and Janet listen to President Nixon's resignation speech on the car radio during the breakdown. Matheson notes that, although Nixon gave this speech in August, the film explicitly takes place in November, introducing an inconsistency between the reality of the church and the unreality of the mansion (19). The speech and the tire signal that Brad and Janet have, at this point, crossed over to the world of fantasy.

The performance of the "Time Warp" declares the mansion a time-malleable space and introduces the cyclic logic of the fantasy. Brad and Janet enter the mansion at the perfect time to witness the key events of the night. The mansion comes into being at precisely the moment Brad and Janet step inside. As Frank-N-Furter later accuses Brad, their breakdown is not mere coincidence; instead, it and the mansion are integral to the fantastical narrative written by

Frank-N-Furter's mind, and so must happen. In the servants' and guests' performance of "Time Warp," the iconic chorus of "Let's do the Time Warp again" presents a logical legislation: in this world (the mansion), time warps, and then warps *again*—you and everything else has been here before, and now you are here again. When Riff Raff and Magenta return Frank-N-Furter to reality, they reference and briefly reprise the "Time Warp," hinting at the mansion's eventual return and another iteration of the fantasy. Mansion time progresses *cyclically*. Frank-N-Furter will continue experiencing repression in the real world and will return to the mansion for refuge.

THROWING THE AUDIENCE INTO THE LOOP

Frank-N-Furter's powerful narrative presence and Brad's, Janet's, and Scott's queer conversion endear the audience to both Frank-N-Furter and the idea of queerness. The film draws the audience themselves into a "carnival" hosted at the mansion, where queerness serves as a "release from the burden of socially imposed sex roles" (Matheson 25–6). The carnival allows the audience to imagine their lives queer. Endres identifies a rhetorical vision of "Righteous Decadence," driven by Frank-N-Furter, which portrays queerness as morally right for human happiness (210–1). Frank-N-Furter communicates queerness to the audience as "a viable way of living" in contrast to normative narratives of queer dysfunction (Lamm 196). The carnival allows him to propose queerness "not as an alternative model," but as an uncontested logic in the mansion space (194). He arises as a teacher, a mentor, and a symbol of queerness around which the cast and audience can rally. Then the students come to the film's queer "edifying epiphany," the key moral realization of the narrative, that they would feel happier pursuing pleasure in the absence of normative sexual policing (Hixon 187–8). *Rocky Horror* allows the audience to "enjoy rather than fear" the uncertain nature of identity (188).

Frank-N-Furter's murder by Riff Raff and Magenta therefore offends the audience in a call to action to accept and adopt queerness, interfering with scholarly interpretations of complete triumph of a conservative moral in *Rocky Horror*. Frank-N-Furter's murder parodies the science fiction trope in which the Earthling heroes kill the alien villains (Matheson 31). Instead, the Earthlings are brought over to the alien's side, and end up on the receiving end of violence when Riff Raff and Magenta kill Frank-N-Furter. The ending of the film leaves the audience unsatisfied, queer without purchase, as their symbol of queerness is removed. This lack of resolution means that Frank-N-Furter's murder "fails to expunge the queer" (Hixon 187). Lamm addresses Frank-N-Furter's last song, "Don't Dream It. Be It." toward the audience as a call to continue engaging in queerness after he dies and the film ends (196). The audience develops a grudge against the unfairness of Frank-N-Furter's demise and the associated conservatism of Riff Raff and Magenta. The murder echoes how queerness is repressed in real life, creating an imperative for the audience to advance queerness and queer acceptance to avenge Frank-N-Furter and recreate the pleasant mansion space in reality.

However, the technological superiority of Riff Raff and Magenta and the manner of their brutal erasure of Frank-N-Furter scare the audience into submission, suppressing the queer call to action. Endres believes the film communicates the presence of "Pragmatic Justice," a pragmatic punishment of queerness in society by conventionality (214). Reale highlights an inverse dynamic between Brad and Frank-N-Furter communicated through subtextual musical elements, with Frank-N-Furter falling from masculinity and into disarray while Brad finds his masculinity and power (159). Endres's competing vision of Pragmatic Justice and Reale's musical narrative may explain how Frank-N-Furter's destruction dampens the film's queer effect. Both authors portray the concepts as creeping in the background for the majority of the movie before rising up

at the end to kill Frank-N-Furter. Riff Raff and Magenta, with their sudden futuristic appearances and laser gun, represent how queer-punishing ideologies stay a step ahead of queer ideologies: their superior technology prevents any of the other cast from saving Frank-N-Furter's life, even if they made the attempt to. The manner of Frank-N-Furter's destruction further demoralizes the audience. Riff Raff and Magenta not only murder him but also remove any trace of the mansion, the queer world which he builds over the course of the film. The audience falls to fatalism: normative society has at every moment the power to completely erase queer progress, making a real queer utopia impossible to achieve. "*Rocky Horror* crowds characteristically go home fairly quietly," with a "pattern of energetic excess finally leading to restored calm" (Purdie 181).

The film may thus construct another loop, akin to Frank-N-Furter's fantastical one, whose residents are the audience; specifically, a negative feedback loop that dissipates queer energy by insulating its expression within the theater. Marin's limit is conspicuously absent at the end, signaling that the audience never fully exits the utopic space. Brad, Janet, and Scott are so immersed in the logic of the mansion that they cannot exit the space gracefully. As the mansion ascends, they squirm on the ground, unable to comprehend the "real" world they have been returned to. The audience follows the cast in being thrown out of the mansion and forced to renegotiate their place in a normative world while holding the queerness imparted by the main part of the film. The film provides a resource for this negotiation by its message of queer happiness. The audience naturally returns to the film as a stage on which queerness can be expressed outside of a repressive normative society. However, the film's ending again throws them out of the queer world and sets their progress in negotiating the world back to scratch, as Frank-N-Furter's queer space is erased by Riff Raff and Magenta. By planting the seed of queerness and immediately extinguishing it, *Rocky Horror* forms a loop for the audience in

which they repeatedly view the film, but fail to progress enough in their queer identity to express it outside the theater.

CONCLUSION

Formulation of the mansion as a queer-fantastical space and of the film as a loop checkpoint answer holistically the worldbuilding function of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* by how subjects move into and out of the spaces. The mansion portrays how repression of queerness motivates the creation of fantastical space in which queerness is allowed. It also displays the permeability of fantastical space, with Riff Raff and Magenta as agents of normativity who break down the fantasy from within. Review of the literature around *Rocky Horror* reveals how the film's structure and themes both encourage and limit queerness. Finally, analysis of the audience's movement out of the film space, in the context of the looping fantasy portrayed within the film, establishes that this contradictory theming creates a loop for the audience. Both the mansion and the film are built worlds that first let their subjects escape reality and then expel them into a loop that eventually leads back to the same world.

Works Cited

“American Gothic.” *Art Institute Chicago*, www.artic.edu/artworks/6565/american-gothic.

Accessed 8 June 2024.

Endres, Thomas G. “‘Be Just and Fear Not’: Warring Visions of Righteous Decadence and Pragmatic Justice in *Rocky Horror*.” *Reading Rocky Horror: The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Popular Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 207–19.

Hixon, Ben. “In Search of the Authentic Queer Epiphany: Normativity and Representations of the Queer Disabled Body in *Rocky Horror*.” *Reading Rocky Horror: The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Popular Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 177–91.

Lamm, Zachary. “The Queer Pedagogy of Dr. Frank-N-Furter.” *Reading Rocky Horror: The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Popular Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 193–206.

Marin, Louis. “Utopic Degeneration: Disneyland.” *Utopics: Spatial Play*, Palgrave Macmillan London, 1984, pp. 239–57.

Matheson, Sue. “‘Drinking Those Moments When’: The Use (and Abuse) of Late-Night Double Feature Science Fiction and Hollywood Icons in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.” *Reading Rocky Horror: The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Popular Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 17–34.

Purdie, Susan. “Secular Definitions of ‘Ritual’: The *Rocky Horror* Phenomenon.” *Theatre and Holy Script*, edited by Shimon Levy, Sussex Academic Press, 1999, pp. 171–90.

Reale, Steven Beverburg. "A Sheep in Wolf's Corset: Timbral and Vocal Signifiers of Masculinity in *The Rocky Horror Picture/Glee Show*." *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2012, pp. 137–62. *Project MUSE*, muse.jhu.edu/article/495230.

Thakkar, Amit. "Who Is Cuba? Dispersed Protagonism and Heteroglossia in *Soy Cuba/I Am Cuba*." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2014, pp. 83–101. *Project Muse*, doi.org/10.13110/framework.55.1.0083.

The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Directed by Jim Sharman, 20th Century-Fox, 1975.