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*Rocky Horror Picture Show* and Transphobia

Queer-coding is “the idea that a character is imbued with traits commonly affiliated with the queer community” (Martinez). A great example of queer-coding is the various villains of Disney movies and for the most part is subtle but still there (*ibid*). This goes for numerous other pieces of media, but one sticks out like a wrecking ball in your face, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*; a movie in which the wrecking ball of queer-coding (if you can even call it that) is a main character, the sweet transvestite from transsexual Transylvania, Dr. Frank-n-Furter.

While this movie can be considered quite dated and just “a product of the times” there must still be a critical examination of the transphobic elements within the work and the work as a whole. *Rocky Horror* is still considered a cult classic for many LGBT+ people due to its “representation” for the LGBT+ community; however, I contend that this movie is transphobic and has not contributed, in the modern day, to a fair representation of trans\* people.

To start at the very beginning there is the matter of the writer of *Rocky Horror*, Richard O’Brien (Sharman). In March of 2016 O’Brien discussed with the *Metro* the statements that Germaine Greer, a prominent TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist), said which included such things as: “Just because you lop off your d\*\*k and then wear a dress doesn’t make you a f\*\*\*ing woman.” O’Brien said in response to this: “I think I agree with that. I agree with Germaine Greer and Barry Humphries. You can’t be a woman. You can be an idea of a woman” (Duffy). So clearly a man who is seemingly not the biggest supporter of the trans\* population would not be the type of person that could create a piece of media that is fair towards trans\* people. This, along with the clear lack of education on trans\* people at the time, helps to understand why the character of Dr. Frank-n-Furter is so sexually charged

and violent, a trope of trans women that has persisted in our culture. He could be considered a personification of the “othering” that trans people face in our society. But this personification is not done in a critical way and instead acts as a reinforcement for the prejudices people have against trans people.

Dr. Frank-n-Furter is a transvestite alien from “transsexual Transylvania” which is the basis of an entire song at the beginning. The beginning of the issues with this problematic character is the label of transvestite. Transvestite is defined as “a person who wears clothes designed for the opposite sex,” essentially an outdated term for cross-dresser but generally is used in a more sexual sense (Definition of TRANSVESTITE). Now this label is, by itself, is not that problematic, the issue arises with the conflation of the term “transsexual” with “transvestite.” This equates people who are trans\* with people who cross-dress, very different groups that society sometimes lumps together. Frank-n-Furter’s appearance is meant to be shocking, to be laughed at, He acts as a perverting force throughout the film, eventually “corrupting” Brad and Janet, Frank-n-Furter accomplishes this using his “transducer” which as he says “will seduce you.” *The Dead Flag* blog describes Frank-n-Furter as such:

“But Frank N Furter isn’t supposed to be a woman (as they understood women), no. Frank N Furter is a monster, an unknowable alien entity. A trans woman, effectively, by any measure, given how O’Brien and society thought of trans women. They call him a man because trans women were understood to be men. They call him a crossdresser/transvestite because it was used to delegitimize us, and O’Brien is illegitimately trying to reclaim those terms as a positive while essentializing them to us.” (“What’s Trans-Misogynous about the Rocky Horror...”)

And so within the film a picture is painted of a freakish, failed-woman, trans person who definitely is not the “beautiful woman” Janet was worried about early in the film.

Beyond the physical appearance of Frank-n-Furter there is the matter of what the character actually does in the film, mostly actual rape and murder. The rape occurs when Frank-n-Furter dresses

up as Janet and Brad respectively when he visits their rooms, coercing them into sex after he was revealed; after creating the titular character Rocky, Frank-n-Furter immediately uses him for sex. Frank-n-Furter has no qualms about murder either, killing Eddy for rebuking his love. So here is the defined nature of Frank-n-Furter, one of a psychopath, a common “occupation” for trans women. This stereotype has been seen elsewhere, like in *Silence of the Lambs* where Buffalo Bill wants to create a suit of skin out of women to wear (The Silence of the Lambs (1991)). So not only does Frank-n-Furter exist as a *physical* stereotype but also as a *mental* stereotype, saying to the audience: “I am a freak inside *and* out.”

Regardless of the historical context of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* the problematic elements must be rooted out and discussed. To not recognize the harm the film does to the portrayal of trans\* people, especially trans women, is damaging to the trans\* community who already struggle enough day to day. This film offers nothing for the LGBT+ community, neither the movie itself or the plays done by various groups that are based on it. Dr. Frank-n-Furter is one of the most harmful exploitations of the meaning of being trans that exists in media. With the character so central to the plot the movie can offer nothing else but this walking propaganda piece.

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