

# Normal versus Freak: The Issue of Staring in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and Classic American Freak Show

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The term “freak show” paints a variety of images on the canvas of the reader’s mind. One may think of anything from fat ladies and strong men to “giants” and “dwarves.” While these performers were certainly stock characters of the historical freak show, they barely scratch the surface of the variety of entertainers featured. According to scholar Robert Bogdan, the classic American freak show was at its height from 1840 until 1940 (23). During this hundred year span, humans who were considered outsiders from mainstream society were put on display to perform for the “normal” public, who in turn stared at these so-called “freaks” for entertainment purposes. Disability scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson defines the dynamics of staring in the following passage: “Staring at disability choreographs a visual relation between a spectator and a spectacle” (56). From the moment when this “starer” versus “stared at” relationship is established, a line of othering has been drawn.

Although the historical freak show is considered outdated by today’s standards, its influence can still be felt in modern culture, most prevalently in the entertainment industry where this line of othering still exists. In stage performances, it is generally understood that the actors perform and the audience watches. The actors exist in a totally different plane than the audience; they behave as if completely unaware of the existence of the audience, yet the audience is aware of the actors’ every movement. Through this feigned obliviousness, both the performers and spectators are forced

## Abstract

Within the world of performance exists a line of othering. By juxtaposing the cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the historical freak show, the issue of staring becomes more apparent.

into a realm of othering. However, this is not always the case. During live performances of the cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, audience members are frequently encouraged to behave in ways that would be considered utterly offensive in the world of traditional theater. During *Rocky Horror* shadow cast screenings—screenings at which the actors act out the film while the movie plays behind them—spectators have been known to throw things, shout at the screen, and even join the actors on stage for the iconic song, “The Time Warp.”

In spite of all the crudity and lewdness, fans frequently flock to the famous midnight screenings of *Rocky Horror* to participate in the onstage zaniness and coarse merriment. During these screenings, it is common for participants to dress up like various characters from the film, especially if the film will feature a shadow cast. While the midnight screenings are not for everyone, the show’s interactive style creates a sense of unity between actor and audience that helps to bridge the othering gap characteristic of traditional live performances.

Juxtaposing elements of the historical freak show and the 1975 cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* reveals that, while it is clear that there is a line between the “spectator” who stares and the “spectacle” who is stared at (Thomson), where exactly the line is drawn varies. The historical freak show and *Rocky Horror* definitely feature many of the same elements, but, whereas people come to *Rocky Horror* to participate, express pride, and show support for the show itself, audience members that attended the historical freak show often went to make a mockery of the entertainers and feel a sense of entitlement.

In order to fully grasp the controversy surrounding *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, it is critical to provide a summary. The film begins with two of the main characters, newly engaged Brad Majors and Janet Weiss, who are driving home when their car breaks down in front of a strange castle located oddly in a rural community. Brad and Janet knock on the front door in search of a phone, and they are greeted by Riff Raff, the castle’s “handyman.” He informs the couple that they are just in time for a party thrown by the “Master.” The two protest, but Riff Raff and his sister, Magenta, sweep the pair into a wild and lavish party where the famous “Time Warp” scene plays out.

Shortly after, the lead character, Dr. Frank N. Furter, makes his debut.

Frank, a self-described “sweet transvestite from Transsexual, Transylvania” (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*), announces that he has discovered the secret to life itself and invites everyone up to his secret laboratory to unveil it. The human creation is revealed to be a sexy, well-toned, blond man called Rocky. The group once again bursts out in celebration, but the festivities are soon interrupted by Eddie, the motorcycle riding ex-lover of both Frank and one of his associates, Columbia. Annoyed by the disturbance, Frank murders Eddie with a pickaxe and proceeds to sweep Rocky off for a night of pleasure. Brad and Janet are coerced into staying the night in the castle and are both individually seduced by Frank.

Meanwhile, Riff Raff tortures Rocky, prompting him to run and hide in terror. Following her sexual encounter with Frank, Janet stumbles across Rocky in hiding and in turn seduces him. While searching for Rocky, Frank is informed that an intruder has entered the castle, and it is none other than Dr. Scott, a former teacher of Brad and Janet’s and, conveniently, also Eddie’s uncle. Everyone discovers Rocky and Janet together, greatly upsetting both Brad and Frank. Magenta breaks the tension by announcing that dinner is served. Everyone sits down to an incredibly awkward dinner, and it soon becomes apparent they are eating Eddie’s corpse. Upon this realization, chaos ensues and sends Janet running, with Frank in pursuit.

After a chase, everyone ends up back in Frank’s lab, where he ensnares Janet, Brad, Rocky, Dr. Scott, and Columbia in his “Medusa Transducer,” a machine which freezes them in place. Frank dresses the frozen individuals in corsets, fishnets, boas, and stage makeup and unfreezes them before forcing them to perform an elaborate cabaret number. The performance comes to a halt as Riff Raff and Magenta reappear, revealing themselves and Frank to be aliens from the planet Transsexual in the galaxy Transylvania. The pair decides they have had enough of following Frank’s orders and proceed to kill him, Columbia, and Rocky. Riff Raff and Magenta release the others outside before beaming the castle back into outer space. The film concludes with the survivors crawling around in the dirt, trying to make sense of what has happened to them (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*).

Mark Siegel, author of “*The Rocky Horror Picture Show: More Than a Lip Service*,” accurately describes the film as “a raunchy, vulgar, and jolting film about the coming to Earth of beings from the planet Transsexual in the galaxy of Transylvania” (305). Siegel’s description is more than correct;

the characters could be seen as incredibly selfish, sex-crazed, and unstable, particularly Frank, whose crowning achievement is his creation of the perfect human being purely for his own sexual gratification. However, this does not change the fact that the show and its characters are adored by fans everywhere. While enthusiasts of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* identify with the nonconformity, people who view themselves as “normal” would most likely deem the show to be ridiculous and offensive.

Christy Tyson comments on reasons that some may not find the show or its midnight performances so appealing: “Some find the music too loud, the people too freaky, the sexual innuendos too embarrassing” (60). While fans typically do not take issue with the show’s overtly sexual nature, others might be highly offended by the show as a whole and especially by Frank’s actions. When Frank visits both Brad and Janet individually in order to seduce them, both encounters take place behind a sheet so that only the silhouettes of the actors are visible. However, the audience is still very aware of what is happening behind the sheet, due to the visibility of the silhouettes performing dramatized sex acts (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*). This is just one example of the sexual content in *Rocky Horror* that some viewers find objectionable.

One reason opponents of *Rocky Horror* feel entitled to judge the show is that they view themselves as “normal” as opposed to the onstage performers, whom they view as “freakish.” Whereas historical freak show performers were scorned for their atypical body types, *Rocky Horror*’s characters behave and dress in ways that are considered abnormal. The only reason that some individuals are freakified is that they do not fit into the mold that society has constructed for them. The title of scholar Robert Bogdan’s essay, “The Social Construction of ‘Freaks’” says it all: the term “freak” is a social construction (23).

“Freak” is a term invented to put people in a box. It may be only a word, but it has the power to further the gap between performer and spectator. Only “freaks” can perform in a freak show. Only “normal” people can watch. Bogdan puts it perfectly when he writes, “‘Freak’ is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people; it is not a person but the enactment of a tradition, the performance or a stylized presentation” (35). Because these “abnormal” individuals do not fit in society’s mold, they are forced to create a new one for themselves. Some

are able to find comfort among others with unique characteristics, and some decide to profit from flaunting their deformities and “abnormalities.” Fans of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* may not necessarily profit from performing, but they also often find the show’s environment welcoming. At a midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, costumes and unconventional behavior are not only accepted—they are encouraged. Existing outside society’s constructed mold is liberating for many.

It is clear people who are labeled strange or bizarre flock together; this is evident in both *Rocky Horror* and the classic freak show. The question is, why does this happen? In a 1980 issue of *The English Journal*, similar questions were posed to its readers: “What is the significance of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*? Why do kids keep going to it?” One reader, Christy Tyson, wrote in and claimed that the show’s popularity was due to the fact that it appealed to those who stood out to others. “It’s OK to be different,” she writes. “It’s no wonder that fans feel a special kinship, a commonality of beliefs and attitudes, intensified by the heavy group participation that is part of the *Rocky* experience” (60). Whereas performers were stared at during the historical freak shows for their abnormalities, no one is stared at during *Rocky Horror* because the show puts forward the idea that everyone is abnormal. No one goes to a *Rocky Horror* performance to judge others or to feel entitled; they go to be around others who are just as strange as they are and to feel unified with their fellow *Rocky Horror* aficionados.

John Boe, author of the review “Don’t Dream it, Be It,” would definitely agree with Tyson’s opinion. Boe writes that his daughter frequently performs in a *Rocky Horror* shadow cast as Dr. Frank N. Furter. After watching his daughter masquerade as the erotic drag queen on stage many times, Boe noticed common behavioral traits among the audience members. Many of the guests were frequent goers and came to see the show “with an almost religious devotion...every Saturday night, week after week, month after month, even year after year” (Boe 63). Such dedication is not indicative of a passing fancy. It has been 41 years since *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* debuted, and the midnight screenings are just as strong as they ever were. This strong dedication to the *Rocky Horror* lifestyle and frequent attendance of the midnight screenings is indicative of a cult following.

When a person hears the word “cult,” they may think of anything from satanic rituals and chicken blood to Charles Manson and his followers;

however, when discussing the term “cult” as it applies within the context of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and other pop culture films, it has an entirely different connotation. In their article, “Toward a Sociology of Cult Films: Reading *Rocky Horror*,” authors Patrick T. Kinkade and Michael A. Katovich explore cult attraction and its definition. According to the authors, “secular cults feature fanatic attachments to objects that stand outside a religious perspective; they thus re-portray historical ties between the sacred and secular in society” (191). People that become so caught up in the film version of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* are attracted to more than just the midnight screenings; they are drawn to the lifestyle it entails. Of course, choosing to be abnormal comes with great responsibility. While *Rocky Horror* is about celebrating sexuality and nontraditional lifestyles, it is not widely accepted by everyone.

Although it has a plethora of fans, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* also has its share of critics. People tend to stare at things that are out of their realm of comfort. Staring is at the very root of audience involvement in both freaks shows and *Rocky Horror*—although the dynamics of staring are different in each. In *Rocky Horror*, the “normal” becomes the object that is stared at. Within the film, Brad and Janet, the representatives of the norm, stare at other characters they view as peculiar, such as Frank, Riff Raff, Magenta, and Columbia. During one of the film’s most iconic songs, “The Time Warp,” Brad and Janet watch as Frank’s companions and various party guests dance about the mansion, but they do not participate themselves (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*). Brad and Janet’s behavior is no different from the way in which people who consider themselves normal treat those they consider abnormal in real life. In “The Politics of Staring: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular Photography,” Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes, “Starers gawk with abandon in at the prosthetic hook, the empty sleeve, the scarred flesh, the unfocused eye, the twitching limb, but seldom does looking broaden to envelop the whole body of the person with the disability” (57).

In *Rocky Horror*, this dynamic holds true; however, it is reversed. While Brad and Janet are staring at the “freaks” they have encountered in Frank’s mansion, the audience members, who are often dressed up like Frank and his merry group, are gawking and poking fun at Brad and Janet. While the duo might fit in within any “normal” setting, they stand out tremendously in

the *Rocky Horror* universe. Interestingly enough, several *Rocky Horror* goers do choose to dress up as Janet in her underwear. It is as if fans only see her as someone worth idolizing once she has assimilated to Frank's world and has also become a "freak" as it pertains to the context of the film. People do not typically enjoy standing out or being othered. As a result, it is easy for people to critique those who take part in any sort of othering.

Critics of the historical freak show often take issue with the fact that many entertainers willingly have chosen to perform. After carefully considering this issue, scholar David A. Gerber poses the question, "By what criteria can we judge that consent fictive or credible?" (Gerber 38). In his article, "The 'Careers' of People Exhibited in Freak Shows: The Problem of Volition and Valorization," Gerber describes an "ultra-obese individual," more commonly known as a "fat lady," who wears small, tight fitting clothing and sits in an atypically tiny chair to emphasize her weight (38-41). If she enjoys entertaining her audience, is it wrong for her to perform? This issue is complicated by the fact that, while contemporary performers have more freedom to consent and control over how they display their bodies, many historical performers did not. Oftentimes, freak show performers were forced to perform, even frequently bought and sold akin to livestock. It would seem that in a circumstance where an entertainer who had not expressed their full consent to perform, even if they enjoyed what they were doing, would be unacceptable. Staring without consent is a violation to one's very right to exist. In a different article penned by Gerber entitled, "Pornography or Entertainment? The Rise and Fall of the Freak Show," he references Otis Jordan, also known as "the Frogman" (20). According to Gerber, Jordan "argued that anti-freak show moralists were interfering with his right to make a decent, honest living" (20). Jordan saw it as his personal choice to emphasize his physical differences and profit from it. Although it is true that Jordan was a performer in the 1980s, after it was no longer legal to traffick humans, his options for earning a living were still incredibly limited because of his disability. Since *Rocky Horror* is a more contemporary show, the participants have more choice regarding how to represent themselves.

Since *Rocky Horror* is a more contemporary show, the performers have more choice in how they choose to represent themselves, audience members who choose to dress in drag included. Anyone who has seen *The*

*Rocky Horror Picture Show* knows Frank is a crossdresser. During his first onstage appearance shortly after the conclusion of “The Time Warp,” he appears dressed in a long, black cape, which he throws to the side revealing incredibly feminine lingerie complete with heels, fishnets, and even a pearl necklace. Even though he is lecherous and distasteful, audiences everywhere adore Frank and frequently attempt to mimic his wardrobe. Historically speaking, however, Frank’s apparel choices would have been considered nothing short of an abomination. Clare Sears addresses the crossdressing issue in her article, “Electric Brilliancy: Cross-Dressing Law and Freak Show Displays in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco,” which also discusses the oppression of the queer community in nineteenth-century America, primarily San Francisco. According to Sears’s research, twenty-one states passed laws forbidding public crossdressing over the span of fifty-two years between 1848 and 1900 (170). The San Francisco law in particular explicitly forbade public nudity, wearing clothes appropriate for the opposite sex, and indecent exposure. A violation of any of these resulted in arrest and a fine of up to five hundred dollars (Sears 171). To *Rocky Horror* fans, Frank is not a criminal; he is only looking to freely express himself and his sexuality. But, according to this law, in the nineteenth century, he would have been considered no better than a sex offender.

Frank’s lifestyle and choices might make certain people feel uncomfortable, but this does not make his behavior wrong. These rules Sears describes became a way to police people who did not wish to conform to mainstream society. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* did not exist in this era, but, if it had, the unified diversity may have provided some comfort to these nonconformists. In addition to banning crossdressing, various cities, San Francisco included, enacted laws designed to ban “problem bodies” from the streets (Sears 174). Since these cities felt that the crossdressing law had been effective in cleaning up the “undesirables” from the public eye, new laws were put in place to control the “abnormal” and regulate their place in society. The main targets in these cases were primarily Chinese immigrants, prostitutes, and anyone who suffered from a visible physical disability (Sears 174). These human beings did not fit the perfect social mold, so the popular mindset was that they were to be eliminated. Many performers in the classic American freak show were merely human beings with disabilities who would definitely be targeted by these inhumane laws. The irony of the

situation is that the law allowed these citizens to exist peacefully in their own homes—as long as they stayed there. In fact, Sears notes several instances of neighbors calling the police on their crossdressing neighbors. The police told the neighbors that, although they sympathized with the situation, the offenders were not in the public eye, so no laws were broken (173). In the case of people with disabilities, as Thomson puts it, “Disabled people were sequestered from public view in institutions and the private sphere as middle-class decorum pronounced it impolite to stare” (57).

When the undesirables were in view, they were stared at with reckless abandon (Thomson). It seems that, wherever such people went, they were ruthlessly ridiculed simply for being different. With this being the case, it is no wonder that historical freak show performers often formed special bonds with each other. Because these stigmas persist today, *Rocky Horror* provides a place where nonconformists can feel a sense of security and comradery at the events. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* often acts as a safe haven for those who have been historically victimized and those who choose to be different.

Since the invention of VHS and DVD, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is available for viewing in the safety of one’s home. People are no longer forced, though have the opportunity if they wish, to venture to the midnight screenings to enjoy the show. Scholar Amittai F. Aviram notes that the “*Rocky Horror* Cult ought to be celebrated in public spaces, late at night, in the dark, and not trivialized by suburban solitude and trips to the kitchen for beer” (183). While the comfort and unobtrusiveness of home may make the film more enjoyable for some, many fans feel that the film can only truly be enjoyed out in the open. A film as zany and chaotic as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* deserves an equally crazy environment in which to be viewed. Embracing one’s differences in public is an important part of what *Rocky Horror* is all about.

Mark Siegel would definitely agree with Aviram’s stance. In the very first page of his article, Siegel describes having a need for celebration in a world that seeks to “restore social equilibrium” (305): a world in which, as Sears describes, “problem bodies” were hidden from the public eye and “normal” people roamed free (174). No person should feel they need to hide themselves from society’s view just because they are deemed a “problem.” The problem does not lie with those who are different, it lies with those who are “normal.”

These “normal” people are wholesome and good; they do not associate with “problem bodies” or crudity. If “freak” is a socially constructed term, then so must be “normal.” Whether it has a positive or negative connotation, a label is still a label. When this label is applied to an individual, this individual is put inside a box in which they do not necessarily belong. There may always be a dance between the “spectator” and the “spectacle” (Thomson 56). Between the two exists a dividing line that will keep the “freaks” performing and the “normals” staring. Performances like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* will be there as well, however, to get us to question where and how that line is drawn.

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