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### Camp in the Rocky Horror Picture Show (2023-2024)

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# “Camp in the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*”

## Anthony Cawley (research inquiry example)

### Questions to Consider For Discussion and Reflection

A research inquiry strives to enter a conversation through research and use of various sources. Here Cawley takes up the film, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, as the main text or source to be understood through the synthesis of other sources on camp, such as Susan Sontag’s famous piece, *Notes on Camp*. By integrating these sources, Cawley understands *Rocky Horror Picture Show* as the “perfect camp film” through its use of several different elements. As you read his essay consider the following:

- Rather than reviewing all the theory on camp and then applying it to *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, Cawley structures and organizes this essay by element. How effective is that choice for you as a reader? What does it suggest about the ways in which you choose to organize your own research inquiry?
- Cawley uses both paraphrasing and direct quotation in using the secondary sources in film analysis and camp. What are some places you found most effective and why? What does this show you about how you might use sources in your own research inquiry?
- Before concluding, Cawley offers a counter-argument about why someone might not consider *Rocky Horror Picture Show* as camp. How does this help to acknowledge different perspectives and ultimately strengthen the interpretation of the film?

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### Camp in the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* by Anthony Cawley

In 1975, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* aired, and it was an immediately controversial film. It had strong layers of LGBTQ+ characteristics, very different for a film in 1975, but it still became a cult classic. Cult films according to Patrick Kinkade and Michael A. Katovich, in “Toward a Sociology of Cult Films: Reading ‘Rocky Horror’ are “secular documents, celebrated as sacred texts by audiences and used as shared foci to collectively create rituals and beliefs” (Kinkade & Katovich 191). When watching *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, many viewers will focus on how horrible and cringey the cult film is, with wild costumes, songs, and dances. Every fascinating character makes viewers feel uncomfortable and asks society to question their own beliefs. However, this very aspect is what makes the film so intriguing and successful. Susan Sontag in *Notes on Camp* says, “The ultimate Camp statement: it's good because it's awful”(Sontag 14). With Sontag’s reasoning, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a perfect example of the movie style Camp. Camp can be defined as an aesthetic style and sensibility that admires bad taste and ironic value. Many films try to include the aesthetic of camp, but not many have succeeded the way *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has. Arguments have also been made for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* to be a camp film in Barbara Ellen’s movie review “TV movie of the week Rocky Horror Picture Show.” Through the unique characters, the feminine features in men, and the serious being not serious, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is the perfect camp film.

The *Rocky Horror Picture Show* is introduced to audiences with a musical number and flamboyant characters. Brad Majors proposes to Janet Weiss by confessing his love with a song and dance. Susan Sontag argues that, “As a taste in persons, Camp responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated”(4). Susan Sontag describes, “The hallmark of camp is the spirit of extravagance”(Sontag 7), and she adds that “Camp is the glorification of ‘character.’”(Sontag 9). All characters show the spirit of extravagance and have glorified their characters. If proposing to one’s fiancé in a song and dance isn’t exaggerated, Brad and Janet’s journey in the movie certainly is. Later on, narrated by “the criminologist” the happy couple finds interesting characters performing a song and dance (Kinkade and Katovich 198). Characters decorated in outlandish outfits filled with sparkles, and out-of-this-world designs, including the Transylvanians Magenta, Riff Raff, and the most wild of all, Frank-N-Furter, shows true camp with their theatrical extravagance, and are portrayed as “seductive, provocative, and androgynous”(Kinkade and Katovich 199). Every character in the film shows intense emotion whether they are climbing for their lives, or breaking out into a time warp dance. Not only are the transsexual characters very outrageous, but eventually, so are Brad and Janet. Brad and Janet become part of the chaos after being seduced by Frank-N-Furter and Rocky Horror. This couple adds to the over the top drama that has gone on during the film. Kinkade and Katovich explain that many cult and camp films usually overcome their new situation, but not Brad and Janet, as they are “challenged to adjust rather than completely overcome the previously unthinkable”(195). Ellen agrees in her review they “perfectly capture the strait-laced shock of high school innocents, whose tiny minds are expanded and bent out of shape by their strange new companions” (Ellen 14). This film makes the outrageous look normal and the normal (Brad and Janet) look passé. This camp film takes the once normal characters and adds them to the list of wild and outlandish characters. All camp films take the dazzling characters to an extreme through unnatural costumes and feminine personas, but none do it as well as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Frank-N-Furter, along with many other supporting characters, are dressed and expressed an important camp feature, androgyny. Androgyny is when a character such as Frank-N-Furter possesses both masculine and feminine features. Frank-N-Furter may have the build and features of a man, however he wears dresses, lingerie and make up that are typically worn by women. Those with androgyny are neither totally masculine or feminine but contain a quality of both features. Sontag argues in her essay *Notes on Camp* that camp isn’t always homosexual taste, but a majority of the time it is (13). This is expressed in characters' attitudes, actions and outfits. Sontag writes, “What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine” (4). What is beautiful about camp is when a man such as Frank-N-Furter shows a feminine side strutting around in lingerie usually worn by a woman. This character shows their feminine side wearing makeup, the carefully selected attire and being treated as a queen. Frank also has sexual intercourse with Brad, Rocky, and Janet during the film. This doesn’t mean that all camp aesthetic and characters are homosexuals, but they certainly address sexually taboo subjects. Frank-N-Furter chases Rocky around in a gold speedo in a beautiful mansion, and they finally share a bed in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. This sexual chaos continues with Frank-N-Furter having sexual intercourse with Janet and Brad. To add more into the mix, Janet seduces Frank-N-Furter's creation, Rocky Horror. This film allows for gender nonconformity, while many characters have gone against the typical gender and sexual characteristics. Through the beauty of femininity in a masculine role, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a camp film.

Brad and Janet are kidnapped into an alien castle, tortured, seduced, and have had their lives changed. These all are serious topics that take place during the film; however none of them can be taken seriously, due to the wild characters, costumes, and set design. Sontag says, "The pure examples of Camp are unintentional: they are dead serious"(6). Sontag means that in a camp aesthetic the characters are dead serious about what is happening, no matter how whacky or "off" it may appear to the audience. Sontag even argues that camp style is the love of the exaggerated and the "off", but still focusing on the seriousness of camp (Sontag 4) . Sontag says that "In naive, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails"(Sontag 7). Not only are the characters totally serious in eccentric ways but make serious topics seem reckless. Kinkade and Katovich argue "messages within cult films' texts also redefine traditional relations between majorities and minorities"(Kinkade and Katovich 196).The article later proves that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* meets this criteria saying, "playing upon themes of heterosexual romance, monogamy, sexual stereotypes and identifications, virginity and in general, middle American morality"(Kinkade and Katovich 199). This movie confronts serious situations, for example, cannibalism while eating Eddie at a dinner party meant to turn Brad, Janet and Rocky Horror against each other. However, viewers can't even take Eddie's death seriously, since it was done in a song and dance while wearing wild costumes. After dinner, Frank-N-Furter seems to kill his guests, but they can't take this seriously either! Frank-N-Furter turns the dinner guests into Greek Statues that add to his lavish mansion then unfreezes them, ending the film with another song and dance. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is a great example of how a serious plot cannot be serious.

Some may argue that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* isn't a camp film, as it isn't pure camp. Susan Sontag herself could argue against *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* saying, "One must distinguish between naive and deliberate Camp. Pure Camp is always naive. Camp which knows itself to be Camp is usually less satisfying"(Sontag 6). They would say that Frank-N-Furter and the rest of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is trying too hard and is unintentional, as intending to be campy is always harmful. They could argue that it is too much, too fantastic and cannot be believed. However, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is pure and naive camp. Sontag argues that, "When something is just bad (rather than Camp), it's often because it is too mediocre in its ambition"(7). *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is not mediocre when it comes to ambition, it meets the criteria of the spirit of extravagance, and maintains an effortless tone throughout the whole film. Barbara Ellen argues that "It remains one of the most original productions in theatre and cinema history"(17). *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is anything but mediocre, being one of the first groundbreaking camp films. Ellen says, "It would probably help if you were into very bad taste"(17). If viewers had bad taste they may enjoy the hilarious dramatic plot meeting the camp criteria. Viewers could enjoy how wild it is for normal fiancés to meet aliens in the middle of the night. The plot and acting were of bad taste. However, it is so bad, that many have grown to love it and laugh at the film for its flaws. This meets Sontag's criteria of camp, being so bad that it is good. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is anything but a deliberate Camp movie, creating the innocent theatrical tone throughout the movie.

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is the perfect camp film. Being a true naive camp film, with an innocence, not knowing how wild the plot truly is. Richard O'Brien's brainchild is a camp masterpiece, with Brad and Janet being the perfect "normal characters" for a camp experience filled with misfits and deviants. Camp is good because it is awful and so is *The Rocky Horror*

*Picture Show*. Through the unique characters, the feminine features in men, and the serious being not serious, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is the perfect camp film.

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