

Power, Sexuality, and Identity: Analyzing *The Rocky Horror Show* in Light of Foucault's Theories

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Abstract

The Rocky Horror Show is a classic musical that was initially produced in 1973, acknowledged for its interactive audience contribution and appealing songs. The show was written by Richard O'Brien, who also acted as the character Riff Raff in the original production. This article seeks to investigate the transformative and insurrectionary nature of the cult classic musical *The Rocky Horror Show* in light of Michel Foucault's theories on power, sexuality, and identity. By taking advantage of Foucault's critical framework, the present research is going to reveal the ways in which the production confronts social standards and concepts, predominantly in relation to gender, sexuality, and power relations. The examination of the characters, plot, and themes in the musical uncovers a multifaceted interaction of power, discourses of sexuality, and the creation of identities. Through a Foucauldian outlook, the study will thus show how *The Rocky Horror Show* works as a site of confrontation and consideration, and how it demands the audiences to question and redefine traditional understandings of power, sexuality, and identity. This analysis not only acts to excavate our understanding of the musical's cultural implication but also stimulates a larger consideration of the intersections of power, sexuality, and identity in the present society.

Key Words: Foucauldian Outlook, Identity, Power, Sexuality

القوة والجنس والشخصية : تحليل لمسرحية "روكي العرض المربع" في ضوء نظريات فوكو

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ملخص البحث :

هو عمل موسيقي كلاسيكي تم إنتاجه لأول مرة في عام 1973، وعرف بمساهمة جمهوره التفاعلية وأغانيه الجذابة. كتبت هذه المسرحية من قبل الكاتب ريتشارد أوبراين، الذي لعب أيضاً دور الشخصية "ريف راف" في الإنتاج الأصلي. يهدف هذا المقال إلى استكشاف الطبيعة التحويلية والثورية لهذا العمل الموسيقي الكلاسيكي *The Rocky Horror Show* في ضوء نظريات ميشيل فوكو حول القوة، والجنس، والشخصية، مع الاستفادة من الإطار النقدي للناقد الفيلسوف الفرنسي فوكو، يهدف البحث الحالي إلى الكشف عن الطرق التي يواجه بها هذا العمل المعايير والمفاهيم الاجتماعية، لا سيما فيما يتعلق بالجنس، والجنس، وعلاقات القوة. يكشف تحليل الشخصيات، والحبكة، والمواضيع في هذا العمل الموسيقي عن تفاعل متعدد الأوجه بين القوة، وخطابات الجنس، وتكوين الشخصيات. من خلال منظور فوكوي، سنظهر الدراسة كيف يعمل *The Rocky Horror Show* كموقع للمواجهة والتأمل، وكيف يدعو الجمهور إلى التساؤل وإعادة تعريف الفهم التقليدي للقوة، والجنس، والشخصية. لا يهدف هذا

التحليل فقط إلى تعميق فهمنا للأهمية الثقافية لهذا العمل الموسيقي، بل يحفز أيضًا تفكيرًا أوسع حول تقاطعات القوة والجنس والشخصية في المجتمع الحالي. هدف البحث الحالي إلى الكشف عن الطرق التي يواجه بها هذا العمل المعايير والمفاهيم الاجتماعية، لا سيما فيما يتعلق بالجنس، والجنس، وعلاقات القوة. يكشف تحليل الشخصيات، والحبكة، والمواضيع في هذا العمل الموسيقي عن تفاعل متعدد الأوجه بين القوة، وخطابات الجنس، وتكوين الشخصيات. من خلال منظور فوكوي، ستظهر الدراسة كيف يعمل **The Rocky Horror Show** كموقع للمواجهة والتأمل، وكيف يدعو الجمهور إلى التساؤل وإعادة تعريف الفهم التقليدي للقوة، والجنس، والشخصية. لا يهدف هذا التحليل فقط إلى تعميق فهمنا للأهمية الثقافية لهذا العمل الموسيقي، بل يحفز أيضًا تفكيرًا أوسع حول تقاطعات القوة والجنس والشخصية في المجتمع الحالي.

لكلمات المفتاحية: المنظور الفوكوي، الشخصية، القوة، الجنس

1. Introduction

The Rocky Horror Show is a famous cult classic musical that first premiered in 1973, and could become an international wonder. This rock musical, with its memorable songs and unconventional plot, achieved popularity for its interactive audience participation throughout transmissions of its film adaptation, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The show's author, Richard O'Brien, is a highly skilled artist who not only wrote the book, music, and lyrics for the show but also represented the character Riff Raff in the original production. O'Brien's exceptional visualization and imaginative genius have left a permanent effect on pop culture, making *The Rocky Horror Show* an ageless favorite amid theater fans.

In the field of theatrical productions, few works have been able to attract audiences and confront social averages like *The Rocky Horror Show*. With its inspiring analysis of power structures, sexuality, and the inconsistency of identity, this musical could be perceived as a representation of autonomy and upheaval since its very initial appearance in 1973. Taking advantage of the avant-garde concepts of the French thinker Michel Foucault, this examination aims to inspect *The Rocky Horror Show* with the purpose of exploring the intricate association amid power, sexuality, and identity concerning the show's narrative and characters.

Foucault, a prominent intellectual of post-structuralist theory, has offered a distinctive standpoint through which to examine the subjects depicted in *The Rocky Horror Show*. His studies on power structures, sexuality, and the identity formation explains how the characters in the musical grapple with social attitudes and ethics. By applying Foucault's theories in the investigation of *The Rocky Horror Show*, we can reach a greater comprehension of the multilayered associations at play and the ways in which power relations determine individual involvement and decisiveness.

This analysis is going to figure out how *The Rocky Horror Show* acts as a standard for confronting customary perceptions of power, sexuality, and identity. By inspecting significant sections, characters, and interchanges through a Foucauldian outlook, I will prove the insubordinate capability of the musical and

its aptitude to barge in conservative power hierarchies and norms. Furthermore, I am going to reveal how the themes and messages of the show still enthrall the modern day audiences by mirroring the recent debates about sovereignty, individualism, and the construction of personal identity in a swiftly changing universe.

2. Statement of the Problem

The problem stated by this study is the examination of how such concepts as power, sexuality, and identity are linked as portrayed in *The Rocky Horror Show* in light of Michel Foucault's notions. This iconic musical, eminent for its revolutionary subjects and innovative content, is observed as a decent case for studying how power is depicted in relation to sexuality and how it determines the individual and communal identities. By taking advantage of Foucault's theories, which revolve around the mechanisms of power, knowledge, and discipline in society, this article aims to show the ways in which power functions in the narrative of *The Rocky Horror Show* and influences the creation and conciliation of miscellaneous sexual identities. Main questions to be addressed contain:

1. How is power represented and applied in *The Rocky Horror Show*, specifically in relation to the characters' expressions of sexuality and the construction of their identities?
2. In what ways do Foucault's notions of power relations, disciplinary mechanisms, and the regulation of sexuality clarify the dynamics depicted in the musical?
3. How do the characters in *The Rocky Horror Show* deal with power structures and fight against or obey social standards concerning sexuality and identity?
4. To what extent does the narrative of *The Rocky Horror Show* defy traditional notions of power, sexuality, and identity, and how does this challenge lead to a better understanding of these concepts in light of Foucault's theories?

3. Literature Review

3.1. On Foucault

"Michel Foucault on Power/Discourse, Theory and Practice" (1987) by Schneck delivers an examination of Foucault's theories on power, discourse, and their interconnectedness in numerous frameworks of theory and practice. Schneck has probed into Foucault's conceptualization of power as a universal and multi-layered force that functions through several channels and arrangements. Schneck also studies how Foucault defies traditional notions of power as exclusively oppressive and instead underscores its fecund and constitutive facets in determining societal relations and identities.

This paper likewise concentrates on Foucault's discourse analysis, which studies how power is implemented through language, knowledge, and cultural practices. It explores how discourse forms perceptions, standards, and societal constructions, affecting the circulation of power within society. Similarly, this study discusses the association between theory and practice in Foucault's work, bearing in mind how his hypothetical understandings of power and discourse

notify practical submissions in numerous fields such as politics, education, healthcare, and penal systems (pp. 15-33).

"Foucault's Theory of Power" (2014) by Lynch offers an inspection and analysis of Foucault's important theory of power. The paper actually probes into Foucault's distinctive viewpoint regarding power, which moves off the traditional interpretations concentrated merely on coercion and domination. Foucault's theory underlines the discrete, relational nature of power, observing it as creative, fluid, and omnipresent throughout societal relations and associations.

Lynch's paper examines how Foucault expresses power as dynamic, implying that it produces knowledge, rules, and subjectivities. Furthermore, Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, as realized in institutions like jails and schools, is a principal argument in this analysis. This research paper discusses Foucault's ideas on biopower and governmentality, which include the regulation of populaces and individuals through apparatuses of control and organization. In fact, Lynch examines how these notions form present-day forms of power and supremacy (pp. 13-26).

"Power/Knowledge" (2020) by Foucault argues that power and knowledge are inseparable; they are interweaved forces that determine and affect each other in multifaceted ways. Foucault contends that power functions through the production and propagation of knowledge. Knowledge is not neutral but is permeated with power forces at work that manage societal standards, institutions, and practices. Those who control knowledge also wield power over others.

Foucault defies the old outlook that power is exclusively intimidating and suppressive. He stresses how knowledge systems, such as scientific discourses, educational institutions, and cultural demonstrations, are apparatuses of power that form reality, describe truth, and control behavior. Foucault's perception of discursive power underscores how language, discourse, and systems of meaning construction are vital to the implementation of power. Through discourses, definite knowledge assertions are raised, whereas others are relegated, leading to the production of societal hierarchies and exclusionary practices (pp. 73-79).

3.2. On *The Rocky Horror Show*

"The Function of the Fetish in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*" (2000) by Robbins and Myrick revolves around the role and importance of fetish objects in these two famous films. The article actually probes the notion of fetishism in the realm of film and how it is used within the narrative and visual features of both *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. It discusses how specific objects or items in the films function as fetishes, permeated with figurative meaning, desire, and power beyond their accurate purpose.

Robbins and Myrick as the researchers have examined how these fetish objects lead to the themes, character development, and general aesthetic of the films. They have also inspected the ways in which these objects act as catalysts for plot development, character incentives, or audience engagement. Likewise, the article

has studied the cultural and social inferences of fetishism as depicted in these films, bearing in mind how they defy conventional standards and explore themes of identity, sexuality, and performance (pp. 269-280).

"Don't Dream It, Be It: Exploring Signification, Empathy and Mimesis in Relation to The Rocky Horror Show" (2006) by Taylor is an academic examination of the themes of signification, empathy, and mimesis as they relate to the cult classic musical, *The Rocky Horror Show*. Taylor as the writer has investigated the idea of signification in the film by examining how symbols, signs, and cultural references are benefitted in order to transfer meaning and establish layers of interpretation in the story. This includes inspecting the ways in which the film undermines conventional standards and confronts societal rules via its usage of symbolism and allegory.

Empathy is another important theme that the article has referred to. The researcher has discussed how audiences empathize with the characters in *The Rocky Horror Show*, chiefly those who are disregarded or eccentric, and how this emotional association improves the audience's inclusion in the film. Mimesis, the imitation or representation of reality in art, is also another principal point of the article. Taylor has actually analyzed how the film blurs the borders between reality and fantasy, and thus, he invites the spectators to take part in the performative facets of the story and challenging traditional concepts of identity and representation (pp. 57-71).

"Reflections on the Self-Reflexive Musical: The Rocky Horror Picture Show and the Classic Hollywood Musical" (2008) by Artt is about the idea of self-reflexivity in musical cinema, with a specific concentration on comparing and contrasting *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* with the classic Hollywood musical genre. Artt has talked about how *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* shows self-reflexivity by drawing attention to its own position as a film and as a musical production. This self-awareness is evident in numerous ways within the film, such as through meta-references, breaking the fourth wall, or undermining conventional musical norms.

Artt has examined how *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* deconstructs and reimagines features of the classic Hollywood musical genre by challenging traditional standards and the limitations of what a musical film can be. The article has additionally emphasized how the film's self-reflexive nature demands the audiences to engage with its themes of identity, sexuality, and performance in a more critical and partaking way. Besides, Artt has inspected how *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* admires, condemns, or ridicules the pacts of classic Hollywood musicals, proposing a present-day and rebellious take on a genre that is intensely entrenched in American cinema history (pp. 51-68).

4. Methodological Approach

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was a very famous French theorist and social thinker acknowledged for his important studies regarding power, knowledge, and discourse. One of his most important theories is about the notion of power and

how it is employed in society. Foucault's analysis of power is unique in that he discards the old view of power as a possession held by individuals or institutions. Instead, he contends that power is diffuse, interpersonal, and works through networks of relationships. In fact, power is not just oppressive, but also fruitful, which can affect and control the behavior and lives of people of a society (Lynch, 2011, pp. 13–26). Power generates knowledge and forms the ways in which people apprehend themselves and their world. Power is existent in all societal dealings and is entrenched in countless discourses, practices, and organizations. Also, Foucault's concept of power is thoroughly linked with his idea of "biopower," which alludes to the ways in which power operates on and controls the bodies of individuals in society. Biopower includes both the control and administration of inhabitants via practices such as observation, punishment, and stabilization. Through biopower, individuals' bodies, behaviors, and identities are controlled and disciplined by social standards and establishments. Likewise, Foucault presented the notion of "panopticism" to define a type of public regulation in which people adopt mechanisms of observation and discipline. The panopticon, a hypothetical architectural strategy, signifies a system of relentless surveillance and checking that prompts self-regulation and conformism amongst individuals (p. 74).

Foucault's analysis of power goes beyond conventional hierarchical structures to inspect how power dealings are disseminated in society. He highlights the significance of comprehending power as a universal force that forms individuals' subjectivities and identities. Through his work, Foucault defies predictable concept of power and inspires a critical investigation of the ways in which power works in the current society.

As mentioned, Foucault's theory of power and resistance revolves around the idea that power is not just a top-down force applied by those in charge but is distributed in society in several methods. He supposed that power functions on a micro-level, determining human beings' behavior and communications within different societal systems. Also, Foucault's notion of sexuality confronts conventional concepts of sexuality as a static and natural identity. He contended that sexuality is a socially constructed and historically liable classification that has been used as a means to apply power and authority. Additionally, regarding identity, Foucault's viewpoint is under the effect of his belief that identity is not intrinsic but created through discourses, practices, and power associations in society (Foucault, 2020, pp. 73-79).

5. Discussion

5.1. Power and Resistance

In *The Rocky Horror Show*, the character of Dr. Frank-N-Furter exemplifies a multifaceted and complex depiction of power that is in accordance with Foucault's theories. Through the relations demonstrated in the play, we can see how power works in different ways, beyond just explicit authority. One important feature of Foucault's conception of power is its relational nature, rooted in social

customs and practices (Lynch, 2011, p. 14). In the play, Dr. Frank-N-Furter's castle functions as a space where traditional power structures are undermined, leading to the examination of substitute procedures of power. This is observed in Frank-N-Furter's competence to use authority over Brad and Janet, the imprudent couple who enter his terrain.

Through seduction, exploitation, and the falsification of boundaries amid authority and ambition, Frank-N-Furter shows how power can be effective in friendly, secretive associations. For example, when Frank-N-Furter sings "I'm just a sweet transvestite, from Transsexual, Transylvania" (O'Brien, 1975, p. 17), he is playing on Brad and Janet's perceptions of gender, sexuality, and power. By taking on his eccentric identity and confronting communal values, Frank-N-Furter uses supremacy over the couple through the interruption of their static viewpoints regarding sexuality and identity.

Still, Frank-N-Furter's exploitation of Brad and Janet's desires and opinions is in accordance with Foucault's notion of power working through subtle structures of authority. Via his enthralling and appealing character, Frank-N-Furter practices supremacy over the couple, inspiring them to have behaviors that challenge traditional thoughts of integrities and graciousness. The song "Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch Me" (O'Brien, 1975, p. 36) also reveals how power plays out in the domain of longing and sexuality of the play. As Frank-N-Furter entices and manipulates Janet, he exhibits the ways in which power can be entangled with eroticism and pleasure. This scene underscores the intricacy of power relations, proving how they can be ratified through acts of closeness and defenselessness.

5.2. Sexuality as a Construct

In *The Rocky Horror Show*, the examination of sexuality as a construct that is formed by social issues is obviously shown via the characters and themes depicted in the musical. Foucault's theories regarding the history of sexuality are sturdily in line with the narratives and relations represented in the play, chiefly in the characters' insubordination of traditional standards and their clasp of sexual freedom and flexibility. Foucault believed that sexuality is not an intrinsic, biological force but rather a construct that is formed and controlled by collective discourses and power structures (Lynch, 2011, p. 13).

In *The Rocky Horror Show*, this idea is demonstrated through the characters' independence to explain their sexuality in ways that confront conventional borders and beliefs. Dr. Frank-N-Furter's iconic statement, "Don't dream it, be it" (O'Brien, 1975, p. 6) summarizes the philosophy of embracing one's wishes and identities without following social standards or limitations. The refusal of heteronormativity and the celebration of miscellaneous expressions of sexuality in the musical align with Foucault's criticism of how organizations have historically tried to classify and standardize sexual behaviors to preserve communal unity.

By illustrating characters who are included in same-sex longing, cross-dressing, and eccentric types of closeness, *The Rocky Horror Show* defies the concept of

an immobile and normative sexuality, instead showing sexuality as a fluid and multi-layered experience that is affected by power structures and social expectations. The musical's depiction of sexual consideration and non-conformity echoes Foucault's declaration that human sexuality is not prearranged or fixed but rather a vibrant and ever-changing side of individual identity. By showing characters who deal with their wishes outside of customary standards, *The Rocky Horror Show* provides a space for audiences to reexamine their insights of sexuality and freedom.

5.3. Identity and the Construction of the Self

As declared in *The New Social Theory Reader* (2020), Foucault's theory that identities are communally created confronts the conformist notion of an immovable, requisite self. He claimed that people are exposed to these external forces as culture, societal traditions, and power that create and influence their sense of self. The conception of an "authentic" self is squashed as a misapprehension, replaced by a changing grasp of identity as ceaselessly transformed and executed in relation to social motivations (p. 78).

In *The Rocky Horror Show*, characters like Dr. Frank-N-Furter, Columbia, and Rocky represent the fluid and performative nature of identity. Dr. Frank-N-Furter signifies a chief example of self-creation, confronting classification and supposing a multiplicity of identities. His character recurrently alters between gender expressions, opposing usual concepts of immobile gender roles and identities. Frank-N-Furter's pretention and clemency, and impenitent encirclement of his own creation establish the idea of identity as a paradigm that can be created and recreated at will.

Columbia, another character in the play, also epitomizes the performative side of identity. Her theatricality and eagerness reflect a character that is expressively created and achieved for the audience and her fellow characters. Through her dignified performance and communicative behavior, Columbia discloses how identity can be an attentive act of expressiveness and performance, shaped by external forces and societal situations.

Rocky, the creation of Dr. Frank-N-Furter, signifies a different side of identity creation. As a character brought to life through scientific intercession, Rocky symbolizes the idea of identity as something formed and fashioned by exterior forces. His reality and development are organized and operated by Frank-N-Furter, which emphasizes the theme of agency and self-sufficiency in the construction of identity.

Also, there is a famous line that demonstrates how human beings are subject to exterior issues such as culture and society: "Unmanners, unmanity, unstable inanity" (O'Brien, 1975, p. 19). This line refers to the fact that people are always affected by the standards, principles, and outlooks of the society they are a part of. Foucault argues that these exterior forces determine individuals' behavior, beliefs, and sense of self, building and controlling their identities within the cultural and social context they live in.

5.4. The Subversion of Norms and the Carnavalesque

Foucault's interest in subverting social norms and fighting against power relations is so much like the idea of the carnivalesque, initially projected by Mikhail Bakhtin. The carnivalesque signifies a moment of momentary downturn of societal hierarchies and standards, leading to a playful and disorderly examination of substitute styles of existence (Lynch, 2014, p. 26). In *The Rocky Horror Show*, this carnivalesque spirit is vibrantly represented through the celebration of peculiarity, sexual changeableness, and unconventionality, producing a world where ordinariness is overturned and undermined.

The musical works as a carnival of excess, where borders are pushed and recognized standards are confronted. Through the characters, plotlines, and atmosphere of the play, *The Rocky Horror Show* generates a space where queerness and unconventional expressions of identity are distinguished and incorporated. Old standards linked with heteronormativity are not only undermined but also responsively teased, emphasizing the subversive nature of the carnivalesque spirit within the musical.

For example, the interaction with the audience thru the "Time Warp" dance: "It's just a jump to the left, and then a step to the right..." (O'Brien, 1975, p. 28) demonstrates the collaborating and partaking nature of the musical, and also invites the spectators to join in the festivities and clasp the spirit of excess and liberation. By inspiring audience members to become active contributors in the performance, "The Rocky Horror Show" thus defies conservative standards of passive spectatorship and generates a space for cooperative revelry and celebration of individuality and multiplicity.

Dr. Frank-N-Furter, as a dominant character in the play, symbolizes this carnivalesque revolt against social expectations and standards. His character disturbs customary gender roles, confronts conventional notions of sexuality, and blurs the borders between desire and taboo. By accepting his own form of assertiveness and independence, Frank-N-Furter becomes an emblem of confrontation to the stiff structures of power that aim to control expressions of identity and yearning.

The carnivalesque elements in *The Rocky Horror Show* drag the audiences to question and denounce conformist values and views by rousing a restorative deliberation of supernumerary styles of life. By making a world where oddness and eccentricity are distinguished, the musical confronts the current state of affairs and offers a space for confrontation against biased power structures and communal limitations.

6. Conclusion

To put it briefly, the analysis of *The Rocky Horror Show* in light of Foucault's ideas regarding power, sexuality, and identity has presented a discerning observation of this iconic musical production. By applying Foucauldian philosophies such as power, the production of sexuality, and the variability of identity to the themes and narrative, I have been able to realize layers of meaning

and complexity that develop the comprehension of the work. One of the most imperative results of this examination is about the ways in which power acts in the world of *The Rocky Horror Show*, and influences the relations, desires, and performances. Foucault's notion of power as productive and instilled within social structures shows how characters in the show negotiate power through acts of resistance, subversion, and self-expression.

Moreover, the analysis of sexuality in *The Rocky Horror Show* through a Foucauldian lens has emphasized the fluid and constructed nature of sexual identities and practices. The blurring of borders and examination of non-normative wishes in the show all encounter conventional notions of sexuality, and demand the audiences to reassess social standards by embracing multiplicity and individual manifestation. Besides, the consideration of identity has proved the way in which the characters in *The Rocky Horror Show* deal with and perform their identities in ways that are multifaceted, complicated, and often revolutionary. The show's inclusion of difference, renovation, and self-discovery underlines the idea that identity is not fixed but rather an unsettled procedure determined by societal circumstances and power relations.

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