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Case Study

“Little Morals...and Some Persuasion”: Positive and Negative Interpretations of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

The 1975 cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* asks the viewer to “give yourself over to absolute pleasure.” This is not an easy feat, however, according to Susan Sontag. In her essay “Against Interpretation,” she argues that art is something wild and hard to fully grasp. She claims that this is why humans try to interpret art—interpretation is an attempt to tame its wildness. If this is true, *Rocky Horror* seems like an especially untameable beast. It is a campy, queer, and just overall absurd film with a dreamlike plot about an innocent couple stumbling upon a castle owned by a mad scientist from the planet Transsexual in the galaxy Transylvania. In 1973, the time of its release, the film was not appreciated because it could not be tamed, but it later gained a cult following of people who were able to embrace its wildness rather than fear it and even create their own art around it through the tradition of shadow cast performances. This case study of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* aligns with Sontag’s idea that interpretation is an act of taming the wildness of art, but also challenges her idea by offering that humans may be able to engage with art in a way that is not only respectful but generative.

Film as a medium is often put under a microscope because of its wide reach. Professional and amateur critics alike feel the need to search for answers to their own made up questions in this art form. In “Against Interpretation,” Sontag writes, “In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone” (Sontag 5). Film critique is a prime example of this inability to let art be. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*’s introduction to its star, Frank N Furter, is a musical number titled “Sweet Transvestite” in which he sensually struts around crossdressing in fishnets, high heels, pearls, and makeup singing about being a “sweet transvestite from Transsexual, Transylvania.” The themes and motifs are queer and vampiric. Sontag continues, “Real art has the capacity to make us nervous” (Sontag 5). For audiences in the 1970s, this overt, unapologetic sensuality and queerness was radical and had the capacity to make viewers especially nervous. According to Sontag, “By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable” (Sontag 5). This film was not a box office success and it was not given strong reviews. The wildness of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* made audiences uncomfortable and they could not tame it, aligning with Sontag’s assertions.

The *Rocky Horror* case also aligns with the ideas presented in another one of Sontag’s essays, “Notes on Camp.” She defines Camp as embracing the unnatural and the exaggerated (Sontag 1). This definitely applies to the over-the-top style of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Sontag also writes, “I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it” (Sontag 1). This is an expansion of the idea already established in “Against Interpretation” that art generally makes one nervous, as she asserts here that Camp art can offend. This is certainly true for *Rocky Horror*. Frank N Furter seduces the innocent character of Janet, taking her

virginity, nearly seduces her fiancé, Brad, and commits murder on screen. The character Rocky is only ever seen in a golden speedo and is the subject of the song “Touch-A-Touch-A-Touch-A-Touch Me,” in which each of the film’s characters lean towards the camera as if the viewer is their sexual partner. There is even explicit nudity in the final scene as Columbia’s bare breasts spill out of the corset she wears matching the rest of the characters. While, as previously mentioned, film itself is subject to extensive attempts at interpretation from critics, the wildness and offensiveness of Camp films, like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, is uniquely untameable. Hence, the original negative critical response to the film aligns both with Sontag’s ideas presented in “Against Interpretation” and her ideas presented in “Notes on Camp.”

In “Notes on Camp,” Sontag also proposes that time removed from art that is originally over-interpreted can highlight its Camp aspects and allow for it to not be taken too seriously (Sontag 8). She writes, “things are campy, not when they become old - but when we become less involved in them, and can enjoy, instead of be frustrated by, the failure of the attempt” (Sontag 8). This seems to be the case with *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. While, as previously stated, original interpretations did not appreciate the more vulgar aspects of the movie, the film later grew a cult following and established a unique fan culture. Now, screenings of the film with shadow cast performances and audience participation give the film a new life. Time away from its release, when it was subject to the most critique, made the art’s wildness feel like its purpose rather than its failure. An important distinction that Sontag makes in “Against Interpretation” is that one purpose that interpretation serves beyond taming art is beginning to understand it

(Sontag 5). Modern interpretations of *Rocky Horror*, like the audience participation tradition, seem to attempt to meet the art where it is at rather than tame it to be something more palatable.

The creation of art from art seems to be a blurry line when it comes to Sontag's view of interpretation. An example of creating art from art that she uses is the example of the Elia Kazan production of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. She implies that by writing in the notes what the characters represent rather than what they are, "Tennessee Williams' forceful psychological melodrama now became intelligible: it was about something, about the decline of Western civilization. Apparently, were it to go on being a play about a handsome brute named Stanley Kowalski and a faded mangy belle named Blanche Du Bois, it would not be manageable" (Sontag 6). From her view, the way that this production handled the original art forced too much interpretation onto it, not allowing it to just be what it is. Shadow cast performances of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* do not seem to do this. When the casts dance along to *Time Warp*, they do not ask why these alien characters take "a jump to the left / and then a step to the right," they just see that they do and dance alongside them. These performances are a form of art within themselves, subject to the same criticisms and interpretations as their source, but they do not seem to be a form of interpretation that oppresses the original film's wildness. Rather, they embrace the campy freedom of the film and emulate that, creating an experience that is just as wild and offensive and is proud to be so.

Susan Sontag's argument in "Against Interpretation" that the interpretation of art is an attempt to tame it seems to accurately reflect the original reception of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. This is especially the case for *Rocky Horror* as it is a work of Camp art, with exaggerated

and vulgar aesthetics and scenes that go beyond the social norms of the 1970s. Art that is made in response to art, like shadow cast performances of *Rocky Horror*, is technically a form of interpretation, as highlighted by Sontag, but it exists in a gray area. While it is certainly true that modern attempts at interpretation still fall into the trap of neutering art and it is impossible for all art made surrounding the film to be faithful, I argue that, in general, shadow cast performances of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* embrace its wildness rather than attempt to tame it and, in doing so, create their own kind of wild, offensive, and Camp art that can, too, be the target of harmful interpretation.

Works Cited:

Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation." *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966, pages 1-10.

Sontag, Susan. "Notes on Camp." *Against Interpretation, and Other Essays*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966, pages 1-13.