

# STAY SANE INSIDE INSANITY: THE OCCULT CLASSICAL AND THE PROPAGATION OF HEDONISTIC INSANITY IN *THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW*

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The LGBTQ+ community's struggle for equality is a tale as old as time. For example, in the early 1970s they were oppressed, beaten, and marginalised. They were even perceived as aliens. Richard O'Brien gave the "aliens" a voice and celebrated their "alienness" in the script for the musical *The Rocky Horror Show*, which became popular enough to be made into a movie, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). As the film became a cult classic, it opened a door for a wider audience to become acquainted with the LGBTQ+ community. Though they are shown as a group of immoral hedonistic aliens from the planet Transsexual, in the galaxy Transylvania, their effect on the everyday human is undeniable. In this chapter, I will discuss how the main antagonist's similarity to the god Dionysus, along with the film's allusions to Greek mythology, help propagate "Trans-bacchanals" and normalise otherness.

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*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), directed by Jim Sharman and based on Richard O'Brien's musical, has become a cult classic. The musical brings up serious issues, such as the status of the queer in the 1970s, and makes them fun and relatable. When *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was written and filmed, LGBTQ+ community members were viewed as aliens, but O'Brien and Sharman managed to make the "alien" LGBTQ+ community seem like a party you would not want to miss. Since its premiere in 1975, researchers have focused on various aspects of the musical, but one central aspect of the story is the theme of the ancient Greek Dionysus myth, the influence of which on the film and its main antagonist, Dr Frank 'N' Furter, cannot be doubted since it plays a role in the propagation of hedonistic insanity through song lyrics in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Boe, 1983). I will examine this connection with reference to the symbolism of music, dance, and visual art in the film to show how the evocation of ancient myth and its symbolism emphasize its theme of social critique, and how stylish and witty satire turned the film into a cult classic. This chapter will analyse visual imagery, lyrics and sound in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* with reference to mythological criticism, cultural studies and art history.

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* follows the adventures of Brad and Janet, two ordinary young people from Denton, Ohio, who, after getting engaged, wish to see their science teacher, Dr Everett Scott. A flat tire brings them to Dr Frank 'N' Furter's castle where they meet an array of interesting people. Frank invites them to his laboratory where they witness his creation of the titular character, Rocky. Frank falls in love with his creation, and during the song "I Can Make You a Man," he is interrupted by an ex-lover named Eddie, whom he murders in cold blood. After being forced to stay the night, Brad and Janet soon realize that Dr Furter has a talent for getting what he wants. After they are both tricked into intercourse with Frank, their science teacher, Dr Scott, who also happens to be Eddie's uncle, arrives at the castle, revealing that Dr Furter and his two servants, Riff Raff and Magenta, are all aliens. In a jealous rage, Dr Furter turns Brad, Janet, Dr Scott, Columbia, a human groupie, and Rocky into statues, which he dresses up in drag and has them all perform a floor show for an empty theatre, at the end of which Riff Raff and Magenta kill him, Rocky and Columbia. The castle turns into a spaceship and is flown back to their home planet, while Brad, Janet, and Dr Scott are left lying on the floor, questioning their existence.

While it might be difficult to find any sign of Greek mythology in a brief synopsis of the musical, a closer examination shows that Dr Frank 'N' Furter resembles a modern-day Dionysus in character, actions, and his influence on others. A comparative analysis of the characteristics of the Greek god Dionysus in mythology shows how they correspond with the text and song lyrics in the musical. An analysis of visual imagery and symbolism in the sets and costume design, a comparison of rituals in the film to Dionysian rituals, and analysis of imagery and symbolism in the song lyrics, also evoke comparison to the myth. Despite the killing of Dr Frank 'N' Furter, which invites comparison to the myth of Dionysus as the dying and rising god, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* propagates hedonistic insanity until the very end of the movie.

First, we must understand who Dionysus was and how his cult worked. According to *History Cooperative*, Dionysus, one of the twelve Olympian gods, was associated with wine, fertility, and joyous revelry. He was the offspring of Zeus and a mortal, princess Semele. Often depicted as youthful and crowned with grapevines, he carries a thyrsus, a staff wrapped in ivy. Worship of Dionysus was pivotal in ancient Greek society, marked by festivals like the Dionysia, featuring drama and celebration, which provided emotional release. Dionysus' mythos has inspired art, literature, and theatre across the ages, cementing his legacy as a significant cultural icon (Gregory, 2022).<sup>1</sup>

Dionysus' mythology gives us a hint of the hedonistic nature that followed his cults. However, before we can begin comparing him to Dr Frank 'N' Furter, there are some elements of the Dionysian cult we must first understand. Though civic cults of Dionysus existed, the relevant elements in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* correspond with private forms of Dionysian worship, which according to Robert Leary (2010, 3), spread from South Italy to Antolia, and were practiced for the better part of a millennium. In *Women on the Mountain: Exploring the Dionysiac Mysteries*, Leary describes the initiation rites, the madness connected to the mostly female followers of Dionysus, and the role dance had in these mystery rituals. There are two important factors that appear in the initiation rites of the Dionysian cult: Leary notes that to be classified as a mystery religion, the Dionysiac mysteries would have involved a

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<sup>1</sup> Other examples of continuous relevance of the Dionysus myth in contemporary pop culture can be found in television programmes to this day. A good representation of this is the new Netflix show *Kaos*, which premiered on 29 August 2024.

transitional state where participants drew nearer to the god in rituals like *telete* and *orgia*; the former could refer to burial or marriage ceremonies (Leary 2010, 8).

A parallel between *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the cult of Dionysus can be found at the beginning of the musical, when Brad and Janet attend a wedding; in ancient rituals, a ceremony during which the followers of Dionysus would get closer to the god. There is a further resemblance between ceremonies in Dionysiac mysteries and ceremonies in the musical, two obvious examples that can be compared to the term *orgia*: the first in the song “Time Warp,” which includes lyrics such as “Time is fleeting/ Madness takes its toll,” clearly a reference to a state between ecstasy and insanity, which are associated with the states Dionysus’s followers would experience during their rituals. The same parallel can be drawn with the following lyrics, “I’ve got to keep control/ ... / Drinking those moments when/ The blackness would hit me/ And the void would be calling,” “But it’s the pelvic thrust/ That really drives you insane,” “It’s so dreamy/ Oh, fantasy free me/.../ In another dimension/ With voyeuristic intention/ Well-secluded/ I see all,” and “You’re spaced out on sensation/ Like you’re under sedation,” which all describe a form of mental instability caused by inebriation, drugs, or insanity. The main parallel here is between the influence of Dionysus over his followers and how the characters in the movie describe the consequences of being involved with Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter, which is essentially mirrored in the lyrics of “Time Warp.” Although the song “Time Warp” does not directly name the perpetrator of these effects, the lyrics, “When a snake of a guy gave me an evil wink/ He shook-a me up, he took me by surprise/ He had a pickup truck and the devil’s eyes/ He stared at me and I felt a change/ Time meant nothing/ never would again” (O’Brien 1975), which are sung by the human follower, Columbia, point us in the direction of a “devilish” male, who could be either Dr Frank himself or a devoted male follower. The lyrics all refer to an otherworldly experience, called the “Time Warp,” which resembles a Dionysiac ritual. This point gains further ground when we take into consideration the dance that accompanies the song in the musical. Every member of the “Time Warp ritual” has their own part to play in a group choreography that ends with everyone falling to the ground in ecstasy. Similar imagery of a dance ending in a fall to the ground can be found in a passage Leary cites in his research: “He is sweet in the mountains, whenever after the running dance he falls on the ground,” referencing Dionysus himself (2010, 14). The other song in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* that resembles

*orgia* is “Rose Tint My World,” with lyrics like “My libido hasn’t been controlled,” and “Now the only thing I’ve come to trust/ Is an orgasmic rush of lust,” both sung by Rocky, Frank’s creation. His entire purpose in life was to serve as an object of desire for Frank’s pleasure. Although Rocky potentially realizes that the hedonism he has known since he was given the “breath of life” by Frank is morally questionable, which can be interpreted from Rocky’s use of the negative “hasn’t been controlled,” he cannot find value in anything other than extreme sexual revelry. We can find approval of Rocky’s world view in the lyrics sung by Dr Furter’s other followers: “His lust is so sincere,” “Give yourself over to absolute pleasure/ Swim the warm waters of sins of the flesh/ Erotic nightmares beyond any measure/ And sensual daydreams to treasure forever,” and “We’re a wild and untamed thing” (O’Brien 1975). The song sends a clear message: you should forgo your inhibitions and give in to a life of pleasure and ecstasy, enabling us to draw a parallel to the revelry, sensuality and hedonism of Dionysiac rituals, which operated under the same rules. In the musical, “Rose Tint My World” is accompanied by a sensual choreography with actions including kissing, heavy petting, and sexual worship of Dr Furter, thus further resembling something we would find in the Dionysiac mysteries and worship.

The next parallel we can draw between *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the myth of Dionysus is madness. Leary cites Greek and Roman philosophers and historians, including Plutarch, who in his *Mulierum Virtutes* wrote about the female followers of Dionysus. Plutarch wrote that the Thyads, female followers of Dionysus, arrived in Amphissa in a Bacchic frenzy, exhausted and without sober judgment. They collapsed in the marketplace and fell asleep (1919, 13). The Thyads were driven insane, though it is not quite clear what prompted their madness. Plato, in his *Laws*, gives us an insight into a part of the rituals that sends the participant into such a state of mind:

All the dancing that is of a Bacchic kind and cultivated by those who indulge in drunken imitations of Pans, Sileni and Satyrs (as they call them), when performing certain rites of expiation and initiation (Laws 815c).

According to Leary (2010, 28), Plato draws a connection between dance and initiation into the cult of Dionysus. The madness that stems from the act of dancing and Dionysus himself is more evident in these lines from *Laws*:

The god Dionysus was robbed of his soul's judgment by his stepmother Hera, and that in vengeance therefore he brought in Bacchic rites and all the frenzied choristry, and with the same aim bestowed also the gift of wine (Laws 672b).

The parallel of dancing as initiation into the cult of Dionysus and the cult of Dr Furter is found in the "Time Warp" scene. Not only do the lyrics mention madness ("Madness takes its toll") but there is also the choreography of the ritualistic "Time Warp." When the song and dance are introduced moments before Brad and Janet first meet Dr Frank Furter, they gain the function of an initiation rite to the cult of Dr Furter. The rite of expiation, or making amends, is paralleled in the song "I'm Going Home," in which Frank tries to make amends with Riff Raff and Magenta who are moments away from shooting him with an anti-matter gun. The parallel in the song "I'm Going Home" and the rite of expiation is a matter of context, and not specific lyrics in the song.

Similarities between *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and elements from ancient Greece reach further than just Dionysian mythology. There is a parallel between the song "Dammit Janet," where a chorus of three church members replies to either Brad or Janet's verses with the lyrics "Janet" or "Oh Brad," respectively, and ancient Greek tragedies where a chorus would sing retorts to what was happening on stage. Another visual parallel to the ancient Greek myths is a bolt of lightning behind Brad and Janet before they are let into the castle owned by Dr Frank 'N' Furter. The lightning symbolizes the Greek god Zeus, father of Dionysus.

The most prominent parallel to Dionysian rituals is the "Time Warp" scene. The "Time Warp," according to the story, is a traditional dance which Frank and his servants, Riff Raff and Magenta, have brought with them from their home planet Transsexual. One of the first lines of the song is "Madness takes its toll," a reference to the insanity that overcomes Thyads during their ritualistic dances. The choreography that accompanies the song can be seen as a ritual, with specific dance moves, such as "a jump to the left," "a step to the right," "put your hands on your hips," "bring your knees in tight," and doing "the pelvic thrust," that drives the

participant insane, which Papaioannou and Lykesas (2012, 71) suggest is a consequence of participation in Dionysian rites.<sup>2</sup>

Further support for this point occurs in the song “Time Warp” with lines like “It’s so dreamy. Fantasy free me/.../You’re spaced out on sensation/like you’re under sedation” (O’Brien 1975). They reference a different state of mind which can be accessed by participating in the “Time Warp” ritual. Throughout the song there are lines which underline this point, including: “/.../ he stared at me/ and I felt a change/ time meant nothing/ never would again” (O’Brien 1975). In the last example there is even a reference to a “he,” the perpetrator of these changes, perhaps even the reason for wishing to participate in such a ritual. Another compelling symbol in the choreography of “Time Warp” is at the end of the song, when every participant falls to the floor, which is like a passage in *Plutarch’s Lives* (1919, 13) about the Thyads flinging themselves on the floor and falling asleep after returning from the mountain. What Plutarch is trying to show is bacchic madness, displayed by the women who are exhausted from their frenzied revelry and fall asleep on the floor in public (Leary 2010, 20).

The first appearance of Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter, the modern Dionysus is his descent in an elevator when he breaks into song. While he sings “Sweet Transvestite,” several interesting elements appear. Frank does not view his identity as male or female as important; rather, he puts the most emphasis on his sexual abilities, and he even sings “I’m not much of a man/ by the light of day/ but by night/ I’m one hell of a lover” (O’Brien, 1975). These lyrics provide us with important information about Frank; he views himself as an object of sexual desire, which he emphasizes as his most important characteristic. According to Goodsell (2020), Thyads or Maenads perceived Dionysus as an object of lust.

Next, Furter mentions “playing them a sound”; as Hosie (2023) states, music was another central element of the Dionysian cult. Then, when he says: “how ‘bout that?” he looks into the camera, breaking the fourth wall, as if he knows he is being watched by the audience, which suggests an almost divine awareness of his

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<sup>2</sup> In this scene, the camera jumps between the participants in the dance and the narrator, played by Charles Gray, who explains while he demonstrates the steps, an ironic parody of scholarly analysis by Sharman and O’Brien.

surroundings. On the topic of being almost divine, when Dr Frank 'N' Furter exits the scene, we see him ascending toward his laboratory, which is symbolic of gods being above humans.

When asked "Is he, Frank, I mean, is he your husband?" by Janet, Columbia laughs and Riff Raff says: "The master is not yet married, nor do I think he ever will be, we are simply his servants." Riff Raff, Magenta and Columbia can be seen as Frank's three "priestesses," just as Dionysus is often accompanied by three maenads. According to Leary (2010, 43), who cites Albert Heinrichs' translation, an oracle advised the Magnesians to build a temple for Dionysus and import three maenads from Thebes, who lead their own *thiasoi* and are to be honoured with public burial upon their deaths, indicating their value to Magnesia. Furthermore, Leary (2010, 43) cites that their presence, along with the reference to the three Cadmean sisters in *The Bacchae*, underscores their significance in Dionysian worship. Therefore, we can see that the number of Furter's most trusted followers is not coincidental. The gender of Dionysus's priestesses is not perfectly mirrored by the genders of Dr Furter's closest servants. Their genders are not specified in the musical and are insignificant: throughout the musical, the emphasis is on lust and the fluidity of gender and sexuality, mainly Frank's.

The musical ventures beyond strict Dionysian mythology with an ironic modern reference to a different classical myth in Frank's line: "We could take in an old Steve Reeves movie." Steve Reeves was an actor, famous for his body-builder physique and for playing Hercules in *Le fatiche di Ercole* in 1957 and *Hercules* 1959 (Clauss 1996, 289). Another parodic reference to Greek ideals of masculinity appears in the dialogue surrounding Frank's creation, Rocky, who "carries the Charles Atlas seal of approval" according to Frank's opinion. Charles Atlas was an American-Italian body builder who died in 1972 (Black 2009). Atlas' seal of approval not only references Rocky's physique, but it also refers to the advertisements at the back pages of comic books in 1940s, where Charles Atlas was pointing his finger at the reader, commanding: "Let Me Prove in 7 Days That I Can Make You a New Man!" (Black 2009). The title of Frank's song "I Can Make You a Man" and the lyric "In just seven days, I can make you a man," are obvious paraphrases of Charles Atlas' slogan. "He thinks dynamic tension/ must be hard work," (O'Brien 1975) is another



lyric that references Charles Atlas and his invention, Dynamic Tension (Black 2009). The body builder's story and how he came to choose Atlas as his last name also contain references to Greek mythology. According to Black (2009), the body builder once saw statues depicting Greek gods at the Brooklyn Museum, which inspired his experimentation with body-building techniques, and once he had built up the muscular build he was known for, one of his school mates told him he looked like the statue of Atlas on top of the Atlas Hotel.

The name of the bodybuilder is not the only reference to the Greek titan. As Gregory (2022) argues, "The most famous myth involving Atlas would be the punishment given to him by Zeus for leading the Titanomachy. /.../ Carrying the heavens on his shoulder was a punishment for the younger Titan for his leadership in the Titanomachy." During the scene when Dr Furter takes Rocky into his bedroom, we can see a stained-glass painting depicting Atlas in his most famous iconographic depiction, supporting the world on his shoulders. Before the two are seen entering the bedroom, two significant things happen: first, there is the almost ritualistic slaughter of Eddie, a biker, who shares his brain with Rocky, and second, we can hear the wedding march by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdi being played as Rocky and Frank "march" toward the bed chambers. Both ritualistic killing (Leary 2010, 14) and weddings (Leary 2010, 8) are elements of Dionysian worship.

The parallels between *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and ancient Greek mythology go even further: for example, Dr Furter's obsession with his creation's appearance as a contemporary Greek ideal is an allusion to the story of Pygmalion. Pygmalionism is "the act of falling in love with one's own creation. The term is derived from Greek mythology, in which Pygmalion fell in love with a statue of Aphrodite that he had sculpted" (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*). According to Wichmann (2022), this is clear in Frank's behaviour toward his creation, Rocky, who is tanned and has a muscular build, blonde hair, and blue eyes, all physical characteristics of an ideal Ancient Greek male, except that his hair is missing the preferred reddish shade of blonde.

Furthermore, several pieces of Ancient Greek art are referenced in the musical. It has been a consensus in the world of art and art history that Greek sculpture belongs among the ideals of and highest points in humanity's art production. As such, they are a physical representation of what Dr Furter wants Rocky to be. The decision to

use them for scenography purposes cannot be unintentional. They propagate the lust for an ideal male body, which goes hand in hand with Furter's treatment and objectification of Rocky. There are two replicas of Myron's Discobolus seen in the laboratory scene. They are positioned on the railing of a passage adjoining the room. Their nails are painted red, and during the "Sword of Damocles" sequence, they both lose their heads. Next, there is a loose citation of Michelangelo's David in the same room. I use the phrase "loose citation" because the statue of a man is holding a piece of cloth in his right hand, while standing in an oversized seashell, both attributes of Venus, the seashell pointing to the iconographical Birth of Venus, while the cloth can be found within the Venus Pudica type of Venus depiction, which is replicated in a miniature version of the Capitoline Venus set in one corner of the castle's dining room. The combination of these classic female and male types in the scenography propagates the fluidity of gender and corresponds with the transsexuality of the main antagonists and, as Goodsell (2020) argues, the Dionysian defiance of gender norms.

The Capitoline Venus is overshadowed by the central scene, in which we see another one of the possible rites of Dionysian mysteries: cannibalism (Leary 2010, 15). Dr Frank 'N' Furter is unstoppable as he feeds his guests – and servants – Eddie's remains. This is one of the last straws that lead to the peak of Frank's insanity, representing another parallel between him and Dionysus. Soon after he shocks his guests with the true source of the meat they are eating, he is provoked by Janet, who seeks comfort in Rocky's arms. He turns all the humans into statues with his Medusa switch.

He dresses them all in drag, mimicking his own attire, another one of the characteristics of Dionysus: Goodsell argues that ancient texts highlight Dionysus' aspiration to shape his devotees in his likeness. His followers, from Maenads to Satyrs, defy traditional gender norms, setting Dionysus apart from other gods. Though these tales are mythical and embellished, they still carry significance for modern non-binary acknowledgment. The Dionysian cult, both in myth and reality, showcases the celebration of identity diversity through themes of harvest and unity (Goodsell 2020).

All these elements are apparent during the “floor show,” as Frank calls it, as he “de-medusas” his prisoners and they begin singing “Rose Tint My World.” Brad, Janet, Rocky, Columbia, and Dr Scott, Eddie’s uncle (who is partly to blame for the escalation of Furter’s insanity), all wear make-up and clothing like Frank’s. They sing about hedonistic enjoyment. It appears that they have been involuntarily driven to madness themselves: “I feel released,” “Don’t dream it/ be it,” “Give yourself over/ To absolute pleasure/ Erotic nightmares/ beyond any measure/ and sensual daydreams/ of sins of the flesh,” and “My mind may as well snap/ and my life will be lived/ for the thrill” (O’Brien 1975) are all lyrics that provide us with an extremist world-view of these “regular Frankie girls” as Columbia calls them in her chorus. They try to fight his influence, some more than others, but in the end his power is too strong, which coincides with one of the two madnesses Leary (2010, 22) suggests as being caused by Dionysus, the other being the willing madness reached through the ritual of dance.

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* uses ancient Greek and Roman elements to illustrate and satirize the culture of its own time. Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter mirrors 1970s Western society’s view of non-cis gender people. In *‘Just’ a Sweet Transvestite(?): (Re)Contextualizing Rocky Horror’s Dr. Frank-N-Furter*, Sullivan Hamilton focuses on how the portrayal of Dr Furter since the time of its release has been problematic and how we can contextualize him through today’s politically correct lens. Hamilton argues that Frank not only dresses in overtly fetishistic feminine clothing but also commits violent acts, including murder, engages in non-consensual sexual encounters with both Brad and Janet, practices cannibalism, coerces his guests into performing sexual acts, and meets his demise at the hands of his servants. These plot elements closely mirror sensationalized stereotypes often associated with transgender characters, portraying them as hypersexual, predatory, and violent, ultimately deserving of death by the story’s end (Hamilton 2021, 8).

Dr Furter’s actions can be described as hedonistic and excessive. He does not respect societal restrictions, refuses to conform, and pursues a hedonistically decadent lifestyle. If we combine that with the fact that he is an alien, we can start to see the puzzle pieces coming together. It is important to note that though he is an extremist who takes advantage of almost every character, the latter do not behave

toward him as if he were a social pariah. On the contrary, after the initial shock of seeing him, even Brad and Janet fall victim to his charms, accepting the lifestyle and even starting to adapt to it. Only after he is killed, are we met with an opportunistic stance against Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter. Hamilton (2021, 13) notes that the justification for Frank’s assassination by ray gun at the hands of Riff Raff frames the act as necessary to protect society, without explicit condemnation of Frank’s gender expression. Society needs to be protected from the hedonism and madness that stem from following the contemporary Dionysus – Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter.

A good representation of how the “Sweet Transvestite’s” actions were perceived by the audience appears in the following review:

A review of the 1975 film adaptation for *The Cincinnati Enquirer* states that Frank ‘singly introduces himself as ‘...a sweet transvestite, transsexual [sic], Transylvania’, ‘totally erasing any nuance between the terms, and damning the film for its ‘totally degenerate, transvestite, transsexual, and blasphemous content’ (Berrigan). (Hamilton 2021, 17)

The extreme lengths to which Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter goes in his blasphemous actions could be interpreted as anti-propaganda against all things LGBTQ+. One of the consequences of Frank’s influence is shown in the song “Touch-a, Touch-a, Touch Me,” in which Janet, who had been saving herself until marriage and was coerced into sex with Frank moments before singing this song, sings lines like “I want to be dirty” and “Thrill me, chill me, fulfil me/ Creature of the night” (O’Brien 1975). Other examples of his sins and bad influence, including the songs “Make You a Man,” “Sweet Transvestite,” and “Rose Tint My World,” have already been mentioned, discussed, and analysed. Indeed, he indulges in intercourse with everyone, and he creates a new life, thus reflecting the theme of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*; he commits murder, he is, arguably, a cannibal, and everybody falls in love with him. However, it could be argued that what he also does is live life to the fullest. The fullest potential of Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter’s character as a representative of the LGBTQ+ community is suggested in the song “Rose Tint My World,” where the message is clear: “Don’t dream it, be it.” This can be interpreted not only as liberating, and a sign of the author’s support for anyone who is afraid to live their truth but is also the message of the mystery cults of Dionysus. Followers would perform the Dionysian rituals in order to be closer to god, which is mirrored in the

choreography of the “Don’t Dream It, Be It” segment of “Rose Tint My World,” where we can see all the human characters in a pool, swimming close to, touching, and kissing Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter, trying to get as close to him as possible, because he shows the characteristics of a god: Dionysus.

One of those characteristics is madness. Frank is insane, in the same sense that Dionysus was insane according to Plato (672b). His mental health can be questioned from the moment we see his first mood-swing, when Columbia states that Rocky is “okay,” and he becomes very agitated and angry. His instability escalates with the jealousy-instigated murder of Eddie, the same jealousy that drives him to trick everyone into an act of cannibalism, prompted by seeing that Janet and Rocky had had intercourse. The next spike in his madness happens when Janet seeks solace with Rocky after seeing Eddie’s corpse, provoking Furter to turn them all into stone. The final stage of his insanity unravels during the song “I’m Going Home” when he sees an imaginary audience cheering for him. He cries during the song and bows to the imaginary audience before being brought back to reality by Riff Raff and Magenta, who want to kill him.

Frank’s three “priestesses,” Magenta, Riff Raff, and Columbia, who resemble Dionysus’ priestesses as described by Leary (2010, 43–44), do everything to appease Frank, letting him take his anger out on them. Riff Raff and Magenta wait for his madness to escalate as much as possible before overpowering him and finally killing him, finally putting an end to the extremism and insanity.

The excess and decadent hedonism that surround Dr Furter are rich in Dionysian symbols, such as drinking wine, marriage, death, rebirth, eating raw flesh, orgies, and insanity. These elements help propagate hedonistic insanity throughout the musical. By having Frank die in the end, the parallel between him and Dionysus gains in salience, as the latter is one of the gods who went through death and rebirth themselves (Gregory 2022).

Staying sane inside insanity, a lyric from “Eddy’s Teddy,” sounds contradictory, and yet it is a perfect combination of both the Apollonian and Dionysian. The two terms apply to tragedy as a genre (Coolidge 1941, 462), which we could argue that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* could be categorized as. If we take Brad and Janet as heroic

individuals, we can see that they encounter many sorrowful events: they are witnesses to a gruesome murder, they are tricked into giving up their virginity in two events that could be categorized as rape, they are drugged, forced into adopting a Dionysian world-view, scorched by the castle/rocket ship flying back to Transylvania, and worst of all, they are met with the realization that they are not really “good, ordinary kids from Denton” – perhaps the biggest tragedy of all. However, it could also be argued that the true tragic hero of the story is Frank because, as with many other tragic heroes, his pride leads to his downfall.

The other element which clearly points toward tragedy are the questions that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* raises concerning our role in the universe. The lyrics of “Superheroes” raise and answer those questions of existentialism: “I’ve done a lot/ God knows I’ve tried/ To find the truth/ I’ve even lied/ And all I know/ Is down inside/ I’m bleeding/ And superheroes/ Come to feast/ To taste the flesh/ Not yet deceased/ And all I know/ Is still the beast is/ Feeding” (O’Brien 1975). What we can notice here is that Brad and Janet question the state of their world and, implicitly, their place in it as well. They come to the realization that everyone is bad, even superheroes. Their epiphany, if we can call it that, is further elaborated on by the Narrator of the musical in his lines: “And crawling on the planet’s face/ Some insects called the human race/ Lost in time/ And lost in space/ And meaning” (O’Brien 1975).

Brad and Janet, in the beginning of the story, represent the Apollonian, as described by Leeming (2010). They are individualistic, they try to practice measured restraint, and are, overall, what we would call “mediocre” or “normal.” When they encounter Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter, the would-be Dionysus, they start shifting toward the Dionysian pole, and right before the end they participate in a Dionysiac rite and experience true ecstasy – not as individuals but together with Columbia, Rocky, Dr Everett Scott and Frank. By having the main two protagonists experience this shift between Apollonian and Dionysian, *Rocky Horror* propagates the latter to the audience. Boe attempts to shed some more light on this matter:

Nietzsche contrasted Apollonian dreaming with Dionysian intoxication. Jung, in analysing Nietzsche's psychological type, argued that Nietzsche's Dionysus represented extraverted sensation, while his Apollo represented introverted intuition. Obviously, the participants in the

Rocky revel are not passively, introvertedly dreaming, but are actively, extravertedly being. And certainly, the Rocky revellers are intoxicated, though not all of them on booze and drugs. (Boe 1983, 63)

Columbia sings in the song “Eddie’s Teddy,” “Stay sane inside insanity”; the words “sanity” and “insanity” reflect the two concepts introduced by Nietzsche. Being sane connotes normalcy, an orderly state of mind, while insanity alludes to disorder. At first glance, the Dionysian and insanity are at the forefront of the musical. They are served to us through the character of the mad scientist. The question we must ask now is whether that is propaganda for or anti-propaganda against insanity.

At first, Brad and Janet fight their most hedonistic urges but fail every time under the skilful mastery of Dr Furter. Second, Dr Furter, the bringer of decadent chaos, must, like Dionysus, die in the end. Third, everyone who was too far gone in the ways of hedonism either dies (Eddie, Rocky, Columbia, Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter) or leaves planet Earth (Riff Raff, Magenta, the Transylvanians). Lastly, there are several lines that point in the direction of anti-propaganda: “It’s not easy having a good time. Even smiling makes my face ache.” Frank’s line makes us empathize with the antagonist. Next, Riff Raff tells Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter that his lifestyle is too extreme, using that as one of the reasons he must be killed. Even Dr Scott, who lost his nephew to this, says: “You saw what became of Eddie. Society must be protected.”

All these points illustrate an anti-propagandistic approach. It appears that Richard O’Brien in the end rejects the Dionysian, hedonistic approach to life. However, we cannot forget the lines from “Superheroes,” where the protagonists have the epiphany that Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter, though obviously an extremist in his own right, is not the antagonist. Although they fell victim to his madness, the madness was already there. O’Brien tells us that we are all waiting to go mad and enjoy life to the fullest, with or without Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter – rendering the modern Dionysus alive in spirit, at least.

To conclude, can Dr Frank ‘N’ Furter be viewed as a modern-day Dionysus, and is hedonistic insanity propagated or refuted through the lyrics in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*? All the overlapping elements between *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and Ancient Greek mythology about Dionysus (female followers, madness, initiation

rites, ritualistic dance and music) along with many ancient Greek pieces of art and references (Discobolus, Michelangelo's David conjoined with The Birth of Venus, the Capitoline Venus, Atlas, ideal male beauty) point toward a strong connection. Dr Frank 'N' Furter can clearly be considered a modern-day Dionysus. As a contemporary Dionysus, Dr Frank 'N' Furter has the power to gain many followers, which if we consider the fact that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* has become a cult movie, he has achieved. Taking the countless "Frankie girls" into account, we may conclude that the over-all propagation of hedonistic insanity in the musical is a successful one. More specifically, the lyrics of all the songs in the *Rocky Horror* musical are full of references to the Dionysian life of excess and hedonism, the most prominent example of this being "Give yourself over to absolute pleasure," clearly propagating elements from Dionysiac mysteries and, although Dr Frank 'N' Furter dies in the end, through the magic of cinema, he returns with each successive viewing.

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