PARIS IS BURNING

A QUEER FILM CLASSIC

Lucas Hilderbrand
In memory of:

Marcel Christian
Dorian Corey
Paris Dupree
Willi Ninja
Crystal Labeija
Pepper Labeija
Avis Pendavis
Kim Pendavis
Octavia Saint Laurent
Angie Xtravaganza
Danny Xtravaganza
Hector Xtravaganza
Venus Xtravaganza
SYNOPSIS

*Paris Is Burning* documents the culture of drag balls in New York City, circa the mid-to-late 1980s. Gay and trans ball “children” compete in categories ranging from High Fashion to Military Realness to Luscious Body, living a fantasy or sometimes simply displaying their beauty. A predominantly African-American and Latino scene, the balls began to attract the spotlight with the mainstreaming of the dance form voguing. The film itself would become one of the most popular queer films and most commercially successful documentaries of the 1990s.

The film introduces audiences to legendary House mothers (Pepper LaBeija, Dorian Corey, Willi Ninja, and Angie Xtravaganza) and younger upcoming participants (Venus Xtravaganza, Octavia Saint Laurent, and Freddie Pendavis) on the ball circuit, as well as a number of the terms of the subculture (Realness, which is a form of passing; House, which is an alternative family of competitors; Mopping, which means stealing; and Shade and Reading, which are witty forms of insult). Comprised of interviews and footage from balls, the film is structured topically rather than chronologically and builds from introducing the ball scene and its competitive categories to documenting the ball participants’ family structures, professional aspirations, and gender identities. The film’s first half focuses on the culture of the balls, and the
second half expands to the public world beyond the balls. The film concludes with an epilogue that presents Willi’s triumph in achieving international success and Venus’s tragic murder. Thematically, the film touches upon such issues as race, gender, class, alternative families, labor, dreams, and cultural appropriation. In particular, the ball walkers’ performances of different identities in competition and their transitions in real life have prompted general audiences and academics alike to reflect upon the fluidity of identity and the politics of cross-cultural representation.
CREDITS

Color, Sound, 35mm (blown up from 16mm), 1:33:1
An Off-White Productions Film
Distributed by Prestige, a division of Miramax Films
DVD released by Miramax Home Entertainment in 2005

Produced and directed by Jennie Livingston
Executive producers Davis Lacy and Nigel Finch
Co-produced by Barry Swimar

*Principal cast:*
Andre Christian
Dorian Corey
Paris Dupree
Junior Labeija
Pepper Labeija
Willi Ninja
Kim Pendavis
Freddie Pendavis
Sol Pendavis
Octavia Saint Laurent
Angie Xtravaganza
Brooke Xtravaganza
Carmen Xtravaganza
INTRODUCTION: LOVE IS THE MESSAGE

“Do you want me to say who I am and all that?” Pepper Labeija (1950–2003) asks as he addresses the camera in Paris Is Burning. He’s speaking to director Jennie Livingston (b. 1962) as well as to the film’s future audience, implying that we should all already know who he is—the Legendary Mother of the House of Labeija. “I’ve been around for two decades. Reigning, that is.” Pepper wears a leatherman’s cap and an embroidered satin shirt with an elegant drape, a crucifix, and a gold “P” on a chain. He gestures with a cigarette in his right hand, rings on his fingers. His self-presentation is more masculine than feminine, though it refuses any prevailing notions of masculinity either. He performs modesty and embarrassment at this moment, rolling his eyes and then covering them before proudly announcing himself. He is legendary, and he has the trophies to prove it.

Moments of direct address appear throughout Paris Is Burning. Although Livingston has been criticized for not being more self-reflexive in locating herself in relation to her subjects or disclosing her identity—as a white Jewish lesbian who grew up in Beverly Hills and was educated at Yale University, as was frequently pointed out in articles about and

1. Because a number of the film’s subjects hail from the same Houses, I refer to them by first name in order to avoid confusion. I follow convention by referring to the filmmakers by last name.
reviews of the film—it is clear throughout that the subjects onscreen are always talking to someone just offscreen. But perhaps more than at any other moment in Paris, Pepper’s seemingly simple question suggests a relationship and a negotiation between the film’s subjects and the documentarian, one in which Pepper has significant agency during the interview itself. What is strange about the moment, if anything, is that it stayed in the film to the final cut. But it appears separated from another moment, apparently from the same interview, that appears in the out-takes during the end credits in which Pepper quotes Norma Desmond in Sunset Boulevard (Billy Wilder, 1950) and says, “Bring the camera closer, Mr DeMille. I’m ready for my close-up.” He gestures to draw the camera closer, and the camera magnetically moves toward
him. This separate shot, in which Pepper quotes a famously camp line from a classic Hollywood film, suggests both the power to call the shots as a star and a desire to live the fantasy. I open with this early exchange between Pepper and Livingston because it already gestures toward many of the theoretical debates that the film has inspired, from the instability of gender categories to the ethics of the power relations that structure documentary representations to the performance of privilege that the film’s subjects may not have in the social realities of daily life.

Following the end credits, the film’s final shot presents two queer youth in Times Square in the wee hours of the morning, one of whom asks, “So this is New York, and this is what the gay life is about, right?” *Paris Is Burning* begins and ends with Pepper and the boys in Times Square, respectively, addressing the camera with questions, thus creating a framework of questioning. This suggests that the potential for self-determination remains open rather than closed. Tragically, while the film presents its subjects as survivors, many of them died young.

Precisely because it allows for such questioning, *Paris Is Burning* has inspired responses from cultish repeated viewings to vociferous political critique, along with just about every possible position in-between. When I began working on this book, I was primarily invested in offering

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2. Thanks to Nicholas DeVilliers for pointing this out to me.
a recuperative reading of the film, but as I continued my research, what became most important to me was historicizing both the world that Paris documents and the contexts for the responses it provoked. What has largely been absent in the (mostly theoretical) writing on the film is a sense of history. The first chapter will fill in some of the history of the ball scene and of the documentary’s production and will examine its formal construction. Chapters Two and Three will focus on the contexts for its release and reception, though the coverage this little book can offer is inevitably partial.

_A formative text_

Before returning to the film or responses to it, I will disclose my own relationship to it and own up to my biases. I
was a sophomore in high school when *Paris Is Burning* was distributed theatrically; I had begun exploring the world of cinema beyond Hollywood and had an innate sense of difference from my peers. I was a middle-class, Midwestern, white queer teen (I knew I was probably gay but hadn’t fully figured out what that meant and was frequently misread as female) living in a racially and culturally homogeneous but relatively tolerant small town when I first learned about the film. I specifically remember reading about it in the *Kansas City Star* film critic’s year-end, ten-best list during the annual family sojourn to Missouri for the holidays. I made a mental note to watch for its eventual video release, hoping—albeit skeptically—to rent it in my small South Dakota hometown. If not then, I expected that—like so much else in my life—I would have to wait until I moved to a city for college to experience it.

Early the following year, a multiplex in Sioux Falls (an hour’s drive from my hometown) hosted its first “art-film series,” which reflected the renewed market for independent and foreign films during the early 1990s. The local newspaper prominently announced the series, listing five of the six films in the line-up. The sixth film was not mentioned. When the sixth week came, Friday’s newspaper offered no editorial coverage of the series or the film, but listed the movie title and show times, with no fanfare whatsoever, for *Paris Is Burning*. I talked two older female friends into road-tripping to see the film, and remained vague about its subject.
matter. They bought tickets and went inside. But when I got to the box office, the cashier asked me for ID and then refused me a ticket. I was sixteen, though I looked like I was twelve. (No, really, I did.) The film was released without a rating, apparently connoting an “unrated” adult film rather than a “not rated” documentary for the woman behind the counter. I bought a ticket for the movie with the next closest show time, which, for the record, was rated R. This double standard reflected a banal, everyday kind of homophobia. Noticing that the auditorium showing Paris Is Burning was within the usher’s line of sight, I apprehensively slipped in with my adrenaline pumping, found an isolated seat in the middle, and slumped down covertly. I spent the first twenty minutes or so fearing that I’d be evicted from the theater. But soon enough, I was absorbed in the film. Movies had long been a way for me to find “my people,” and some of my primary relationships were with the films themselves.

My relationship to this film was marked by first reading about an elusive text and experiencing queer longing, followed by feeling transgression upon viewing it and, peculiarly, seeing it with friends, yet still alone. I don’t remember talking much about it on the drive home; it was too personal, and I wanted to keep it inside me. But I also wasn’t ready to talk about why it resonated for me, and what it might mean about my own identity or sexuality. I also know that I would never have read about the film or been able to see it had it not achieved extraordinary mainstream critical and commercial
success of the kind that is rare for documentaries. Over the years since that first encounter, I have watched the film dozens of times. My affection for Paris Is Burning has never waned. If anything, with historical distance, it feels all the more compelling, even sacred.

I have always viewed the documentary’s subjects with enormous respect, my relationship to them structured more by inspiration than a desire to co-opt. I have also always recognized the gap between my own relative privilege and the ball children’s institutional marginalization, and surely the difference between their lives and mine has been part of what allowed the film to make such a strong impression on me. But the subjects’ incisive perspectives—the ways they read their own systematic oppression and cultural heritage—and the fabulous ways they invented their own forms of community and validation were extraordinary to me. To me, the film has never been about oppression as much as about finding ingenious ways to live in spite of it. Paris Is Burning was testimony that there are other ways of being in the world, ways that are self-defined—at least in New York. This is an idealistic take on the film, but it’s what it has meant to me—even as I recognize that the film is always ambivalent in its affect, so that the subjects’ resilience and the film’s jubilant tone exist in relation to real-life struggle. Writing about a formative text poses particular challenges, and I have attempted to treat Paris with love and rigor, to subject it to extended study without losing sight of its spirit.
My reading of the film is certainly not the only or even a dominant one. For audiences invested in it and in the community it represents, reactions have tended to be polarized between those who find it celebratory and those who see it as voyeuristic. I believe it’s possible to understand political critiques, empathize with its subjects, and still experience the joy that both the ball children and the film engender. To quote leading queer-of-color scholar Roderick Ferguson’s take on the figure of “a black drag-queen prostitute” in the contemporaneous documentary *Tongues Untied* (Marlon Riggs, 1989), “this hint of pleasure and alrightness [sic] flies in the face of those who say that her life is nothing more than a tangle of... misfortunes. In the pleasure of her existence lies a critique of commonplace interpretations of her life” (Ferguson 2004, 1). This book seeks to situate *Paris Is Burning* within its complex historical context, but also insists on recognizing its subjects’ ingenuity, wit, bravado, and glamour as glorious, if at times contradictory, forms of self-creation.

*Making the film*

For Livingston, making *Paris Is Burning* was serendipitous, a labor of love, and a political project. As a post-collegiate still-photographer living in New York, Livingston was taking a film production class at New York University in the mid-1980s when she observed three young men voguing in Washington Square Park. She approached them to ask what they were doing, and they told her to attend an
upcoming drag ball at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in the West Village. Soon she began documenting the ball scene in black-and-white still photos. Never having made a film—or, indeed, having thought of herself as a filmmaker—she first began to audio record interviews, and only started to film the balls later. She knew, however, that she had encountered an extraordinary documentary subject, one that pushed her queer-feminist-leftist politics to a whole new level of cultural analysis and potential. As she told the New York Times, “My photos were about the pressures of the media, racism, sexism and classism. But I was a little frustrated with the silence of the medium. I wanted to do something more overtly political. Tell stories.

In an extensive director’s statement for an early press kit, Livingston detailed her first-person account of the production process and her intentions:

I had my own prejudices about what oppression does to people, but my cultural assumptions were overturned when I realized that these men and women had adopted attitudes based on the certainty that they—in the expression of the ball world—were *not bothered*. They had more style, more fortitude, more wit and more true intelligence than most people with five times their opportunities. The ball people I filmed could have turned out spiteful, angry or downtrodden, but instead they opted for a wildly creative life; the idea was to become as *fierce* as possible. The balls *are* a response to homophobia and racism, but one full of optimism and spirit…

Certainly the people I filmed worked with me in part because I represented a chance to speak out, to be in front of a camera, to show off… I consider *Paris Is Burning* a collaboration on the deepest level. The people who we filmed are articulate, funny, and poised; while the editor and I made coherent form of all that we shot, the documentary was truly *written* by the ball people themselves.³

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Livingston has also suggested that she was cheered on to continue the project after she screened an early cut of footage for the groups Men of All Colors Together and Gay Men of African Descent; she was unsure about whether it would resonate with them, but she reports that they applauded Junior Labeija’s monologue about “White America.”

Livingston initially wanted to make a cinéma vérité documentary about the ball walkers and their lives, following them around in observational footage. But there was simply never enough funding to shoot endless hours of such footage. *Paris Is Burning*, of necessity, became a different kind of documentary, drawing from the resources it did have: interviews and documentation of balls. Beginning production in 1985, Livingston spent five years working on it, a period that extended for so long in large part because it was so difficult to finance a film—even a low-budget documentary—about black and Latino queer communities and drag balls. Livingston had recorded approximately twenty hours of audio pre-interviews and filmed one ball when she had her first meeting with her future editor Jonathan Oppenheim (b. 1952) in early 1986. He had previously been an assistant editor on the film *Streetwise* (Martin Bell, 1984), but *Paris Is Burning* would be his first film to shape as primary editor. The two worked together for four months to create an initial trailer in

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order to apply for grants, and the sample reel helped secure funds to shoot more footage that summer and begin editing.\(^5\)

On paper, the project seemed commercially unviable, and Livingston, a first-time filmmaker, had no track record of her own. Funding came incrementally in the form of grants from foundations and non-profits, including the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) (see the credits listed at the beginning of this book for a list of funders). Some of these organizations were entirely private foundations, whereas others received public monies. Strikingly, the film was repeatedly refused funding from gay and women’s foundations for not advancing an assimilationist image of gays or seeming to reflect proper “feminist” politics (Minx 1991, 54). The film also relied upon two important public television sources for funds: New York PBS affiliate WNYC and the BBC.\(^5\) Considered a commercial risk that would ultimately document an underrepresented subculture and inspire its own body of critical thinking, *Paris Is Burning* is precisely the kind of project that the NEA and PBS were supposed to nurture and finance.\(^7\)

*Paris Is Burning* was produced during a period marked

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6. Davis Lacy, executive producer for WNYC, had previously directed and produced the landmark Civil Rights Movement documentary mini-series *Eyes on the Prize* (1987); Nigel Finch, executive producer for BBC, went on to make the feature film *Stonewall* (1995).

7. Livingston wrote a piece on the funding situation of the NEA for *Outweek* in 1991.
by what have been called the “culture wars” in the US. This political struggle was a product of the rise of neo-conservative politics—embodied by President Reagan and the increasing political influence of the religious right—and a turn toward neoliberalism (government privatization and social program downsizing), which sought to slash public funding for the arts, especially for programs seen to “promote” sexuality of any stripe. The NEA and PBS, both of which were accused of promoting a liberal agenda, endured damning political rhetoric and financial cuts as a result.\(^8\) The works and artists targeted during the backlash of the late 1980s and early 1990s tended to represent the perspectives and experiences of queers and/or people of color. It is surely not coincidental that these were the populations most visibly affected by both the AIDS crisis and the homophobia, racism, and paranoia the pandemic stoked. Livingston herself was involved with the grassroots activist group ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a radical protest organization that focused on coalitional protest and bridged different identity groups, bringing gay men and women, whites and people of color, queers and straights together in solidarity for a common cause. ACT UP, in part,

\(^8\) A number of individual artists were the subjects of controversy because they had received (often minimal) public monies from these sources, including Andreas Serrano, Robert Mapplethorpe, Ron Athey, Karen Finley, and Holly Hughes. In addition to visual and performing artists, filmmakers including Todd Haynes, who received an NEA grant for *Poison* (1991), and Marlon Riggs, who received PBS funding for *Tongues Untied*, were controversial.
inspired a shift from “gay” to more confrontational yet inclusive “queer” politics. Thus, this documentary was made and released within an embattled terrain, one of divisive politics, reactionary politicians, and activist responses. (For more on the culture wars, see Bolton 1992 and Wallis, et al 1999.) That the film necessitated funding from these sources also speaks to the conditions of independent queer documentary production.9

The film, upon completion, built an audience on the film festival circuit in 1990–91 and was one of the key texts of what would be soon be called the New Queer Cinema. *Paris Is Burning* eventually achieved uncommon commercial success in its national release and catalyzed significant ideological debate.

**In context**

*Paris Is Burning* epitomized a cultural moment and anticipated many of the emergent developments in cultural politics. The documentary was filmed and released during the oppressive Reagan-Bush era, as the culture wars were blazing and when everything seemed to be contested. But it also signaled the near future and a political shift from a

9. Since *Paris Is Burning*, Livingston has worked on a number of projects, most prominently the narrative short film *Who’s the Top?* (2005), which screened at more than 100 film festivals around the world. For the past decade, she has been working on *Earth Camp One*, a first-person essay film reflecting on grief and impermanence, inspired by a series of family deaths.
sense of opposition to optimism reflected by US President Bill Clinton’s election in 1992. The world presented in Paris Is Burning is one that had already been deeply impacted by neoliberalism, Reaganomics, and the Wall Street and gentrification booms specific to New York City (Harvey 2005, 45–48). The film demonstrates that the cultural and the economic were mutually constitutive (and always have been). In addition, Paris Is Burning appeared just as the very category of “identity” was beginning to be interrogated (particularly gender identity), and the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality were becoming recognized. The film also significantly contributed to a rise in transgender visibility and culture. It became one of the most written-about films of the 1990s in academia, particularly by scholars in queer, critical race studies, and performance studies, and it remains an important tool for teaching critical thinking. The film has remained relevant, even as cultural theory largely shifted from identity-based formulations in the 1990s to analyses of institutional forms of power and subjection in the 2000s.

In terms of popular culture, Paris is Burning was released at a time when any representation of queerness was transgressive, progressive, threatening, and debated, and it anticipated the mainstreaming of gay representations in the media in the 1990s. Looking back, the period documented already reflected the shift in popular entertainment from social relevance and realism in the 1970s to fantasies of luxury in the
1980s. Looking forward, the film preceded the revival of drag with the rise of RuPaul in 1993 and the release of The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (Stephen Elliott) in 1994. Even more importantly, the film prefigured the rise of multi-racial, queer, and eventually transgender casting, led by reality-TV programs, such as The Real World, that radically changed who got to be included and represented in popular media. The film also reflected a general turn toward celebrity culture and revealed the contradictions inherent in the ideology of the American Dream, both of which would fuel the rise of reality TV: the articulation of “average” people’s contradictory desires to be both famous and “normal” (married homeowners with children). Simply put, the film presents an astonishing mirror of the complexities and desires that pervaded American culture during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Paris Is Burning and its reception powerfully revealed—and continue to reveal—our culture to us. It “is profoundly and paradoxically social, but even more than that, it’s acutely historical. It’s an archive of data about both our history as a culture and our own individual histories—our formations as selves.”

Over two decades after the film’s release, Paris Is Burning continues to screen (and now stream online), to be taught, and to be quoted. The ball children’s statements throughout the film have entered our lexicon. The film remains a touchstone to the ball scene and, more broadly, to queer men of

10. I am appropriating Laura Kipnis’s language in her analysis of pornography (1999, 167).
color. In 2012, it was added to the Sundance Collection at the UCLA Film & Television Archive, and was given the Black Pride Heritage Award at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

This book is guided by an appreciation of what has been so generative about the film and by the insistence that we understand that it always had queer (including queer-of-color) audiences, that its ethical and political complexity was recognized from the start, and that it was made and circulated in a particular historical context. In revisiting the para-texts—the interviews, the festival descriptions, the press kits, the reviews, and the scholarly debates—it becomes clear that Paris was absolutely central to thinking about the meanings of identity, queer-of-color politics, and the value of pleasure as a survival tactic. Formally, the work weaves a complex soundscape of voices and music, while visually it cuts between individualized star moments and gestures of physical intimacy amidst crowd scenes. The editing effectively suggests the possibilities of simultaneously achieving selfhood and finding community. Some viewers experience Paris Is Burning as deeply sad, and others find it profoundly joyful, though I imagine most audiences see it as a complex negotiation of the two. The film is a tribute to the ball children it represents and, for audiences, it powerfully demonstrates the possibility of queer world-making.11

THREE: LOVE HANGOVER (DEBATES)

In 1991, Jenni Olson reviewed both Paris Is Burning and responses to it in a Minneapolis-based gay newspaper and told her readers: “Jennie Livingston’s film is being criticized from all sides for not providing viewers with a clear perspective from which to view it. Amid the variety of these critiques, it is striking that primary emphasis is most often placed on conjectures about how other people will interpret the film. This emphasis seems a convenient strategy to avoid examining personal responses to, or understandings of, what is in many ways a very difficult to read film. (I’ve seen it four times and I still don’t know what I want to say about it; except, ‘Go’)” (1991, 8). Olson’s review reflects the fact that Paris Is Burning generated a lot of press and mixed responses from the start. The review referenced both Livingston’s own statements in Outweek and bell hooks’ critique (discussed below). This and other reviews suggest that it introduced a lot of audiences—including review readers—to ways of questioning identity categories and cultural hierarchies that apparently left them perplexed by their own subject positionings afterward.

Having first seen the film at the same theater in Minneapolis as Olson, Jacqueline Zita reflected on her own enamored experience of watching it and on the academic cottage industry it had already generated.
Since my first enthusiastic viewing of *Paris Is Burning*, the documentary has become somewhat of an academic cult film, where the work finds a lively currency in gender performance theories and current academic fascination with transgender experience. Why, I must ask, after my first viewing of the documentary, did I too feel the urge to write about this piece? ... Several gender and race... analyses have emerged from *Paris Is Burning* as a function of viewer identities, especially the race perspective of the viewer, and as a function of “receiving contexts”—whom you sat with, whom you talked to, who talked back, who listened, and who controlled the conversation. While *Paris Is Burning* was made by a white lesbian filmmaker, Jenny [sic] Livingston, and while many commentators have pointed out the lack of any interrogation of the race/racist components of the film’s making and viewing, I find this lack energetically addressed in the space that has opened up since the film’s appearance, namely the “talk back space” where theorists and critics have engaged a new kind of theory-making that brings theory back to the body, to social location and identity, and to the self-reflective process of visual literacy (1998, 185).

Here I find Zita’s remarks to be precisely on point: with whom you saw the film and to whom you talked about it afterward shaped how you saw it, and it created a common groundwork for thinking through a range of social
issues. Certainly this is potentially true for every film, but it becomes particularly important for documentaries that, on the one hand, bear the burden of representing an otherwise underrepresented community, and on the other, provoke both affective and political responses.

_Paris Is Burning_, which raised questions for general audiences, became central to academic work—both in theoretical writing and classroom discussion—almost immediately, and it continues to be taught regularly (see footnote 19). As the complex and at times divided critical responses to the film demonstrate, reception (the meanings audiences make) matters—even for documentaries. But it also bears stating that films that resonate will do so differently for different audiences: what some may read as enlivening will seem reactionary to others. The interpretations of the film, at times, arguably reveal more about the projections and politics of individual viewers than the ball scene or the film itself. But I also want to stress in this chapter that the first wave of responses to the film should be understood within (but not be reduced to) their historical context of the culture wars. Some of the criticisms of the film, its filmmaker, and its audience reflected a period of identity politics prior to more intersectional perspectives, and when any kind of queer rep-

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47. The affectively charged and politically divisive responses to _Paris_ recall reactions to the film adaptation of Alice Walker’s _The Color Purple_ (Steven Spielberg, 1985), which was widely attacked as racist and potentially dangerous by the leftist press and black commentators and yet which found an adoring black female audience (Boo 1988).
representation was politically charged. Some of the early debates indicate urgent struggles over who would get to speak for and define the nascent field of queer theory, which was predominantly white and which made frequent reference to transgender figures without necessarily speaking from transgender experience. Academic attention given to the film in the late 1990s and early 2000s reflects shifts in perspectives, investments, and questions.

Reception
Reception has figured prominently in accounts of and debates about Paris Is Burning in both community-based publications and academic ones. In comparison to mainstream journalistic reviews of the film, these responses tended to be more charged, presenting either stinging critiques or stirring defenses. In particular, leftist criticism focused on issues of cross-racial representation and audience reception. In some cases, scholars have theorized the film in ways that depart from how Livingston and her interview subjects theorized the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and class. Some critiques of the film remain entrenched or, for younger viewers, continue to re-emerge. But from the time of its release, there have also been audiences who identified with the ball children and took pleasure in their wit and ingenuity. That the film has sparked such vibrant discussion is testament to its power to challenge audiences to recognize the complexity of identity and social relations.
Perhaps the best and earliest concise analysis of the ambivalence the film raises for both its subjects and audiences appears in Bruce Benderson’s article for Outweek, published during the initial run at the Film Forum:

“The film is slowly becoming accessible by word of mouth,” the very wise and very articulate Dorian Corey later explains to me. “But not all the House children read newspapers. And, well, the Film Forum isn’t exactly on their list.”

These comments augment the queasiness I felt watching the movie—hearing the giggles of Film Forum’s mostly white, downtown audience become more and more strained as the film deftly drew them into the unfamiliar culture of the Balls. The self-consciousness of the audience that night brought to mind for me all the contradictions inherent in making art about a community to which you do not belong—art that will be exhibited to an audience composed primarily of members of a community to which you do not belong... I admit that I loved Paris Is Burning—I saw it twice. And in my great admiration for that film, I faced my envy of the energy, ambition and vitality of the participants... And as well-intentioned as I believe Paris Is Burning really is, its audiences will take only what they want from it.
Benderson continues, addressing the impact the film’s success was having on its subjects:

Octavia tells me that she welcomes the exposure afforded her in *Paris is Burning* but deeply resents the fact that no one bothered to inform her of its release. She did not even learn of the film’s success until people started recognizing her on the street.

For a large segment of the House children and their mainstream consumers, issues of ownership or co-optation have become just too convoluted. “Nobody in the actual community was making shit about our drag balls,” said Dorian Corey, who is not one to mince words. “Thank God, somebody [like Jennie Livingston] came and did it...Now that small success is happening I’m waiting to see how Jennie will give people their due.” (1991, 54, 60)

Benderson understands the significance of this film in producing a representation—one that is “well-intentioned”—of a queer-of-color scene, but he also, perhaps more than any other film critic, bases the critiques he raises on conversations with the documentary participants themselves and on first-hand knowledge of the demographic and geographic separations between the ball world and the independent film circuit. He understands the conditions in which a documentary can be made as well as the uncertain potential for the film to reach back to the community it represents.
The most influential account of audience responses to *Paris Is Burning*, and probably the most critical, was African-American feminist cultural critic bell hooks’ recollection of her experience with a predominantly white audience who seemed to mock the subjects onscreen. Unfortunately, her polemic has largely set the terms for much of the subsequent discussion. hooks inaccurately claims that femininity in the film is represented and understood only through the lens of whiteness and that the ball children themselves are unaware of the politics of race (1992a, 147). hooks understands *Paris* as a white imperialist project and, as has been pointed out elsewhere, focuses her critique on the filmmaker rather than broader conditions of film production (Champagne 1995, 114). She expresses disappointment that the film did not present the “destruction of a dominating white western civilization and culture, an end to oppressive Eurocentrism and white supremacy” (hooks 1992a, 149). Her response locates the work within a history of subjection for African Americans, but her expectations and preconceived desires—for the destruction of white power structures—would be impossible for any film. She does not seem to recognize in it the potential for the kinds of identification and pleasure—even ambivalent forms of either—that she herself describes in her important essay “The Oppositional Gaze” (1992b, 115–32).

Yet, productively, hooks repeatedly foregrounds the film’s audience in her analysis:
Watching *Paris Is Burning*, I began to think that the many yuppie-looking, straight-acting, pushy, predominantly white folks in the audience were there because the film in no way interrogates “whiteness.” These folks left the film saying it was “amazing,” “marvelous,” “incredibly funny,” worthy of statements like, “Didn’t you just love it?” And no, I didn’t just love it...

Watching the film with a black woman friend, we were disturbed by the extent to which white folks around us were “entertained” and “pleased” by scenes we viewed as sad and at times tragic. Often individuals laughed at personal testimony about hardship, pain, loneliness. Several times I yelled out in the dark, “What is so funny about this scene? Why are you laughing?” The laughter was never innocent. Instead it undermined the seriousness of the film, keeping it always on the level of spectacle. And much of the film helped make this possible. (1992a, 149, 154)

I do not doubt that this account reflects hooks’ experience or that such infuriating incidents occurred at theaters elsewhere. But a major shortcoming is that she seems to suggest homogenized “black” and “white” positions that do not allow much space for perspectives that might complicate either, whether queer or not. Certainly it is possible that some viewers, regardless of their identities, experience the film as “fun” without recognizing the social critique it offers, yet she presents such responses as representative and dominant.
Furthermore, the way hooks frames her polemic suggests that any pleasure—or reading counter to her own—is structurally racist. By seeing the film’s subjects as simply tragic and oppressed, hooks does not afford them joy, community, or agency. She did not speak for all viewers of color, however, as the film did have enthusiastic early support from black artists and cultural critics such as Michelle Parkerson (1991), Essex Hemphill (1991 and 1992), and Jackie Goldsby (1991).

Given that the film’s audience would become a significant part of the debate about its politics, it is worth noting that the film features numerous shots of the ball audience, particularly of masculine gay men of color. Such shots present a range of responses, from animated clapping, standing, and cheering, to gestures of affection, cutthroat arguments, boredom, and
discomfort, as the ball children fan themselves with paper programs. The film presents the ball audience as something close to a community, and the audience participates in making the scene. Perhaps the best retort to hooks appears in the scene in which Junior schools the ball audience: “As far as all of y’all not walking, please realize that we all at one time or another have lusted to walk a ballroom floor, so give the patrons and contestants a round of applause for nerve ’cause with y’all vicious motherfuckers it do take nerve.” Junior nods for emphasis. “Believe me. We’re not going to be shady, just fierce.” He instructs the film’s audience as well as the live one in paying proper respect.

Gay African-American scholar Robert Reid-Pharr’s account of seeing the film makes clear that there were venues where chiefly black and queer audiences identified with and talked back to the subjects onscreen. Yet he too experienced the film differently when he saw it again with a predominantly white audience:

Black gay New York had come out en masse to see its own. Waiting in line was itself a lesson in the intricacies of black speech, dress, hair, gossip, attitude and camp... People were doubled over laughing in their seats as Pepper Labeija held forth on the intricacies of House Life. We squealed our approval as ‘sisters’ vogued their way across the screen. We talked back to the characters, even read them, while at the same time openly yearning that
one, just one, might trick fate and snatch up the glory...

This time [a repeat viewing with a predominantly white audience] the atmosphere seemed thoroughly domesticated. Laughter came on cue. The only spontaneous responses I heard were the whispered complaints of a lesbian couple who found the queens’ gender politics offensive. (1990, 62)

Reid-Pharr calls for more context, specifically the history of the balls and the even longer history and politics of racial passing. “The tragedy of Paris Is Burning,” he says, “is once again its seeming inability to deal effectively with the issues of history and power” (63). What it produces instead “is quite similar to a minstrel show” (64). Although I would challenge the essentialist lines along which some of the film’s audiences have been recounted, reviews such as this reflect significant struggles over who gets to “own” representations—and their interpretations—of people of color. The fact that Livingston is white became a sticking point for a number of the film’s detractors. The (mainly white) New Queer Cinema reflected a turn toward de-essentializing identity categories, yet Paris Is Burning was relatively atypical in presenting non-white and economically disadvantaged subjects.

I have revisited a number of writings on the reception of the film to show that, from the start, there were diverse audiences for the film and a range of complex responses. Interviews with Livingston reveal that she was well aware of
complex issues of race and class as well as gender and sexuality, informed by her education, her years working to make the film, and her experiences as an AIDS activist. I have spoken at some length with Livingston about the production and reception of the film, and in the process I came to recognize that, despite the pervasive interviews with her published to promote the film’s release, none of the academics who commented on the film actually consulted her when writing about it. The film hit at just the right moment to become central to difficult political and theoretical debates, and even now it remains astoundingly pertinent as a key case study to examine and question the complexity of identity categories in American culture.
Ethnography

Paris Is Burning’s release coincided, as I have previously noted, with an exciting (and at times maddening) ground-swell of cultural theory, particularly queer theory, critical race studies, and performance studies. The film became a text through which cultural critics and academics were able to address such charged political issues as the histories of racial appropriation and oppression. Thus, responses to Paris were often impassioned precisely because they were, fundamentally, not about the film specifically as much as about the broader stakes of power and racial/sexual politics. Artist and cultural commentator Coco Fusco has been particularly helpful in keeping her eye on the larger issues involved in critiques and defenses of the film’s reception when she wrote, “What is more fundamentally at stake than freedom, I would argue, is power—the power to choose, the power to determine value, and the right of the more powerful to consume without guilt. That sense of entitlement to choose, change, and redefine one’s identity is fundamental to understanding the history of how white America has formed ideas about itself, and how those ideas are linked first to a colonial enterprise, and, in the postwar period, to the operations of industrialized mass culture” (1995, 68). Fusco goes further to suggest that both sides of the debate are culpable. “White resistance to reckoning with the politics and economics of appropriation is not the only obstacle to furthering more productive discussion of cultural politics. Subaltern attempts to redress inequalities
and misrepresentations are still rife with inconsistencies. Protectionist measures are frequently couched in [the] moralistic language of guilt and blame, or they depend on static notions of authenticity to determine group membership and valorize certain forms of expression” (74).

One of the primary ways that Livingston was critiqued involved describing her as an “ethnographer” or “anthropologist,” charges that perhaps say more about feuds between humanities and social science disciplines than they do about the film itself. Although “ethnography” more or less means “writing about ethnicity” (and Paris Is Burning has inspired much of this), the methodology has been viewed with suspicion because it is presumed to mean representations of other (i.e., other than white) ethnicities and to reflect a kind of intellectual and cultural imperialism. Ethnography was a key academic buzzword and contested field in the early-to-mid-1990s, which, in part, explains why it was so commonly a lens through which to understand Paris’s mode of production and address. Anthropology itself was undergoing newly politicized self-reflection and methodological challenges concurrently with the film’s production and release, from “decolonizing” the discipline to exploring gay and lesbian research perspectives.48

48. The year the film was released, a collection of essays, Decolonizing Anthropology, sponsored by the Association of Black Anthropologists, suggested that much of the field’s work was “vulnerable to being complicit if not in fact collusive with the prevailing forces of neocolonial domination” and advocated for “activist
In the wake of this, *Paris Is Burning* was accused of inspiring voyeurism in audiences, exploiting its subjects, and reaffirming white privilege. In her discussion of ethnography, performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan asserts, “Part of the appeal of *Paris* for a white, straight audience is its ability to absorb and tame the so-called Otherness of this part of Black and Latino gay male culture” (1993, 106). I understand these political critiques and recognize that many viewers, including many of my students, continue to experience the film as “otherizing” its subjects, but this reading has never characterized my own relationship to the text. Instead, I’ve always wondered: Who is presuming a white, straight spectator? Doesn’t this conflate whiteness with straightness in much the same way that the ball-walkers and the film have been accused with conflating femininity with whiteness? Why can so few scholars imagine a diversity of audiences? I have found it deeply ironic that a documentary that presents a ball world where identity categories are destabilized should be critiqued on the basis of essentialist understandings of the director’s and audiences’ identities.

In much of the critical work on *Paris Is Burning* written in the 1990s by queers and/or people of color, there is a repeated presumption of a white heterosexual audience

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anthropologists committed to and engaged in struggles against racial oppression, gender inequality, class disparities, and international patterns of exploitation and ‘difference’ rooted largely in capitalist world developments” (Harrison 1991, 1–2). On gay and lesbian anthropology, see Lewin and Leap (1996).
for the film, thereby occluding the film’s initial and enduring core audience. Critics have repeatedly failed to imagine identification, appreciation, or coalition in their claims of exoticization, exploitation, and “otherizing.” Speaking only for myself, I’ve never cared much about what white straight audiences make of the film because it has always mattered to audiences of queers, people of color, and queers of color. This is our film. That it crossed over to mainstream attention and national distribution was a surprise, one that fortuitously also made the film more accessible to marginalized audiences. If it had remained obscure, *Paris Is Burning* might have still found classroom audiences, but it probably would not have been attacked as intensely in academic circles. And it might not have reached the audiences for whom it means the most. The film festivals, public television stations, upscale theaters, video stores, and college classrooms where the film was shown may have marked it as high culture and thus raised the question of who its “intended” audience was. Yet it became “problematic” largely because of its popularity.

At the core of much of the debate around the film is the question of whether an “outsider” has the right to represent (on film) and speak for (as Livingston did in interviews while promoting the film) a structurally marginalized community. Is it ethical for a white person to portray people of color? Does it make a difference if that person is a woman, is queer, is feminist? If so, what are her responsibilities to
her documentary subjects? In addition, a question rarely asked of documentaries—but one implicit in responses such as hooks’ (1992), Phelan’s (1993), and Carol Flinn’s (1998) writings on *Paris Is Burning*—is, who has the right to watch these representations? And are there “responsible” ways to interpret them? These are ethical questions at the root of documentary practice and theory.

49. The documentary *How Do I Look?*, produced and directed by white German filmmaker Wolfgang Busch, was conscientiously made in collaboration with community members (assistant directors Kevin Omni and Luna Khan and editors Busch, Gregg Paine, Aaron Enigma, and Darryl Hell). It was a “corrective” to *Paris Is Burning* in terms of being more historically detailed and by involving the ball children in its making. This film, however, has remained comparatively obscure, aside from some festival screenings and a self-release on DVD.
All documentaries that aspire to distribution or broadcast aim to speak to audiences beyond the specific subjects and communities represented in the film. Livingston experienced the production of the film as a process of collaboration with the ball children, whereas Oppenheim has characterized the editing of the film as a process of creating a structure that educates outsiders about the ball scene before focusing in on the participants’ more personal and social struggles. Thus the film might be understood, from the perspective of its makers, as a negotiation of collaboration with insiders and address to outsiders. This also creates a structure wherein some viewers experience the film as very intimate and others will find it distancing, some effective and others problematic. Indeed, much of the film’s power comes in its ability to stimulate such a range of strong responses.

The scholarly work on *Paris Is Burning* is often simultaneously erudite yet careless about the details (misspelling Livingston’s name, attributing statements to the wrong person), brilliant but overly blunt. In part, such inaccuracies in description or lack of engagement with documentary practice more generally reflect that much of the literature on the film comes from outside of film studies; this is a sign that its influence has been more social than specifically cinematic (exceptions include Cvetkovich 1993, Fuchs 1997, and Flinn 1998). In a more recent reconsideration of *Paris Is Burning* that attempts to recuperate it from its academic baggage, Daniel Contreras writes, “What seems to be irksome for these critics is that
the fantasies in the film feel far from revolutionary. Instead, it is the content of the dreams and the aspirations expressed that are most provocative. For me, both the above positions are over-determined in their conclusions and... ignore the utopian possibilities present in the film” (2004, 124). Indeed, one of the recurring blind spots in some theoretical work on *Paris Is Burning* is that academics seem to forget that they are responding to a documentary, and they critique real people’s lives, identities, and values for failing to live up to an ideological ideal. Furthermore, the documentation and interviews predate much of the theory used to critique it, and academics are prone to use language that would be inaccessible to the film’s subjects.
Agency

*Paris Is Burning* is not a social-movement film, nor does it presume to represent the totality of queer-of-color existence. In fact, the film is quite explicit that it is specific to a time and a place, and that it focuses on the ball scene and some of its participants. All documentaries must choose a focus and create a structure that inevitably excludes aspects of a culture and its contexts. As I have already suggested, this film operates in a liberal *cinéma vérité* tradition that refused voice-of-God narration in order to allow the participants and the footage to speak for themselves. However, the lack of the filmmaker’s own didactic voice may, in part, suggest a kind of ambiguity and account for the divided readings of the film.

Documentaries of all forms, because of their direct reference to the “real” and real people’s lives, carry a burden of representation and an ethical responsibility not to exploit their subjects. In the case of ethnographic documentaries, there is an additional responsibility for cross-cultural representation of the subjects’ cultures, which in most cases, are not fully “knowable” from the filmmaker’s or viewer’s outsider perspective (Ruby 2000). The academic subfield of documentary studies has tended to focus on the ethics of the filmmaker-subject relationship, the political agendas and efficacy of propaganda, the potential for truth in representations, and what Bill Nichols has influentially termed “the discourses of sobriety” (1991 and 2001). Reception and audience
pleasure have been all but unacknowledged in research on documentaries. The issue of reception is different from the ethics of documentary production, but no less important or complicated; it is not possible for documentary subjects (or even filmmakers) to anticipate or control the interpretations audiences will make.

From an ethical standpoint, perhaps the most troubling account of Livingston’s relationship to her subjects appeared in a 1993 *New York Times* follow-up article. Reporter Jesse Green alerted readers that times were dire for the film’s subjects. “Once mainstream America began to copy a subculture that was copying it, the subculture itself was no longer of interest to a wider audience, and whatever new opportunities existed for the principals dried up... The film’s critical and financial success should therefore not be taken for the success of its subjects... [T]he characters Ms. Livingston presented remain, at best, exactly where they were when filmed.” Green played up the controversy by saying, “There is a lot of anger in the ball world about *Paris Is Burning*... most of [which] centers on money.” Then he quoted Pepper at length:

“I love the movie, I watch it more than often, and I don’t agree that it exploits us... But I feel betrayed. When Jennie first came, we were at a ball, in our fantasy, and she threw papers at us. We didn’t read them, because we wanted the attention. We loved being filmed. Later, when she did the interviews, she gave us a couple hundred dollars. But she
told us that when the film came out we would be all right. There would be more coming…but then the film came out. They got rich, and we got nothing.” (1 and 11)

After the distribution deal with Miramax, Livingston dispersed about $55,000 among the most prominent subjects in the film; this plan was in the works before a number of the film’s subjects attempted to file a lawsuit against Livingston. When the lawyers saw that the plaintiffs had signed releases, they determined that there wasn’t a case to be made. Livingston has never disclosed how much money she personally earned for *Paris Is Burning* and told me that she eventually stopped doing the accounting. Given the infamously unfavorable trickle-down economics of film distribution—especially for an emerging filmmaker—it is highly improbable that she made *Dynasty*-level money or anywhere near it. The bottom line is that probably no one got rich off the film except—maybe—Miramax.

From my perspective, much of the most productive theoretical work that the film has fostered has focused on issues of agency and institutional critique. Cultural studies scholar Phillip Brian Harper’s essay on the film helped shift the discussion from questions of identity to those of agency; he has questioned film critics’ assertions that *Paris Is Burning* and its subjects are “subversive” in presenting drag (de)constructions of normative cultural tropes (1994, 90–91). Harper asks: What is at stake for critics and audiences who desire
Figure 34. Jennie Livingston and Todd Haynes (Poison) on the cover of Outweek, April 17, 1991. Publicity for Paris Is Burning tended to privilege interviews with the filmmaker rather than the documentary’s subjects. Courtesy of the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.
to attribute a kind of subversive agency to the documentary subjects? For Harper, self-definition seems impossible, particularly for those without the agency to have an impact on the cultural superstructures of power and meaning (93, 98–99). The importance of his essay is that it does not just analyze the film as a text but rather as a site of actual social negotiation. Ultimately, Harper concludes with the contradiction that the subjects of Paris Is Burning—indeed, of most documentaries—must opt into: they must relinquish all rights by signing a release form in order to express themselves (102). Harper’s critique returns us to fundamental issues at the heart of the film’s controversy, namely individual people’s power to define their own lives and change their social situations, and the issue of agency for documentary subjects to determine their representation and reception. Drag itself is not enough to change socio-economic conditions on an infrastructural level, though it may function as a survival strategy.

Cultural theorist Chandan Reddy points to the contradictions of understanding a subculture through its documentary representation and points to the form’s historical connections to ethnography. However, he allows the subjects some agency in performing themselves: “The subjects of Paris... embrace, by playing up to the camera (and to Livingston), the fundamental impurity of their entrance into representation” and “approach ‘social reality’ as a contradiction” (1998, 368). His insightful analysis focuses primarily on a Marxist critique that situates the film within broader material conditions and
histories. As noted in Chapter One, Reddy understands the ball children’s reconceptualization of “Houses” in relation to structures of racism in US housing policies. The ball scene in *Paris Is Burning* is not as much about subversion as it is about survival.

These terms precisely reflect a shift in gender theorist Judith Butler’s work on the film, which has been some of the most influential. More than a decade after first writing on it, Butler returned to the film and offered a less abstract and more humanized re-reading: “This film travels, because of its beauty, its tragedy, its pathos, and its bravery. Its pleasure crosses cultural boundaries in a way, because what also crosses those boundaries, and not always in the same way, is the threat of violence, the threat of poverty, and the struggle to survive—all of which are more difficult for people of color. It is important to note that the struggle to survive is not really separable from the cultural life of fantasy. It is part of it. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise” (2004, 216). Here, Butler speaks not only of the material struggles and fantastic strategies with which ball walkers live, but she also acknowledges the issue of reception and hints at some of the ways in which the film “travels.” In her account, *Paris Is Burning* is not the troubling work of exploitation or white flattery some have accused it of being, but one that allows for connection and recognition. To reiterate, what is at issue for Butler is no longer subversion, but survival.

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Figure 35. Reading and throwing shade are survival skills on the street. DVD still.

Ball participants-turned-scholars such as Marlon Bailey and Jonathan David Jackson have also begun to alter how both ball culture and Paris have been theorized. In 2011, Bailey published an essay in which he powerfully responded to writing on the film and the ball scene: “Ultimately, in this queer minoritarian sphere, Black gender and sexually marginalized people forge lives worth living. Other critiques asserting that ballroom members are obsessed with white femininity and illusions of material wealth discount the actual labor in which its members are constantly engaged to create an alternative existence for themselves within their marginality... The gender and sexual performativity of ballroom culture emerges and functions at the interstices of hegemony and transformation to create new forms of self-representation and social
relations” (383). Bailey also asserted that the film “continues to be the primary point of reference for members of the contemporary house/ball scene” (368).

Perhaps the most heartening evidence that *Paris Is Burning* has continued to resonate for queer youth of color audiences is that in 2009 the community-based organization FIERCE (Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment) screened the film on the Christopher Street Piers, where much of it was shot, to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots. FIERCE operates for and by queer youth of color in New York City, and the screening, outdoors and free, presented the documentary to the next generation of the communities represented in it.50

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I’d like to conclude with one of Pepper’s boasts in the film: “And for those children who can’t take the fact that I still look beautiful, suffer. No bags. No lines. Lovely.” *Paris Is Burning* feels ageless. The film, in its own time, seemed extraordinary and revelatory. What is perhaps most astonishing two decades later is that it retains its power, relevance, and ability to stimulate charged responses. For

50. The film has also inspired numerous queer-of-color artists, including filmmaker Dee Rees (*Pariah*, 2011), who chose to present the film as part of the Queer/Art/Film program at the IFC Center in New York City in summer 2011. Wu Tsang staged and later recorded a reinterpretation of selections from the film as *Full Body Quotation* (performed at the New Museum in New York City, November 19, 2011) and as *For How We Perceive a Life (Take 3)* (2012).
me, *Paris Is Burning* was always the most inspiring of the New Queer Cinema films, and in retrospect, it has arguably continued to remain the most vital, the most seen, the most written about, the most referenced, the most influential, and the most important.

The joy of the film is that the ball children find ways to make life livable through the drag ball events and through the formation of drag Houses. The tragedy of the film is that Venus was murdered, that so many of the other ball children struggle to live, and that almost all of the film’s leading subjects have died young in the intervening two decades since the film was completed. But there are at least two sets of lives affected by the film: those of the documentary’s subjects and those of the documentary’s audience. The film *matters* to many of its viewers, particularly those who have been starved for images of lives with which can they identify and that validate their right to exist and inspire alternative ways of being in the world. Thus, the film’s importance is not just historical but also affective. The cultural work this documentary has done in the world transcends the film and its filmmaker by offering models of queer world-making.
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