

# A Pumpkin at Midnight: Intersectionality of Race, Class, Orientation and Gender in “Paris is Burning”

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## Abstract

This essay explores the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation in Jennie Livingston’s film, “Paris Is Burning”. It critically examines the methods of presentation and documentation by Livingston and questions the presentation to and reaction from American audiences to the film. Ultimately, it is concluded that the gender and class performances as depicted in the film are not subversive as originally believed, and instead paint a soothing narrative for the heavy conscience of the privileged viewer.

It’s a postmodern twist of the classic Cinderella story– a girl with a heart of gold, yet demonized by her family and society, manages to overcome her humble circumstances and participate in a world of glamour and patriarchal validation. The “balls” of Harlem’s Black and Latino gay communities of the 1980s were hotbeds for cultural innovation, launching the careers of many of the world’s most famous drag queens and gay icons, and inspiring the “Vogue” dance featured in Madonna’s eponymous smash single. “Paris is Burning” purportedly focuses on the lives of these characters. Yet director Jennie Livingston’s portrayal fails to take a stand on

just what her narrative is meant to be promoting and what it is deconstructing. Her treatment of ball culture and the people who comprise it left white American audiences breathless, but it also (controversially) left its stars in the dust. Despite the fame that came with Livingston's documentary, most of the main characters faded into obscurity. Livingston's attempt to present her work as objective has the effect of giving the audience the overwhelming job of sorting through layers of class and race issues to form a coherent interpretation. Expecting to find subversion of oppressive regimes, to find a way to celebrate the portrayal of a marginalized group, viewers squint through the hazy smoke of dressing rooms and the fluorescent lights of dance halls and try to piece together a narrative that satisfies and does justice to its subjects. The critical eye hopes to find that these subjects are empowered by their cultural activities and that through this, they celebrate pride in a unique cultural identity; and if not those things, that the director at least will deliver a criticism of the oppressive forces which use the balls as tools to repress subversion and glorify white patriarchal and heterosexist normativity. In short, we expect the director to take a stand— Are the balls doing justice to the characters? Are they harming them? Yet, Livingston does neither, instead choosing to masquerade as a neutral observer and to distract from these questions by bombarding us with images meant to entertain and amuse (hooks, 1999). The effect is more an act of appeasing privileged viewers than challenging them. And, just as in *Cinderella*, at the end of the day the glamour and circumstance fades to reveal a dreary and oppressed existence for those who still inhabit this realm.

Reviewer Kimberly Davis points out the irony of the film's treatment of these issues and criticizes the film's *cinéma vérité* style, wishing for a "less ambiguous text, one that came clean with its politics and took a stand rather than blurring its point of view" and concluding that as opposed to direct cinema, *vérité* "consciously constructs a political point of view, but one that is

often muted or ambiguous” (Davis, 1999). Documentary film scholar Bill Nichols also criticizes this hybrid attempt to both insert oneself into the culture of the filmed and also pretend to be objectively observant from without, saying,

“Self-referentiality is an inevitable communication category. A class cannot be a member of itself, the law of logical typing tells us, and yet in human communication this law is necessarily violated. Those who confer meaning are themselves members of the class of conferred meanings (history). For a film to fail to acknowledge this and pretend to omniscience- whether by voice-of-God commentary or by claims of "objective knowledge"-is to deny its own complicity with a production of knowledge that rests on no firmer bedrock than the very act of production” (Nichols, 1983).

Far from celebrations of blackness and gay identity, the gay balls featured in Jennie Livingston’s “Paris is Burning” are framed to show what one scholar sees as a suggestion by the (white) director “that the queens are in love with the value system of a white heterosexist society that condemns them” (Davis, 1999). By aspiring to become a part of and glorifying the white American experience, the characters in this film perpetuate a structure of racism, which raises the question of why the film was so well-received among white American film critics and audiences alike – were the characters telling white Americans what they wanted to hear? That privilege can be earned, attained, and that such privilege is the pinnacle of a successful life?

Despite its controversial subject, the film went on to success so smoothly precisely because it featured blacks, Latinos, gay men, and poor people doing exactly what patriarchal white, heterosexist upper and middle class Americans wanted these people to do- to pay homage to the almighty power of these institutions and, rather than subverting the structures which shape their oppression, to seek some conformity within it through an imperfect and essentially flawed imitation. Philip Harper argues that the balls are assumed to be “subversive” merely because they feature people outside the heterosexual white middle-to-upper class performing acts of gender

and class which are foreign to them. This alone does not constitute subversion, especially if the underlying motive is still a longing for assimilation. He believes that the film was so well received because it was able to create for its white audiences a narrative which affirmed privilege while still appearing to celebrate diversity. It was, he argues,

“a phenomenon whose progressiveness must be questionable at first glance, because of both the distinctly cultural- not to say frivolous- mode of its intervention (as opposed to, say, a properly economic one), which renders it unorthodox as a political undertaking in any event, and the particularly conflicted significance of such cultural intervention in the contemporary postmodern context.” (Harper, 1994)

The very name by which the characters identify themselves, “Children”, signifies the patriarchal nature of this relationship, and since children are connoted as imperfect, unfinished human beings, the implication is that the work these performers do is similarly flawed and ultimately ineffective. Children are powerless, their voices stifled as they are relegated to playing make-believe, dress-up, and house, badly, because their impressions are not shaped by experience but merely by outside perception of and longing for foreign privilege. A child is a being who has not yet formed an identity. A child exists outside the realm of gendered consciousness and sexual politics. A child has a future and a family and is free to play, to create, and to make mistakes.

The “Children” in Livingston’s film are in a more complicated, nuanced situation. Several reviewers refer to the men’s ambitions as “endearingly childlike,” stating that “however much they might enjoy such a capacity (for exploring privilege through social performance) in the ballroom, the subjects of *Paris is Burning* were definitively shown to lack it beyond the ball context” (Hluchy, 1991) (Harper, 1994). Moreover, it is devastatingly clear throughout the film that these characters have never had the kind of childhood described above. Growing up black or

Latino in Harlem of the 1980's, dealing with poverty and crime, facing rejection from your family because of your sexuality; this is the childhood of the "children" in Livingston's film.

The performance of gender in the world of the ball is flexible and gender mobility is used to construct a more situated identity within heteronormative society. As the camera pans over crowd shots of whites moving around New York, we hear soft words, spoken off-camera, "when you're a man and a woman, you can do anything". Veteran drag queen Dorian Corey deems the "Banji" category, in which children compete as their "straight counterparts", a sort of "going back into the closet". Conversely, 'House of Labeija' mother, Pepper LaBeija, discusses the efforts of "children" who hope that by committing to one side of the gender binary, by cutting their body, not necessarily because of actual gender identification, (importantly!) but to fit in with the patriarchal and heterosexist notion of the "female", they can live a normal life. Young Venus Xtravaganza, explains that she would like to be a "spoiled, rich white girl. They get what they want, whenever they want it, and they don't struggle with finances, and nice things, nice clothes, and they dont have to have that as a problem," These characters try in vain to transcend oppression off-stage because they feel they can successfully "fit" into a niche in society which, as Pepper sagely points out, often becomes worse than the one from which they originally sought to escape. He wryly remarks that being a woman and having a vagina doesn't solve your problems. Unlike the naïve Venus, Pepper's perspective is built on hard won experience. He acknowledges a more brutal reality: for women in general and poor women of color, the world is a dangerous place. Ultimately, this revelation indicates that the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in this film cannot be ignored. There is no extricating one from the other because the experience not only compounds as additional marginalizing factors are added, but it begins to

take on an entirely new shape of multifaceted oppression that is more than the sum of its parts.

Never is this point made more clear than in the opening quote of the movie:

“I remember my dad saying, you have three strikes against you in this world, and every black man has two- that they’re black and they’re male. But you’re black and you’re male and you’re gay. You’re gonna have a hard fucking time.”

The balls themselves reveal a narrative of despair, a kaleidoscope of all the opportunities that the characters have been denied. One of the most wrenching is the “school” category, in which individuals compete wearing glasses, toting books, and sporting “Yale” letter jackets. The organizer announces wryly “Going to school. High school, elementary, college. Not. Here. (to soft laughs from the crowd) School”. According to Christian A Gregory, the “shoddiness of the imitation” of the performers in the “student” category signifies how out-of-reach many of the dreams are to the performers (Gregory, 1998). The characters themselves acknowledge the role that lack of education and opportunity has upon the categories featured. As Corey states,

“In real life, you can’t get a job as an executive unless you have the educational background and the opportunity. Now the fact that you are not an executive is merely because of the social standing of life. That is just the pure thing. Black people have a hard time getting anywhere... And those that do are usually straight”.

This intersectionality of race, sexuality, class, educational opportunity and socio-economic status poses a problem to film reviewers, who often appear to struggle with references to these characters precisely because there is no niche or anchor with which to pin them. The confusion in trying to find a primary label to ascribe to each child’s experience (is he mostly gay? More black? Is it the poverty that makes him act this way?) plays out interestingly, as some reviewers have resorted to the use of animalistic terms to describe the subjects, writing about

birdlike “preening” or “strutting” in their behavioral assessments of the children (Hluchy, 1991), (Hentzi, 1991). Livingston herself uses the juxtaposition of shots in the film to compare Corey to a cat grooming itself: during one of his interviews, in which he is applying makeup backstage, the camera switches away from his face and zooms into an extreme close-up of a cat licking its paws and washing its face. The connotation is that this group of people is some sort of zoo or circus act, an act which extends, troublingly, after the show is over and continues offstage in candid interviews and b-roll footage.

Yet, the fact that the children perform gender and class is still not as significant in some ways as what they do *not* perform. Ironically, while in the ballroom the men can temporarily transcend their identities as gay or male or poor, never do they venture into “whiteface”, a signifier of the power, social clout, and luxury which is seemingly all-important at these events. “Cross-racing” is notably absent from the ritual performance of the balls even amid fearless impersonations of glamorous females, Ivy League scholars, military personnel, movie stars, and even aristocratic equestrians. As if to say that even fantasy can go too far, the act of “passing” never crosses into racial territory, effectively quashing any notions of the violability of racial division in America. Sex, gender, class, all can be deconstructed within the simple confines of a ballroom floor. But race appears in the film as a “master status”, retaining its ubiquity and its omnipresent importance notably in a world in which participants are allowed to be just about anything (else) they like. In ball culture, “realness” can be claimed and performed in any category except whiteness, which would apparently be too unbelievable even in the context of the ball.

Every fairy tale has its limits, and for the children living the fantasy life, those limits are tested daily. The death of young sex-worker Venus at the hands of a client is treated by

Livingstone and by the ballgoers with as little regard as the other harsh realities of these characters' lives. A ball is a place to be fabulous. It is not a place to mourn. Once an element of the ball ceases to deliver, breaks from the fantasy narrative established by the group, it fades into the "real world", a place from which the children resolutely work to distance themselves. Perhaps it is this detachment from reality that is so characteristic of ball culture that drives Livingstone's confused and noncommittal treatment of the issues presented in the film. Perhaps, like the rest of the "real" world, she can't quite see past the illusion. Audiences have fallen under the spell of these children, and mistakenly taken the self-soothing narratives they construct to be performance spectacle for white, middle-class, heterosexist and patriarchal America's consumption. Yet the film is impossible to shake, and if the message is garbled, at least it is heard. Perhaps the film calls to audiences because something in the characters' struggles to come to terms with their exclusion from the American dream appeals to anyone who has ever felt the sting of prejudice and the weight of missed potential. When the announcer exclaims to the contestants, "You have space to do all that you intend to do... Whatever you want to be, you be... You can become anything and do anything, right here, right now, and it won't be questioned," we too, want to sashay across the runway with the legendary children.

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