“PARIS IS BURNING”
Directed and produced by Jennie Livingston
An Off White Production.

“The gay life is about affectation, but style is not imagemaking. Style, at best, is an attitude, a reaction to oppression, a way of being perceived as less oppressed, a way of feeling attractive when we are deemed unattractive.”
Joseph Beam
“Making Ourselves from Scratch”

In this country the seductive advertising slogan “membership has its privileges” ominously celebrates economic injustice and class and racial oppression. And “Paris Is Burning,” Jenny Livingston’s fierce, award-winning documentary on Black gay drag balls, is a window into a world where the hunger for privilege, dignity and membership is thought to be satisfied by material possessions.

This, it would seem, is what the disempowered and marginalized dream of having access to and owning when they dream of power, at least in the context of the balls. But these dreams are not particularly unique, they are our common language.

The balls on which Livingston turns her lens feature Black and Latino, mostly poor, gay men—and a few women—mocking and playing out the rituals of a fashion show. The “children,” grouped into “houses” of fashion, vie for trophies in the highly competitive events held in New York every month or two.

“This is white America,”
"This is white America," says a voice off camera as ball walkers parade and pose in nautical and grand attire, stylishly stepping to the strains of what sounds like a British coronation march. "When it comes to minorities, especially Blacks," he soberly continues, "we, as a people, for the past 400 years is the greatest example of behavior modification in the history of civilization. We have had everything taken away from us, and yet we have all learned how to survive. That is why in the ballroom circuit it is so obvious that if you have captured the great white way of living, or looking, or dressing, or speaking, you are a marvel."

Unabashedly, "Paris Is Burning," which will be opening nationwide later this summer, shows us a world where illusion and signifying are valued precisely because they have the power to affirm and engender confidence and self-esteem. For those who are brave enough to participate in this highly dramatic milieu, for those brave enough to "walk a ball" and "snatch a trophy," the most coveted reward is to earn the adulation of their peers and the judges who will confer the title of "legendary," which is the same as becoming a "star."

As one of the masters of ceremonies in the film shouts at a group of ball walkers, "O-P-U-L-E-N-C-E!"
OPULENCE! You own everything! Everything is YOURS!” he could well be shouting at legions of white men and women, but the ball-walkers, listening to his fervid, insinuating exhortations are Black and Puerto Rican. And as they walk they believe they own everything for that moment; everything that was ever theirs, everything stolen from them, everything that they can imagine owning, while the crowd cheers them on. And if the crowd and the judges are convinced of the walker’s “realness,” if the trained and the untrained eye cannot tell the difference, then the illusionist wins a trophy and recognition. But it’s a small fame in an invisible and troubled world.

Competition in the ball world stretches across a diverse array of categories, allowing everyone to participate: Sportswear, Eveningwear, Schoolboy/Schoolgirl Realness, Executive Realness, Military Realness and my favorite category—the one I would likely compete in: Butch Queen First Time in Drag at A Ball. What these categories tell us is that in this world membership is open to everyone. As the MC says, “We all at one time or another have lusted to walk a ballroom floor.”

In a country where “membership” and “privilege” translate into white, male heterosexuality, which is itself a distracting pose and illusion, “Paris Is Burning” comes to the screen with a dressing room full of articulate butch/femme queens who collectively say “I am,” and are so, so real.

Transsexuals, drag queens, gays and sexual transgressives, gender-benders, legendary children, up-and-coming legendary children, mothers and fathers, elders: the ball-walkers construct surrogate families
from them to replace the ones that may no longer exist or that may be too dysfunctional to offer any sense of safety, support, or love. Houses of silk and gaberdine are built. Houses of dream and fantasy. Houses that bear the names of their legendary founders or of fashion designers such as Chanel or Saint-Laurent parade and pose at the balls. Houses rise and fall. Legends come and go. To pose is to reach for power while simultaneously holding a *real* powerlessness at bay.

Television and magazines tell us that our standards of beauty must be those of the white supremacist, heterosexual culture, and if in doubt we should look to sacred Europe for guidance. All of us are at risk of aspiring to be like and look like the very thing that despises our existence. In an ironic twist on the idea that the disempowered aspire to look like those in power, it is curious to note the now-popular practice among fashionable and monied white women of taking silicone injections in their lips to make them fuller like Negroid lips. This surgically created effect is called the “Paris Lip,” though Black women have been giving this beauty for centuries without the aid of injections.

Maybe “Paris,” a bastion of standards of Western beauty, is beginning to burn in the torment of its own genetic dissatisfaction, or maybe this is boredom and restlessness, or nothing of any more significance than the recent appropriation of rap by white rapper Vanilla Ice or the appropriation of “Voguing,” originally a Black gay dance form, by Madonna. Vanilla Ice and Madonna ruthlessly continue the tradition of exploiting and stealing from Black culture. They are clearly descendants of Elvis Presley and other culture vultures who have gone skipping to the bank trading on their imitations and appropriations.
of Black culture for fame and fortune.

Voguing grew out of the gay balls. It is a very expressive dance of hands and limbs and attitude that is best exemplified by Willi Ninja, Mother of the House of Ninja. The name for the dance is appropriated from Vogue, the infamous fashion bible, because the dance is a stylized imitation and exaggeration of fashion modeling. But from Madonna, the legendary “material girl,” the raider, the plunderer, you will never hear acknowledgement of the fact that Voguing grew out of Black and Puerto Rican gay ball communities.

Her “Vogue” song, a commercial hit, was an insult to these communities because the litany of names she calls in the song as representative of style and attitude deliberately excludes Blacks and Puerto Ricans. Obviously Madonna must believe that Blacks and Puerto Ricans have contributed nothing to the theater of style and attitude originating in this country, since names like Josephine Baker, Dorothy Dandridge and Celia Cruz are conspicuously absent from her list of the beautiful ones.

Black gay British filmmaker Isaac Julien raised an important issue regarding Black art and culture when I interviewed him shortly after the release of his film, "Looking for Langston." He said, "I’m more interested in questions concerning the commodification of Black art and culture. I think questions such as commodification provide a more realistic analysis and critique of Black art as we approach the end of the 20th century." Not only are questions of commodification more critical than we may
yet realize, but urgent questions about U.S. and Western cultural appropriations of those it despises, marginalizes and disempowers also emerge from the interrogation, Julien suggests. What I find commendable about Livingston’s “Paris Is Burning” is that she allows the voices of this highly transgressive ball community to emerge without her interference, without excessive questioning. The “children” enter the frame talking about their lives, the significance of the balls, their families, their precious dreams. We are not exposed to any of Livingston’s judgments, if she has any, of the subjects. The authentic voice of this community emerges unfettered.

What was obviously at risk for Livingston, a white, lesbian filmmaker, is that she could have been rejected as an outsider by the community she was documenting, or she could have mistakenly imposed her personal cultural presumptions and interpretations upon the material. But, fortunately, we are spared such a travesty. What we are left with, however, is a lack of historical context for the phenomenon of the balls, but even this lack is somewhat diminished by the brutal honesty of the subjects.

‘SWEET DREAMS ARE MADE OF THIS’

Entering the world of the balls is to enter a world where the harsh, soul-breaking realities of oppression are mitigated by the nurturing of dreams and fantasies of splendor. Many are there for the fame and glory a successful walk can bring. Surely, the walk itself and the projected illusion of grandness are far more appealing than the prospect of seeing no acknowledgment of your beauty or your worth anywhere around you.
The day-to-day realities of oppression have driven others to less creative survival options than dressing up and pretending to be someone other than who they are.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that using illusion to construct identity is unique to Black gay reality. Everyone is capable of creating and employing illusion and fantasy for whatever purpose. An immediate example is “gangsta rap,” in which the rapper boasts of being an outlaw, of having control and power, guns and money—again, things longed for by the disempowered. Glorifying urban terror in gangsta rap, or glorifying the U.S. image of success and beauty and seeking to emulate it at gay balls; longing for a thick gold chain and a jeep or for a thick strand of diamonds and a designer gown are not really different in the context of Black reality. In either instance they are desires from a place of disempowerment, and their potential for causing self-destruction is vast. They are seductive longings, mutated dreams forged from the multitudinous oppressions constructing U.S. society.

In “Paris Is Burning,” power remains almost exclusively defined in materialistic, white, consumer terms. Many long to be rich and famous. Some long to be white and female, clearly an escapist longing, a longing that if realized would then place them in collusion with white supremacy—the primary source of their present disempowerment. They want to be stars in a world that barely wants to see them alive. They want things in a world that has caused more than a few of them not to want themselves.
The danger in illusion is that it doesn’t remove the facts of racism, sexism, homophobia and economic injustice—it only tempers or obscures them for the moment. Leaping through the looking glass is a risky escape from oppression and can result in an early death. As Octavia Saint Laurent says, “I don’t want to end up an old drag queen with nothing going for me but trying to win grand prize at a ball.”

Octavia is an attractive transsexual determined to be on the covers of fashion magazines. For her, drag balls are not enough. She wants membership. She wants recognition. She wants privilege. She says, “Sometimes I sit and look at magazines and I try to imagine myself on the front cover or even inside.”

Some in this world are deluded by the imagined possibilities awaiting them beyond the ballroom approval of their peers. That some of the dreams they hold are sweetly scented and waft through the air like trails of silk is not surprising: the illusion for some is to be seductive and intriguing, to deflect and hold at bay the reality that does not tell them they are wanted and needed and desired. Dorian Corey, a professional drag queen and “elder” from the “old school,” says of the power of illusion, “You erase all the mistakes, all the flaws, all the giveaways to make your illusion perfect.”

Corey provides a clarifying voice, succinctly explaining various aspects of ball life as he has seen it evolve over several decades. In his voice there is a willing acceptance of the life he has chosen for himself.
The camera visits him as he begins dressing for an evening, painting his face, taking his time, as though he has done this 10,000 times before and automatically assumes there will be applause when his drag is done. The small fame he speaks of achieving in ball settings is perhaps just that in comparison with the enormous amount of wisdom and clarity he brings to "Paris." He is an elder. He provides a blunt lucidness that is at once eloquent and even protective of his community.

It is Corey who comments on the influence of television on the illusions of younger ball-walkers. He recalls a time when everyone wanted to look like movie stars as opposed to the present generation's obsession with emulating "Dynasty's" Alexis and Krystal and other soap opera divas. "When I grew up you wanted to look like Marlene Dietrich or Betty Grable. Unfortunately, I didn't know that I really wanted to look like Lena Horne. When I grew up Black stars were stigmatized. Nobody wanted to look like Lena Horne. Everyone wanted to look like Marilyn Monroe."

Venus Xtravaganza, a petite, seductive-looking, Puerto Rican pre-transsexual, noted for his "femme realness," speaks volumes of suffering from racist and economic oppression when he says, "I would like to be a spoiled, rich-white girl. They get what they want whenever they want it, and they don't have to really struggle with finances." He deepens the complexity of his identity crisis and his dislocation when he later in the film spells out his wants in simple, direct, poetic statements. He says:
“I want a car.
I want to be with the man I love.
I want a nice home, away from New York,
up the Peekskill or maybe in Florida,
somewhere far where no one knows me.
I want my sex changed.
I want to get married in church in white.
I want to be a complete woman.
I want to be a professional model
behind cameras in the high fashion world.
I want this. This is what I want
and I’m gonna go for it.”

Venus never lived to have his sex changed or get married in a church in white. Angie Xtravaganza, Mother of the House of Xtravaganza, shares this story. “I always used to tell her, ‘Venus, you take too many chances, you’re too wild with people in the streets, something is going to happen to you,’ but that was Venus. She always took a chance. She always went into a stranger’s car. She always did what she wanted to get what she wanted. ... The [detectives] came to me with a picture of her murdered. They were about to cremate her because nobody had come to verify the body. [They] found her dead after four days, strangled, under a bed in a sleazy hotel in New York City. ... She was like my right hand. ... I miss her. [She] was the main daughter of my house. But that’s part of life, that’s part of being a transsexual in New York City and surviving.”

Pepper LaBeija, legendary mother of the House of LaBeija, claims to have won more ball trophies than any of them, and that he has been reigning for 20 years. He knows the ball is all some live for. He and Corey explain how the houses function as surrogate families for Black and Puerto
Rican gay youth who may be homeless, orphaned or rejected by their families because of their gayness. On joining a house, it is customary for members to adopt the name of the house for their surname to signify that they “belong” to a family. "Mothers" are usually those who have made legendary names for themselves on
the ball circuit. A mother's duties can be numerous, but the primary function is to manage and nurture the illusions of the children because they are all important. A mother must ready the children for competition. They have to be fierce enough to snatch trophies and bring prestige and honor to the house. The balls have been likened to street gangs at war over turf or sports teams competing for pennants.

"Paris Is Burning" is a combustible mix of race, gender, sexuality, class and identity issues. Contradictions speak out as loudly and as candidly as the subjects. Feminists have raised legitimate questions about men replicating the submissive and passive female identity constructed to oppress women vertically and horizontally. "Femme Realness" condones the very things feminists have condemned and criticized about
patriarchally constructed female identity. That the balls reward what feminists reject is not an issue to be taken lightly.

Speaking about sex-change operations, Pepper LaBeija said, "I've been a man, and I've been a man who emulated a woman. I've never been a woman. I've never had that service once a month. I've never been pregnant. I can never say how a woman feels. I can only say how a man who acts like a woman or dresses like a woman feels. I never wanted to have a sex change, that's just taking it a little too far. ... A lot of the kids that I know, they got the sex change because they felt, 'Oh, I've been treated so bad as a drag queen. If I get a pussy, I'll be treated fabulous.' But women get treated bad. They get beat. They get robbed. They get dogged. So, having the vagina, that doesn't mean that you're going to have a fabulous life. It might in fact be worse."

"Paris Is Burning" reveals the price some of us are willing to pay for membership, privilege and "realness."

Realness is valued for the obverse of what one expects realness to be. It isn't candor that defines realness, it's illusion. Realness is the ability to pass as something you are not, as in poor for rich, male for female, gay for straight.

The erasure or silencing of identity through the use of illusion might be considered simply an act of entertainment in the
Uppper LaBeija and a group of her children ready to walk 'Executive Realness.'

context of the balls if it weren't such a willful act of survival and affirmation exercised in a state of increasing desperation. The yearning festering behind the illusions is a yearning for a full equality and a common privilege that the United States has yet to deliver, and that may have to be forcibly taken by any means necessary, if any of us are truly to be real.

"Paris Is Burning," which won the 1990 Los Angeles Film Critics award for Best Documentary and was co-winner of the 1991 Sundance Festival Grand Jury Prize for Best Documentary, has been playing at New York City's Film Forum since March 13 and will open nationwide later this summer.

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