

TURNING TO ASHES: GENDERFUCK IN *PARIS IS BURNING* AND BEYOND

Rebecca Liu

Blonde hair, green eyes—an angel looks at you, curled up in her bed, and speaks intimately to you. Her stuffed animals lie near her pillow, near her head, and the soft sunlight filters through her window and onto her body. She looks like a dream. She speaks to you softly, her voice beautiful and sweet. “I want a car. I want to be with a man I love. I want a nice home away from New York . . . I want my sex change,” Venus Xtravaganza says, solemn and serious—the “Femme Realness Queen” at her finest (*Paris is Burning* 1:03:41). You can’t help but root for her, this girl with a sweet face, with a soft voice, with dreams and aspirations heartbreaking in their simplicity. These dreams will never be fulfilled, like the dreams of so many others of her time—of her community—due to untimely death. Her death, brutal and violent—found strangled under the bed of a New York City hotel room, her murderer still on the loose—is echoed in the rampant transphobic murders and deaths of trans women nowadays, in 2014.

Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning* is an intimate depiction of the drag scene in the mid-to-late 1980s in Harlem. The film focuses on the ballroom community, where drag queens performed for awards at “balls.” Livingston points her gaze largely at the experiences of not only sexual minorities—queer people—but of racial and socioeconomic minorities as well. *Paris is Burning* offers a soft, intimate glance into the lives of drag queens, both in drag and out. Normally stated with a scathing, misogynistic kind of lens, drag is defined in mainstream pop culture as gay men dressing as women for performance. In his 2013 article “Everything Else is Drag: Linguistic Drag and Gender Parody on *RuPaul’s Drag Race*,” Ramey Moore offers a far more progressive definition of drag: a “performative act which attempts to re-inscribe new, altered, transgressive, or, most importantly, parodic gender identities within the context of performance” (19). This definition of drag is far more in line with the concept of “genderfuck,” or

mixing masculine and feminine gender codes in a way that subverts the gender binary (Reich 255). The drag queens in Livingston's documentary didn't simply dress in women's clothing for laughs or performance; often, it didn't even involve presenting themselves as feminine. For them, genderfuck was escapism, a way for them to be and to do anything that they wanted.

In the balls in mid-eighties Harlem, there was an emphasis on "realness," on being able to pass as another—the more real you could look, and the more you could pass as whatever gender or persona you were dressed in drag as, the more you would receive awards (*Paris is Burning*). In the film, these awards were the queens' fantasies, their "Oscars"; "[queens] came to balls starving" to perform, to be anyone they wanted, to show the world that they could pass as a business executive, as a soldier, as a thug (0:06:05). It was their way of showing their "realness," that they, too, could blend and pass and be safe—and be who they wanted to be.

Though the documentary is well-meaning and gentle, Livingston's own identity and the prejudices she brings with her can be seen through the way she films some of her subjects, namely two trans women: one black and one Italian. Livingston, a white lesbian who was designated female at birth and identifies as such, views the queens through her eyes. As a person who is not trans, Livingston cannot truly understand genderfuck and the fluidity of gender. She does not know the true feeling of disconnect between one's outward appearance and how one feels inside, between who one is and who one wants to be, and between who society wants—and will 'allow'—one to be. And that—*that* is a large part of the drag culture and the genderfucking portrayed in *Paris is Burning*.

Venus Xtravaganza and Octavia St. Laurent's stories are incredibly similar—both women are incredibly tragic, beautiful, and headstrong, struggling against everything in order to find themselves, to allow themselves to transition. The ways they are portrayed, however, perhaps not even intentionally, differ greatly. In their interviews, Octavia, a black woman, is framed and lit by Livingston far differently from how Venus, an Italian-American, is lit. The lighting on Venus is far softer, natural. She's lit by the bright sun peeking through the trees in the window behind her. Livingston makes her look delicate, like an angel, fitting to her soft-spoken voice and the white she wears. Octavia, however, is lit more harshly: the whole room is darker, tinted in an

unnatural, sickly shade of yellow. Livingston centers Venus in the interview scenes as well, while placing Octavia in a lower position. Venus takes up the vast majority of the frame; Octavia is small and takes up perhaps a sixth of her frame. Livingston portrays Venus as soft, muted in dream-like colors of browns and creams and rosy pinks that recall the feel of vintage prints—of softer times, of better times. Octavia is yellow.

I doubt that Livingston intended to make Venus softer, prettier, and more sympathetic than Octavia, but this is racism: inherent and engrained in her, engrained in society. By contrast, in the 2014 documentary *Laverne Cox Presents: The T Word*, narrated and executive-produced by a trans woman of color, Laverne Cox, trans people of all races are treated equally. In interviews and in direct cinema scenes, they're lit and framed with consistency. Unlike Livingston, Laverne Cox is just as sympathetic towards trans women of color as she is to white trans people, and that shows not only through her dialogue with them, but in the way that the camera shows them.

Cox seems to be an exception, though. Drag culture, even when it's genderfucking, tends to be horribly transphobic. Perhaps the best example of this can be seen on the Logo reality television show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which features a wide variety of transphobic slurs, such as "she-male," "ladyboy," and "tranny." Despite multiple protests from both trans and cisgender activists, including former *Drag Race* contestants Carmen Carrera and Monica Hillz, the show has done nothing to change (Reynolds). With the advent and popularity—and cult status—of *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its majority upper middle class, white cisgender male contestants, drag has become appropriated into pop culture. But drag's popularity has not led to greater sympathy and understanding, only to more transphobia. It seems, in a way, that trans issues have been trivialized, treated as less important than they actually are. Trans people, especially transfeminine people, are viewed as simply 'dressing up,' as a man in a dress and false eyelashes; and drag culture nowadays, with its focus on hyperfemininity, does not help this stereotype. Perhaps drag queens no longer feel the need for "realness." Perhaps it has to do with the fact that a majority of drag performers nowadays, at least the better-known ones, are white—or at least, white-passing—and middle class. Perhaps it has to do with them having more opportunities than the drag

queens in *Paris is Burning*, who would lie and hustle and steal their way to the balls. And this is dangerous.

Paris is Burning took place in a darker time, a harder time, in the midst of the AIDS epidemic. In 2014, there is no longer such a severe social stigma against people who are HIV positive. While not completely accepted and completely 'normal,' it's alright to be queer and a minority—at least in New York City. However, this is not true everywhere, and it is definitely not true for everyone—there have been at least ten trans women of color murdered in the last six months in the United States (Kerr). A wave of anger and determination has spread throughout the country, throughout the world, at the brutal and unjust murders of black men. Amidst the chants of “black lives matter,” it's worth noting that this kind of attention is still not given to those who genderfuck, who don't conform to society in multiple ways, who blur and shift our normative perceptions of identity. Outrage, to this extent, doesn't happen for those who are minorities in more than one category.

That's not to say that it's not important to march for Mike Brown, for Eric Garner—it is so important. But it's important to acknowledge the troubles and the hardships of those whose identities intersect, who are minorities in not just one category, but in multiple, and to protect them as well.

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