9. NEW QUEER CINEMA:
SPECTACLE, RACE, UTOPIA

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Paris is Burning, a documentary directed by Jennie Livingston, was the art house hit of 1990 and became an important example of what was becoming defined as the New Queer Cinema. Film critic B. Ruby Rich in her foundational essay, while describing the films and videos as not sharing a 'single aesthetic vocabulary or strategy or concern', pointed out that:

there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitively breaking with previous humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive. Above all they’re full of pleasure.¹

Rich’s piece released a celebratory energy about these new forms of representation and an optimism about what they could achieve, challenge, and create in the cinema and in society. Partibha Parmar responded to Rich’s enthusiasm with a measured critique which emphasised the racial homogeneity of the New Queer Cinema and its self-conception:

I am wary of talking about an overarching queer aesthetic, as my sensibility comes as much from my culture and race as from my queerness. In queer discourses generally there is a worrying tendency to create an essentialist, so-called authentic queer gaze. My personal style is determined by diverse aesthetic influences, from Indian cinema and cultural iconography to pop promos and 70s avant-garde films.²

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This direct critique would (rightfully) haunt ongoing discussions of the New Queer Cinema’s accomplishments and its claims of representational revolution and inclusion. Parmar’s critique served as a reality check on the invisibility of queer filmmakers of colour: in fact, only two major ones emerged as important artistic forces in the incontestably rich terrain of race and sexuality. Isaac Julien (Looking for Langston) in the UK and Marlon Riggs (Tongues Untied) in the USA represent for me two of the more productive filmmakers of this new politics of difference. In their films, Julien and Riggs not only presented new forms of queer visibility but also presented new forms of narrative, mixing documentary, history, and testimony to present less coherent or linear perspectives – a ‘mix’ that was queer in the broadest sense of the word. But these filmmakers were not often brought into the larger discourse of the New Queer Cinema and instead were relegated to specific discussions about race and representation and not the more general discussion on queer film itself.

I would argue that Paris is Burning is one of the very few New Queer Cinema films that directly and complexly dealt with race at all in an unavoidably queer context. Released almost simultaneously with Madonna’s hit single, ‘Vogue’, Paris is Burning celebrates Black and Latino drag queens and transsexuals who held ‘voguing’ balls and competitions in Harlem in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Voguing is a dance form that consists of a series of poses struck by the performer in campy imitation of a high fashion catwalk. The dance fad achieved its widest circulation through Madonna’s accompanying video, but it was Livingston’s film which offered a more meaningful context for the art form and the complexities of race, class, and, gender that accompanied it.

Furthermore, Paris is Burning could be thought of as functioning as a type of critique of the euphoria around queer representation in the New Queer Cinema – it offered a more sobering and artistically complicated vision of queer urban life than that offered by many of the other New Queer Cinema filmmakers. I would like to discuss Paris is Burning in detail as a way to explore how at least one film in this movement dealt with issues of race and queerness at the same time, in a decidedly non-essentialist way. While at times bleak, the film’s portrait of race has utopian aspirations that mirror for me the utopian gestures of the New Queer Cinema itself.

GENDER AND RACE TROUBLES

The New Queer Cinema emerged in the milieu of the identity politics and Culture Wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s, where questions of identity and race were hotly debated both in the academy and other cultural and artistic institutions. Arguably, a key characteristic of the New Queer Cinema was its interest in destabilising the notion of a single fixed (queer) identity. One of the most influential works on the subject of identity was Judith Butler’s
(1991) book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. On the opening page Butler argued: ‘For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued’. Butler goes on to point out that gender is not consistently constructed in different historical contexts, especially considering that gender intersects with other constituted identities such as race, class, and sexuality.

Regarding the issues of race and identity as they play out in the New Queer Cinema, what I find productive in Butler is her consideration that Queer practices such as drag, which seem to mimic heterosexual institutions such as femininity and masculinity, may in fact be reshaping and transforming familiar gender roles. These practices may only superficially resemble heterosexual representations; therefore, drag can be liberatory in its derailing of gender assumptions even if it often partakes in oppressive narratives of gender, race, and class. This point provides *Paris is Burning* with its spectacular charge that still gives it an oppositional stance more than ten years later. In 1990 and 1991, issues of race, gender, and queerness aligned in a particularly urgent way in many cultural texts, and *Paris is Burning* provided visible and entertaining representations of these cultural questions.

In fact, by de-centring essentialist readings of gender identities, by suggesting that ‘we dispense with the priority of “man” and “woman” as abiding substances’, Butler opens up different contexts in which to consider *Paris is Burning*.

If, for example, we detach, however imaginatively, the concept of masculinity from men, we draw upon the ability of queer people to fashion and refashion identities and practices that may only superficially resemble heterosexual constructs. In this case, a gay marriage may not simply be an imitation of a heterosexual legal and religious union. It may draw upon some (or most) of the elements of convention but also may re-invent ways to construct a commitment or imagine heretofore unimagined forms a relationship could take. This way of re-working heterosexual meanings allows us to re-consider, for example, a gay man’s claim that he only wants to find a husband, cook for him, and live in a house with a white picket fence. The very conventionality of this wish, and its reliance upon bourgeois standards of contentment, takes on an entirely different inflection in *Paris is Burning*, which provides ambivalent representations of material dreams of wealth and stardom. Considering that Livingston struggled for at least six years to assemble footage and funding, simply the release of the film itself was a triumph of determination and visibility, which resembles the struggles depicted in the film to achieve ‘stardom’.

The participants in the film are clearly shown in a drag environment: dressing up, sewing clothes, applying make-up, and gossiping about each other. The film, of course, has many displays of voguing, but the larger context is that of the competitive atmosphere of the drag ball itself. The cultural sensationalism of
drag attracted many viewers to the film, but I think it was the racial and class dynamics of the performers that gave the film its gravity, and provided the greatest attraction for cultural critics in the academy.

In the film, not one person is marked visibly as white. The only white images are quick edit clips of rich New Yorkers walking on Park Avenue, glossy magazine photographs, and the cast of TV’s *Dynasty*. The juxtaposition between how the queens in the film ‘really’ live and the fantasies they live inside of provides a charge, and not always a positive one. For example, a prominent character in the film is Octavia, a young black transsexual, who describes her life and dreams quite frankly:

I’d always see the way rich people live, and I’d feel it more, you know, it would slap me in the face, I’d say, ‘I have to have that’, because I never felt comfortable being poor, I just don’t, or even middle-class doesn’t suit me. Seeing the riches, seeing the way people on *Dynasty* lived, these huge houses and I would think, these people have forty-two rooms in their house, Oh my God, what kind of house is that, and we’ve got three. So why is it that they can have that and I didn’t? I always felt cheated. I always felt cheated out of things like that.

Another seeker of fame and fortune, Venus Xtravaganza, a young Latina transsexual, is also clear about her dreams:

I want to be a spoiled rich white girl . . . I don’t want to have to struggle for finances . . . I want a car. I want to be with the man I love. I want a nice home away from New York . . . I want my sex change.

A veteran of the ball scene, Dorian Carey remarks that ‘some of these kids don’t even eat – they come to the ball starving . . . but whatever you want to be, you be’. Carey’s remark is notable because it connects a material reality of physical suffering with the fantasy of dreaming up another identity, one that is not starving. This contradiction of consciousness that the participants in the film express received different critical responses ranging from cheering to condemnation. The conflicting views that met the film were determined by the reviewer’s perspective on whether the film was radical in its representational visibility or conservative in its perpetuation of normative consumerist dreams.

Of the latter view was bell hooks, in *Z* magazine, who was especially piqued by Livingston’s film:

Within the world of the black gay drag ball culture she depicts, the idea of womanliness and femininity is totally personified by whiteness . . . This combination of class and race longing that privileges the ‘femininity’ of the ruling-class white woman, adored and kept, shrouded in luxury, does not imply a critique of patriarchy.\(^5\)
In fact, hooks sees the entire cultural structure of the drag balls as ‘contaminated’ by a colonising whiteness, she continues: ‘The whiteness celebrated in *Paris is Burning* is not just any old brand of whiteness but rather that brutal imperial ruling-class patriarchal whiteness that presents itself—its way of life—as the only meaningful life there is’. hooks reads the participants’ claims straightforwardly and seeks to expose the buried reactionary contexts of their dreams. From the opposing point of view, John Champagne wrote in his 1995 book, *The Ethics of Marginality: A New Approach to Gay Studies*, that:

The film’s relationship to this common-sense desire for wealth and fame is necessarily ambiguous and complicated. Although the interviewed subjects often speak of their desires for wealth and glamour, the film portrays, in what this context seems a highly critical light, white consumer culture, its distance from their ‘real’ lives; and the lures that it continues to hold out and to deny to them.°

Since hooks views the film as *cinéma vérité*, she sees the fantasies as retrograde and as evidence of a flawed consciousness; Champagne, on the other hand, sees the film as primarily symbolic of the social order, and therefore, too elusive to provide evidence of reactionary politics. These two positions can be seen as two sides of the same coin: they both look through the film, wanting to see critical value in what are basically quite tawdry and commercial dreams contained in a small and under-budgeted film.

Judith Butler, in her sequel to *Gender Trouble, Bodies That Matter: The Limitations of ‘Sex’*, devotes an entire chapter to *Paris is Burning*. Drawing upon Foucault’s formulation of the productivity of power, Butler looks at the film for ‘what it suggests about the simultaneous production and subjugation of subjects in a culture which appears to arrange always and in every way for the annihilation of queers, but [also for] . . . those killing ideals of gender and race [to be] mimed, reworded, resignified’°°. Butler recognises that the oppression(s) caused by racial and economic exploitation can produce a counter-narrative; the creativity displayed in the drag pageants is made possible by the very exploitation that makes them necessary. At the end of the film, the viewer discovers that Venus Xtravaganza was brutally murdered by one of her tricks and not found for three days, which leads Butler to question whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them. Butler in fact is suggesting that the very displacement of gender norms can lead to a strengthening of those norms. Here, Venus’ murder is a means for thinking through the limitations of drag as a ‘political’ response.

There is no necessary relation between drag and subversion . . . Drag is a site of certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power one opposes.°°
hooks, too, noted this ambivalence in the film, claiming that it was seen as 'inherently oppositional because of its subject matter and the identity of the filmmaker'. hooks' point is well taken, but she describes ambivalence as a negative criticism: 'Yet the film's politics of race, gender, and class are played out in ways both progressive and reactionary'.9 (It is worth wondering what film, or any cultural production, would not contain elements that could be considered both 'progressive and reactionary'.)

Champagne, meanwhile, criticises hooks for not privileging this ambiguity in the film and feels that her reading fails to recognise how drag's very idealised, fetishised sexist version of femininity is what Livingston's film both celebrates and critiques. Champagne then offers his own critique of drag: 'I would suggest here that drag is not a politically oppositional practice, but one that might be mobilized in the service of, and connected up to, struggles both politically oppositional and reactionary'.10 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, as I will discuss later, ignore the utopian possibilities present in the film.

Racial Dreams/Racial Nightmares

What is at stake in Paris is Burning is the question of the value of sheer fantasy and of wish fulfilment on the part of queers of colour. When Venus says she wants to be a 'rich spoiled white girl', her wish is compounded not only by her economic and racial subjugation, but also by her gender: she knows she needs her sex change to be a 'total woman'. This does not fit into the critical context of drag, but to that of transgender politics, which is ignored by all the critics that I have read, who are distracted by the familiar drag theatricality of the film. But Venus' wish to be white is harshly criticised by hooks as purely symptomatic of a colonised Fanonian consciousness, and, further, this is seen as her retrograde wish to be a white woman. But in Venus' eyes, this is the same thing. In terms of the film, this is not to say that all those who want to dress up or want to be a woman also want to be white, but that the identity of race becomes as unfixed as a masquerade. In Paris is Burning, it is not just gender that is being de-naturalised but also race at the same time. To me, this signalled its importance not only to the New Queer Cinema, but also to the debates and activism of the early 1990s around queer politics.

I wish that hooks, Champagne, and other commentators and critics of the film had not ignored one of its most visible and winning aspects – the relationship of race to fashion and fashionableness. They take it for granted that the participants in the balls are simply practising a type of parody of high fashion catwalking instead of actually creating it. Towards the end of the film, Venus goes to an open call by Eileen Ford for new models looking pretty and a
little forlorn, but she clearly holds her own with the gaggle of eager white women. This little moment is important to me, as it shows the clearest mixture of dreams and reality. The highly stylised strut of the fashion runway in fact does not seem so removed from the highly stylised world the 'kids' live in, as they theatrically insult each other, haughtily proclaim their 'realness', and generally make mischief. Passing over the texture of the film and the possibility that these kids of colour would have followed the fashion world, these critics respond, instead, in a spirit of either bemused or indignant condescension that doesn't recognise young queers' ability to fantasise without futility.

One of the lessons for me of Cultural Studies is that mass culture spreads information along with its relentless advertising, and it is entirely conceivable that some of the kids would read Vogue, be able to identify with various supermodels, have a fairly sophisticated sense of how fame and publicity work, and want to be considered fashionable. It is often difficult for US 'white' culture to conceive of people of colour as having sophisticated relationships with fashion, beauty, and the arts. Although these fields are structured along a generally white supremacist ethos, they often can be reappropriated and consumed in unpredictable ways by people of colour. This is one of the missed joys of the film—the courageous, inventive creativity of queers of colour in the most abject of circumstances.

The relationship of fashion to the street and fashion to the avant-garde is not an entirely degraded one—I am willing to hold that the legitimacy the kids seek from the grammar of the fashion world is not entirely one-sided. Fashion has also historically drawn legitimacy and relevancy from the streets and youth culture. Isaac Mizrahi in the 1993 documentary, Unzipped, made the connection between gay male camp and high fashion explicitly clear. In fact, around 1989, the lines between the fashion world, the art world, and mass culture may have been a bit more blurred than they are now: figures such as Keith Haring, Peter Hujar, Nan Goldin, Robert Mapplethorpe, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Andres Serrano, and David Wojnarowicz were all creating work which pushed the parameters of Queer Art into new social contexts. Most sensationally, Mapplethorpe's photographs of black male nudes were exploding boundaries in the artistic and political spheres, leading to their denunciation in the US Senate. And by 1990, ACT UP had achieved its maximum exposure point, using the language and graphics of publicity, fashion, and advertising in its most effective interventions. Queer Nation also took up these tactics, and worked to incorporate race at the centre of queer debates and activism.

It was for Madonna that such acts of appropriation proved so commercially advantageous, and her widely publicised and visible uses of race were richly documented. Madonna was not only spreading the word about voguing, though; she seemed to embody an approachable text of race and gender, with the extra charge of obscenity her image carried then. Madonna played
publicly with *Paris is Burning* figures like Willie Ninja and furthered the kids' dreams of stardom. But if there was something naïve and giddy in her approach to people of colour's 'realness' and 'eroticism' (as demonstrated in the documentary *Truth or Dare*), it was characteristic of a current in popular culture, which found something appealing in the visibility and 'expressiveness' of people of colour. Madonna represented a commercial manifestation of this 'new' multiculturalism.

The New Queer Cinema carried this trend and seemed to promise that new representations of queers and queers of colour could lead the vanguard and that the deliberate 'play' of racial stereotyping in films like Livingston's could clear the air of racial repression. But, as Partibha Parmar noted, what did not change was that all of the major figures that achieved wide circulation from the *Paris is Burning* phenomenon were white. But importantly, some filmmakers of colour like Julien and Riggs did emerge as forces in the queer avant-garde and, however mediated, texts like *Paris is Burning* did offer new possibilities for different narratives. It is interesting, then, to consider how depressing the film's texture actually is. AIDS is not explicit in the film, but its ravages are there in the subtext, adding to the material and emotional suffering. When confronted with the drag queens and transsexuals of colour in *Paris is Burning*, one is confronted with the collision of race and sexuality—and poverty. The kinds of wishful aspirations that are produced in this context are necessarily formed and reformed and deformed by exploitation. In fact, the gritty sheen of the film's texture contributes to its ambience not just as 'reality', but as a resourceful use of materials at hand.

**Racial Utopia**

I argue that if drag is an instance of gender de-naturalisation, and a site of affective investment and historical context, in *Paris is Burning*, race becomes a signifier of utopian longings. The wish to be 'white', seems in this case, not simply a psychological pathology, but also a sense of not wanting to be what one is—poor, abject. How exactly gender as an aspiration is imprecated cannot be made entirely clear, but I do think that in this film, race contains its own fantasies of displacement and escape. In the film, it is *stardom* which is supposed to fulfil all the longings that poverty and racism create.

For me, the longings for stardom in the film, for comfort from suffering, remain unrequited. To want to change what one is, to inhabit another space more comfortable and beautiful, a place that may contain forty-two rooms and where a boy is a girl and a girl is a boy is not simply a reactionary wish. In fact, it seems a fairly reasonable one. That in this film these wishes take place in a space of racial marginalisation, through race and gender, makes them much more poignant, and perhaps more impossible to fulfil. The film's longing for something better and for something different is particularly resonant for me in terms of AIDS. The memory of losses known and
unknown, recorded and unrecorded are practically unspeakable for queers of colour.

Perhaps sexual identities feel different when expressed through desires and race; racial identities may feel different when experienced through poverty and sexuality. What Paris is Burning makes poetically clear is that wish fulfilment cannot follow any straightforward political trajectory. This is what makes longing and dream-making such potent and dangerous cultural tools and why the promises of the New Queer Cinema and representations of queers of colour are important to maintain. That these dreams of the New Queer Cinema failed to maximise their potential regarding race and were at times co-opted by the media was unfortunate, since these expressions were then dependent on the temporality and obsolescence of fashion and trends. But visibility and queer media attention also ensured that these images could achieve their widest audience, perhaps still leading to unpredictable new manifestations of utopian possibilities and new considerations of queer identities.

It would be difficult to argue, more than ten years on, that the New Queer Cinema developed a critical racial perspective, but it would also be difficult to argue that the space it inhabited did not contain a racial component at all. If it fell short of the radical possibilities that critics like Rich hoped for, a type of erasure takes place to suggest that it simply remained a purely white gay male aesthetic. Paris is Burning remains as a reminder of the New Queer Cinema’s racial and utopian potentialities.

Notes
7 Butler, Bodies, pp. 124–5.
8 Ibid., p. 123.
9 hooks, ‘Paris’.
10 Champagne, Ethics, p. 120.