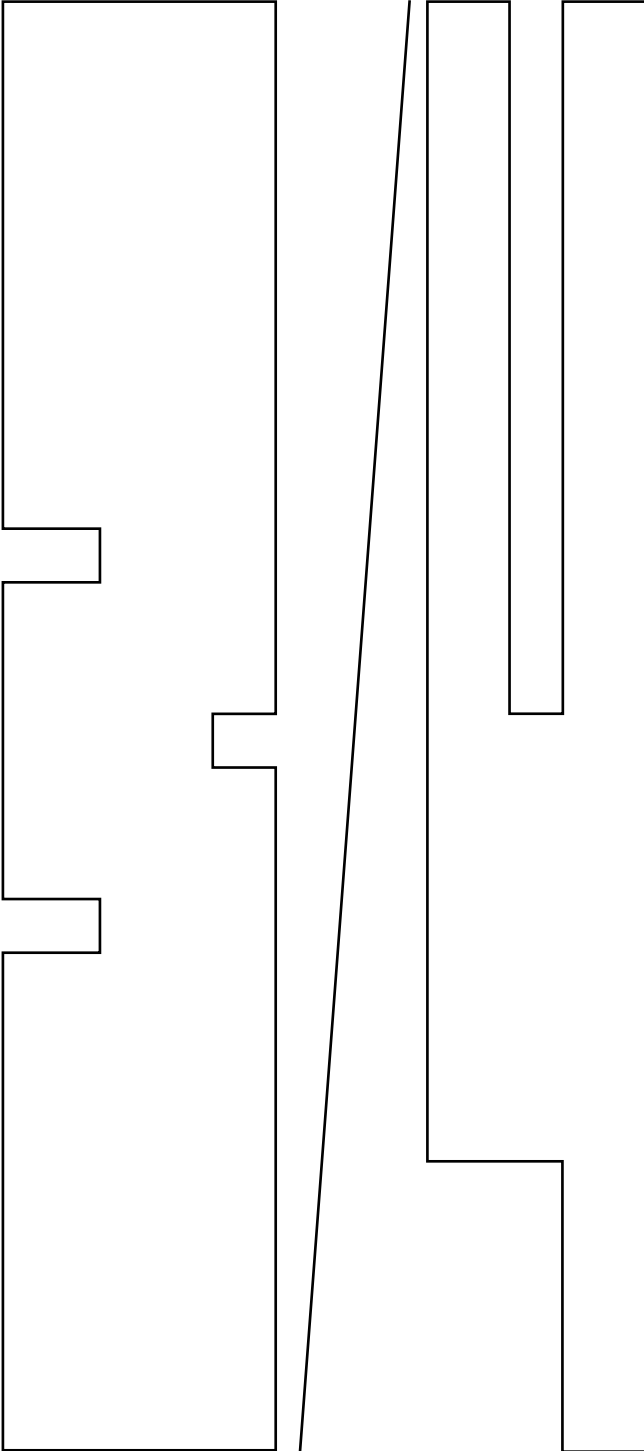


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Hétérotopies de l'affiliation

Between Subversion and Submission: from *Paris is Burning* to *Pose*, New York Ball Culture as Heterotopia

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Abstract

Almost three decades span the release of *Paris is Burning* (1990), Jennie Livingston's arthouse documentary on the late-1980s New York ballroom scene, and its fictional revisiting in the TV series *Pose* (2018-21), created by Ryan Murphy and now a global phenomenon thanks to its presence on streaming services. *Paris is Burning* and *Pose* have both gone on to be highly successful commercially, and stand as landmark moments of non-white queer visibility. Appearing at critical junctures in the history of racial non-heteronormative sexualities, they have occasioned, in their wake, a rethinking of the epistemological foundations of gender identity and the generic codes underpinning trans representation. As such, these visual texts and the world they represent can be also be read as queer heterotopias – “other spaces” where dominant values and practices are at once mirrored and challenged – as they invite both an endorsement and a queering (or “transing”) of the norms with which they engage.

Keywords: ballroom, drag, heterotopia, queer, transgender.

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places... which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.

Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” (1985 [1967]).

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Almost three decades span the release of *Paris is Burning* (1990), Jennie Livingston's art-house documentary on the late-1980s New York ballroom scene, and its fictional revisiting in the TV series *Pose* which first aired on the US TV network FX in 2018, before going global on Netflix, as its creator Ryan Murphy accepted a multi-million pound deal with the streaming service (Koblin). Their different budgets and contexts of production notwithstanding, *Paris is Burning* and *Pose* have both gone on to be highly successful commercially and stand as landmark moments of non-white queer visibility. Appearing at critical junctures in the history of racial non-heteronormative sexualities, they have occasioned, in their wake, a rethinking of the epistemological foundations of gender identity and the generic codes underpinning trans representation. As such, these visual texts and the world they represent can be also be read as queer heterotopias – “enacted utopias,” “other spaces” or “counter-sites” where dominant values and practices are at once mirrored and challenged – as they invite both an endorsement and a queering (or “transing”) of the norms with which they engage.

Drag balls, which first emerged in and around New York City in the 1920s as a predominantly white practice, were adopted by the queer Black and Latinx¹ communities from the 1960s onwards when they established their own underground ball culture catering for sexual, ethnic and economic marginals (“Underground Ball Culture”). By the time of *Paris is Burning*, the balls had evolved into contests in which the participants performed or “walked” under a variety of “categories” such as “Femme Queens” (transgender women) or “Butch Queens” (gay men), or the more aspirational “Executive” or “Town and Country” (specifically referencing affluent white America). Contestants competed for trophies or prizes and were judged for their “realness”, in other words how realistically they eliminated any sign of deviation from a (generally white) heterosexual norm.

As sociologist Daphne Spain has argued in *Gendered Spaces*, gender, space and status form a particularly complex matrix, where gendered spaces often function to perpetuate a specific hierarchical difference in status. But what happens when a particular space works to question that model, representing, but also contesting and inverting it? Confronting Foucault's notion of heterotopia with ball culture may go some way to answering that question. It will be argued that the ballroom circuit and its on-screen avatars *Paris is Burning* and *Pose* offer a particularly salient instance of the Foucauldian heterotopian space illustrating as they do many of the principles outlined in *Des espaces autres* (“Of Other Spaces”),

1 The gender-neutral term ‘Latinx’ refers to people from Latin America, or having a family from Latin America.

the 1984 transcript of a talk Michel Foucault gave to the *French Cercle d'études architecturales* (Circle of Architectural Studies) in March 1967, as well as in Foucault's other writings on heterotopias. Foucault's opening principle describes "heterotopias of deviation" that house "individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm"² in "counter-sites" such as prisons, psychiatric hospitals and rest homes. This definition finds obvious resonance with the Black and Lantinx ballroom as a self-elected space of sexual and racial otherness, each gay male and transgender body moreover constituting its own heterotopian space where the tension between individual desire and communal social norms and values (Loos et al. 23) is played out as "enacted utopia" ("Of Other Spaces"). Also significant is Foucault's observation that the heterotopian space is one that is in constant mutation, just as society, or more specifically, a body in transition evolves. A heterotopia may contain several apparently contradictory elements—for example, the space of the theatre, which "brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another" ("Of Other Spaces"). Instances of such mutation can be observed in the complex temporal and transmedial interconnection between the 'real' ballroom space—where contestants perform a variety of corporeal "heterotopias of femininity and masculinity" (Ayouch 304) — and its virtual filmic and televisual representations, each specific to their particular moment of production. Further on, the philosopher describes how a heterotopia "presumes a system of opening and closing that isolates [it] and makes [it] penetrable" ("Of Other Spaces"). As we will see, while the ball circuit provides a locus of kinship for its members, many of whom have been excluded from their biological family groups, it is also a space that many queens may dream of leaving — if and when they achieve their goal of acceding to fame and fortune in mainstream culture and society. At the same time, that aspirational impulse to integrate "real sites" is always already thwarted, not simply because access there is generally denied the sexual and racial other, but also because the heterotopian counter-space also works to reveal the chimeric nature of the world that ballroom categories re-represent, exposing "every *real* space...as still more illusory" (Foucault's sixth trait of heterotopias). I will argue that *Paris is Burning*, and more particularly *Pose*, reveal the reality of the neo-liberal heterosexual world that inspires and informs

2 "Those spaces that society places in its margins [...] reserved for people whose behavior deviates from the norm", as Foucault puts it elsewhere (*Le corps utopique suivi de Les Hétérotopies* 26-27). My translation.

ballroom categories as a “phantasmagorical ideal” (Hidalgo-Ciudad 188) of sorts.

In short, it is through the variously heterotopian lens of the transgender body, the ballroom, the movie theatre and the TV screen that New York ball scene will be explored here. The notion that heterotopias at once “represent” but also “contest” and “invert” dominant culture according to Foucault’s formulation seems an appropriate place to begin. It is indeed highly suggestive of drag’s ambivalent relationship to the norm, sitting uneasily between submissive emulation on the one hand and subversive reappropriation on the other—a contention echoed by Judith Butler when she says of the “occasional space” of the the drag ball (a heterotopia in all but name) that it “mimes”, but also “reworks” and “resignifies” white heterosexuality’s normative ideals of gender and race (“Gender is Burning” 125). This article will question how transgressive ballroom culture is and to what extent it may be said to rework and resignify gender and other socio-cultural norms. More specifically it will explore how that culture is depicted in *Paris is Burning* and *Pose*. What does it mean for the Yale-educated Jewish lesbian Livingston or Murphy, a white gay man who made it in Hollywood, to represent a world “at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual marginalization” (Bailey 368) that is so far from their own position of ethnic and economic privilege? Under such circumstances, can the Black or Latinx trans subject still be said to actually “speak”, as feminist and post-colonial scholar Gayatri Spivak said of the subaltern subject, or are they simply being once again submitted to the racial and cultural mainstream?

Paris is Burning

Winner of the grand jury prize at the 1991 Sundance film festival, *Paris is Burning* can be linked to ‘New Queer Cinema’ an emerging group of independent films and videos that marked the early 1990s (“New Queer Cinema”). “Hew[ing] more closely to traditional forms” than others, it proved a box office hit after being picked up for distribution by Miramax (Oishi 257; 267). It was not the first film or documentary to have been made on the subject;³ nevertheless its success increased trans visibility significantly. The film *Paris is Burning* can be largely credited for bringing the ball circuit and its highly stylized dance routines called “voguing” into the general public consciousness⁴ – even if voguing had already featured

3 See for example *The Queen* (1968) and *TV Transvestite, First Ball Room Movie* (1982) which can be seen as a prequel to *Paris is Burning*. *How Do I Look* (2006) is often viewed as its sequel.

4 The term “voguing”, an allusion to the fashion magazine *Vogue*, originates from the fact that the dance is said to imitate the characteristic poses struck by a model on a

in a number of videos before the movie was released. Starting with Jody Watley's clip "Still a Thrill" in 1987, voguing went on to be sampled on Malcolm McLaren's video clip "Deep in Vogue" (1989) which starred Willi Ninja who features in *Paris is Burning*. Other ballroom "legends" (Jose Gutierrez Xtravaganza and Luis Xtravaganza) appearing in the movie had also choreographed and starred in Madonna's 1990 global chart top-per "Vogue". In other words, there was a kind of ballroom and voguing moment revolving around *Paris is Burning* at this time, which not only hitched the hitherto little-known minority phenomena to mainstream pop culture, but also, as Eve Oishi has argued, contributed to producing its protagonists as queer subjects at a moment when the rigid essentialism of gay and lesbian identities was expanding to embrace more fluid transgender configurations (257), thereby creating a community that was moving, in Judith Butler's words, "from abjection to politicized affiliation" ("Gender is Burning" 124). Writing two decades later in 2011 David Bailey noted "*Paris Is Burning* continues to be the primary point of reference for members of the contemporary house/ball scene" (268).

The Queer Turn

The documentary should also be placed within the context of what Anne-Emmanuelle Berger has termed the "queer turn" in academia which saw the discipline of gender studies leaving identity categories behind and developing into "a theory of 'performance.'" According to Berger, crossing dressing was an "anchor point" for this theory and the figure of the drag queen an "icon" (*The Queer Turn*). *Paris is Burning* elicited a stimulating discussion from Judith Butler in an essay entitled "Gender is Burning" (1993) that builds on the theory of gender performativity she developed in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler's theory of gender performativity rests on *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962 [1945]) by French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty according to whom the body becomes the locus of a "perpetual incarnation" (Merleau-Ponty 192). Livingston's movie offered Butler the opportunity to revisit and refine the relationship between gender performativity and drag, starting with what drag can tell us about the constitutive instability of the heterosexual matrix: "drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender...hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations" ("Gender is Burning" 125). Following Foucault, Butler argues that drag is subversive "to the extent that it reflects on the imitative

catwalk; according to voguer Willi Ninja it also takes inspiration from the hieroglyphs of Ancient Egypt (Shapiro).

structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" ("Gender is Burning" 125). The bodily "heterotopias of femininity and masculinity" (Ayouch 304) created in and by the ball circuit thus create, "a space of illusion that exposes every real space"—every racially and sexually normative space—"as still more illusory" ("Of Other Spaces").

Realness

At the same time, however, the benchmark⁵ of ballroom "realness" whatever the category the contestants are "walking"⁶ is, glosses Butler, the "ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect" ("Gender is Burning" 129). In other words, according to the formulation of one of the competitors in *Paris is Burning* "the more natural you are, the more credit your outfit is given" (00:15:52-00:15:56). This definition would seem to suggest that realness unquestioningly buttresses and sustains the norms it appropriates, leading to "an embodiment of norms, a reiteration of norms, an impersonation of a racial and class norm [...] a morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance" ("Gender is Burning" 129). Moreover, as the late Dorian Corey, femme queen and icon of the ballroom community explains in *Paris is Burning*, that standard, is also a regressively heteronormative one: "if you can pass the untrained and even the trained eye and not *give away* the fact that you're gay, that's when it's real...the idea of realness is to look as much as possible like your straight counterpart...it's really a case of *going back into the closet*" (00:18:12-00:19:43, my emphasis). It is also very much a racially specific ideal: "that is everybody's dream and ambition as a minority to look and live as well as a white person is pictured as being in America" (00:41:30-00:41:45). This is not to say that the queens are not fully conscious of the discrimination at work in society — as Corey puts it:

In real life you can't get a job as an executive unless you have the education the background, the opportunity. The fact that you are not an executive is

5 The importance of this criterion can already be evidenced in the 1982 documentary *TV Transvestite* where Pepper Labeija, the head or "mother" of the House of Labeija repeats the term almost incessantly.

6 In the categories of 'femme queen realness' and 'butch queen realness' participants are judged on how convincingly they assimilate with heterosexual women and men. Other categories specifically reference white culture's signs of class distinction, such as "executive realness" or "schoolgirl/ schoolboy realness," while the "banjee" boy and girl categories are taken from urban street culture. Viewed as a whole however, the categories constitute a kind of mirror of the white heterosexual mainstream from which the racially and sexually marginal groups of the ball circuits are excluded.

merely because of the social standing of life ...black people have a hard time getting anywhere... and those that do... are usually straight. (00:14:10-00:14:29)

Thus, if on the one hand one ballroom realness in *Paris is Burning* undermines mainstream society's claims to primacy and authenticity, and contestants rile against the social injustice of which they are victims, on the other they remain harnessed to the very codes and values whose legitimacy they challenge and strive to debunk.

Ideological Conservatism

Another queen interviewed in *Paris is Burning* underscores the ideological conservatism underlying ball contestants' quest for realness when they note of those performers who succeeding in passing "they give the society in which they live in what they want to see, so they [the contestants] won't be questioned" (00:19:54-00:20:05). It is a remark which goes some way to explaining the appeal the documentary would go on to have for the mainstream. Indeed, it was the apparently unquestioning validation of white neo-liberal hegemony, rather than the film's subversive potential that left many viewers "pleasantly surprised" (Harper 90) when they watched *Paris is Burning*. The perfect illusion of normalcy strived for in the ball's regimented competitions and the desire for emulation taken as a flattering mirror was being held up to mainstream culture and the Caucasian heterosexual norm. Commenting in 1989 on footage of what was then Livingston's movie in progress, one critic enthused:

In costumes and poise, these artificial Yalies and businessmen would be utterly indistinguishable from the 'real thing' on the campuses or in the office. Similarly, any general would salute troops who paraded with the spit and polish panache of the vogueur. (qtd. in Harper 90)

It was a strikingly similar reaction that bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins) identified among the audience in the movie theatre where she first saw *Paris is Burning*, and with which her own critical take on the documentary took vociferous exception:

Watching *Paris is Burning*, I began to think that the many yuppie-looking, straight-acting, pushy, predominantly white folks in the audience were there just because the film in no way interrogates "whiteness." These folks left the film saying it was "amazing", "marvellous," "incredibly funny," worthy of statements like, "Didn't you just love it?" (hooks 149)

In its “precise replication...of the styles and behaviours of a range of social types recognizable from daily life, from mass media projections, or from both” (Harper 90), viewers observed a tribute to a world with which they were very much at home

The Ethnographic Documentary: A Potentially Reactionary Genre

But that sense of familiarity was not just a result of the queens’ apparently fawning simulation of a lifestyle and values the viewers themselves endorsed. It is also reinforced by the formal conventions of the documentary that the movie adopts, privileging as it does “narrative legibility” (Oishi 257) over the more experimental or confrontational modes of representation characteristic of other New Queer Cinema productions of the period. Livingston’s camera alternates “fly on the wall” shots that place the viewer in the position of a voyeur – in a way that seems to recall the gawping heterosexual tourists who flocked to the very first balls in the Roaring Twenties (Greco 2) – or interview sessions that also work to objectify ball participants and, crucially, place them at a remove from the audience⁷ Furthermore, Livingston never sets forth her own educated-middle-class-Jewish-lesbian identity in the film—credentials she has not hesitated to reference elsewhere (Green). Questions of representation (who is being represented, by whom, in what way and to what purpose) are thus elided behind the screen of the cinematographer’s seemingly universal and objective gaze, thus allowing the codes of documentary realism to unproblematically reference reality from a perspective of ethnic and economic privilege. As a consequence, they tailor the film to fit the perspective of viewers hailing from that same social and racial group.⁸ Not only does the documentary as genre purport to tell the truth, but, as Butler reminds us, “a neutral gaze will always be a white gaze, an unmarked white gaze, one which passes its own perspective off as the omniscient” (“Gender is Burning” 136).

In an oft-quoted passage, hooks trenchantly observes:

7 This can be contrasted with *TV Transvestite*, where median shots and close-ups bring the viewer much closer to the contestants, and low angle shots make the queens appear strong and powerful.

8 The use of explanatory signposting cards such as “Town and Country” or “Executive Realness” throughout the movie confirms this very point by clearly underlining the fact that Livingston is explicitly addressing a neophyte audience (Oishi 256). In contrast, the contradictory signposting in *TV. Transvestite* knowingly plays with an ambiguous gender identity: “The performers you are about to see are women” (00:02:56); “None of the performers you are about to see are women” (00:08:54).

Since her presence as a white woman/ lesbian filmmaker is “absent” from *Paris is Burning* it is easy for viewers to imagine that they are watching an ethnographic film documenting the life of black gay “natives”... Livingston does not oppose the way white hegemonic whiteness “represents” blackness, but rather assumes an imperial overseeing position that is in no way progressive or counter-hegemonic (hooks 151).

Importantly also, much of the film is shot indoors, either in the locale of the ballroom or in the queen’s own homes, which are nearly always artificially lit. It is as if the outside world had been blocked out; street scenes are limited to the subcultural environs of the ballroom or to the gay cruising area of the Christopher Street piers, confining the queens to the city’s shady underworlds. These scenes are juxtaposed with streets shots of bustling white, downtown New York, but the two worlds rarely meet. One instance is when femme queen Octavia St Laurent is filmed attending a modelling competition – and here, a mark of disapproval is sounded, as the sequence includes shots of a journalist asking a recruiter from Ford, one of America’s most successful model agencies, how “this kind of thing square[s] with the women’s lib?” (01:01:31-01:01:33). Another is when Willi Ninja is filmed instructing a class of cisgender female New Yorkers on how to recover what he calls their “wiles” – the feminine “grace” and “poise” they need to deploy if they wish to survive in a “man’s world” (00:46:08-00:46:25). By showcasing Ninja’s rather traditional view of femininity, a certain incompatibility between the ballroom circuit and enlightened late-twentieth century society is once again conveyed. Put simply, there is a sense that the basic scope of the film functions to disparage and limit the queens’ purview and horizons, conveying the sense that they are to be forever condemned to their pre-condition of racial and sexual otherness, the ballroom heterotopia a place of containment and compensation rather than a locus of agency and possibility. What is more, leaving the confines of the ball circuit is portrayed as a potentially deadly affair, as the tragic end of Venus Xtravaganza, a sex worker who dreams of a life as a suburban housewife (“I wanna car, I wanna nice home, I wanna be with man I love, away from New York” [01:03:38-01:03:48]) but is murdered, presumably a victim of homophobic violence (“Gender is Burning” 130). A number of the members of the drag ball circuit had already collaborated on mainstream music projects and some actually went on to gain a taste of the wealth and recognition they aspired to following the success of the *Paris is Burning* (Green). However this more positive message of self-empowerment is not the one the film chooses to privilege.

As critics of the film have pointed out the conventions of the ethnographic documentary are potentially reactionary in that they claim to

offer viewers the objective truth, while “concealing the power dynamics inherent in the film’s presentation of its subjects” (Oishi 260). There is no natural or privileged link between the documentary film and the real world. The documentary genre is – much like drag – performative in nature. In that sense, the apparently authentic, artless “reality” conveyed by the realist documentary is ironically not so far removed from the “realness” sought by ballroom contestants as both are attempting, not to “represent” gender or reality, but to simply “pass” as real. This begs the question as to how Livingston’s realism-passing-as-real and Murphy’s big-budget exuberant revisiting of it in *Pose* compare. What perspective is the viewer invited to adopt in the latter? Do the trans subjects gain in agency and self-empowerment in the TV series? Does the narrative “allow” its characters to evolve beyond the heterotopian space of the ballroom and stake a claim to a place in the “real site” of mainstream society? The same question may be asked of the protagonists’ non-fictional counterparts, many of whom went through experiences not dissimilar those of their on-screen personae. These are some of the key issues to be explored in this next section, but before doing so, a brief overview of the context within which *Pose* emerged will be provided.

Pose

The TV show *Pose* (2018-2021) has been described as a “fictional alternative narrative built from—among other elements and original contributions – the events, settings, aesthetics, and community covered in Jennie Livingston’s documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990)” (Koch-Rein et al. 1). While it might ostensibly appear less cutting edge than the film upon which it is based because of its slick production and cast and sometimes-fanciful plotlines, *Pose* emerged at a time when the small screen serial TV was undergoing a seismic shift both in terms of the “modes of production, distribution and consumption” of the shows being aired and the proliferation of non-heteronormative and ethnically diverse characters in their scripts (Hogg and Goddard 2). At a time of renewed interest in the contemporary New York ballroom and voguing scene⁹ and with the trans community gaining greater visibility *Pose* could easily be dismissed as an opportunistic, commercial, televisual replication of the landmark documentary that inspired it. I wish like to argue otherwise. Not only will it be suggested that *Pose* provides a response to many of the gaps,

9 See the documentary, *Kiki* (Sara Jordanö, 2016), and the Viceland reality TV show, *My House* (2018) and Danielle Lessovitz’s independent feature film *Port Authority* (2019).

failings and limitations of the earlier *Burning*, but that the aesthetics of defamiliarization (often) favored by the show offers a rethinking of how to convey transgender sensibility in media and the arts in a way that is not “limited to the notion of ‘authentic’ or ‘good’ trans representations but ideally intervene[s] and *trans[es]* our ways of looking at the world” (Koch-Rein et al. 7).

The “Transing” of Television

As argued above, *Paris is Burning* appeared at a juncture in music and the visual arts when queer culture was beginning to hesitantly impact the mainstream. Independent queer cinema was newly emergent, the ballroom video scene was hitting alternative film festivals and the drag ball circuit was also given high-profile visibility in chart-topping pop videos. Set firmly in that same period, *Pose* taps – possibly nostalgically – into this rich cultural vibe, but it is also very much a product of the twenty-first century. Indeed, as Hogg and Goddard have argued, the hit TV shows of the early twenty-first century which dominated by US cable television focused primarily on toxic masculinity and difficult men.¹⁰ The era of Netflix and Amazon is now offering non-heteronormative, non-white characters and narratives a privileged platform—be it in *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), *Sense8* (2015-2018), *Transparent* (2014-2019) or the latest arrival *Pose* (2018-2021). This trans-TV phenomenon has coincided with the global spread of streaming and SVOD, which have replaced the conventional “top-down” broadcasting model with a consumer-centred approach that accords greater importance to the desires of “niche” users and creates a new kind of viewing experience and a more active sense of televisual community identity. This has led to what Hoog and Goddard have termed “a queering of television itself into a kind of divergent heterotopia, radically different from preceding corporate or national spaces of televisual transmission” (2).

It is within the context of this “divergent heterotopia” that series such as *Orange is the New Black* and *Transparent* have emerged, marking significant steps along the road to trans visibility. The first of the two propelled supporting black transgender actress Laverne Cox into the global media spotlight and onto the front pages of magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Essence* and *Time*, which went as far as to proclaim Cox the symptom of a “Transgender Tipping Point” in public and political discourse. On the strength of her on-screen role, the actress presented and was executive

10 For example: *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Mad Men* (2007-2015).

producer for three documentaries aimed at raising trans awareness¹¹ and continues to be involved in high-profile trans advocacy. *Transparent* was created, written, directed and produced by Joey Soloway, who identifies as non-binary,¹² and is loosely based on their own transgender parent; the narrative arc revolves around Maura Pfeiffer, her fictional embodiment. *Transparent* put the issue of transidentity centre stage for the first time in mainstream scripted TV and included a trans actor and scriptwriter (who would later collaborate on *Pose*).

Between Reality and Fiction

Pose builds on the advances made by the aforementioned shows. Not only would Ryan Murphy's series put trans women of colour at the heart of its 1980s New York ballroom narrative, it has also cast black and Latinx trans actresses – Indiya Moore, M.J. Rodriguez, Dominique Jackson, Hailie Sahar, and Angelica Ross – in five of the main roles. Moreover, in addition to boasting “the largest trans cast in scripted television history”, it also includes trans writers, producers, set decorators and advisors (around 140 all told) making it, according to one *Guardian* review, “the gold standard of representation in action [...] era-defining television about communities only just beginning to represent themselves” (Ramaswamy). Another noteworthy fact is while some of the cast (such as Billy Porter who plays the MC Pray Tell) were already media personalities before joining the show, others have gained celebrity status in the “real site” of mainstream culture at the same time as they have claimed “legendary status” on-screen in the fictional heterotopic space. In so doing they have achieved the goal of fame and fortune the protagonists of *Paris is Burning* could only dream of. Dominique Jackson, who plays the haughty and glamorous Elektra is a particularly interesting case, on account of the porosity between her real and small-screen life trajectories which the actress says created a role “that was very much me” (“A Conversation,” 00:20:06-00:20:08). Jackson, who was a victim of transphobia and sexual assault, found refuge in the New York ball scene as a teenager, where she swiftly rose to become a ballroom queen, gaining the moniker of “our Naomi Campbell”, while surviving financially as a sex worker: “my life very much parallels everything in *Pose*” she explains (00:15:11-00:15:12; 00:02:46-00:02:48). The character of Elektra is based on a series of prominent figures from

11 *Laverne Cox Presents. The T Word* (2016); *Free CeCe* (2016); *Disclosure. Trans Lives on Screen* (2020).

12 Relating to or being a person who identifies with or expresses a gender identity that is neither entirely male nor entirely female.

the ballroom community, many of whom feature in *Paris is Burning*¹³ and are known to the actress, who used stories about them to “create” her role (00:24:27-00:24:28). According to Jackson, shows like *Pose* have “opened the door” (00:13:32) for herself and the rest of the trans community. *Pose* gave Jackson’s career vastly increased visibility and sway, both as artist and advocate. As a leader of #BlackTransLivesMatter and boasting a fan base of over 100,000, she, along with many of her co-stars, has been transformed into a standard bearer of black trans rights.

Similarly, the transgender non-binary¹⁴ Indya Moore, another ballroom *habitué* who on-screen interprets Angel Evangelista, a Latinx sex worker and upcoming ballroom legend, describes how they too underwent the same experiences as the characters on screen. In one newspaper article (significantly published in the popular conservative, low-brow *Mail online*) they explain how “[*Pose* is] a huge mirror, a reflection for so many of us into our childhood. It was anxiety-inducing in some ways, but it was also really affirming. I think it was cathartic, because reading that script, it was like, ‘Wow, I went through this’ (Dean). But the show has done more for Moore than enable them to process an adolescence rife with transphobia, sex trafficking and deprivation. Whereas the fictional late 80s character Angel hits a transphobic glass ceiling, becoming a successful model in season two of the show, but losing her contract when she is outed as trans, Indya on the other hand has pursued stellar runway career since *Pose*, signing up to IMG and becoming the “face of Louis Vuitton, appearing in campaign imagery and sitting front row at the Paris collections” (Allwood). They are also a powerful voice for their community relaying its values and reality into the normative mainstream as evidenced by the conclusion to the *mail online* article, in which they spell out for the presumably ill-informed reader “My choice to identify as nonbinary—though I typically express in femme ways—is to constantly disrupt the notion of the gender construct” (Dean).

Engaging Empathy

Just as interviews with Jackson, Moore and others have increased trans visibility and awareness, so too do the dialogues in *Pose* also perform an important educational function. In contrast with the ethnographical distance established in Livingston’s documentary, the fictional format encourages identification with the main characters, who “take the

13 Jackson cites Paris Dupree, Pepper LaBeija, Octavia Saint Laurent and Avis Pendavis, all of whom appear in *Paris is Burning*.

14 Moore identifies as non-binary (note 13) though they generally express their sexuality in femme ways.

viewer by the hand”, initiating them into the ballroom universe (each episode is punctuated by a ballroom scene featuring performers “walking” for prizes), but also following the characters in their everyday life and in the public space where the harsh reality of Black and Latinx trans stigmatisation becomes plain. Central to this diegetic thrust is Blanca Evangelista (M.J. Rodriguez), the show’s lynchpin protagonist, whom the viewer follows as she sets up her own “house” – an alternative LGBTQ+ family and support group – the House of Evangelista, in the show’s pilot. As “mother” of the new house, Blanca welcomes into her new family Damon, a young gay aspiring ballet dancer from the respectable leafy suburbs of Allentown, Pennsylvania, who has been expelled from his home by his conservative, god-fearing parents, after which he winds up sleeping rough and vulnerable in a New York park. Initially setting himself apart from the ball scene (“I’m not like you sorry, my dreams are real” [“Pilot” 00:25:51–00:25:53]), Damon functions as the neophyte viewer’s ignorant and slightly precocious double, assuming that viewer’s attitudes, asking their questions and getting all the answers from Blanca, with whom the narrative focus invites the viewer to identify. “So do you have a real job?” he asks his new mother, “I don’t judge people on how they live”, she retorts, shrugging aside the normative imperative of social recognition (Pilot 00:28:26–00:28:29). Offering a definition of realness which echoes that put forward by Dorian Corey in Livingston’s movie, Blanca’s lines bring the ballroom’s contradictory relationship with mainstream America – part naive emulation, part knowing contestation – into even sharper focus, making plain the socio-political injustices the documentary had already alluded to: “realness is what it’s all about, being able to fit into the straight white world and embody the American Dream. We don’t have access to that dream, and *it’s not because of ability*” (“Pilot” 00:27:30–00:27:42 my emphasis). Similarly, the pain felt by abandoned trans teens, is clearly articulated as she explains to Damon (and the viewer) the kinship role provided by ballroom houses: “houses are homes to all the little boys and girls who never had one, and they keep coming every day, as sure as the sun rises” (“Pilot” 01:03:18–01:03:30).

As Juan Carlos Hidalgo-Ciudad has rightly noted, “*Pose* acknowledges sociological evidence showing how prostitution and drug dealing are the only sources of income for many members” of the black and Latinx LGBTQ+ community (Hidalgo-Ciudad 192). When he is expelled from his house, Papi Evangelista, one of Blanca’s “children” explains his life of crime to his mother and the show’s viewers, inviting empathy and understanding, not knee-jerk condemnation. “It don’t get no worse, what other choices are there for a twenty-year old with an eighth grade education?”

(“Pink Slip”, 00:12:23-00:12:30).¹⁵ However, as a piece of fiction *Pose* functions not only by telling through “sound bite” dialogues, but also by *showing* the lives of its characters, encouraging viewer identification with their experiences and emotions, breaking down the barrier between real and heterotopic worlds and fostering a greater awareness of the trans community’s situational vulnerability. Sex work is matter-of-factly portrayed as the economic mainstay for many of the ballroom queens: it is Angel Evangelista’s only revenue until she is hired as a model and how she meets her Wall Street executive boyfriend Stan, while Elektra Abundance finds herself back working the peep shows and later engaged at a BDSM¹⁶ club when she is dumped by her white sugar daddy for having fully transitioned.

Fleshing out the Reality of AIDS

In its “taking fictional author- and ownership of some of the elements of *Paris is Burning*” (Koch-Rein 2), *Pose* also accords a far greater place to the horrific reality of the AIDS epidemic which is only referred to tangentially in Livingston’s film. For Murphy, there was both a tragic dramatic resonance and an ethical urgency behind this editorial choice: “I was interested in *the idea of a community in crisis and under siege*. The medications that have helped stop *the plague, the holocaust*, came out in 1996, so I hope to end the show right as that happened, to *show the decimation of a world*” (qtd. in Weber and Greven, my emphasis). The AIDS crisis informs the central narrative arc of the show as the show’s heroine, Blanca, learns that that she is HIV-positive a quarter of an hour into the first episode, while the show’s final episode ends with the AIDS-related death of her best friend, ballroom MC Pray Tell, having altruistically donated his life-saving medicine to his younger partner Ricky. It is knowledge of her diagnosis that gives Blanca the impulse to form her own house and live a meaningful life, although she heroically hides her condition to her children. The viewer is not spared the grimly realistic clinic scene where she is informed of her condition; the show returns repeatedly to the bleak, mortuary-like AIDS ward at Roosevelt hospital, which becomes one of its key locales, all the more stark and gritty when juxtaposed with the spectacular exuberance of ball room glamour. The scale of the epidemic is also underlined, both explicitly – “You know how many boyfriends I’ve seen go in there in the last four years?” asks Pray Tell on returning from a

¹⁵ The gay male house mothers interviewed in *How Do I Look* also stress the importance of education for the children in their care. (00:07: 51-00:09:20).

¹⁶ BDSM is an acronym for bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism.

Christmas visit to his dying partner (“Giving and Receiving” 00:13:44-00:13:51) – and implicitly, as when Pray Tell and Blanca discuss their HIV-positivity at an eerily empty Christopher Street Pier (“The Fever” 00:29:00), a key space in *Paris is Burning*. It is as if the entire population of the (in)famous gay cruising area had already been “decimat[ed].” An even more chillingly historically accurate moment is achieved in the opening scene of season 2, when the same pair travel to the heterotopic Hart Island off the Bronx, “the most remote part of New York” (“Acting Up” 00:00:27-00:00:28) to find out where one of the latter’s former lovers, who died of AIDS, has been buried. Rather than a cemetery, they discover a segregated mass grave (“just a bunch of pine boxes in a ditch” dismisses the city employee [“Acting Up” 00:01:27-00:01:29]), where the corpses of unclaimed victims of the epidemic have been buried in a segregated space away from the other bodies. As F. Hollis Griffin has argued, this “centrifugal” narration, “moving out from individual characters’ experiences to broader cultural concerns”, and “centripetal”, in “narrating the intensely personal experience of living with the illness” creates “an empathetic position for viewers” that is a far cry from *Paris is Burning*’s ethnographic remove “creating a form of cultural memory” – and a heterotopia of sorts – that “resonates with both people and a specific moment” (Weber and Greven).

Empowerment and Agency in Pose

Pose’s storyline also conveys a “message about resisting the scourge of stigmatisation, building self-esteem, “opening the door” into a world of opportunity and claiming one’s rightful place there. Thanks to the persistence of his mother Blanca, Damon auditions for, and is accepted at, the (fictional) New School of Dance from where he graduates at the end of the second season; Bianca also helps Papi pass his GED, enabling him to leave a life of drug dealing behind him, and she helps a homeless Elektra find a job as a maître d’hôtel: “a real check! That reminded me of my value, it wouldn’t have happened if it wasn’t for you” Elektra gushes when she is paid for the first time (“Mother of the Year” 00:31:13-00:31:17). Angel is recruited by a modelling agency and even after she is fired on account of her gender identity, she goes on to excel as an openly trans mannequin, with her own agent (Papi). As for Blanca herself, she challenges the transphobic attitudes prevalent in a gay bar where she is refused a drink: “how can you discriminate against me in my own community?” she rails (“Access” 00:22:13-00:22:16), a stand that leads to her arrest for disturbing the peace. The character of Blanca stands in contrast to the embittered diva-esque Elektra (“there comes a point when you must accept disappointment” she sermonizes [“Access” 00:51:12-00:51:13]) who mocks Blanca’s crusade

against injustice: “You’re not Rosa Parks sitting upfront in a bus. You’re a tired old queen,” she snarls (“Access” 00:50:16-00:50-17). It is of course the upbeat “against-the-odds” determination of Blanca, “beating heart of the show” as Ryan Murphy’s co-showrunner Steven Canals puts it (Alexander and Opi) which the narrative privileges. Even at the beginning of Season 2 when she learns she has full-blown AIDS, she refuses to give up, voguing valiantly into the downtown nail bar where she works and where Madonna’s hit single “Vogue” is playing in the background: “The most famous woman in the world singing about us! Strike a pose” she informs and enjoins her on-screen white client and off-screen viewers. (“Worth It” 00:10:27-00:10:30). In so doing, the show references the porosity between the two worlds, celebrating an influence of subculture on mainstream that is side-lined by Livingston, who, it should be recalled, was accused of financially exploiting members of the Ballroom community (Gooding).

Going Beyond Generic Realness

As Lynne Joyrich has argued, there are elements of a “neo-liberal, pull-one-self-up-by-one’s-bootstraps success story” to these sentimental storylines, which link them to the narrative conventions of a mainstream TV—perhaps not surprisingly, since FX, where it first aired, is a widely distributed commercial cable channel (Joyrich). At one level then, the program “seems to glorify the rewards which effort, self-sacrifice hard work and persistence procure and thus sanctions trans experiences as indifferent from heteronormativity” (Hidalgo-Ciudad 199). Indeed, the show’s success stories actually buy into the American Dream mythology that, in the show’s pilot, Blanca had claimed her community was denied access to. In this sense, *Pose* could be said to include a good dose of unsophisticated feel-good, fairy-tale wish fulfilment. The show has been criticized for its facile scripts, its stock or flat characterisation and general lack of “realness.” In his review in the *Atlantic*, Spencer Kornhaber bemoans the fact that the “characters don’t so much enact storylines as they do parables or lessons.” He feels this is the particularly the case for Stan Bowes and his boss Matt, white executive-embodiments-of-80s-corporate-culture, who work at Trump Tower on Wall Street: “What more obvious way to seek relevance than to insert Trump?” he asks (Kornhaber). Goddard and Hogg also regret what they view as the show’s creative limitations and deplore the “lack of an aesthetic adequate to its subject matter” (261), comparing it unfavourably to the more sophisticated *Transparent*¹⁷ Koch-Rein et al.

17 Arguably the tension between “reality” and fake news have become central to post-Trump America. This accords both Stan and the concept of realness even greater

however, state the argument for a rethinking of the parameters underpinning how trans representation is viewed, to go beyond the goal of “a progressive signposting of liberal inclusion and a celebration of more ‘mature’ and realistic depictions of trans lives” that defamiliarise and ‘trans’ existing television genres and conventions:

Violence and trauma are addressed in these shows in a tonality that – via moments of bursting into song and breaking the fourth wall – resists the confines of realism and instead uses TV as an escapist tool that celebrates trans visibility and resilience and offers hope, sometimes against all odds... Consequently, the politics of trans representation is not limited to the notion of ‘authentic’ or ‘good’ trans representations but ideally intervenes and trans our ways of looking at the world. (6-7)

Paris is Burning offered an exoticized but still reassuringly familiar version of the cultural mainstream—both on account of the “realness” of the contestants’ categories which aped white neo-liberal 80s America and the “realness” underpinning the “narrative readability” of the cinematic language used to portray them. In contrast, *Pose* offers a potentially discomfiting, generically hybrid representation, whose constantly shifting tone frustrates the viewer’s attempts to categorise and therefore control what they are watching: part gritty realism, part melodrama, part sentimentality, part irrepressibly effervescent, irreverent and improbable spectacle. This sense of disorientation is metatextually thematized in the scene where, at his behest, Angel Evangelista takes Stan, the family man and Wall Street executive who is keeping her as his mistress, to a ball. There is precious little realness in that evening’s unabashedly camp category, “Intergalactic Best Dress - Bizarre”: “quarter grapefruit, quarter gingerbread man and totally out of his mind” is how MC Pray Tell describes the first performance which wins 10s across the board for their freakish costume. “I’m going to be sick,” mutters Stan under his breath, as they leave (“Pink Slip” 00:31:25-00:31:50; 00:34:50-00:34:51). His reaction is a far cry from the “pleasant surprise” felt by the white heteronormative cinemagoers that first discovered *Paris is Burning*. In proudly proclaiming its own monstrous artifice, the weird, almost post-human category Stan beholds can be seen as an image of the show as a whole: both break free from “the confines of realism” and the “notion[s] of ‘authentic’ or ‘good’ to go where sophisticated aesthetics and “mature’ and realistic depictions” have no place. In its rejection of the tasteful and the reassuringly familiar, the show’s inherently trans perspective strives to subvert and to “undo the naturalization of cultural forms and practices, unmask[ing] the natural significance.

and expos[ing] it as yet another form of make-believe,” as Mattjis van der Port has remarked of camp sensibility (864).

‘Transing’ one’s world view then involves much more than rethinking gender identity construction but revealing as make-believe some of society’s most abiding fictions, be they naturalized “cultural forms and practices” or commonly accepted political ideologies such as the American Dream and family values. As Hidalgo and Joyrich have noted, the poor, racialized, queer subculture of balls and houses and the white high-earning, heteronormative executive world of Trump Tower and Wall Street function as mirror images of each other; they are “linked thematically, visually and self-reflexively” (Joyrich), and both “live, work [and] pose” (as the show’s motto has it) to survive. There are key differences however. *Pose* shows us that “walking” is a knowing, self-aware kind of performance, limited to the heterotopian confines of the ballroom. On the other hand, in Middle America, one’s whole life is a pose, one is trapped within the dictates of class and consumer culture, working constantly to sustain the outward illusion of wealth, success and happiness, as Stan comes to realize after spending time with Angel:

I’m no one. I want what I’m supposed to want, I wear what I’m supposed to wear, I work where I’m supposed to work. I stand for nothing... I can buy things I can’t afford which means I’m never really mine, I don’t live, I don’t believe, I accumulate. I’m a brand. I’m a middle-class white boy [...]. I’m the one playing dress-up. Is it wrong to want to be with one of the few people who isn’t? To have one person in my life who I know is real? (“Access” 00:42:44-00:43:35)

Initially, Angel seems to hope she has met the man who might make her dreams of conventional housewifely suburbia a reality: “I want a home of my own, I want a family... I want to take care of someone and I want someone to take care of me, I want to be treated like any other woman” she tells Stan the first time they meet, echoing the very similar wish-list enumerated by Venus Xtravanga in *Paris is Burning*. Unlike Venus however, Angel comes to realize the illusory nature of her fairy-tale projection: “what I want has changed” (“Mother of the Year” 00:47:37-00:47:39), she explains when, at the end of season one Stan pleads to let him come and “save” her from a life of moral depravation and dire poverty on the fringes of society. But Angel chooses community, “familialism, homeliness and mutual support” over “presumptively white ‘family values’” (Joyrich): “I got a family, they already take care of me, I wanna do right by them, I wanna look after *them*, *they* need me” she retorts (“Mother of the Year” 00:47:43-00:47:56). *Pose* dismisses as hollow chimera the glamorous allure of white middle-class America – “You’re not my first Prince Charming, you’re

not real” she informs Stan bluntly (“Mother of the Year” 00:47:07-00:47:15). In so doing, it undercuts the uncritical emulation of the mainstream evidenced in *Paris is Burning* and its performers’ unquestioning belief in the coincidence of appearance and reality: “that [it is] is everybody’s dream and ambition as a minority to look and live as well as a white person” (my emphasis). “Copy” and “original” are inverted, it is Stan who is beguiled by what he perceives as Angel’s authenticity: “I just wanted a taste of being you...one moment of being true in my whole goddam life” (00:36:02-00:36:12).

Conclusion

Perhaps what Stan believes to be Angel’s “authenticity” or “truth” is actually something rather different: an inner strength gained from the ability to deconstruct the power of the normative, those scripts to which we often adhere against our better judgement. In Lacanian terms, it might be possible to speak in terms of the impossibility of achieving symbolic closure, of being able to make sense of and give meaning to ourselves or the rest of the world. Just as drag, as Butler argued, with reference to *Paris is Burning* denaturalized heterosexuality, revealing it as never-achievable ideal that could only ever be imitated, performed and repeated, so too does *Pose*’s generic failure—its “multitude of affective registers” (Joyrich) and discourses, (feel-good homilies, outrageous ebullience, camp drama, excessive sentimentality) all vying for diegetic supremacy — lay bare the lacks, the rents and the fissures that the fantasy formation that is normality works to conceal and screen off. In a truly Foucauldian manner then, the seemingly marginal heterotopian space of the ballroom’s on-screen representations, and their unsettling, mirror-like functions have much to tell us about the once-invincible cultural and political mainstream, while simultaneously “pushing the boundaries of where the normative lies” (Munoz), and finally offering ballgoers and their houses the possibility of much more of a voice and a far more of a future than their 1980s counterparts.

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