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Paris Is Burning

Jennie Livingston

USA, 1990, 87 minutes

Colour/16mm

Production Company: Off-White Productions, Inc.

Producer: Jennie Livingston, Claire Goodman,

Barry Swimar

Cinematography: Paul Gibson

Editor: Jonathon Oppenheim, Kate Davis

Sound: Judy Karp, Catherine Calderon, Scott

Breindel, Etienne Sauret, JT Takagi

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Pretty Girl, Schoolboy, Town and Country, Dynasty, Military, High Fashion and Executive Realness: every detail must be accounted for, from body language to personality, from clothing to accessories (briefcases, airline ticket, and Wall Street Journals for executives, textbooks for students). In the Harlem drag Balls, realness is a competitive category in which the most normative roles in our culture are replicated perfectly by its most marginalized members — gay blacks and hispanics, who gather in "houses" and are nurtured and coached by "house mothers" so that they can parade and compete for enormous trophies. The parade here takes the form of voguing, combining break-dancing, gymnastics, attitudes, and the poses of fashion-magazines — a dance mainstreamed in Madonna's "Vogue" video. Deliberately blurring the line between theatre and performance, voguing goes beyond mere spectacle to raise questions about race, sex and class at the outer edges of our social norms. It is performed by triple outcasts: poor homosexuals of colour. It is also a utopian enterprise, in which the qualities that make people like the "house children" marginal are magically inverted to make them stars. Filmed largely in 1987 in New York, *Paris Is Burning* took three years to complete, so with updates and media contexts book-ending the film, it has the historical value of a time-capsule, and its poignancy as well.

Jennie Livingston studied film at the NYU summer programme, worked on Laurie Anderson's film *Home of the Brave* and assisted on Alan J. Pakula's feature *Orphans*. *Paris Is Burning* (90) is her first film as director.