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## *Paris Is Burning*



*Paris Is Burning* is that rare find: a documentary that combines drama, sociology, culture and history into a powerful, passionate and entertaining package. Director Jennie Livingston explores the world of the Harlem House balls and looks at how a younger generation of gay Black men have transformed their oppressive reality into an intricate world of glamour and fantasy.

For those who think Madonna invented voguing, a little background info is in order. A House is an extended family of gay Black men, including transvestites and transsexuals, gathered together under a name often inspired by fashion (e.g. House of Saint Laurent). House members compete at balls in voguing duels as well as an endless array of categories, each about achieving "realness"—dressing and posing as something else: a fashion model, a banjo boy, a schoolgirl, an executive. The transformation must be accurate enough for someone on the street to believe it and is thus, in some ways, about looking like anything but a queer boy. But more than that, it's about being gay, Black, male and—not insignificantly—poor (as one Housemother says, "These kids don't have two of nothing"), and about finding a way to bring glamour and prestige to an otherwise difficult life.

Director Livingston foregoes the use of a narrator, letting the participants speak for themselves. And can these girls speak! More than finger-snapping Miss Things, her interviewees are alternately profound, poignant and full of pride. A street-smart wisdom accompanies older members, such as ball-legend Dorian Corey and Housemother Pepper Leibeija, that commands respect. Livingston fleshes out not just the cultural facts of the ball scene and its attitudes but, more significantly, the struggle for survival at its roots.

*Paris Is Burning* is, ultimately, less an analysis of the scene it documents than a celebration of it. It takes a group of poor Black men and accords them a heroic status—and, in one tragic case, martyrdom. Despite all the poses that are struck, no one claims to be anything but what they really are—gay men. I'll take a Paulina Porizkova wanna-be over an established, upscale closet case any day. As one ball spectator tells the filmmaker, going to a ball makes him "feel 100-percent right being gay." *Paris Is Burning* reveals a humbling strength of survival that could teach lessons to the more privileged among us.

—Karl Soehnlein