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Documentary Cinema

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When the Curtain Closes: Trans Identity on Screen

Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* (1991), though a source of much controversy, has persisted as an essential, forever relevant documentary archiving the lives of now iconic figures within the queer Black and Latinx communities. At face value, the film paints an intimate portrait of the lives of poor but talented queer people of color—specifically trans women, gay men, and drag queens—living in New York City. Ostracized from heteronormative society, the subjects of the film forge their own culture in which families, or houses, compete for trophies in competitions, known as balls, based on desirability and dance performances. David France's *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson* (2017), a documentary that has also garnered its fair share of controversy, grapples with the harsher realities of those of this experience. In it, Victoria Cruz, a caseworker for the New York City Anti-Violence Project, sets out to reopen the case of trans activist Marsha P. Johnson's mysterious death. The film is heavily comprised of intimate archival footage of balls, liberation marches, and personal interviews intertwined with present-day footage of Victoria's investigation. In this paper, I would like to place these two documentaries in conversations with each other to analyze the ways in which they attempt to document the transgender experience.

Although the documentary has many scenes capturing the underground community of ballroom culture, I will focus mostly on the segments dedicated to two specific subjects. A little

over midway through the film, Octavia St. Laurent's name is flashes across a black screen in a bold, white font almost like the credits at the end of a blockbuster film. Seconds later, we are introduced to her petite frame and delicate features with a standard medium shot of being interviewed in her tiny kitchen. Immediately, she begins to share her dreams, alluded to by her introduction, of becoming a wealthy model or actress. Although her eyes are bright with excitement, the size of her hopeful plans for the future seem to shrink ever so slightly against the harsh, dingy background of her apartment. As if acknowledging her material constraints, she tells Livingston, "I want to be somebody! I mean I am somebody; I just want to be a rich somebody." The scene then jumps to Octavia as she walks, or competes, in a ball. Unlike the more outrageous and campy ballroom scenes shown throughout the film, Octavia's 'costume' offers little pomp and circumstance. Her natural hair is blown out in a voluminous flare, she wears little makeup, and her dress is simple and well-fitting. In this space, she presents the 'realness' or the hyperfemininity that is often coveted within the culture. In the next part of her extended sequence, however, she shares her desire to become a real woman. This pattern continues as later in the film *Venus Xtravaganza*, another conventionally attractive, petite trans woman, shares Octavia's same desire to experience realness outside of the ballroom.

A pointed translation of transness is depicted as the film highlights the traditional desires that both Octavia and Venus harbor. In "White Filmmakers and Minority Subjects: Cinema Verité and the Politics of Irony in *Hoop Dreams* and *Paris Is Burning*," Kimberly Davis further expands upon the framing of their aspirations.

Octavia St. Laurent and Venus Xtravaganza both earnestly desire to get a sex change operation to become 'full fledged woman,' to force the outside to match the inner woman, while they also fantasize about a race and class transformation—to be white and

privileged as well, either as a model (Octavia) or a middleclass housewife (Venus)...the feminist viewer is moved to either pity or condemn Octavia and Venus for their desire to be women, instead of empathizing or identifying with them as victims of oppression.”

(40)

Within the safe spaces created in their world such as their homes or during balls, both Octavia and Venus are allowed access to a superior form of gender performativity. Between the former's high cheekbones and rounded figure and the latter's blonde hair and petite frame, both women experience of a sense of realness that many others in their community scramble to construct. However, once the women cross the threshold into what they consider to be the 'real' world, their desire for conventionality shifts from the external to the internal. Away from the comfort of their safe spaces, they are then confronted with cisgender women who are considered women simply because of their biological composition.

In her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey uses Freud's theory of development to explain the origins of the desire to be looked at and writes, “...with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body...it is an image that constitutes...the first articulation of the “I,” of subjectivity” (836). Mulvey uses this theory to argue that the pleasure in looking and being looked at is derived from the establishment of the ego, and we, as subjects, can only derive pleasure from an object onscreen if we can also identify with their ego. However, this phase of development can also account for the need for trans women like Octavia and Venus to conform to both traditional social and physical markers of femininity. Much like Mulvey's argument that women cannot become spectators because female images are created to be displayed rather than be identified with, Octavia and Venus are socialized into believing that

they cannot fully adopt the role of woman. Thus, they must continue to alter themselves into assimilation to chase the elusive notion of realness.

The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson concerns itself with the brutal realities, in both cisheteronormative and queer spaces, that trans women face instead of engaging so heavily with the politics of passing. As we learn more about the ways in which Marsha influenced her community, we are introduced to Sylvia Rivera, a close friend of hers and a fellow activist. The scene begins with the camera sweeping across clusters of people in the crowd as if to familiarize the audience with its competition—mostly white men and women in clothes that are consistent with the time. Then, the camera briefly pans out into a wider shot to showcase the mass of people who have gathered at the stage. Suddenly, Sylvia storms on the stage and the camera frantically swoops between her presence on the stage and extreme close-ups of the now angry faces in the crowd. Using footage of the march from a handheld camera fuels the charged energy of the scene, as the audience identifies with its frantic movement. We transition into a full shot of Sylvia at center stage as she grabs the microphone; seconds later, the camera goes back into an extreme close-up of her face. As she begins to speak, the frame closes in even tighter as if the camera is afraid to miss a single detail. Staying within the claustrophobic frame, the camera pans back and forth between Sylvia and the angry crowd as she speaks. The experience is comparable to watching a boxing match. At the climax of her speech, Sylvia yells into the crowd, ““I will not put up with this shit. I have beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation. And you all treat me this way? What the fuck’s wrong with you all? Think about that.” After, her speech has reached a crescendo, the focus begins to blur until you can no longer see Sylvia on the stage.

What can be learned from this scene in relation to the stories of Venus and Octavia is that marginalization exists within a series of complex socializations. In *Paris Is Burning*, we are shown how much of the hierarchal structure within ballroom culture such as the selection of house mothers and category winners is dictated by desirability. Although any member of their community—where almost everyone is nonwhite, nonstraight, and impoverished—would be deemed undesirable or defective under the harsh light of cisheteronormative society, there are further rankings within the subculture. In the case of *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson*, Sylvia is met at the liberation rally with anger and disgust despite being one of the originators of the gay liberation movement altogether. As she remembers almost being prevented from speaking at the rally, Sylvia's present-day voiceover firmly refuses to go unheard, "But if it wasn't for a drag queen, there would be no gay liberation movement. We're the front liners." In a crowd full of white gay men and lesbians, Sylvia's trans body becomes a site of unruliness and rebellion. Maite Escudero-Alias discusses how this deviation from normativity can be read as transformative:

In her elaboration of a queer phenomenology, Ahmed emphasizes that following lines of resistance and rebellion against heteronormativity may give rise to new impressions of reality. Thus, for a [queer person] to live a disoriented life does not exclusively mean inhabiting a body that is not recognized by the social and political order, but also embodying a politics of hope which might generate new paths of desire and different routes. (68)

There is a moment during the rally scene where the unsteady, handheld camera zooms into an extreme close-up of Sylvia's anguished face as she becomes almost hysterical. Though we have stopped oscillating between her and the crowd, the cacophony of both earnest support

and continued disdain can be heard. This noise continues even after the camera goes out of focus and the stage is nothing but a blob of grey. Though some may argue that this footage is merely a testament to the ways in which trans people have been ostracized by both the straight and gay communities, I would like to argue for a more optimistic reading. I have spoken about realness and its unattainability in my analysis of Venus and Octavia earlier, but I would press further on to say that this conception of what is real and what is fake has been in part influenced by Livingston. Here, Livingston is not merely the director of the documentary but also a reflection of white, cis gay and lesbian culture at large. Therefore, while Sylvia may have been ousted from a movement that she created and welcomed with disdain, she is disrupting their narrow view of what queerness can look like by simply existing. By showing up and demanding her voice be heard, she is creating an alternative future where people like her can be loved and desired.

Both *Paris Is Burning* and *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson* seek to document the lives of transgender people living in the United States, and despite existing almost thirty years apart from one another in their respective releases, it is surprising how little things have changed. According to Human Rights Campaign, “In 2018, advocates tracked at least 26 deaths of at least transgender or gender non-conforming people in the U.S. due to fatal violence, the majority of whom were Black transgender women. These victims were killed by acquaintances, partners and strangers, some of whom have been arrested and charged, while others have yet to be identified” (HRC). Although Victoria is devoted to the daunting mission of uncovering the truth about Marsha’s untimely death, she must also grapple with recent murder of Islan Nettles, a trans woman killed by a man who felt as if his manhood had been threatened once he found out she was transgender. It seems as though the violence will never end.

Considering the sheer amount of violence that is depicted in the two films, I cannot help but interrogate the ethics used in the film. In “Ethical Responsibilities to Subjects and Documentary Filmmaking,” Ellen M. Maccarone posits, “Even when consent is given, the potential for harm to subjects still exists. Consent to be filmed might mitigate some ethical responsibilities filmmakers have to their subjects, but it does not absolve them of all responsibilities when harm can be done” (Maccarone 199). Jeanie Livingston, the director of *Paris Is Burning*, identifies as cis, white, and lesbian. The director of *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson*, David France, identifies as cis, white, and gay. While I am not arguing that it is inherently unethical for someone who is a member of the dominant culture to publish the stories of marginalized people, I am concerned with the ethics of their storytelling delivery. Maccarone goes on to say, “Documentarians often have the luxury of longer, deeper relationships with their subjects than journalists writing or producing pieces for typical news outlets” (Maccarone 200). With the extensive amount of time that documentary filmmakers must spend with their subjects to create their hours of footage to come through, I imagine that they begin to feel as if they are an extensive of their subjects’ community. But they aren’t. No matter how much time Livingston or Green can cast out their privilege enough to slip inside the shoes of the hypermarginalized—one of the most endangered demographics of people. What, then, do these subjects gain in return? Is having one’s story heard truly enough for a population of people so economically, socially, and physically vulnerable? Livingston tells her audience that Venus has been brutally murdered in a motel room the same she was introduced—white words across a black screen. Final. Cold. Evidence such as this leads me answer my questions myself.

Once again, we return to this idea of realness. I just questioned the “realness” of the justice that is presented with films such as *Paris Is Burning* and *The Life and Death of Marsha P.*

Johnson. Venus and Octavia dream of becoming “real” women. Sylvia and Marsha struggle to be considered “real” members of the gay community in the seventies. What does realness even mean?

The ever-receding horizon of the real, however, need not be the downfall of transsexual aspiration, indeed it may be its strength. Needless to say, the fantasy that many queers may entertain of gender realness is extremely important as we challenge the limits of theories of performance (Halberstam 52)

In my previous viewings of *Paris Is Burning*, I have stopped my analysis at the realization that everyone is performing—that no form of gender performance is any more authentic than the other. However, I now argue that that is only the surface. Once we understand that realness is just as much as a social construct as concepts such as time and money and language, we can then see that there is freedom in the fantasy. There is freedom in having the power to occupy the positions of both creator and creation. Marsha was never concerned with the many aspects of gender performativity that we have come to associate with transfeminine identity such as perfectly applied makeup, feminine pronouns, and long hair. However, she managed to create the movement that launched a thousand ships. Despite the imperfect nature of both films, *Paris Is Burning* and *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson* act as call and response to one another. While the former attempts to show the glitter of an unforgettable era and culture, the latter works to expose the glass from which it comes.

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