

*Does 'Paris is Burning' reinforce or displace heteronormativity?*

Judith Butler discusses the film *Paris is Burning* in a chapter of her book *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993) and the idea that the film establishes an ambivalence in drag, of which aspects can be commodified and fetishized for the passive public and where heteronormative ideals are reinforced. Is this true? Or do the ambivalences created, when actively embraced by the public, displace or subvert heteronormative ideals.

As such, this essay considers whether *Paris is Burning* is successful, either in reinforcing or displacing heteronormativity.

*Paris is Burning* is a documentary from the film-maker Jennie Livingston which centres around the drag and ball scene in the late 1980s in Harlem, Manhattan in New York. The movie is cinematic in style and dramatic in the content it portrays. As bell hooks notes<sup>1</sup>, film has two main plots. The first being the pageantry of the ball scene and the pleasurable fantasy that the protagonists engage in, and the second, the lives of the queens outside of the balls which are portrayed as painful and despairing.

The movie juxtaposes these two narratives seemingly to encourage the audience to view the spectacle and engage with the content and the protagonists, but also to bring the hard life and struggles faced by this community into sharper public consciousness. Presumably, this is done to encourage awareness and acceptance of the ball scene and its participants in wider society.

The documentary opens with views from the streets of Harlem. In the distance, we see Downtown Manhattan with its skyscrapers, glittering and reaching high into the sky. Then we are taken down to the streets, as though we are walking the streets of Harlem in 1987 ourselves. On the streets, we see a vivacious night scene. People are dancing, drinking and eating, dressed colourfully, and smiling. However, on a message board on the side of a building, we see, flashing in red lights, the news that the "WHITE SUPREMACIST CHURCH BEGINS NATIONAL CONFERENCE". This juxtaposition sets the tone for the film and highlights a commentary on race and identity.

The opening line verbally situates this juxtaposition:

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<sup>1</sup> hooks, bell (1992) *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press. p149.

“I remember my dad [saying] you have three strikes against you in this World. Every black man has two: that they’re just black and they’re male. But you’re black, and you’re a male, and you’re gay. You’re gonna have a hard fucking time. If you’re gonna do this, you’re gonna have to be stronger than you ever imagined.”<sup>2</sup>

From these opening scenes we are taken straight to the ballroom. Savoy Manor Ballroom glitzes in the background and a slow build up for Pepper LaBeija’s legendary entrance begins.

We see a crowd of ecstatic young black and Latinx men cheering raucously. We then transform from viewing the crowd to joining the crowd, as all gaze is directed to the performer. We hear the master of ceremonies (“MC”) speak to the crowd, and as such, directly to us, as members of the crowd:

“Get off the floor! Learn it, and learn it well!”.

This makes clear the educational aspect of the movie and speaks to the culture of “educate yourself!” which has become a mantra in the drag, and queer community in recent times.

All the while, the tension continues to mount, helped by the beating of the song “Just Fierce” by Argy and Honey Dijon as Pepper LaBeija begins to strut. It is clear that Pepper LaBeija, the legendary mother of the House of LaBeija, is performing a legendary act. Legendary status is a revered category in the ball scene which is reserved for contestants who are considered icons in the community and have already grand-prizes to their name. We learn that attaining the title of Legendary is similar to winning an Oscar.

The choice of the song “Just Fierce” is noteworthy, as “fierceness” is a sought-after quality in the ballroom and another part of the lexicon that surrounds the scene. “Fierceness” we discover, means something to be admired and celebrated. This understanding of the word subsequently traversed into mainstream colloquial language due to, in part, the success of the movie.

The language of the scene is also a focal point of the documentary. We learn new words at regular intervals which are given full screen attention and then are elucidated by the

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<sup>2</sup> Livingston, Jennie (1990), *Paris is Burning*, online video, viewed 16 February 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LUH8sRwzBs&t=2403s>>.

protagonists through a teacher-student dynamic. We, as the students, pay attention to the teachers and their explanations. This educational motif is important because words, descriptions and images have significance and are fundamental to “reading” and to the process of identification.

“Reading” is the exchange that happens when a person takes in the look of a person and comments and exaggerates their flaws. Normally conducted in a witty manner, the desired outcome is to ridicule the subject of the “read” and make onlookers laugh at these comments and thus the flaws of the subject. The act of reading takes into account factors, such as, the associations, and the expected look of a person, and when conducted by a drag queen against another drag queen, assertions over the other’s “realness” also feature.

“Realness” is another term described by the documentary. “Realness” can be understood to be how convincing a subject is in displaying the attributes that are most associated with the generally accepted standard and as such, to “pass” as a member of the relevant category.

Participants dress according to the category in which they are competing, and are expected to display a “realness” that supersedes that of the other contestants to win. This ideal after which the contestants seem to be striving, is not tangible nor defined. However, Livingston juxtaposes real shots from everyday life in New York of white, upper-class men and women and of their portrayal in media and advertising to help give us, the audience, an understanding of what some of the notions associated with these ideals might be.

However, this “realness” although undefinable and intangible, seems I would say, to somewhat relate to Judith Butler’s notions of the performative.

“Reading” and “realness” are inextricably linked to the associations with commonly held perceptions about how something or how someone should look. These associations are then imbued into the performance of the drag queen who identifies and is identified by the onlookers through these representations.

This process of identification is precisely what Judith Butler hits upon when Butler discusses gender and performativity.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), Butler puts forward Butler's theory on gender performativity.

Judith Butler first defines gender as performative in *Gender Trouble*<sup>3</sup>.

"gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed"<sup>4</sup>

Butler argues that performativity is something that produces a number of effects and that rather than the individual choosing the performance, that in actual fact, the performance is what produces the individual. The fact that the individual is produced through this performance is what makes this performative and not merely performance.

"For something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman...we act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or simply something that is true about us. Actually, it is a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time."<sup>5</sup>

Butler is essentially saying that an individual does not choose their identity but can be understood to be the imbrication of mobilized identifications. These identifications come into being through a process of iterability.

Butler makes use of Jacques Derrida's notion of iterability from his essay *Signature Event Context*<sup>6</sup>. Iterability can be understood to be an attribute of a signature, which means something that is recognisable and can be repeated. A signature strives to attest for the validity of a thing; however, as soon as a signature is created, so too is the possibility for forgery and inauthentic copies of the signature.

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<sup>3</sup> Butler, Judith (1999) [1990] *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge. p. 179.

<sup>4</sup> Butler, Judith (1999) [1990] *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge. p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler (2010), Judith Butler: Your Behavior Creates Your Gender | Big Think, online video, viewed 20 February 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7o2LYATDc>>

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida (1988) *Limited Inc: Signature Event Context*. Evanston, IL: North Western University.

Another core aspect of iterability is repetition. The repetition of words is what creates language. We learn through repetition; and meaning is attributed and altered through repetition of iterables. In the same way, the repetition of perceived gender iterables is what perpetuates perceived normativity. This repetition is, as aforementioned, expressed through mobilized identifications which manifest themselves as an imbrication.

This imbrication is a citation of all previous gender performances. Butler notes that because it is a citation of numerous and various iterables, gender includes both contradicting and inauthentic aspects of identity. This means that the notion of gender is, at the very least, non-binary.

Furthermore, Butler argues that many of the gender iterables can be paradoxical when correlated to one another. This paradoxical nature of the iterables creates an ambivalence in that the iterables can both reinforce and displace hegemonic heteronormativity.

Normativity in this context, can be understood to be an evaluative standard. This means that there are accompanying actions and perceptions about what the “norm” is, and relative evaluations from persons in a community about how permissible or desirable a thing is. Following on from this, heteronormativity, then, is the evaluative standard that accompanies preconceptions of heterosexuality as the default sexual orientation. The heteronormative view can be said to be one where biological sex, sexuality, gender identity and gender roles all align, and any deviation therefrom, is therefore, abnormal.

This heteronormative view is considered to be problematic because of its unwillingness to accept variations in sex, gender, sexuality and gender roles. Lips (2020, p. 7)<sup>7</sup> outlines the general distinction between gender and sex: sex is used to refer to a person’s biological maleness or femaleness in the binary sense, and gender to the nonphysiological aspects of being female or male and the cultural expectations and roles associated with femininity and masculinity.

However, even this definition of sex from Lips is problematic as it makes no allowances for intersex individuals who may not typically fit binary notions of male and female and present characteristics of both male and female genitalia at birth.

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<sup>7</sup> Lips, Hilary M. (2020). *Sex & Gender: An Introduction*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, pp. 7.

Furthermore, it is rather dubious to distinguish gender as a nonphysiological aspect of “femaleness” and “maleness” when these concepts are binary, fleeting and open to change and interpretation. For example, taking a recent example from Japan’s preparations for the Olympics, Yoshiro Mori, the 83-year-old former prime minister said that women talk too much at meetings<sup>8</sup>. Speaking a lot at meetings could be associated with maleness and thought of as “considering all the angles” or negatively perhaps more in the direction of “mansplaining”. Or it could be associated with femaleness and considered “building consensus”, “allowing for understanding” or negatively, as Yoshiro Mori did, as “chatty” or “verbose”. This example highlights how interpreting traits as inherently female or male is problematic.

Butler also describes how these iterables and their paradoxical correlations can create ambivalence in drag. This is noteworthy because as viewers of the film, and metaphorical members of the crowd, and students, we are also implicated by these paradoxical correlations.

Butler notes this ambivalent implication:

“drag is a site of a 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 that one opposes.”<sup>9</sup>

We are implicated because the effect of the documentary and the idealizations and representations of the drag scene are ambivalent. Butler draws our attention to the fact that identification is always an ambivalent process:

“... identification is always an ambivalent process. Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated.”

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As Butler notes, the norms by which the regimes of power operate are in actual fact not realizable. One could argue that we are all oppressed, though, naturally, not to an equal extent, by the regimes of power and the heteronormative hegemony. This is to say that even those who

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<sup>8</sup><https://www.irishtimes.com/sport/other-sports/tokyo-olympics-chief-resigns-over-women-talk-too-much-comment-1.4482968>

<sup>9</sup> Butler, Judith (1993). *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>10</sup> Butler, Judith (1993). *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge.

sit as white privileged, wealthy New Yorkers, like those juxtaposed in *Paris is Burning*, they too can never fully present the idealizations we see in Vogue, Mode, or Polo Ralph Lauren, because as Butler notes, they are not real. They are idealizations that cannot be attained. In the same way, these idealizations are even more distant to those who fall further from the inferences of these idealizations. This is to say that the oppressiveness of the heteronormative hegemony is significantly more oppressive to those whose iterables vary in race, class, gender identity, sexuality, gender role, and sex than to those which are presented by the heteronormative hegemony as most desirable.

Venus Xtravaganza speaks candidly to the camera informing us of her desires:

“I want a car. I wanna be with the man I love. I want a nice home, away from New York, up the Peaks Hills or maybe in Florida somewhere, where no one knows me. I want my sex change.”<sup>11</sup>

Octavia Saint Laurent tells us:

“I want to live a normal happy life.”<sup>12</sup>

We can see that both Venus Xtravaganza and Octavia Saint Laurent describe an ideal that is rather common and which makes up what could be said to be a general ideal. It could be argued that it is the same ideal that acts on all of us. To be accepted, to find love, to have security, to have a “normal happy” life. Attributes of this ideal are then usurped through imagery and the heteronormative hegemony in order to assert its dominance as the most desirable.

In this sense, we are all complicit to a degree in the reiteration of these idealizations and the ambivalences of the iterables that make them up. We are complicit because we all desire the ideal, but it's inferences and iterables are ambivalent.

But what is meant by the term ambivalence? In psychology, “valence” is the affective quality of something. The affective quality refers to the intrinsic attractiveness (positive valence) or

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<sup>11</sup> Venus Xtravaganza (1990), *Paris is Burning*, online video, viewed 16 February 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LUH8sRwzBs&t=2403s>>.

<sup>12</sup> Octavia Saint Laurent (1990), *Paris is Burning*, online video, viewed 16 February 2021, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LUH8sRwzBs&t=2403s>>.

averseness (negative valence) of the thing in question<sup>13</sup> and is characterised by the emotions one has in reaction to this something.

Ambivalence then is the state of having mixed reactions, beliefs, attitudes, or emotional reactions to someone or something which are made up of both positive and negative elements<sup>14</sup>.

In this sense, it could be said that the drag scene depicted in *Paris is Burning* conveys the mixed set of expectations, beliefs and attitudes that the ball-goers have at these events. There is clearly an emotional atmosphere where participants compete fiercely and are judged based on their “realness” and their ability to comply to the fullest extent possible with the ideals of their categories.

But Butler rightly questions “what is the status of the ideal?”. Butler also asks whether the denaturalization of the norm subverts the norm, or whether the denaturalization is, in fact, the re-idealization of the norm. A reassertion rather than a subversion.

“Although many readers understood *Gender Trouble* to be arguing for the proliferation of drag performances as a way of subverting dominant gender norms, I want to underscore that there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms.”<sup>15</sup>

This is an important consideration and Butler poses the question in *Gender is Burning* “whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms”<sup>16</sup>.

To answer this, Butler invokes an idea from Jacques Derrida “there is no nature, only the effects of nature: denaturalization or naturalization”<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Nico H. Fridja (1986) *The Emotions*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 207.

<sup>14</sup> Armitage, Christopher J.; Conner, Mark (2000) “*Attitudinal Ambivalence: A Test of Three Key Hypothesis*”. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. 26 (11): 1421–1432.

Accessed on: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0146167200263009>

<sup>15</sup> Butler, Judith (1993). *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>16</sup> Butler, Judith (1993) *Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion*. Minnesota, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida (1988) *Limited Inc: Signature Event Context*. Evanston, IL: North Western University.



The terms naturalization and denaturalization can be said to have a double meaning in the context of *Paris is Burning*.

In one sense, naturalization is generally understood to be the process by which a person acquires citizenship or is approved as an official member of a society. In the context in which Butler refers to the term, it is clear that there is a reference to the protagonist in *Paris is Burning* being accepted in the wider society. Denaturalisation is then the revocation of this membership of the wider community.

Tragically, Venus Xtravaganza is murdered a few months after the shooting of the film. As such, her desire to be naturalized into society, with a car and a house outside New York give way instead to her denaturalization. Her membership and belonging to the wider community is revoked, revoked by the hegemonic heteronormativity that oppresses her, by way of her murder.

However, naturalization in the Derrida sense can also refer to the act of being seen as natural and becoming natural in the eyes of others and thus a norm. In this sense, Derrida asks us to contemplate that there is no “nature”, just the understanding of what is natural and the subsiding of that understanding.

As such, we could postulate that there is no heteronormative hegemony per se, but rather the naturalization and denaturalization of heteronormativity.

However, in discussing this point, Butler draws our attention to the importance of intersectionality and refers to the “ruling of the symbolic” in the Lacanian sense.

“... the symbolic assumes the primacy of sexual difference in the constitution of the subject. What *Paris Is Burning* suggests, however, is that the order of sexual difference is not prior to that of race or class in the constitution of the subject; indeed, that the symbolic is also and at once a racializing set of norms, and that norms of realness by which the subject is produced are racially informed conceptions of “sex” (this underscores the importance of subjecting the entire psychoanalytic paradigm to this insight).”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Butler, Judith (1993). *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge.

Therefore, Butler highlights that sexual, racial, or class differences inform conceptions of sex and as such, must all be considered in an intersectional manner to provide appropriate insight. As such, sexual orientation does not have primacy over other factors of privilege and discrimination.

As such, although postulating that heteronormativity exists only through naturalization and denaturalization, it also exists in conjunction and relative to intersectional elements, and that the attempt to subvert one does not ipso facto subvert other notions of privilege and discrimination.

“The citing of the dominant norm does not, in this instance, displace that norm; rather, it becomes the means by which that dominant norm is most painfully reiterated as the very desire and the performance of those it subjects.”<sup>19</sup>

Subversion can be understood to be the process by which the values of a certain system that is in place are overthrown or contradicted. However, Butler notes that *Paris is Burning*, and more widely, drag, is not inherently subversive and that, due to the ambivalences it encapsulates, can both denaturalize and re-idealize het norms.

“As Paris Is Burning made clear, drag is not unproblematically subversive. It serves a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure. But there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion. Heterosexuality can augment its hegemony through its denaturalization, as when we see denaturalizing parodies that reidealize heterosexual norms without calling them into question.”

This is due to the aforementioned notion that imbrications in action are citations of all previous gender performances. Therefore, the performance of drag and its ambivalent iterables is not necessarily subversive as it also invokes understandings and conceptions of gender that are in the process of being naturalized or denaturalized. As such, the naturalization of het norms are also at play.

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<sup>19</sup> Butler, Judith (1993). *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge.

“If the ethnographic conceit allows the performance to become an exotic fetish, one from which the audience absents itself, the commodification of heterosexual gender ideals will be, in that instance, complete. But if the film establishes the ambivalence of embodying—and failing to embody—that which one sees, then a distance will be opened up between that hegemonic call to normativizing gender and its critical appropriation.”<sup>20</sup>

However, by juxtaposing iterables through drag, the audience becomes aware of their existence, parodic aspects and varied conjugations. This allows for what Judith Butler describes as a “distance” to be opened up between the conceptions of normativity and expressions of identity.

In conclusion, *Paris is Burning* creates an awareness in an active audience who is willing to engage in the educational aspect of the film, about the drag scene in Harlem in 1987. In doing so, we begin to understand the importance of language and imagery in the pursuit of realness which is correlated to an ideal. This ideal is dominated by a heteronormative hegemony that oppresses us all, but especially those who fall further from the inferences of the ideal than those who most closely resemble it.

*Paris is Burning* also allows for a passive audience to be enthralled by the phantasmic elements of the ball scene and drag. This in turn could bring about fetishization and eroticization of representations and allow for the commodification of het gender ideals through drag.

“If the ethnographic conceit allows the performance to become an exotic fetish, one from which the audience absents itself, the commodification of heterosexual gender ideals will be, in that instance, complete.”<sup>21</sup>

However, by juxtaposing the iterables via the mobilized identifications in drag and their gender, racial, sexual, and class interconnection, an ambivalence is also created which projects into future citations of gender. This means that when these iterables are reiterated, they are imbued with heteronormative iterables as well as non-heteronormative iterables. This creates paradox and ambivalence in drag that can create an awareness that gender, sex, class, and races are all non-binary.

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<sup>20</sup> Butler, Judith (1993). *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>21</sup> Butler, Judith (1993). *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge.

These intersectional and sometimes paradoxical iterables can be said to be constantly in a process of identification, naturalization and denaturalization.

Therefore, *Paris is Burning* both reinforces and displaces heteronormativity depending on the interaction. But in all instances, affects future citation of gender norms because the imbrication of interables are citations of all previous gender performances. Therefore, *Paris is Burning* is on the whole a displacement for heteronormativity.