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Paris is Burning

Notes and Queries:
Some Questions About Reading, Representation and Paris is Burning

By Amy Weismann
Bryn Mawr College

"Chain of many mirrors, the cinema is at once a weak and a robust mechanism: like the human body, like a precision tool, like a social institution..."

-Christian Metz, Imaginary Signifier

"Every representation of truth involves elements of fiction, and the difference between so-called documentary and fiction in their depiction of reality is a question of degrees of fictitiousness. The more one tries to clarify the line dividing the two, the deeper one gets entangled in the artifice of boundaries..."

-Trinh T. Minh-ha interview with Judith Mayne in Afterimage

Can this writing, can any writing, refuse the terms by which it is appropriated even as, to some extent, that very colonising discourse enables or produces this stumbling block, this resistance? How do I relate the paradoxical situation of this dependency and refusal?"

-Judith Butler
"Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in Dressing Out: Performing Identities

Boundaries. Representation. Sexuality is an intersection, a site upon which race and class intersect. Jennie Livingston's construction of the gay, Ball subculture of New York City is a cultural product which entangles all its consumers in the artifice of hegemonic culture. And the double vision of marginality. It entangles me in a web of self-reflexivity which sticks to my identity as a white, economically privileged, heterosexual woman in both a subversive understanding of representation as it engenders sexuality, body-as-spectacle, and as a reiteration of my positionality as spectator. Realness. Passing. I am moving, unreal, passing- forgetting my truths. Speaking about myself, I am speaking an exclusionary "truth". Speaking about this culture of hidden dreams and far away bodies, a group of people I have never known, I am representing. Can I then speak at all outside of myself? No, I cannot, I do not. I perceive the Ball world as an intersection of my spectatorship, my identifica-

"disclosure: The Buying and Selling of Culture"
tion with the spectacled subject/object. I say I don't wish to speak about, but to speak nearby.

But such a claim is truly disingenuous because I don't know; I am trying to understand. I speak through unrecognized synapses. My voice is made of hidden forces. I am colonized to colonize. Can (mis)representation (mis)interpretation be anything but colonial? Can it be reciprocal? What boundaries are really crossed? What boundaries are shattered? Power remains a function of the Law. Coupling the will of authority to the subordination of an articulation of the personal prevents interaction. It suppresses creative confrontation in the subjective, in favor of projecting acts in themselves as 'objective' entities, escapable phenomena, in order adversarially to enjoin structure. This is conventional "looking", "seeing". This is the conventional production of culture. See. Seek. Be. Do.

I wish here, from my limited position, to explore some of the consequences of black looking and of my reading (in light of bell hooks's review) of the film Paris Is Burning. This essay is thus about my politics of representation as it relates to spectacle, the results of lingering reflections upon the film and the positions it induces. The flow of interaction. This flow follows the potential for renegotiating self in the light of its construction. Exploring the nature of reciprocity, I have no answers, only the contention that there is no wholeness in representation, in cooptation, and a faith in the power of building bridges, of being uncomfortable. I speak through questions. And this may all be bull.

"In the world in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself"
-Franz Fanon

Lyle Ashton Harris is a Black gay photographer. His explorations into the politics of self-portraiture speak to his belief that expressing desire by crossing gender (gendered?) boundaries is a potentially transcendental act, providing a third space, a space, however, engendered by dominant oppositionality, from which to reclaim subjectivity:

Ultimately, I place the Black subject at the center of what Kobena Mercer has called the matrix of desire, and inscribe myself as the subject of my own text. It is within this framework that I am choosing to articulate my personal investment in Black subjectivity and continue to visually explore it - not by denying or negating but by acknowledging and celebrating Black desire and contradiction. My current work continues this claiming of radical Black gay subjectivity through the process of self-interrogation, and furthermore through the interrogation of location. For me transgression begins not by going beyond, but by inhabiting that racially and sexually fetishized space, and by exploring our relationship to it.

His photographs, terse and yet subtle, using blackness as a frame for the subject often bathed in a luminescent key light, are as aesthetically challenging as they are politically courageous. They are about men in women's clothing. They are about being Black and wanting whiteness. And they are about being white and wanting Blackness. Mostly they are about self representation, or rather, its limitations. For Ashton-Harris, negotiating with structures of violence, to use Gayatri Spivak's phraseology, is a moot point; we all are a part of these structures, all are violent. It is a recognition of complicity and a house-cleaning of our particular inhabitation in the discourse of domination that serves to construct an "authentic" desire:

[My photos] are a play of coded elements. Whether it's the excessively coded black male body, the artifice represented by the use of wigs and fabric, the nuances of posturing -confrontational, elegant, seductive, active/passive- the play on the paradoxical relationship between being vulnerable, as well as unrevealing, these images exhort viewers to examine their own conditioning of self.

This revelatory power is the product of self-representation. It is through his own desire that he is able to express the relationship between his representations of his sexuality and his perceptions of "the" dominant Other. Inhabiting a transsexual persona, one that bases its construction upon a synthetically understood white "femininity", is, for Ashton Harris, a self-consciously political and sexual act. It is a political act that, when endowed with the power of consciousness, is extremely subversive. It is a ritualized critique of the phallocentrism present not only in Black male culture, but in white culture as well. As a spectator, however, (if not aware of (his) consciousness and political texts), one sees a Black man in a blond wig and women's clothing. An aberration, a spectacle, not a subversive transformation. The representation part seems to supercede the self part. How does representation, then, function? Is self-representation necessary in order for "the play of coded elements" to emerge and challenge the thinking spectator?

Paris Is Burning is a film which derives enormous power from a revelatory interaction with the spectator, an interaction that, regardless of intention, serves both to reinforce and to reveal the coded structure of marginality and dominance through sexuality. It both reflects and projects the identity of the viewer.
not so much through a Bazinian ‘aesthetic-scope’ as by its depiction of “hidden reality”, a reality which resonates through and with conceptions of gender, racial/colonial and class identity (identity here is defined as a process, a strategy, not as an endpoint or goal). [the sacred cows of the Symbolic order]

I am now engaging in reading a world which I know nothing about. Reading a film as text. Reading lives as signifiers of my own identity. Of their subtextivity. Of their objectivity. Is this colonial? What reciprocity is therein my gaze? In my language? In the language of the documentary film?

Language is something imbedded in my seeing. Documentary film, intentionally conceived of as being interested in exposing boundaries, can be a tool for crossing them, a project with which Paris is Burning invests itself. Paris is Burning remains tied to a documentary form which “resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signifiers is bound in a reformed and recognisable totality.” Documentaty film invests itself with a regime of truth that saturates Realism with “objectivity”, and can thus be a very dangerous cultural product. In its mythology, it can represent but it can’t create—it seeks a whole.

This myth of totality is also the nature of colonial discourse. The red is mythical, from my inside (as white woman confined and represented by fetishized “femininity”)/ very outside (as non-Black or Latino, as non-male, as non-gay, as economically privileged) position, is the discourse of the Ball and is also the self-reflexive revelatory project of the film which “reveals” (while constructing) this culture and its creators. For as Judith Butler understands “...imitation does not copy that which is prior, but produces and inverts the very terms of priority and derivativeness.”

Throughout and within, masquerade structures cultural derivatives. Film is about masquerade. The Ball is about masquerade. White feminist discourse is about masquerade. Whiteness is masquerade. Blackness is masquerade, but also an imposed marker, requiring resistance for the survival of those whose masks have been cemented, whose screams are filtered. Masks do not only enact, they protect. But, perhaps only through masquerade can identity be appropriated, coopted, in this society of inside/outside, real/unreal, white/Black, Male/ female, this binary world. For Mary Anne Doane, masquerade is an appropriation and reidentification of “masculine” (read: white, heterosexual) activity—a colonial project, especially in relation to her rejection of transsexual identification on the part of the white female viewer as a measure recuperating her mobility as a spectator, an analysis which illuminates the aberrational power of male transsexualism:

The masquerade’s resistance to patriarchal positioning...lies(s) in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as precisely, imagistic... [It] involves a realignment of femininity, the recovery, or more accurately, simulation, of the missing gap or distance. To masquerade is to manufacture a lack in the form of a certain distance between oneself and one’s image...By destabilizing the image, the masquerade confounds this masculine structure of the look. It effects a defamiliarization of female iconography.

The Ball reveals, simulates the gaps in identification (of the white, heterosexual male spectator, who sees not only his hidden “femininity” revealed, but its co-optation by the Black Other) the gaps in society, the Lack of justice. It co-opted a female iconography. Does it subvert a “Black identity”? The intercutting of questions (“What is Passing?”, “What is Realness?”), followed by the explication and definition of these posits by those who invest them with meaning as structural introductions of the lives of gay and transsexual ethnic minorities, incorporates the otherwise reified and fetishised images of the film into a plurality of languages of the self, using language—both verbal and cinematic—as both the product and the signer of the self.

And the suture—the incorporation—of the Ball. Kaja Silverman provides an analysis of suture, defined as a process which “attempts to account for the means by which subjects emerge within discourse”, explicating Jacques-Alain Miller’s founding conceptualizations of spectatorship:

Miller defines suture as that moment when the subject inserts itself into the symbolic register in the guise of a signifier, and in doing so gains meaning at the expense of being...Miller’s account of suture locates the emphasis in orthodox Lacanian places: the key terms in are “lack” and “absence”. Indeed, ...suture closely resembles the subject’s inauguration into language... A given signifier...grants the subject access to the symbolic order, but alienates it not only from its own needs but from its drives. That signifier stands in for the absent subject (i.e. in being) whose lack it can never stop signifying.

Exclusion from the Symbolic (in the Lacanian sense) is perceived as being overcome, by some members, via an appropriation and identification with dominant images, stereotypes, of white women (and also white culture in general). The inside/outside and the outside/insider need to see each other for the first time and then use the power of articulated experience to guide cultural renewal. Appropriating (I hope not misappropriating) Homi Bhaba’s re-theorization of the stereotype as a site of both alienation and self-recognition in colonial
structures—his conception of ‘stereotype-as-suture’—is particularly applicable to the “spectacle” of Black transsexualism as well as white “femininity” in particular:

Although the ‘authority’ of colonial discourse depends crucially on its location in narcissism and the Imaginary, my concept of stereotype-as-suture is a recognition of the ambivalence of that authority and those orders of identification. The role of fetishistic identification in the construction of discriminatory knowledges that depend on the ‘presence of difference’, is to provide a process of splitting and multiple/contradictory belief at the point of enunciation and subjection... It is a non-repressive form of knowledge that allows for the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official, one secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division. Its knowledge ‘value’ lies in its orientation as a defence towards external reality...[8]

But, is this also the suture experienced by the filmviewer? (bell hooks certainly does not think so, and her position will be examined and critiqued shortly). Questions of identification cannot be resolved without first examining, if briefly, issues of positionality. Is the outsider looking in? Or the insider looking out? The photographs of National Geographic, as studied by Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, highlight that the “recognition and disavowal of ‘difference’ is always disturbed by the question of its representations or construction”.[9] Difference conflates deviation, and determines the power of the gaze to reconstruct and define self and other:

[Photography’s and/or the gaze’s] efficacy lies not so much in its actual facilitation of social control of those photographed but in its representation of these others to an audience of non-deviants who thereby acquire a language for understanding themselves and the limits they must live within to avoid categorization with ‘the outside’. The gaze of the Geographic can be seen as part of the ‘capillary system’ of international power relations as Foucault’s analysis might suggest, allowing for the surveillance, if not the control of non-western people. The magazine’s gaze at the Third World operates to represent it to an American audience in ways which can (but do not always) shore up a cultural identity or sense of self as modern, civilized, etc. The gaze is not, however, as singular or monolithic as Foucault might suggest...[10]

In this sense, ‘documentary’ film is a guided tour. The responses, the “pieces of life” belong to the “subjects” of the film, but the camera is their privilégier, their devourer, their interpreter, and it is the unsaid, the “invisible question” that frames their stories and makes the connections between the object/subject and the bearer of the question. But, as Collins and Lutz suggest, the gaze is not singular or monolithic. It is dependent upon the positions of its possessors, which are dependent not only upon class, gender and sexual orientation, but the interaction of these elements and the political will to transcend them, that inhabits the viewer.

It is also dependent upon the position of the filmmaker, and the gaze and position of the subjects of the film itself. And it is dependent upon the critic, the spectator with a vision. Translating experience should test the transformative potential of the process, the potential for change within the language of the translator, not an attempt to manipulate what is “found” into a predetermined order. Without this effacement, the cultural text is created by the reader; the agents are irrelevant. Reader as author. Tania Modleski, criticizing “reader-response” theory, potentiates an alternative, truly “politicized feminist spectator/critic:

(reader response) critics have countered textual critics by insisting that meaning resides not in any given text, but in readers as they interact with the text, though this meaning may be determined within a larger context—that of the interpretive community to which the readers belong...[a] problem with such formulations lies in their assumption that an already existent meaning resides somewhere, and that the critic’s only job is to locate it (in the text, in the reader, in the interpretive community, or in the relations among the three)...a fully politicized feminist criticism has seldom been content to ascertain old meanings and...take the measure of already-constituted subjectivities; it has aimed, rather, at bringing into being new meanings and new subjectivities, seeking to articulate not only what is but “what has never been.” In this respect it may be said to have a preformative dimension—i.e., to be doing something beyond restating already existent ideas and views, wherever these might happen to reside.[11]

Reading should be doing. But translating is not about locating meaning. Rather it should be about locating intention, producing a version, not a knowledge. This is the heart of feminist reading. We all must name ourselves as writers, as producers. Indeed we must reveal interface as identity. This is the reading
of Ball culture and Black/Latino/Gay subjectivity that Ashton Harris wishes to articulate. This is the reading strategy that bell hooks believes is non-existent in the world of the movie theater and the Ball. This is the reading strategy that transforms the potential reflexive power of Paris is Burning into a political text. Thesis. Antithesis. Synthesis.

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s overcome the tradition of silence.

-Gloria Anzaldúa

In other words, whose “realness” is it anyway? This is an extremely vitriolic question, for on one level, the revelation “My god, he’s as much of a woman as I am” intended to consciously engage the “dominant” or female, I believe) in self-identification, reveals the constructed nature of the very self. But it also, reaching into the world of the film, disengages the men of the Ball from developing a subjectivity outside a colonial and patriarchal matrix, in this way mirroring the position of women, particularly Black women, who are neither spectacle nor part of the dominant paradigm of “whiteness.” Black women, as bell hooks points out in her review of the film, are the true “feminine”, the encroaching feminine, the threatening feminine, that which must be suppressed. Annihilated from the self. Speaking to the drag tradition of mainstream black male comedians, hooks explains:

Growing up in a world where black women...are...the objects of extreme abuse, scorn, and ridicule, I felt these impersonations were aimed at re-enforcing everyone’s power over us.12

This annihilation, according to hooks, is the heart of Black male homophobia which is intimately connected to a “disempowering image of black masculinity”13: a self-hatred which is a hatred born of a white, patriarchally imposed femininity upon the Black man. Within this imposition, self-hatred certainly functions as part of the Ball. Within this world of marginalization, it is revealed that an individual is only aware of oneself, the self is only solidified when it is mirrored to the Dominant Other. But hooks focuses the world of the Ball with its enunciation through film. No, appropriation of spectacle (real white woman) as a means of self-validation is not necessarily sociological inquiry; it does not constitute a critique of the “original” and material mechanisms of poverty, patriarchy or racism. As Bhaba states:

Caught in the Imaginary as they are, ...shifting positionalities will never seriously threaten the dominant power relations, for they exist to exercise them pleasurably and productively. They will always pose the problem of difference as that between pre-constituted, ‘natural’ poles of Black and White (Man and Woman) with all its historical and ideological ramifications. The knowledge of the construction of that ‘opposition’ will be denied the colonial subject.14

But that is not the project of the film. That is the project of a culture. “Knowledge of the construction” is simultaneously revealed and hidden; the men of the Ball know, they appropriate, this knowledge, while perpetuating the construction. But to be implicated in dominant paradigms, in heterosexuality, in “whiteness”, in individualism, is not necessarily to be determined by them:

The origin requires its derivations in order to affirm itself as an origin, for origins only make sense to the extent that they are differentiated from that which they produce as derivatives. Hence, if it were not for the notion of the homosexual as copy, there would be no construct of heterosexuality as origin. In other words, the entire framework of copy and origin proves radically unstable as each position inverts into the other and confounds the possibility of any stable way to locate the temporal or logical priority of either term... The parodic replication and resignification of heterosexual constructs within non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called original, but it shows that heterosexuality only constitutes itself as the original through a convincing act of repetition. The more that “act” is expropriated, the more the heterosexual claim to originality is exposed as illusory. 15

Can the heterosexual, white male viewer, does any viewer, in “seeing” (in all its ambiguity) the constructed nature of dominant culture deny their participation in its creation, in their self-as-Other enacted at the Ball? Or is the self/Other bind transcended only to distance and not to entrench the self in subversive appropriation?

It is an unfortunate oversimplification on the part of hooks to state with such unequivocal certainty that whiteness is celebrated in the film. It seems her primary evidence for such a reading stems from the audience with whom she first viewed the film. White, “yuppie-looking, straight-acting”16, I think she calls them:

I began to think [after reading positive reviews of the film] that the many yuppie looking, straight acting, pushy, predominantly white folks in the audience were there because the film in no way interrogates “whiteness”.17
It was their laughter that bothered her the most, what clued her in to the "messages" of the film—laughter she interprets and feels down to her bones as that most vicious and insidious of realizations: that ignorance is not innocent, it's organized. (I can see her sitting in that theater, surrounded by, in her mind's eye, unthinking mounds of white flesh, so privileged, so clueless of their position. She felt superior in consciousness, in knowledge, but powerless to control her fellow gazers. Totalitarianism is a theater faux-pas. Very frustrating. Hands clenched, barely able to suppress her contempt. But she had power, apparently, to rediscover, when her anger was overcome. This is not the position of the Black gay male of the Ball world). Witnessing gaping holes in humanity's lack of self-reflexivity is indeed disturbing.

But laughter can signify more than this. It is also a defense, yes an organized defense, but a defense which emerges most primarily with an identification. All good comedians know this. It is why pain and humor are so intimately connected. I believe there is a recognition, a subversive recognition, occurring through the laughter: "we" targets (read white, "straight-acting", privileged) are, whether it registers immediately or not, laughing at ourselves. Seeing the self in the Other is nothing new; it is the seductive element in a colonial relationship. But seeing the self being seen is to undermine the power of the Original Gaze, to give the veiled eye the power of sight and judgement. hooks chastizes director Jennie Livingston for what Hooks perceives as a debilitating ignorance about the nature of her project:

R ritual is that ceremonial act that carries with it meaning and significance beyond what appears, while spectacle functions primarily as entertaining dramatic display. Those of us who have grown up in a segregated black setting where we participated in diverse pageants and rituals know that those elements of a given ritual that are empowering and subversive may not be readily visible to an outsider looking in. Hence it is easy for white observers to depict black rituals as spectacle...Livingston does not oppose the way hegemonic whiteness "represents" blackness, but rather assumes an imperial overseeing position that is in no way progressive or counterhegemonic. By shooting the film using a conventional approach to documentary and not making clear how her standpoint breaks with this tradition, Livingston assumes a privileged location of "innocence." She is represented both in interviews and reviews as the tenderhearted,...virtuous white woman daring to venture into a contemporary "heart of darkness" to bring back knowledge of the natives.

Art is not created out of intentions; it develops meaning through interaction. Through interaction in context, in relation. Does the fact that the meaning of the rituals of the Ball are not readily visible somehow negate, as if dependent on a dominant gaze, their subversiveness? hooks seems to feel that Ball culture only reinforces the dominant hegemony and the participants marginalization within it, anyway, so what is their to misrepresent? The camera does reveal to the spectator, albeit selectively, as much despite as through the eyes of Livingston, certain portions of the lives of these men, some rituals and voices that inform their lives, rituals which both point to and reify dominant constructions of fallacious subjectivity. As earlier hinted, Livingston's project, as I see her use of intertitles, and shot juxtaposition, is very self-reflexive and politically conscious and breaks with the "objective" suppositions and conventions of documentary film. But beyond this variance in structural interpretation, lies a more central issue; can the representation that Livingston constructs, because it is constructed and because she is who she is, an outsider, possibly be revelatory or politically useful in common struggle against oppression?

Rather than speaking of an essential freedom, it would be better to speak of...a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitement and struggle, less of a face to face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation.

-Michel Foucault

hooks confronts, like a thunderstorm, (sweeping away any recognition of the multivalenced manifestations of power, denying the potentialities of coalition, and drenching "identity" with stasis and representational assent) the place of voice and of hegemonic penetration in art. Her questions are important; they are mine as well: even if whiteness is revealed as a construct to the "white" spectator, within and through the world of the ball, is this "whiteness" really a manifestation of a co-optation or is it self-negation? Are these men negotiating with the structures of violence or are they themselves creating/reinforcing these structures? It seems to me that transsexualism is about reinforcing gender boundaries and stereotypes. It is about solidifying a place of contention in order to re/territorialize the deterritorialized identity by retreating to the dominant field of discourse.

This reinforcement is passing. But it is also construction. Woman's (read both Black and white, both economically privileged and economically marginalized) goal in liberal (read fallacious feminist) doctrine is to "pass" as a man (read white and heterosexual). The marginalized male's subjectivity is relational to this same enigma. No amount of gender inversion will alter this means of self-validation. Equality equals sameness. In difference you are the
same. Being real/passing does not earn us the right to speak in our own voice. Pepper LaBeija speaks forcefully to this, "You think if I have a vagina that my life will be any better? It would probably be worse!" And it does matter whether he speaks about a Black vagina or a white one. One symbolizes an appropriation, an insertion, into the symbolic; one symbolizes the visceralness of marginality, in the ideology of the Ball world. One representation is a misreading of subjectivity, the other is a denial of self.

The struggles to live within multiple locations and to sustain multiple strategies of resistance are allowed to invade the mythical 'inner wholeness' of the self-image.

- Stuart Hall

So when does lived experience act as a cathartic message but not as a transformative political act? Better yet, when is it transformative? Is it a revelation of the self as spectacle a self-defeating enterprise, one that causes further disassociation rather than reflection? And for whom? Are the individuals of the Ball depositors and thus articulators of a collective conscience as gendered human beings? Collective unconscious? Whiteness. Whiteness. "Womanly Spectacle".

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life, and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back" that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice."

-bell hooks

There is no "justice" in the film. Only frustrating fractures—fractures that speak, that "talk back" to injustice. Imbedded in racism, structured by homophobia. These belong to me. I speak through them...

Dominant positions/subjectivities can be questioned while being appropriated, because marginalized people have always been socialized to see more than their own point of view. "We" (the spectator represented by dominant discourse/representation) are both "their" (the men of the Ball) collective conscience and subconsciousness. "They" possess "double vision", a vision that develops from this place of dislocation and state of negotiation and transition between two claims and cultures. Such a vision prevents the hegemonic incorporation of consciousness, but yet cannot deny its appropriation of subjectivity. Dying yet living, they let us see their seeing. (Is this an ironic privilege of marginalization?)

The structure of the film uses this mirroring power to juxtapose (albeit in a rather polar and simplistic way) "normalcy" and the crossing of "normalcy's" boundaries (shot of three young, white stockbrokers on a street corner, cut to the "executive-real" Ball competition) and then its reappropriation in the service of transforming identity. In the act of showing is the act of construction (or deconstruction, as the Ball participants show us). And we are all constructed. This is a statement of revolution. It effects how selves meet and move in the world. It is not enough, but action cannot be taken without it. In/Out, white/black, filmmaker/filmed—many boundaries become blurred. Now the intersections of these multiplicities within the pervasive dichotomy rich/poor needs addressing. Film can construct this challenge, make it visible. But it is up to other interrogations to determine strategy and muster models. The camera, I think, can be a gun. It is rarely a negotiator, however. Or a bullet.

In Paris is Burning, both the camera, by framing the conscious appropriation, and the subject/objects themselves, through their "double vision", reflect the constructed nature of the identity of the gazer her/himself—and in this reflection transforms the viewer into a participant in this world of passing. Such is the nature of political transformation and cooptation of hegemonic structure—the subject as self-reflexive object. This positioning catalyses a potential for establishing the ambiguity of identity by creating participants in these constructions, made of fragments of hegemonic culture—the self becomes interdependent, not only relational.

It is then clear that the self can be constructed only out of community. This is emblazoned by the two young and "homeless" (read nuclear family-less) gay boys who met twice (towards the beginning and then at the very end—a frame of sorts) in the film. Their dis/ease with their parent(s) expectations and invalidation of their feelings and gay identities is healed by the communal identity of the Ball circuit. As filmmaker/theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha has written, healing is a socio-cultural act. Community as self is also the meaning of family—the central institution of the life of a Ball member and of the boys mentioned above. The re/constitution of idealized traditional roles (mother and father as nurturers and disciplinarians, authority and knowledge incarnate)— Pepper LaBeija and the other Legends—is both regressive and progressive. It does not alter the power dynamics of authority in family life, but it recreates, reinvests these roles with new meaning, i.e. "parents" are authorities but they are also me—they embody my experience. Not Communitarianism, but Cognitivist acknowledgement of the realm of experience to identity. A recognition of interdependence as survival and perhaps, more powerfully, as transforma-
It is such a recognition that needs to be carried away by all conscious and critical viewers, not eclipsed by the limitations of representation—both within the constructs of the film itself as well as between the film and its gazers. There must be a recognition of the political significance of “seeing” dominant culture via its gender structures as constructed. Such a reading allows for potentially transformative coalition building through shared struggle, not shared “identity” to develop. Such a coalition would not only serve to endow “justice” with new meaning and concrete viability, but it would serve to redefine the process of subjectivity as an affirmation of self instead of a negation of others. This can only develop with an unveiling of the consuming eye and the use of spectatorship as an active politics of both unknowing and re/covering. As D.N. Rodowick states:

Reading encounters the text as a relation of difference not identity. It not only renders as legible and meaningful aspects that were previously unforeseen, it also potentially creates the text anew while ideologically transforming the larger discursive context where both text and reading are embedded. In this manner, reading is always an activity of intervention and creation—the possibility of counter-hegemonic collectivities to refunction and reconstitute the extant discourse of mass culture...19

Walter Benjamin once said that the greatest crime is to leave language in the state where you historically found it.20 Tools endowed by language cannot be chosen. They precede. Conceive? The language of film, and the language of the Ball, should be read, spoken, mutated, perverted into signs of self-reflection and resistance. The Origin is imitation! Perform and inform!

Endnotes

2 Ibid.: 10.
7 Ibid.: 200.
10 Ibid.: 136.
13 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
Works Cited


