

# Throwing Shade: a Review of *Paris is Burning*

Richard Comwall

To throw shade is to practice an art form, the art of reading someone's strengths and flaws, then puncturing their pose with over-compliment, with elegant sarcasm. What is this doing in Vermont? Why do two back-to-back shows on a Sunday afternoon and evening at that height of sophistication, Middlebury College, draw large, appreciative audiences?

Of course, we do suffer from celebrityitis, over-infatuation with anyone who has achieved a lot of national media copy, so we were impressed that Jennie Livingston was living in Middlebury with her partner who was Artist-in-Residence at the College. After all, it is extraordinary when a new, young filmmaker's first film ends up getting commercial release, and, after a year of nonstop showing at the Forum in Manhattan, makes it to Burlington, and Jennie and three others who worked or are shown in it tour the country promoting the film.

But this only explains the large initial turn out. It does not explain the upscale hetero audience's genuine warm glow from appreciating the realness of extreme deviance from upscale, white, male, heteroid life. No, this film succeeds by making its definitions come alive:

**Send a Valentine to  
someone who you  
have had a crush  
on...  
and have never  
dared!**

a "House" is a family for those who don't have any, not a sitting-by-the-hearth family, but the mutual bonding of a gay street gang run by a "Mother" ("house" is also a verb meaning to take possession and shelter some object, like Adidas, formerly used by someone else);

a "Ball" is a dance competition type of street fight between houses (Willi Ninja, one of the especially succulent men in this film, says "we come out to assassinate");

"Throwing shade" is the most frequent weapon used by house members - to throw shade well, you focus on all the details (i.e., read your opponent) and pick out the telling detail;

"Vogueing" is organized shade, done on the dance floor, with judges to watch that you do not interfere physically with your competitor and to declare the winner of the contest;

"Mopping" is stealing, as in Madonna expropriating dances from the House of Xtravaganza, or eating at Roy Rodgers where it is "done your way" and you leave without paying; or the "realness" competitions at the balls where the contestants choose their categories and do it their way, that is, they become for 30 seconds a real executive, or a Marine or a Ford model with tits and lashes and definitely the walk, without paying the white male culture they imitate and do aspire to.

Was Jennie mopping in using the boys, men and women of the houses to advance her career and to entertain us? Of course, all economic interaction has elements of expropriation. But the beauty here is that though white and educated, as a queer woman, Jennie was able to hear much of what was said, probably to be surprised by some of it, but to appreciate it and let the deeply human qualities come through, so

that we, the upper class audience who generate the revenue for this film, also become involved, become more than visitors to a zoo. Yes, Paris Dupree, Legendary Mother of the House of Dupree, was correct in feeling exploited in not getting paid up front for an interview. Although several of the stars of this film have gotten some fringe benefits from the publicity it has generated, none have been paid cash. On the other hand, a big chunk of the budget for this film has already been paid to singers, agents, etc., who are plugged into our power-property rights system well enough; but Paris, wise Dorian, beautiful Octavia and many others must rely on Jennie's charity to receive a share of any surplus that results only after these other claimants have gotten their pieces. No other fact captures the inequity of our system more nakedly.

The members of the houses have to work most of the time. There are many types of work, but most are hustlers, many are hustlers for straight men. The extent of gender fuck is breathtaking: noses reconstructed, breasts implanted, cheeks reshaped. Yet the beauty of the construction of this film is that it seduces the viewer to enter the lives of the drag queens that Jennie got to know. We accept it when Octavia and Venus share their outlandish dreams: to live a normal happy life, to get married in church in white, to be a complete woman. We enter their spiritual world, seeing that the balls on Sundays (the day we watched this film) are a genuine alternative in New York to the white church on the hill in New England.

Jennie Livingston set out to make this film only after getting to know its actors. The House of Dupree, i.e., the gay street gang run by Paris DuPree, with its poster advertising the ball-competition it organizes each year entitled *Paris Is Burn-*

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