



Big Screen Classics

Paris Is Burning

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Director: Jennie Livingston

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Production Companies: Prestige, BBC,

WNYC-TV New York

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Executive Producers: Nigel Finch, Davis Lacy

Producer: Jennie Livingston

Co-producer: Barry Swimar

Associate Producers: Claire Goodman,

Meg McLagan

Additional Associate Producing: Richard Dooley

Production Manager: Natalie Hill

Production Co-ordinator: Elise Pettus

Production Assistants: Rosalinda Alvira,

Nicole Barnum, Harry Birckmeyer,

Sara Blecher, Jane Bresnick, Penny Dow,

Jan Heissinger, David Irrera, Karen Kandrak, Bengt

Mattson, Tracy Morgan, Myra Paci, Sydney

Pokorney, Eric Rosenblatt,

Carolina Salguero, Kevin Skvorak,

Phoebe Yantsis

Cinematographer: Paul Gibson

Additional Camerawork: William Megalos,

Frank Prinzi, Alyson Denny, Ben Speth

2nd Unit Camera: Maryse Alberti

Assistant Camera: Michael Bonvillain,

Theo Crimuna, Lloyd Goldfine

Additional Camera Assistants: Zinka Benton,

Bonnie Blake, Jill Johnson, Hugh Walsh

Stills Photographers: Jennie Livingston,

Dorian Corey, Hector Crespo, Josef Astor

Graphic Designer: Jim Rogola, Anne Duhinger

Editor: Jonathan Oppenheim

Additional Editing: Kate Davis

Associate Editor: Carol Hillson

Titles: Borden Elniff

Sound Recordists: Catherine Calderon,

Judy Karp

Additional Sound Recording: Etienne Sauret,

George Leong, Jehuda Maagan, J.T. Takagi, Scott

Breindel, Stanley Nelson, James Adner, Maryse

Alberti, Jennie Livingston

Sound Transfer: Sound One

Sound Mix: Rick Dior, Matt Skilton

Sound Editor: Stacia Thompson

Thanks to: Alan J. Pakula, Werner Herzog,

John Waters

With:

Paris Dupree

Pepper LaBeija

Kim Pendavis

Freddie Pendavis

Dorian Corey

Venus Xtravaganza

Angie Xtravaganza

Willi Ninja

Octavia Saint Laurent

Brooke Xtravaganza

Carmen Xtravaganza

Eileen Ford

Shari Headley

Andre Christian

Junior LaBeija

Sandy Ninja

Sol Pendavis

Avis Pendavis

Stevie St Laurent

Bianca Xtravaganza

Nearly 40 years after the release of *Paris Is Burning* (1990), Jennie Livingston's beloved documentary exploring the LGBTQ+ underworld of New York's ball culture, its reputation is stronger than ever. Although so many of the formidable ballroom stars spotlighted in the film – Dorian Corey, Pepper LaBeija, Willi Ninja, Octavia St. Laurent, Angie Xtravaganza, Venus Xtravaganza – are no longer with us, clips of their performances and their sharp, witty pieces to camera have been embraced by online audiences. The interviewees' critiques of race, class, gender and the construction of identity in Reagan's America have taken on new resonances in the Trump era. I spoke to Livingston on the occasion of her film arriving on UK Blu-ray for the first time, in a new 2K restoration which she supervised.

Livingston explains that the film started life as a photography project ('I wanted to be Robert Frank or Diane Arbus'). After encountering people voguing in Washington Square Park and photographing them, she attended a ball and realised there was potential for a film. Getting access to the balls was relatively easy, with the performers happy to be filmed. 'There really wasn't a sense that there was a barrier to anybody attending or competing,' says Livingston. 'It wasn't a segregated space, it was a party space, and if you have cameras, you're invited to go in.' Livingston made the decision not to narrate the film or appear on camera – 'The people interviewed are more interesting than I am. Who wants to see the nerdy white kid?'

The new Criterion release boasts a rich selection of extra features, including nearly two hours of deleted scenes. Livingston regrets having to exclude some of the footage. 'The thing I loved most were the cut scenes [where people are talking] about religion. I felt like the ball was a kind of spiritual space. Octavia saying, "I think God wanted me to be trans because he made me this way." Venus very sincerely saying that she had a saint who she talked to. I love that, because I felt there were deep spiritual roots in the ballroom community. But I didn't know where this would fit in the film.'

Livingston served as a consulting editor on the FX show *Pose* (2018-21), Ryan Murphy's tribute to ballroom culture, which was clearly inspired by the subjects of *Paris Is Burning*. She even directed an episode, but despite the success of her debut film, subsequent film work has been sporadic. Did she choose to step back from filming? 'It's all about funding. I kind of joke that, in the lexicon of the ball world, I win trophies for slowest filmmaker. It's really hard to get money.' But new work is in the pipeline. 'I'm working on a film now, I'm pretty sure it will be done next year. It's about a hippie summer camp in the 70s. It's about loss, it's about queer identity. And it has a musical number.' Does she mind having such a sparse body of film work? 'It's OK to not have a filmography that looks like someone else's. And Agnès Varda and Fred Wiseman were making their best films in their nineties.'

Paris Is Burning is very much a snapshot of 1980s America. Has the film resonated differently with British audiences? 'I think the themes are universal. But I also think British people have a different relationship to class. [US citizens'] relationship to class is really deceptive and wrong. I mean, Americans feel there's mobility. There isn't.' With the film's legacy now firmly established, Livingston adds: 'It's sad that so many people in the film are gone. The film discusses the murder of Venus, but not so long after the film's completion and

Danny Xtravaganza
David Xtravaganza
David Ian Xtravaganza
David the father Xtravaganza
USA 1990©
74 mins
Digital

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Tahliah Simumba, artist and BFI Inclusion Partner

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release, so many people died: Kim, Pepper, Octavia, Angie, Dorian, Willi and
others. So many of the losses are, I feel, related to poor healthcare in my
country, especially for people who belong to groups who receive substandard
healthcare due to all kinds of social and systemic factors. I wish Dorian and
Willi, and all the others, were here to know how the film has had such a long
life, and how their words and actions have meant so much to so many
audiences. People come up to me and say: "*Paris Is Burning* helped me
imagine I could live the life I needed to live."

Alex Davidson, *Sight and Sound*, October 2026

When Jennie Livingston's documentary about Harlem's gay ball scene opened
as a 58-minute video at New York's New Festival of Gay and Lesbian Film in
1990, it was instantly recognised as a masterpiece of underworld reportage.
And not just within the gay culture. Bounced up from 16mm form, with added
credits, a flashcard guide to the ball vocabulary and a killer soundtrack of disco
hits, the film scooped the kind of awards that its voguing heroes would die for.
At New York's Film Forum, it ran for a record-breaking 17 weeks in 1991. In
Britain too, where a truncated version was screened on BBC TV's *Arena* in
1990, it provoked strong reactions and high ratings.

This is a satisfying success. The release of Livingston's film was roughly
contemporary with the discovery of the underground ball scene by the pop
world, as commemorated on records like Madonna's 'Vogue' and Malcolm
McLaren's 'Deep in Vogue'. Although the latter actually used ball world
personnel – Willi Ninja featured in McLaren's video and was flown all over the
world to promote the record – it was obvious that both stars were only
temporary sojourners on a souvenir hunt. Livingston makes it quite clear that
the world of *Paris* is one filled with complex messages that require a more
careful analysis than pop appropriation can provide.

Livingston's method of weaving the ball, street and interview footage into a
coherent and flowing whole is audaciously simple. Some 20 phrases flashed
up on screen – Bangee! Luscious Body! Pig Latin! – announce the film's
editorial structure. Each phrase is defined, elaborated on and activated in
ensuing shots. The careful segues between sections establish a fluid
momentum in which very little intervention is necessary; Livingston never
appears as interlocutor although her presence is very much felt through her
choice of material. Livingston, on record as a lesbian of German Jewish
extraction, finds in the ball scene men marginalised through race and sexuality.
Her implicit message – one which should be heard by us all – is that the
benefits of community are underlined by its role as protection against outside
threats. Short of the ritualised combats of the ball-walking scenes, violence is
off-screen, out there and completely real. The ball queens inhabit a dangerous
world.

If the wit, glamour and mind-boggling outfits of *Paris Is Burning* are disarming,
not far beneath the film's surface is an immensely moving quality. Watching the
sublimely elegant Willi teaching a class of slouchy (real) girls a feminine
deportment is hilarious, but the outside world intrudes in a more insidious way.
Venus' death (presumably at the hands of a client who discovered her secret) is
bad enough; but realising that no amount of ballroom realness can get these
voguing 'executives' off the Harlem catwalks and onto Wall Street itself is
quietly heart-breaking.

Louise Gray, *Sight and Sound*, April 1993