Jennie Livingston’s documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1991) shows an important aspect of African-American and Latino gay and transgender life in New York in the 1980s: drag “balls.” Organized in Harlem, these balls consist of competitions where bodies attempt to perform in the “realest” manner, where someone occupies a different position than one they usually occupy in society. For example, a ball jury determines which one of the two dark and gay bodies can perform the best as a rich heterosexual white body. Similarly, transgenders are judged on their ability to perform as “real” — a term used by the jury itself — women.

Fashion is an important component of the balls. Some contestants create their own clothes, others struggle to gather enough money to purchase remarkable clothing relevant to the category in which they compete. In this matter, a brief inventory of these categories is evocative of the variety of the social labels performed: “pretty girl,” “high fashion winter sportswear,” “luscious body,” “schoolboy schoolgirl,” “town and country,” “businessman of the 80’s,” “high fashion Parisian,” “butch queen,” “military,” “high fashion eveningwear,” etc. The balls also invented a new dance at the crossroad of homage to and parody of fashion magazines like *Vogue*: 

"PARIS IS BURNING:
GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RACE’S PERFORMATIVITY"
THIS IS WHITE AMERICA.
“voguing” thus consists in the fast succession of poses systematically adopted by models when being photographed for fashion magazines.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler describes gender as a performative act, a repeated performance accomplished in the public realm as a recognizable semiotics:

In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation. Although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this “action” is a public action. There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential; indeed, the performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame – an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject. (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, 2006, 140.)

The drag balls in Harlem certainly illustrate Butler’s thesis. The assemblage behavior+fashion+confidence can construct a gender. Bodies that are recognized as male by society can use such an assemblage as a sort of camouflage. Similarly, the balls tend to show us that race and sexuality are also founded on performativity and here as well, camouflage can be created. Although we can think of this idea of camouflage as a way for dark bodies to appear as white bodies or for male
bodies to appear as female bodies, we should refrain from this idea as it precisely brings us back to the idea that each body belongs to a category by some sort of essence. Rather we should recognize the norm for what it is: a camouflage for all bodies. The norm is performativity since no body fully corresponds to the norm. Of course, some bodies (white, male and heterosexual for example) do not need much effort to perform the norm as several characteristics of their public body are already interpreted as symbolically embodying the norm. Others, presenting characteristics that are recognized by the norm as distant from its composition, require many efforts to get closer to that supposed norm.

What *Paris Is Burning* reveals both through the presentation of the balls and through the interviews with its protagonists, is the deep desire and will of most these bodies to reach what they themselves call “normality.” Transgender women explain that they want to be normal housewives and dark bodies explain that they want to live like normal rich white people do. One may think that these desires and volitions do not constitute strong political manifestos, or that the very will for normality prevents by definition the idea of transgression. However, a body that gives itself the means to hack the characteristics of its public appearance to the point of changing one’s sex (even as performance), constitutes an extremely high degree of subversion of the norm’s mechanisms, and therefore constitutes a serious political act.

The film provides a tragic proof to such a politics, as one of its transgender protagonists, Venus Extravaganza, is said to have been savagely murdered during the making of the documentary. Therein lies the violence that the norm reserves for bodies that subvert its function and unmask its performative technics. The film is made in such a way that the performers’ aspirations for normality affirmed in a supposedly trivial man-
ner by its subjects (participation in “balls”) is soon contrasted in the strongest way with this murder that characterizes the risks of trying to be something else than what the norm wants to legislate in other bodies.

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