

From Subculture to Mainstream: The Influence of Paris Is Burning on Voguing's Evolution

Ruxin Huang^{1,a,*}

¹Affiliated High School of Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou, 350007, China

a. 206081185@mail.sit.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: Voguing, now widely accepted as a dance form, prompts contemplation on how it gradually gained mainstream exposure from its origins in the non-mainstream field. The documentary *Paris Is Burning* has played a specific role in introducing voguing to many people for the first time. Through an analysis of the film's content, subsequent reviews, and social reactions after its release, the impact of this documentary on voguing's status can be discerned. After thorough research and analysis, it becomes evident that the development of voguing is closely related to the narrative presented in this documentary. The visuals and characters depicted therein truly the voguing milieu, shedding light on the group of individuals behind voguing that merits attention. *Paris Is Burning* effectively promoted voguing's integration into mainstream culture. Through this research, the connection between film and voguing becomes clear, enhancing a better understanding of voguing.

Keywords: *Paris Is Burning*, drag ball, sexual minorities, mainstream culture

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Voguing was born in the Harlem ballroom scene of the 1860s, and due to its historical circumstances and the unique individuals who created it, voguing was once suppressed and ignored by mainstream culture. However, following the popularity of Madonna's song "Vogue" and the release of the documentary *Paris Is Burning* by Livingston, voguing received significant mainstream exposure and was recognized by many. So far, voguing has developed a very specific and clear dance structure. This paper aims to examine how voguing became integrated into mainstream culture and gained public acceptance. It notices the significance of the documentary *Paris Is Burning* and its influence on public perceptions of sexual minorities.

1.2. Literature Review

Currently, there is no clear explanation in academia regarding how *Paris Is Burning* facilitated voguing's integration into mainstream culture. Nevertheless, this film is frequently referenced in discussions about voguing's history and development. The content of the film enhances understanding of voguing, and its wide circulation significantly boosts the popularity of voguing.

Based on this premise, the research explores the film's voguing segment and its relationship with voguing's evolution to determine the extent to which the film contributed to its promotion.

Since *Paris Is Burning* not only depicts voguing but also features the representation of many sexual minorities in the drag ball culture, there has been little research on the relationship between the film and voguing in isolation. To address this issue and ensure the research's specificity, this study concentrates on the voguing component of the film and the subsequent voguing-related film reviews. However, the research and analysis are contextualized within the broader environment created by the entire film.

1.3. Research Methods

In addition to the film itself as the main research material, supplementary sources include contemporaneous film reviews, interviews with actors, and current relevant investigations. After gaining a preliminary understanding of voguing's history and the film through visual and textual analysis, this research focuses on the impact of this film. This entails examining how the film interprets and represents voguing as well as the information and attitudes it conveys to viewers. It is found that *Paris Is Burning* effectively promoted voguing's integration into mainstream culture.

2. Voguing

2.1. The Origin and Development of Voguing

Many records attribute the origins of voguing to the dance craze that emerged in the 1980s within Harlem's Black and Latino queer community dance halls [1]. Some also link it to beauty contests organized by transgender and queer inmates at Rikers Island Prison in late 1970s New York [2]. However, there is no clear definition or timeframe for the birth of voguing; its earliest forms can be traced back to the year 1960. The name "voguing" is derived from *Vogue*, which is one of the most important and influential magazines in the world. This dance style evolved from ballroom culture, gradually transforming into its structure. At a time when transgender, queer and marginalized communities were competing in drag queens, a dance inspired by model poses in *Vogue* magazine was born. References were drawn from ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, now known as the "Egyptian hand", as well as gymnastic movements.

As time progressed, three voguing styles emerged: the original "Old Way", characterized by rigid lines, symmetrical poses, and sharp body angles. Constant transitions between static movements might appear a little blunt but effectively express the "aggression" required by performing groups of that time. Subsequently, the "New Way" emerged, placing higher demands on the body. Performers need to use various body parts to execute intricate bends and challenging forms, emulating magazine model poses. Lastly, "Vogue Femme" integrated classic voguing components such as hand gestures, spins, catwalks, duckwalks, and dips [3].

2.2. Voguing's Association with Race and Sexual Minority

Voguing was born out of a ball culture predominantly comprising black individuals whether transgender or marginalized. Their performances were not only a way to express themselves but also a revolt against white elites and black homophobia. While these performers were not explicitly suppressed, each step in their resistance against mainstream ideology proved arduous, as it struggled for recognition and dissemination.

Ball culture emerged during the Harlem Renaissance, a period of significant black creativity in literature and art. Although not in its heyday, the revival movement accelerated the spread of ball culture across the United States. In the late 1960s, Crystal LaBeija, a legendary transgender drag

queen, played a vital role. Influenced by the revival, he returned to Harlem to perform dress-up dances for the black community. He was hailed as a mother figure for homeless LGBTQ+ youth, eventually founding one of the first “houses”.

3. Voguing in *Paris Is Burning*

3.1. Voguing as a Space to Perform Sexual Identity

The film suggests that voguing evolved from “shade”, a dance performed by two people who hate each other. The skillful dance moves acted as a replacement for verbal conflict, with success determined by one’s ability to humiliate the other through dance. In order to attend a dance and complete a shade, participants carefully prepared costumes and makeup. In the film, most of them did not have a glamorous job or a stable income, but they invested all their savings in clothing and spent a lot of time sewing clothes. They constructed appearances reflecting their satisfaction or emulation of their subjects.

The voguing competition had a well-established system, with participants, hosts and judges. The film showcases their assessment of participants based on thematic alignment while maintaining individuality. Although voguing was influenced by the magazine *Vogue*, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and gymnastics moves, it further incorporated community-driven elements, such as pantomime. The community’s enthusiasm propelled voguing’s evolution beyond their own circles.

In conclusion, voguing, as portrayed in *Paris Is Burning*, is more than just a dance; it is a testament to the resilience, creativity, and determination of marginalized individuals. It not only provides them with a stage to express themselves but also defies societal norms, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. As the film captures, voguing serves as a profound illustration of how art can serve as a platform for marginalized voices, enabling them to break free from the shadows and demand recognition on their terms.

3.2. Voguing as a Way to Respond to Mainstream Culture

“It’s like stepping into another magical world where being gay is 100 percent the right thing to do. Totally out of this world, but this is how the world should be” [4]. These words echo the feelings of every participant in a drag ball, for whom a drag ball represents life itself. While activities like basketball or football are pastimes for many in society, drag ball is a pastime for its participants. While white people can rely on hard work and talent to continuously move up the social ladder and obtain fame and wealth, black and LGBTQ+ people can only rely on drag ball which is the most realistic way for them to gain attention and financial stability.

“I want to take voguing not to just *Paris Is Burning*, but I want to take it to the real Paris, and make the real Paris burning.” This is the voice of a voguer from the Ninja House in the film. Voguing, as one of the most important products of this community and ballroom culture at that time, was undoubtedly endowed with many special meanings and hopes.

Ballroom participants’ performances are inspired by many things including models, stars, and soap operas like *Dallas*. Voguing is no doubt inspired primarily by the movements of models in *Vogue*. These reference objects all have one thing in common: their roots are in mainstream society. Whether these sources depict mainstream figures or portray the lives of upper-class figures, they are recognized and accepted by mainstream society completely. *Vogue* became a mainstream magazine many years before the advent of ballroom culture, initially targeting white women as its primary audience. This fits perfectly with the aspirations of voguing performers: a connection to white, high society, and mainstream fashion [5].

Voguing is a tool for drag ball participants to better tell their life stories or the lives and careers that they want to experience. In order to imitate the models in the magazines, they will try to imitate

the models' makeup, clothes, and even hairstyling techniques under static conditions. For sexual minorities, they would also show highly feminine gestures to express their attitudes towards voguing, which later evolved into what is now called "Vogue Femme."

Although voguing was born out of mainstream magazines, it thrives as a non-mainstream cultural expression. Given the circumstances and the impact of AIDS, many characters in the film did not end well. For example, Venus Xtravaganza, who sought funds for a sex change operation, just wanted to live a life of opulence. However, before realizing this dream, he was killed and his body was hidden in a hotel. The murderer has not been found yet, and due to the lack of understanding and support from his family, his body has not even been claimed. His personal ending reveals the plight of countless individuals. While finding camaraderie within their "houses", they often sought refuge in their self-constructed world. However, the grip of mainstream society remained firm.

Some scholars believe that *Paris Is Burning* reinforced the dancers' determination to dream, and the entire film exudes an "energetic frenzy" [6]. This energy is evident in aspects such as shade, reading during voguing performances, meticulous preparations prior to drag balls, and dramatically charged performances across various categories. Paradoxically, these expressions of vitality accentuate their isolation and marginalization from mainstream society. The film was crafted and released in 1990, within the socio-cultural context of that time.

3.3. Voguing in Mainstream Culture

Mr. Livingston, the white director of *Paris Is Burning*, spent seven years attending dance parties in New York in the late 1980s. Initially conceived as a revelation, the film won the 1990 Los Angeles Film Critics Circle Award for Best Documentary and the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival the following year [7]. The Sundance Film Festival is dedicated to American independent filmmakers and is uniquely positioned to showcase independent and authentic films that do not appeal to mainstream cinema audiences. There is no doubt that *Paris Is Burning* presented unique complexities that resonated with the demands of this festival [8].

Vogue is a kind of cultural memory that is distinct from that of a largely hostile mainstream [9]. Voguing is not only a dance but can also a highly-developed form of expression. Perhaps many people do not know voguing culture directly through *Paris Is Burning*, the film often serves as an introduction, providing a glimpse into voguing's history and origins. Many film reviews refer to the world presented in this documentary as "another world", even if it is a real existence with the mainstream reality. Such characterizations just show the ignorance of the writing community. As an aging drag queen said in the film, "Everybody wants to leave something behind." This remark underscores the director's intention in producing *Paris Is Burning*. The film serves as a testament, despite facing rejection and misunderstanding from the mainstream. It is a testament to perseverance, capturing a shift from non-acceptance to curiosity and understanding among the broader population and acting as a catalyst for change [10].

4. Conclusion

Through a comprehensive analysis of the film's content, intricate details, and the diverse societal responses following its release, it can be concluded that *Paris Is Burning* vigorously promoted voguing's integration into the mainstream culture at that time. It served as a significant and essential channel for introducing voguing to the public and facilitating its acceptance. At that time, there was a lack of clear data on the composition of the film's audience, such as age groups or ethnic backgrounds. These factors could have served as valuable variables for refining research on how the film gradually influenced people's perceptions of voguing.

The popularity of voguing owes its success to a combination of factors. However, when exploring the development of voguing, *Paris Is Burning* is an indispensable reference point and a unique cinematic element. This study aims to provide greater clarity regarding the relationship between a single film and voguing. Future research can delve even deeper into this complex and multifaceted subject.

References

- [1] Vogue. "Vogue decodes the history of voguing". Retrieved on September 1, 2023. Retrieved from: https://www.vogue.com.cn/invoke/industry/news_155365be04e19966-5.html
- [2] Hart, B., Roberson M. (1992), "The Ballroom Scene Has Long Offered Radical Freedoms For Black and Brown Queer People. Today, That Matters More Than Ever", *Time*, February 26, 2021.
- [3] Freeman, S, "The Vogue Trend Returns", *Dancespirit*, August 1, 2008.
- [4] Livingston, J. (1990), director, *Paris is burning*. Entertainment Off White Productions, 1 hr., 16 min.
- [5] Schacht, S P. (2000), "Paris is burning: How society's stratification systems make drag queens of us all", *Race, Gender & Class* 7(1), 147-166.
- [6] Carril, F. (2010), "The metaphor of fire – the performance in *Paris is burning*", *World Film* (3), 153-162.
- [7] Brian, M., "Paris Is Burning sizzles again at the Sundance film festival", *The Guardian*, January 29, 2015.
- [8] David, K C. (1999), "White Filmmakers and Minority Subjects: Cinema Vérité and the Politics of Irony in "Hoop Dreams" and "Paris Is Burning". *South Atlantic Review* 64(1), 26-47.
- [9] Susman, T. (2000), "The Vogue of Life: Fashion Culture, Identity, and the Dance of Survival in the Gay Balls", *A Journal of Social History* 9(5), 117-141. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.09.15>.
- [10] Goldspy, J. (2013). "Queens of Language: Paris is Burning." In Martha Gever, Pratibha Parmar and John Greyson (Eds.) *Queer Looks*. New York and London: Routledge. 108-115.